

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. Isaiah 2:4 (passage upon which Richard Nixon took the Oath of Office on January 20, 1969.)¹

Let's play some word association: Richard Nixon. What comes to mind? For many, Nixon reminds them of nothing but how corruption can reach the highest levels of power. In light of the Watergate scandal, one is tempted to view his presidency as an object of failure. However, that view is short-sighted and does not take into account what is perhaps the most important legacy of the Nixon years. During his time in office, Richard Nixon made significant contributions in the avenue of foreign relations, particularly with the communist nations of China and the Soviet Union. One could argue that the success of Reagan would not have been possible without the efforts of this maligned leader.

To fully understand foreign policy during the Nixon years, one must go back to a time of great instability characterized by great mistrust and mutual fear between the two greatest superpowers on earth, the United States and the Soviet Union. Discussing the experiences that shaped the sensibilities of both the nation and its highest executive can help in understanding the foreign policy that was created under Nixon. Issues that seem inconsequential in the modern mindset were then the issues that defined the struggle between the superpowers. How could the two nations keep peace when both were constantly upgrading their war machines? How could each nation maintain strength and still show a willingness to work for peace? What was the proper balance between force and compromise? These questions had to be answered by men who were mortal and

¹ Nixon, Richard. *RN The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. Simon & Schuster Inc. New York. 1978

dealt with the same elements of stress, pride, and pressure that face world leaders today. Though the successes of this era would not have been possible without the efforts of thousands of men and women, two men in particular stand out: Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev. These two men had starkly opposite experiences and personal traits, but they had the same goal in mind: stabilize the world and prevent nuclear war. Unlike their predecessors, Nixon and Brezhnev saw the value of working with each other to achieve their goals. They were willing to give where their contemporaries had insisted on drawing a hard line. In a strange way, Nixon and Brezhnev were dependant upon each other. Both staked enormous political risk on the success of their compromises, as failure would result in great political harm to both men. Their bond was unique in American in addition to world history. Through their persistence, ingenuity, and resolve, Nixon and Brezhnev were able to move toward answers to some of their questions. Though they failed to find consensus on many issues, they closed the chasm and opened a relationship.

The word most associated with this effort is neither English nor Russian. *Détente* is a French word that roughly translates to “release of tension.”² This word has come to represent a period of increased cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union that began with the election and Richard Nixon in 1968. Cooperation increased when Nixon visited the Soviet Union to publicly sign weapons reduction treaties. Make no mistake, *détente* did not represent an end to the tension. In fact, negotiations often brought more tension to the surface. Kissinger may have said it best when he said, “*Détente* is rooted in a recognition of differences and based on the prevention of disaster.”³ However, the events of the 1960’s, as well as the ongoing war in Vietnam,

² Cold War Detente

³ Stoessinger, John. *Henry Kissinger: The Anguish of Power*.

illustrated just how volatile the world was and how seemingly unimportant conflicts on the periphery could have devastating results when allowed to balloon out of control. Ideology, not territory, was the focal point for many of these conflicts. Several issues were central in freezing the Cold War.

When one studies détente, endless information on missile silos and offensive weapons limitation can be found. However, the story of détente is really a human one. The achievements that occurred were shaped by the personalities of the men who were committed to its success. Thus, to understand détente is to understand the many facets of Richard Nixon.

Nixon's experience with communism colored him as an unlikely choice to bring about improved U.S.-Soviet relations. After coming home from service in World War Two, Nixon gained election to Congress. His political sensibilities were shaped during the post-war Red scare of the late 1940s. As a member of Congress, he was confronted with the saga of Alger Hiss, the hearings of Joseph McCarthy, and the Committee on Un-American Activities. As Vice-President, Nixon was on the front line of the steadily freezing war of ideology with the Soviet Union. Nixon quickly developed a reputation as a hard liner and used the seeming weakness of rival candidates on communism against them. When he assumed the Presidency in 1969, few expected his administration to signal a drastic shift in U.S. foreign policy.

The signature event of the Cold War during the 1960's occurred in 1962. Since the Cuban Missile Crisis, relations had steadily warmed but ever so slightly as there were still large chasms of mistrust and a war still raged in Vietnam. The 1968 Presidential Election was one of the most volatile in American History. With the nation being torn

apart by an unpopular war and a widening generation gap, Nixon appealed to the so-called silent majority, a phrase he used with great success. This group represented those who were concerned with the rebellious culture developing on city streets and college campuses. Nixon's appeal to this group led to his election but did nothing to stabilize a nation in disarray and a world with a balance so delicate that the slightest push could have catastrophic consequences.

Nixon did not wait very long to extend an overture to the Soviet Union. During his Inaugural Address, Nixon said that he was prepared to enter "an era of negotiations" with the Soviet Union.⁴ Soviet Leadership seemed warm to the idea from the start. In this matter, Nixon had an advantage. The story of détente would likely not be possible if not for a change in Soviet leadership prior to Nixon's election. The more moderate Leonid Brezhnev had replaced Nikita Khrushchev, the hard-line Soviet Premier, and Nixon and Brezhnev are now forever linked in this extraordinary story. Despite their cooperation, Nixon and Brezhnev had different motives in approaching the other.

For Nixon, everything in the foreign policy realm related to the quagmire dropped in his lap. Realizing how unpopular the war in Vietnam had become (the mass protests certainly helped to hasten that realization), Nixon began searching for a way out of Asia without losing all objectives in the region as well as considerable international prestige. For Nixon, who had long been convinced that Moscow was pulling the strings in Hanoi, any talk of negotiations was linked to the war in Southeast Asia. In addition, the Americans had other motives. Nixon, who prided himself on being a pragmatic realist, came to the conclusion that nuclear dominance was no longer a realistic goal because the Soviets had developed too large a nuclear armament to hope to control it. Though it may

⁴ Stoessinger pg 83

have been tough to admit, both sides were fully capable of destroying the other.⁵ The only solution at the time was for Nixon and Brezhnev to come together to ensure that the worst-case scenario did not become reality.

Nixon had some personal reasons for approaching the table as well. As discussed earlier, Nixon was nearly the last person anyone expected to open talks with the Soviets. Before assuming the Presidency, Nixon's most famous interaction with the Soviet Union had been in the so-called Kitchen Debate with Khrushchev in Moscow in 1959. However, Nixon felt that he was most qualified to open the door to the Soviets, partially because his biggest potential critic was in the mirror. If anyone else had attempted the same thing, Nixon reasoned, they would have to deal with him. Therefore, Nixon would be free of the most critical voice in the nation. His outstanding record on communism would give him room to maneuver where others may have been pressured to the right. Furthermore, Nixon had a more personal angle as he loved the idea of shocking his critics and keeping people guessing.⁶ Finally, with the 1972 Presidential Election approaching, Nixon saw an opportunity to take an issue away from the liberals and exhibit his considerable abilities at a most opportune time.

While the Americans could be characterized as willing to talk, the Soviets were eager to establish better relations. However, their motives were numerous. First and foremost was the emergence of China as a potential power. China and the Soviet Union had never had a warm coexistence, and they were on what appeared to many analysts to be collision course. By 1972, the Soviets had more troops on the Chinese border than

⁵ Ambrose, Stephen E. *Nixon The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972*.

⁶ Ambrose pg 439

they did in all of Europe.⁷ The rivalry was further complicated when the United States began to open relations with China. Brezhnev saw this as a potential threat and did not want to become the odd man out. Nixon and Kissinger recognized this growing Chinese-Soviet rivalry and saw an opportunity to play one off the other. China was the driving factor because once China began talks with the United States, the Soviets felt like they had to take similar steps to open relations. Throughout the era of détente, China and the Soviet Union would be inextricably linked.

The Soviets had also become victims of their own success. As the Soviet Union grew, their technologies had not kept up with needs. The Soviets exuded an aura of strength, but internally problems were abundant. As a result, Brezhnev was anxious to gain access to American technology and scientific advancements. He also desired to purchase U.S. goods, especially food stuffs such as corn.⁸ Even the Soviets were forced to admit that the United States was a strong player to have in your corner. Brezhnev recognized the advantages of open relations with America, so much so that he effectively staked his reputation as a leader on the success of détente.

From the very beginning, United States National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger played a large role in the negotiations with the Soviet Union; however, for several reasons, all negotiations were to be done in the most secret manner possible. First and foremost, secrecy would allow for the free flow of ideas. If information was constantly leaked into the media, every overture would become world news and the stress would inhibit progress. Nixon had another, more personal reason for secrecy, timing. Nixon wanted any announcements of progress made on his terms, and his terms were

⁷ Ambrose pg 514

⁸ Stoessinger pg 84

always near election time. For the most part, Nixon managed to keep all talks a secret. This was no small accomplishment for an administration that struggled to plug leaks, the Pentagon Papers being a prime example.⁹ Nixon was able to keep most of Kissinger's activities away from the eyes of the public, to the point that on occasion Kissinger would be in Moscow, and the United States ambassador would be unaware. The Secretary of State was often out of the loop as well. In many aspects the negotiations were a two-man show. While this made for an unhappy State Department, it gave Kissinger tremendous latitude with Brezhnev; in turn, he had great influence on the final product.

The first negotiating session began on November 11, 1969 in Helsinki, Finland.¹⁰ From the beginning it was decided that the Soviets would be allowed to throw out ideas and the Americans would answer. This went further to reduce the pressure of SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) talks. The first SALT meetings began in Helsinki on November 17, 1969, less than a year into Nixon's presidency. The nature of these early talks was purposely vague, but from the beginning the Soviets valued one thing over all others, ABMs.

An ABM or anti-ballistic missile was a defensive arm used to counter offensive nuclear weapons. By 1969, both the Americans and the Soviets had been developing missile defense systems, and the potential of American success scared the Soviets. With the number of offensive missiles too large to hope for disarmament, the greatest deterrent to using nukes against the other nation was Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). In other words, one nation was significantly less likely to deploy nuclear weapons if the end result would be destruction all around. In essence, what both sides were trying to ensure was

⁹ Ambrose

¹⁰ Stoessinger

the retention of second strike capability. Throughout the period of détente and the Cold War, the issue of missile defense was primary to the Soviets. (As late as 1985, talks between Reagan and Gorbachev broke up over Reagan's refusal to sacrifice SDI missile defense.) The main question during this time was what America was willing to sacrifice.

The end result of the first SALT conference was nothing tangible. However, in the spirit of détente, this was acceptable. The point of the conference was not necessarily the final result but rather the spirit of compromise. The two great nations continued to meet and a second conference lasted from April to August of 1970. During this time, impressive progress was made in Vienna. The end result was an agreement in principle to limiting ABMs to protecting the respective national capitals and primary missile launching bases. For the first time in the nuclear age, nations had made the initial steps toward agreement on willing disarmament.

The third SALT summit (November, 1970, once again in Helsinki) focused on offensive Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles or ICBMs. The talks came down to numbers of launchers, interesting in a sense as it would not take very many missiles to do significant damage to a nation. However, for the Soviets, this became somewhat of a beauty contest. Kissinger, always devoted to détente, advised Nixon to give ground as Kissinger knew that this would allow the Soviets to claim nuclear superiority. Furthermore, he knew that this appearance was mostly facial and not reality. In fact, while the United States would have fewer weapons because of the negotiations, the weapons they had were far superior to those of other nations. In fact, the Americans had technology that allowed American military leaders to launch multiple warheads from one missile silo. In a sense, the Americans were allowing the Soviets to think they were

gaining a clear advantage when they were not. The negotiations came down to limiting the expansion of new ICBMs. Once it became known that part of the agreement would include a promise to limit the creation of new ICBMs, the Soviets began to stall because the freeze on building new weapons would not take effect until the agreement was officially signed. The Soviets were busy building as many weapons as they could during negotiations.¹¹

While the Soviets had a clear goal in negotiating during the SALT meetings, Washington was split between two schools of thought. Nixon wanted any progress in arms limitation directly tied to progress in Vietnam. Since the beginning of the negotiations, Nixon strongly believed that the Soviet Union had a strong hand in what was taking place in Southeast Asia. According to Nixon, any progress in Vienna would be threatened by a lack of help in Vietnam. He had several reasons for maintaining this as a focus. Vietnam was the issue that drove public opinion, and he had promised to end the war with honor when he was elected. Nixon saw a chance to fulfill his campaign promise through the negotiations. On one hand, he was busy escalating the war, but he was well aware public support would not last. Thus, he began looking for a way out that would maintain regional stability.

Kissinger had a different focus in mind than Nixon. During the era of détente, he was wholly dedicated to his focus. On several occasions, Kissinger advised concessions to keep talks alive. In no case was the division between Nixon and Kissinger clearer than over Vietnam. While Nixon did not want to accept any agreement that did not include linkage to Vietnam, Kissinger was willing to cut the American losses and pull out. In fact, in a strange way, Kissinger did not seem to mind the idea of a Soviet supported

¹¹ Thornton

communist Vietnam. He felt that allowing a Soviet supported Vietnam would result in a situation in which China would be surrounded by hostile communist nations. Kissinger was more than willing to play the communist neighbors off each other, and he saw this as an opportunity to play on the mutual fear of both China and the Soviet Union. This disagreement between Nixon and Kissinger would become a theme throughout Nixon's tenure in the oval office.

The third round of SALT talks broke down without an agreement reached on ICBMs. The Soviets insisted on a separate treaty covering ABMs and ICBMs, and they stalled in an attempt to delay the freeze on offensive weapons. The Americans countered by agreeing in principle to a freeze on offensive weapons, but the Soviets continued to delay official ratification of that portion of the agreement as long as possible.

Despite a lack of consensus on the development of ICBMs, enough progress had been made to make the first official announcement of progress. On May 20, 1971, a preliminary agreement was reached that would make up the core of the SALT I treaty (though the Soviets attempted to word the Soviet language version to their advantage).¹² The treaty announcement signaled the "beginning of a new era."¹³

All the while, the United States was continuing to increase communication with China, not without the attention (and chagrin) of the Soviets. On June 10, the United States ended a twenty-one year trade embargo with China.¹⁴ On July 15, Nixon made the official announcement that he would make a state visit to China. The Soviets were forced to view their own posturing as ineffective and potentially dangerous. It was one thing to give in negotiation; it was another to be shut out completely. With China and the Soviet

¹² Thornton

¹³ Ambrose

¹⁴ Ibid.

Union more rivals than comrades, and Nixon still convinced that Vietnam and détente with the Soviets were inseparable, two party dealings took place with multiple elephants in the closet.

Though the Soviets and Americans had been engaging in SALT talks for over a year, the public was kept largely in the dark. Nixon wanted to produce such a trump card at the most opportune moment for himself politically. With the 1972 Presidential election approaching, the White House announced that President Nixon would travel to Moscow for a summit on relations, only the second President to do so. The two nations prepared for an historic meeting in Moscow.

However, as so often happened with American-Soviet relations, the rest of the world would not allow so simple an arrangement. In the small Asian region of East Pakistan an independence movement was stirring, a movement fully supported by neighbor India. India was friendly with the U.S.S.R., and this was naturally unsettling for West Pakistan, who happened to be a U.S. ally. As conditions in East Pakistan moved toward war, Indian military positioned themselves to invade Pakistan, and America was already lending aid to Pakistan. By the time war broke out in December, both the Americans and the Soviets were ankle deep in the conflict. This entanglement threatened the summit in addition to the future of SALT and détente. The dedication of both sides to détente was to be tested.

Though the Americans were prepared to pull out of the summit in the Soviet Union, Nixon decided not to. In East Pakistan, India pulled their troops back and a new

nation was born.¹⁵ Despite an ongoing war in Vietnam (one which Nixon had just escalated by mining the waters offshore), and tensions in Asia and the Middle East, Nixon left for Moscow on May 20, 1972 and forever changed the history of American foreign policy. He arrived on May 22 and was given a grand tour, becoming the first president to visit the Kremlin. The framework of the arms treaty had been developed during the SALT talks, but Nixon still had plenty to do. Though Nixon took part in talks over economic détente, the primary purpose of the meeting was achieved on May 26 when Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev made history by signing part one of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. Each nation agreed to a limit of two hundred defensive launchers, one hundred around the respective capital cities and another one hundred to guard offensive weapons.¹⁶ Each nation also agreed not to develop a nationwide defense system, an agreement the United States would attempt to pull out of thirty years later. Each nation also agreed to limit the number of ICBMs produced, developing a trade out system by which the nation could trade out older weapons for modern counterparts. However, advances in weapons technology made these swaps a misleading proposition. For one of the first times in history, two great nations mutually agreed to limit their own military force, at least in a sense. Arms reduction was the crowning achievement of the summit, and perhaps in the administrations of both Nixon and Brezhnev.

While arms reduction was the jewel of the event, Nixon was kept adequately busy with other matters. Along with military détente came economic détente. For Nixon and the Americans, this was a worthwhile endeavor as it was an opportunity to sell to a new

¹⁵ Ambrose. The conflict was one of the few examples when the Soviets stared down the U.S. and came out mostly ahead. The end result was the new nation of Bangladesh and an increased animosity between India and Pakistan.

¹⁶ Stoessinger

and large market. Furthermore, Americans felt that if the Soviets were economically reliant on the United States, they would be less likely to wage war.¹⁷ For the Soviets, economic détente was crucial because they needed both American raw goods and technological insight to help support what had become an overwhelming burden of area and people. While the primary Soviet goal of détente was to reduce American arms, it can be certainly said that the promise of economic benefit helped lure the Soviets to the table. By the end of 1972, the Soviets had purchased over \$1 billion in American grain with more to come. In the spirit of détente, the Soviets agreed to pay some lend-lease debt incurred during the Second World War.¹⁸ A plan was implemented in which the Soviet Union created a payment plan for \$722 million.¹⁹

Negotiations in Moscow also produced technological sharing agreements. In an interesting juxtaposition from the space race of the previous decade, the Americans willingly shared technology with the Soviets. (Later in the decade this friendship would result in the iconic “handshake in space”). With the race to the moon won, astronauts and cosmonauts would work in concert in the space station age. Furthermore, American engineers were given permission to explore Siberia in search of natural gas.

As Nixon had hoped, the Moscow summit was a triumph. Most Americans lauded the President for his strong action in making the world safer. More than anything, the world was impressed with the ability of Nixon and Brezhnev to set aside their national differences to achieve peaceful arms reduction. For a man who grew up in a Quaker home, who was bombed in World War Two, and had been bemoaned as a war monger,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ambrose

¹⁹ Stoessinger

Nixon must have been exultant. His popularity soared and his re-election, once very much in doubt, was becoming more likely.

As was almost always the case with Nixon, his victory was not complete. Most of the public opinion was behind arms reduction, but not all agreed with the economic and technological détente. Critics argued that the Soviets were reaching equality with Americans by being brought up to their level. In other words, the Soviets had everything to gain and the Americans could gain very little or nothing. In an interesting personal reversal, Nixon was accused of being too kind to the Soviets and giving away too much. This was not the Nixon of Alger Hiss or even the Kitchen Debate. This was a new and compromising Nixon, willing to listen to the pragmatists such as Kissinger over the hawks in Congress. Nixon had deferred to Kissinger on the issue of linkage, agreeing to proceed with SALT even though it was absent of any substantive agreement on Vietnam. By acting in this manner, Nixon had seemed to finally get the last laugh on his critics.

With the President still basking in the sheen of the Moscow summit, he received still more good news from Europe. The Soviet Union and West Germany had finally reached an understanding on the issue of Berlin. The great city had served as a center stage during the Cold War and this agreement, while mostly coincidental in timing, highlighted Nixon's victory all the more. By 1973, both East Germany and West Germany had been accepted as sovereigns into the United Nations.²⁰ The thaw in relations was almost tangible.

In November of 1972, Richard Nixon was overwhelmingly re-elected as President of the United States. Even as Nixon was bathing in red, white, and blue pageantry, the

²⁰ Stoessinger

public was becoming aware of a break-in at the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. However, few knew what havoc would be unleashed on the Nixon administration.

By December of 1972, Nixon turned over control of foreign policy to Henry Kissinger. This move came as a result of steadily increasing pressure from Watergate and made official what some felt had been fact for two years.²¹ Kissinger wasted no time before he acted with his new power. As 1972 gave way to 1973, the United States went back to the table with the Viet Cong. With Kissinger now calling the shots, the American focus shifted from an honorable withdrawal to withdrawal under the best attainable conditions. On January 27, 1973, the United States formally signed a peace treaty with Vietnam, ending arguably the most unpopular ordeal in American military history. The terms reached by Kissinger were predictably less than flattering for the United States. In the philosophical battle between Nixon and Kissinger, Henry Kissinger had won, if albeit, a hollow victory as the pragmatists trumped the idealists.

In April of 1973, Nixon presented a bill to Congress that would give him the ability to expand trade with the Soviet Union. Nixon ultimately sought “favored nation status” for the Soviets. This idea was unpopular with some Americans and several in Congress. A bill granting the President expanded trade powers was finally passed on December 20, 1974, but Nixon would not be the beneficiary of the legislation.²²

In June of 1973, Nixon and Brezhnev again met in Washington D.C.²³ The agreements reached amounted to little in tangible achievement but represented a continuing shift in attitudes. Each nation pledged to avoid nuclear war and to submit to

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²² Thornton

²³ Stoessinger

third party talks to settle disputes. Nixon and Brezhnev both agreed to continued talks with one another as well.

Despite his incredible foreign policy accomplishment, Nixon could not avoid the trap he had laid for himself. As the year progressed, more information became public concerning the break-in at the DNC. Some began to call for Nixon to resign, and by 1974, Congress was starting impeachment proceedings. Even many in Nixon's party were distancing themselves. When the Supreme Court unanimously denied Nixon's request to keep secret the content of White House tapes, Nixon realized it was a matter of when he would be impeached, not if he would be impeached.

In July 1974, Richard Nixon appeared at the site of his first major triumph with another Moscow conference. However, by this time Nixon's position was weakened on the world stage as well as domestically. While Nixon was the official United States presence, Kissinger wielded the greatest influence. Détente would continue, but with a leader other than Nixon.

On August 9, 1974, Richard Nixon stepped down as President of the United States. The era of détente continued under Kissinger and new President Gerald Ford, but the enigmatic Nixon would not share in future successes. He retired to home to California to live out the life of author and statesmen, if perhaps an unpopular one.²⁴

With the Cold War won and the Soviet Union dissolved, Americans look back at détente as a starting point, a point when the nation realized that success could be achieved with diplomacy as well as force. What then was the legacy of détente? How would history remember its players? The answers are sometimes hard to see clearly due to the smudge of Watergate, but they are worth considering.

²⁴ Nixon

Richard Nixon wanted to be a President of international consequence and a broker of peace in the world. This image seems inaccurate in light of the expansion of the Vietnam War, but one must consider what Nixon did with what he was given and what he did on his own. Perhaps it was his Quaker upbringing or coming of age during World War Two, but Richard Nixon knew that violence, while sometimes unavoidable, was not the ultimate answer. In his first inauguration speech, he said that the greatest title history could bestow on someone was that of peacemaker.²⁵ Peace was possible if leaders were willing to work for it.

Richard Nixon once said that all he wanted was a life with one more victory than defeat. Whether or not he achieved this goal is debatable. However, few would argue that his greatest victory as President was détente. Détente represented the best of Nixon: to willingly defer to the expertise of others, to trust a nation that he had made a career out of not trusting, and to abandon image in favor of substance. A complete history of Nixon includes the image of a statesman who opened relations between two great superpowers, and he made peace a possibility by doing so.

²⁵ Ibid.

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