FROM CONTAINMENT TO DETENTE: ASPECTS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER JOHNSON AND NIXON

by

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PREFACE

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The following sub-thesis is entirely my own work. All sources used are acknowledged in the accompanying footnotes. Errors of fact, perception and interpretation are entirely my own.

Adrian E. Burn
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The history of diplomacy is the history of relations among rival powers, which did not enjoy political intimacy, and did not respond to appeals to common purposes. Nevertheless, there have been settlements. Some of them did not last very long. Some of them did. For a diplomat to think that rival and unfriendly powers cannot be brought to a settlement is to forget what diplomacy is about.

Walter Lippmann, 1947

The years from 1963 to 1974 were a turbulent and eventful period in American life. From the assassination of John F. Kennedy to the resignation of Richard Nixon, the period was characterized by social and political upheaval. After the stability and predictability of the Eisenhower years and then the optimism and excitement generated by the youthful President Kennedy, the years of Johnson and Nixon saw a sharp growth in domestic political dissent, unprecedented attacks on political institutions and civil authorities, and a deep questioning of many of the foundations of American foreign policy.

This paper concerns itself specifically with aspects of American foreign policy and, in particular, how and why those policies came to be dramatically reorientated in the decade following Kennedy's assassination. The Presidencies of Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy were years of continuity in foreign affairs for the United States, with the common thread of implacable opposition to and containment of communism, as first spelt out in the Truman Doctrine of 1947. The gradual realization under Lyndon Johnson that the containment policies of the Truman Doctrine were failing to secure

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US global interests, most vividly illustrated by the impasse of Vietnam, and then the subsequent questioning by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger of many of the existing certainties and assumptions, represented the most fundamental reassessment of American foreign policies undertaken since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 had dramatically ended America's traditional isolationism. As such, knowledge of the Presidencies of Johnson and Nixon is crucial to an understanding of the evolution of US foreign and national security policies.

In moving to analyse that period of evolution, this paper commences with a chapter of historical background, showing the central reasons for the changing shape of foreign policies from the latter years of World War II through the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. The increasing American commitments and expectations through those years, reaching their high point with the bold rhetoric of John F. Kennedy, are examined.

The next chapter is devoted to an examination of the declining efficacy of the post-war containment policies, with emphasis on the Vietnam war as the embodiment of and reason for that decline. Foreign affairs, and its domestic political impact, caused the political downfall of Lyndon Johnson, thus being dramatic evidence of the failure of US foreign policies to that time. The chapter indicates that Johnson's successor more or less had to look for new ways for America to manage its global affairs if the US was to reassert its post-war dominance and organise foreign policy outcomes to its own advantage.

The fourth chapter looks at the changes in foreign affairs that occurred under Richard Nixon with particular reference to the emerging detente with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and then the move to
normalize relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). These moves toward America's two key ideological adversaries represented a revolutionary change in US foreign policies, recognizing the necessity to construct a system of global power-sharing, shared interests and mutual understandings, while maintaining disparate national interests and spheres of influence. Nixon moved beyond the traditional European-style bipolar balance to an attempted tripolar balance, offering positive inducements to the USSR and the PRC to actively participate in the emerging international system, while maintaining a US deterrent against belligerent behaviour at a cost that was to be more acceptable than the "global policeman" role implicit in containment. Nixon saw the benefits for the US of closer relations with both communist powers and of playing each communist power off against the other. It was an activist and manipulative foreign policy, dependent in part upon the prevailing international and domestic climate, in part upon the process of evolution of US foreign policies, and in part upon the personalities of Nixon and Kissinger.

The conclusion is that Nixon had a great chance to achieve a new bipartisan foreign policy consensus and thus to secure his place in American history. He did achieve the latter, but through the trials of political scandal rather than from the plaudits of international statesmen and foreign policy commentators.

The years of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon form a fascinating period of recent American history. This paper concentrates on the foreign policy aspects of those years as it attempts to chart and explain, albeit briefly and selectively, the evolution in US foreign policies from containment to detente.
CHAPTER II

FROM WORLD WAR II TO KENNEDY:
GROWING U.S. STRENGTH AND COMMITMENTS

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty. This much we pledge - and more.

John F. Kennedy,
inaugural address,

I

When President Monroe enunciated the Monroe Doctrine in December 1823, declaring that the United States would rigorously avoid involvement in European affairs (and that the Europeans should similarly avoid interfering in the Americas), he ushered in a long era of US isolationism. That isolationism continued until 1941, broken only by America's somewhat belated entry into World War I and President Wilson's subsequent efforts at the Versailles peace conference to establish the League of Nations. Significantly, the American people did not share Wilson's belief in the value of participating in the new world forum, and the US stayed out of the League.

The Second World War again saw the US participating in a global conflict whose origins lay in Europe. By the time of the war's conclusion in 1945 it was obvious that the US would have a continuing involvement with European affairs, if only with the economic reconstruction of its allies. This involvement was turned into an inviolable policy with President Truman's announcement of the Truman Doctrine in 1947. The Doctrine signalled a
permanent commitment to European and global security, thereafter making a return to isolationism impossible for the US.

The origins of the Truman Doctrine can be found in World War II, specifically with developments in Eastern Europe and with constant Soviet preoccupation with security against external attack. By virtue of its membership of the Grand Alliance, and its role in the defeat of Germany, the Soviet Union was poised to have a decisive influence over Eastern Europe after the war. President Roosevelt realized this and "sought to ensure a stable postwar order by offering Moscow a prominent place in it".¹ The defeat of Germany was going to ensure a power vacuum in Eastern Europe which the Soviet Union expected to fill. Roosevelt envisaged a postwar world based on a Wilsonian concept of the US, UK, USSR and China collectively ensuring global security, and he did not see Soviet ideology as a barrier to such co-operation. In fact Roosevelt thought the Soviets were not without virtues:

They are friendly people. They haven't got any crazy ideas of conquest, and so forth; and now that they have got to know us they are much more willing to accept us.²

It seems that Roosevelt's explanation for Soviet behaviour in their paranoia about security inclined him to be tolerant towards them, seeing postwar global security likely to be enhanced by co-operative policies (an early version of detente). His death in April 1945 means that it cannot be known how he would have reacted to postwar events, although it is known co-operative policies (particularly the Lend-Lease program) were becoming increasingly unpopular.


² Roosevelt, undated citation in Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, p.9.
II

The change of President from Roosevelt to Truman did not mean a clear change in US policies. Truman had been chosen by Roosevelt as a compromise vice-presidential candidate in 1944 and his preparation for the Presidency was less than comprehensive, especially in foreign affairs. Roosevelt never confided in him and indeed saw him on a couple of occasions outside Cabinet meetings - and "Roosevelt never discussed anything important at his Cabinet meetings". Roosevelt was in Washington for only thirty days while Truman was Vice-President, so Truman entered the White House knowing "about as much as any other careful newspaper reader" - an astonishing state of ignorance for someone called upon to lead the US in wartime.

Although Roosevelt had kept Truman remote from nearly all important questions, "this characteristic negligence in no way lessened the new Chief Executive's determination, upon entering the White House, to work towards the goals his predecessor had set". He had no intention of reversing Roosevelt's commitment to co-operation with the Soviet Union. Although, being raw in foreign policy matters, Truman generally accepted advice on foreign affairs "with an alacrity that unsettled even those providing it".

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4 Barber, Presidential Character, p.249.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
The world that faced Truman at the war's end was vastly different from that of 1939. Many of the European political structures and relationships were destroyed and even the victors were severely debilitated. Against this background was the Soviet attitude towards Poland and Eastern Europe. Stalin had long made it clear that a "friendly" government in Poland was absolutely essential to the Soviet Union, but the Yalta Conference, and his agreement to hold free elections in Eastern Europe, led to soaring expectations in America. However, both the White House and State Department probably realized that governments "friendly" to the USSR and free elections were irreconcilable concepts. American domestic opinion expected the Eastern European countries to retain their capitalist orientation with a high degree of integration with the West, and when this failed to happen "millions of Americans were outraged". Scapegoats were sought even up to the highest levels of the American government. This emotional and complex situation faced the inexperienced Truman.

From the outset of Truman's Presidency Soviet statements, attitudes and policies puzzled and increasingly disconcerted American policy makers. In an effort to find a rationale for Soviet behaviour the administration sought an explanation from the American embassy in Moscow. The result was the famous 8000 word telegram from George Kennan in February 1946, which charged that the attempt at normal US/Soviet relations during and after the war was blocked by structural impediments. The telegram, together with a later article in Foreign Affairs (called "The Sources of Soviet Conduct") forced a

8 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, p.15.
10 Ibid.
change in US foreign policy attitudes and practices that was to remain essentially unchallenged for over twenty years. In short, Kennan's assessment ushered in the policy of containment, which was officially stated when the President enunciated the Truman Doctrine on 12 March 1947.

Ignoring the Yalta agreements, which implicitly gave the Soviet Union a "sphere of influence" in Eastern Europe, Truman charged that communist activities in Turkey and Greece (where Britain had recently indicated inability to continue maintaining its presence - thus signalling that the US would have to take over the responsibility) and ruthless Soviet behaviour inside their own bloc, effectively divided the world on ideological lines. In promising to "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures", Morgenthau believed "the Truman Doctrine transformed a concrete interest of the United States in a geographically defined part of the world into a moral principle of worldwide validity, to be applied regardless of the limits of American interest and American power".12

Ideological differences were seen as insurmountable hurdles to peaceful co-existence, and the works of Lenin and Marx were viewed in Washington "not as a body of political philosophy but as a field manual of Soviet strategy". Communism was viewed as a monolithic expansionist enemy which had to be "contained" by all possible means. "Virtually no-one in a


position of power was receptive to the hypothesis that Soviet truculence
reflected weakness rather than strength",\textsuperscript{14} Fulbright has suggested.
Containment provided Truman's globalist rhetoric with a strategy to match
his means (of greatly reduced US military strength).

The slide into Cold War became a certainty with the announcement on 5 June
1947 of Secretary of State Marshall's ambitious plan to stave off the very
real threat of imminent European economic collapse, and the implicit
advantages that would have for the Soviet Union. Aid was offered to any
European government, including those in the Soviet sphere. It was the
Soviet bloc's refusal to accept the aid (on 2 August 1947), and hence
economic integration with the non-communist world, that divided Europe into
two hostile groups.

Containment was a political and military strategy devised to deal with the
reality of massively increased Soviet influence, the implications of
substantially reduced American military strength, and the incompatibility of
the two opposing ideologies. It continued to underlie American foreign
policies, albeit with varying emphases and nuances, until the total impasse
of America's Vietnam involvement. The Truman Doctrine was the ideological
rationale for the concept of containment. While perhaps appropriate to its
time, the wisdom of its universal application for decades afterwards has
been questioned:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The perniciousness of the anti-Communist ideology of the Truman
Doctrine arises not from patent falsehood but from its
distortion and simplification of reality, from its
universalization and its elevation to the status of a revealed
truth.}\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.25.
In part the Doctrine was couched in language designed for domestic consumption. There had to be a good reason for the massive aid to Europe proposed under the Marshall Plan and an ideological crusade was one way to counter the historical American tendency towards isolationism. There was a clear need for the US to accept the global burdens which Britain and other European nations could no longer shoulder, "to assume leadership in organizing and directing the power of the free world [and] to balance, and thereby ... check, the expanding power of the Soviet Union".16

A number of factors emerged in the months and years following the announcement of the Truman Doctrine which were seen as evidence of communist aggression. In September 1947 at the inauguration of the Cominform (an economic grouping of Eastern bloc countries), Soviet Foreign Minister Zhdanov urged colonial countries to engage in wars of liberation to gain their independence, and subsequent communist risings in India and South-East Asia were seen in the West as a direct consequence of the speech.

Another development seemingly supportive of Truman's thesis was the Soviet blockade of West Berlin from late 1948 to May 1949, forcing the Americans and British to supply the Western sector by airlift. The Soviet explosion of an atomic device in September 1949 ended the American monopoly of the atomic bomb, providing further "evidence" of aggressive Soviet intentions.

The "loss of China" in 1949 and the onset of the Korean war in 1950, presumed, along with the above factors, to be masterminded by a monolithic source, seemed glowing justification for the Cold War rhetoric emanating from Washington and sufficient reason for a considerable build-up in America's armed forces.

16 Halle, Dream and Reality, p.300.
Many of the ground rules for East-West diplomacy for the next twenty years had been firmly set by the time Truman vacated the White House, and indeed the anti-communism of the Truman Doctrine, its underlying assumptions rarely questioned, has been the guiding spirit of American foreign policy ever since. Anti-communist fervour, encouraged by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, made it politically inexpedient for any administration to soften its anti-communist rhetoric. Dwight D. Eisenhower, a vastly different leader from Truman, inherited the political climate and assumptions of the Truman era.

III

Eisenhower's win in the 1952 election ended twenty years of unbroken Democratic tenancy in the White House and might have been expected to usher in significant changes in US foreign policies. Eisenhower contrasted sharply with the unknown quantity that Truman had been on assuming the Presidency. He was a renowned wartime military leader and he had immense experience of international relations at the highest level. However, he shared most of Truman's foreign policy assumptions.

Eisenhower won the 1952 election primarily because he promised to end the Korean war, but also because of constant allegations of corruption in the Truman administration and McCarthy's charges that communists had infiltrated the highest levels of government. In addition, the Republicans' campaign rhetoric, promising to go beyond containment to a policy of "roll back", probably won important support from ethnic minorities. The Republican platform, condemning containment as "negative, futile and immoral" for
abandoning "countless human beings to a despotism and a Godless terrorism",\textsuperscript{17} ensured "Eisenhower reaped where McCarthy sowed".\textsuperscript{18}

For all the rhetoric of the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower's foreign policies were if anything more cautious than Truman's. Eisenhower was well placed to seek a thaw in the Cold War despite the confrontationist implications of his campaign rhetoric. Although he "shared with the majority of Americans the belief that the Kremlin directed a monolithic conspiracy aimed at taking over the world",\textsuperscript{19} his wartime experience gave him a high level of credibility in seeking to end the Korean war. Rather than relying largely on military strength, Eisenhower "seems to have believed that the United States would have to look to non-military instruments to protect its interests..."\textsuperscript{20}

The Eisenhower administration was staffed by economic conservatives who believed the US to be threatened as much by expansionary economic policies and big budget deficits as by communists. As Gaddis suggests, the Republicans' pre-election rhetoric was "motivated in fact more by determination to lure East European voting blocs away from Democrats than from any realistic expectations of 'rolling back' Moscow's sphere of influence".\textsuperscript{21} Domestic influences, both fiscal and political, can therefore

\textsuperscript{17} Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.94.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{21} Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, p.128.
be seen to have been no less important in determining foreign policies under Eisenhower than under Truman.

Eisenhower wished to reduce defence expenditure, which meant that a policy that more readily fitted means to ends than did the "global policeman" assumptions of containment, had to be found. This resulted in National Security Council resolution 162/2 (NSC 162/2), which advocated deterrence through the threat of "massive retaliation", that is the threatened use of nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union or its allies whenever thought necessary. Initially Soviet aggression was allegedly to be deterred by relying on US air and sea power to bolster indigenous forces (thus obviating the necessity for the US to maintain costly overseas deployments) with nuclear weapons retained as the decisive option. This was expected to prove a less costly defence policy than containment while the US maintained an effective monopoly on the means of "delivering" a massive retaliatory nuclear blow, but one where the stakes were significantly higher. "Thus conservative economic theories were operationalized in the fields of foreign affairs and defence by the massive retaliation policy and its diplomatic implications", according to Capitanchik.22

In the words of Eisenhower's Defense Secretary Wilson, it was "more bang for a buck",23 but as a refinement of Truman's containment policies it was based on brittle assumptions. It "assumed that Moscow and Peking could be held accountable for the actions of communists throughout the world; that the threat of nuclear massive retaliation was inherently credible to friends and enemies and that everyone would know the difference between a 'brushfire

22 Capitanchik, Eisenhower Presidency, p.44.

23 Defense Secretary Wilson, undated citation in Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.79.
war' and a war which could trigger an American nuclear response". Whether the so-called "New Look" succeeded or failed in a crisis depended on the soundness of those assumptions.

The key to the New Look was America's superior ability to "deliver" large numbers of nuclear bombs to the Soviet homeland. This enabled Eisenhower to put restraints on military expenditure while retaining sufficient strategic superiority to deter a Soviet attack on Western Europe or the US. But once the Soviets attained a comparable capacity against the US mainland, the stage would be set for an arms race unless the superpowers could reach an accommodation.

The assumptions underlying the New Look were not put to the test until 1956. By 1955 Cold War boundaries had been irrevocably defined with the entry of West Germany into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the subsequent creation of the Warsaw Pact. In July of that year Eisenhower met the Soviet leaders in Geneva, and a divided Europe thereafter became a reality which no subsequent President could pledge to change though policies of "roll back" or liberation.

In 1956 serious "intramural" tensions developed. The Suez and Hungarian crises "dramatised certain fissiparous tendencies within the two blocs and, perhaps more importantly, they illustrated the failings of relying too exclusively on the military instruments of power". Such episodes (the first of which marked the effective sunset of British and French global influence - at least on an imperial scale - and the second, a schism in the

24---------------- Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.79.

Soviet bloc) were salutary experiences for the Eisenhower administration of the complexity of East-West relations and the unpredictability of relations within camps.

By Eisenhower's second term his administration no longer saw the world in strictly bipolar terms, even if the guiding light of American foreign policy - resistance to communist aggression - remained constant, and he became keen to establish a lasting peace with the Soviet Union.

Eisenhower brought experience and wisdom to the White House, along with an avuncular and reassuring style. He avoided direct military involvement in Vietnam after the French defeat in 1954 (although later initiating a program of massive military and economic aid to the Saigon government) and he created a number of pacts and treaties which tied countries into regional anti-communist groupings with the US, as the following map illustrates:26
Such treaties were examples of how Eisenhower refined Truman's foreign policies without challenging the basis of containment.

Towards the end of Eisenhower's second term there was a lessening of East-West tensions, enabling Khrushchev to visit the US in 1959 and Vice-President Nixon to visit the USSR (even though the propaganda war did not abate). But the possibility of Eisenhower leaving a legacy of lessened global tensions to his successor was lost when an American U2 "spy plane" was shot down deep inside Soviet territory, causing the abandonment of the Paris summit meeting scheduled for May 1960. Open hostility once again became the norm in superpower relations as the US prepared for the 1960 presidential elections, ensuring that foreign affairs would take a prominent place in the campaign.

Eisenhower's Presidency had seen the world change dramatically even while he essentially continued his predecessor's foreign policies (though attempting to curb defence expenditure). A line had been drawn in Europe, but regimes hostile to US interests had multiplied in South-East Asia (eg North Vietnam). The 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine had been designed to forestall increased Soviet influence in the Middle East following the Suez debacle and, although it was forcefully applied in 1958 when US Marines were landed in Lebanon, it effectively challenged the Soviet Union to increase its activities in the region in order to retain its own level of influence. In the Caribbean there had been a revolution on the United States' doorstep, where Castro had taken over in Cuba and, after his initial overtures to the US were spurned, had forged strong links with the Soviet Union.

America itself had changed under Eisenhower as well, with the decline of the rampant anti-communism of the McCarthy era. Eisenhower's leadership gave
the US "time to mature and become reconciled to a more sophisticated world role".\(^{27}\) This new maturity was tested during the Presidency of John F. Kennedy, when America's power and prestige was dramatically challenged and Cold War tensions reached a new peak.

IV

The transition from Eisenhower to Kennedy marked a significant watershed in American politics, not least on a symbolic and stylistic level. Whereas the ageing and predictable Eisenhower had seemed above politics in many ways, the relatively youthful Kennedy was intensely political—a charismatic figure able to command widespread support for an entirely different set of reasons. He was, to a significant extent, the first American President for whom image and style were as important as policy and platform.

The record of Kennedy's brief incumbency in the White House indicates that he had a profound effect on international relations—although he did not reduce Cold War tensions. Kennedy disliked what he saw as self-imposed limitations on America's world role in the preceding years and "[he] and his aides were especially interested in restoring the prestige and primacy of the Presidency, which they felt had fallen under Eisenhower".\(^{28}\) His sentiments resembled those used earlier by advocates of "roll back". He saw the ideological conflict as not confined to Europe:

> The great battleground for the defence and expansion of freedom today is the whole southern half of the globe ... the lands of the rising people.\(^{29}\)

\(^{27}\) Capitanchik, Eisenhower Presidency, p.72.

\(^{28}\) Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.246.

\(^{29}\) Kennedy, undated citation in Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p. 248.
His rhetoric seemed more ambitious than "containment" or Eisenhower's essentially conciliatory approach to international differences.

Despite his persona of wit and erudition, Kennedy did not believe that words and reasoning alone could counter Soviet ambitions. He thought instead that the only way to deal with the supposed monolithic expansionist communist enemy was from a position of strength. His Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, was given the job of ensuring US military superiority, and the result, arguably the most enduring legacy of JFK's Presidency, was that the "Kennedy-McNamara team had launched the greatest arms race in the history of mankind". McNamara was later to admit that the policy had been extremely ill-advised, because "... by building more missiles the Americans only increased their own danger". As commentators have noted, "The long-term effect of Kennedy's decisions was an inevitable massive build-up of Soviet arms".

It would be incorrect to suggest that Kennedy was mindlessly belligerent in ordering a massive increase in American military strength. In fact he was aiming for a "flexible response" to different levels of threat, to have a choice in responding between the extremes of surrender or mutually assured destruction which a virtual total reliance on nuclear weapons implied. The Soviet Union saw, however, only an aggressive President, eager to challenge them by both military and non-military means whenever possible.

30 Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.251.
31 Ibid., p. 252.
32 Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.109.
Kennedy's first test in foreign affairs occurred only seventy-seven days after he took office, when he authorized a plan, originated under Eisenhower, for invasion of Cuba by CIA-backed anti-Castro rebels. The attempted invasion at the Bay of Pigs was spectacularly unsuccessful. Contemporary commentators saw this as evidence of his inexperience and he himself lambasted the "experts" for giving him wrong advice: "How could I have been so stupid, to let them [i.e., the experts] go ahead?"33 Later commentators, like Ambrose, do not share the view that Kennedy was persuaded into the attempted invasion against his better judgement: "It was not the experts who got Kennedy into the Bay of Pigs; it was his own view of the world".34 The episode reinforced Soviet perceptions of an aggressive American administration.

In 1961 East-West tensions increased over the flow of refugees from East to West Germany through Berlin (2½ million had crossed the border since 1949). The Soviets and East Germany resolved the problem in August 1961 by building the Berlin Wall, a dramatic symbol of the ideological divisions. The Wall was really a defeat for both sides: "America had been unable to prevent [its] existence and had lost the refugees; a Soviet ally had had to build a barricade to keep its people in, and the Soviets had failed to prize West Berlin out of the Western orbit".35

Kennedy's greatest crisis was the Cuban missile incident of October 1962, when the Soviet Union was found to be deploying a number of offensive missiles in Cuba, thus reducing the warning time the US would have of

33 Kennedy, undated citation in Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p. 249.
34 Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.250.
35 Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.113.
missile attack from thirty minutes to two. Although the reasons for the Soviet decision were never clear, it became a matter of prestige for both sides not to be seen to retreat once the missiles were detected. Forthcoming congressional elections put added pressure on Kennedy.

The crisis probably led the superpowers closer to nuclear conflict than at any time before or since. Kennedy rejected advice for pre-emptive bombing raids on Soviet positions in Cuba and instead ordered a naval blockade. In the ensuing days, "... in much of America people ... braced themselves for disaster"\(^36\) as the feeling of crisis deepened and the situation reached a dangerous impasse. It was eventually resolved after Robert Kennedy, the Attorney-General, suggested a formula which allowed Khrushchev to order the missiles back from Cuba without overt loss of face for either side.

The episode had long-lasting consequences on East-West relations, not least because it "was followed by a Soviet decision to ... move towards strategic nuclear parity with America"\(^37\). Khrushchev's position was weakened domestically by his inability to out-manoeuvre Kennedy and his tenure in office was subsequently terminated. Kennedy's international position was enhanced. He had remained cautious in rejecting advice for more forceful, and potentially inflammatory, action. And he was magnanimous in victory, saying, "We tried to make their setback in Cuba not the kind that would bring about an increase in hostility but perhaps provide for an easing of relations"\(^38\). The crisis had demonstrated that neither superpower could

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\(^{37}\) Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.117.

unilaterally attempt to alter the complex equilibrium of world power.

Schlesinger argues that the missile crisis demonstrated "a sense of American determination and responsibility in the use of power..." but it had at least two other consequences. Firstly, it reinforced American feelings of omnipotence, the notion that America's will would prevail even in moments of great crisis, and secondly it ensured that the zone of superpower rivalry would shift from their areas of primary interest, Europe and the North Atlantic, to the Third World. After the crisis the Kennedy administration's rhetoric became more moderate and "the need for peace and arms reductions replaced boasts about American military power". Yet another factor, America's increasing involvement in Vietnam during the last months of Kennedy's life, was to become even more significant.

Kennedy's had been a dynamic Presidency, undoubtedly put into dramatic relief by the manner of its ending. He was an enigma; the educated liberal who perhaps strained to prove himself "tougher" than his military predecessor and thus worthy of being the second youngest incumbent in the White House. He was to the right of his two predecessors, urging America to "pay any price, bear any burden" on the Cold War crusade:

Republican rhetoric had consisted of unrestrained hostility to the Soviet Union ... Republican action, however, revealed restraint and caution. Under Kennedy, the Democratic rhetoric favoured co-existence ... But Democratic actions revealed a dynamic militancy, which traditional cold warriors like Acheson and Truman could and did applaud.  

39 Schlesinger, Thousand Days, p.767.

40 Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.267.

41 Ibid., p.246.
American power had seemed to be invincibly growing under Kennedy. He had proven his mettle in dealings with the Soviets. Massive American arms programs seemed to promise military ascendancy for years to come. He even promised to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade - possibly the ultimate demonstration of American technological prowess and achievement.

In 1963 it seemed unthinkable that the United States should suffer any significant setbacks to its power and prestige in international affairs. Yet the certainties of the past, which had served Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy so well, proved to be the undoing of Lyndon B. Johnson, precipitating a search for new ways of dealing with the complexities of America's global relations.
CHAPTER III

THE PRESIDENCY OF LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND THE
COLLAPSE OF CONTAINMENT

The central lesson of our time is that the appetite for aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next. We must say in South-East Asia - as we did in Europe - in the words of the Bible: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further".

Lyndon B. Johnson,
Johns Hopkins University,
7 April 1965.

I

Lyndon Johnson became a victim - a victim of the assumptions that had underpinned US foreign policy since Truman's day, a victim of the bold rhetoric of Kennedy, and a victim of his own personality and hubris. A consummate operator in the domestic policy field, Johnson eventually was politically crippled by the foreign policy morass of America's involvement in Vietnam. Yet he did no more than apply the assumptions and guidelines that had been the mainstay of his three predecessors since World War II. What he and his advisors failed to realize was that the Vietnam situation was not an example of communist expansion controlled by Moscow or Peking, and thus they failed to recognize that the policy of containment was not applicable to that situation.

The origins of America's involvement in Vietnam, Johnson's Nemesis, lay with the Eisenhower administration and the decision to give aid to South Vietnam following the humiliating departure of French colonial forces from that country. America's military involvement deepened in the years of the Kennedy administration, Kennedy himself having long been totally committed
to "drawing the line" in South Vietnam. "Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia ..."¹ he said in 1956, anticipating the attitude he would have in the White House. Kennedy's views "conformed to the prevailing concept of America's interests in the non-Western world and Southeast Asia",² a view which perceived a monolithic expansionist communist threat requiring "containing" in Asia just as it had been successfully contained in post-war Europe. This readiness to draw a parallel between Asia (South-East Asia in particular) and Europe came to the core of the problems of America's foreign policies outside Europe. By failing to perceive differences in disparate theatres and by attempting to apply similar strategies in dissimilar situations, Kennedy and his advisors accelerated the decline of the viability of containment as the key to America's global relations.

Johnson first visited Vietnam in 1961 as Vice-President, going there at Kennedy's request to assess the situation. Johnson's report was unequivocal, describing Vietnam in terms reminiscent of the Truman Doctrine, saying the choice was between resisting communist expansion or withdrawing to an insular "Fortress America". His report reinforced prevailing perceptions in Washington and helped determine his own view of South-East Asian affairs when he became President.

Kennedy was predisposed towards activism in foreign affairs, believing that the Eisenhower administration had failed to be sufficiently assertive with regard to America's interests. His development of a "flexible response"


capability to allow a wide range of potential responses to varying levels of threat was indicative of this activism. Events during his Presidency served both to reinforce Washington's views of the prevailing world order and also perceptions of America's ability to shape that order. The Truman Doctrine had attempted "to build and maintain a global order among great powers such that American values of political economy might flourish", and the Cuban missile crisis and the Berlin confrontation of 1961, both evident "wins" for Kennedy, served to demonstrate the apparent continuing viability of the Doctrine. It reinforced the administration's belief that "it knew how to threaten to apply or, if necessary, actually apply conventional military power to obtain maximum results". In so doing, the Cuban and Berlin crises helped foster the illusion of American omnipotence and generate ill-founded confidence that the emerging situation in Vietnam could be contained and the communists "beaten".

Crucial to the emerging international climate which encouraged American activism on a broad front in international affairs was Khrushchev's speech in 1961 proclaiming Soviet support for the many "wars of national liberation" in Third World countries, many of which were in the process of gaining their independence. Khrushchev was primarily offering moral support (although Soviet economic and military aid was given in some instances) but Washington saw his speech as further evidence of a "worldwide communist conspiracy". The rationale for potential American intervention in world affairs was hence significantly enlarged. Whereas previously external aggression had justified American intervention, following Khrushchev's

3 Ibid., p.315.

4 Lafeber, America, Russia, and the Cold War, p.233.
speech "... the presence of armed insurgents was ipso facto grounds for intervention".5

With this rationale in mind, that is the suppression of insurgents allegedly inspired, aided and/or supported by Moscow and/or Peking, Kennedy sent 1364 military advisors to Vietnam in 1961.6 In the same year he had also sent to assess the situation a Stanford University economist,7 who recommended a policy of creating "strategic hamlets". This policy (which was soon instituted), of moving the peasants off their traditional land into protective compounds, was another seed of destruction for America's Vietnam policy. The program only served to alienate the population by severing their bonds with their land, causing them to become increasingly disenchanted with the Saigon government. This lack of popular support for the government led by the aristocratic Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem was crucially important and it was often overlooked or minimized by the Americans in their attempt to "save" South Vietnam.

Successive reports to Kennedy from Vietnam were optimistic, the constant assumption being that the war would soon be "won" - and with a minimum US involvement. There is some evidence that Kennedy would have kept US involvement to a minimum. Talking of what would happen following his expected re-election, he said to an advisor:

In 1965 I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser. But I don't care. If I tried to pull out completely now [Spring 1963], we would have another Joe McCarthy red-scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm re-elected.8

Nathan and Oliver, United States Foreign Policy, p.315.

Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.280.

The economist was Professor Eugene Staley.

Kennedy speaking to advisor Kenneth O'Donnell, cited in Nathan and
But his assassination in November 1963 ensured that the burden of Vietnam fell to his deputy, Lyndon Johnson, a man who grasped the nettle of foreign affairs with less skill and enthusiasm than had Kennedy.

II

Three weeks before Kennedy's death Diem too had been assassinated. Kennedy had earlier approved his overthrow, but this did little to clarify the situation because of the chaos that resulted from Diem's death. Thus Kennedy had exacerbated the very situation American policy was designed to avoid - political instability in South Vietnam.

Johnson therefore inherited a confused situation in Vietnam, a domestic polity traumatised by Kennedy's assassination, and Kennedy's team of foreign policy advisors, who were "hawkish" and activist in their outlook. Buoyed by Kennedy's success in the Cuban missile crisis, and choosing to view China's withdrawal in the November 1962 Sino-Indian border crisis as a reaction to US naval movements, the President's advisors believed "that they could ultimately shape world affairs with American firepower". As Senator Fulbright later put it, they had fallen victim to "the arrogance of power". Diplomatic success apparently achieved by the judicious application of military force had "riveted American expectations to the

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Oliver, United States Foreign Policy, p.360.

9 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, p.246.

10 Lafeber, America, Russia and the Cold War, p.235.

necessities of the diplomacy of violence"\textsuperscript{12} and this remained Kennedy's over-riding legacy to Johnson.

Johnson fought the 1964 presidential election campaign from a strong position, enjoying residual public goodwill from having assumed the Presidency at a time of great national trauma. His opponent, Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, was right wing and alarmed many people with his advocacy of greater military force in Vietnam, including possible use of nuclear weapons. Johnson meanwhile stressed that he would not escalate US involvement by sending "American boys ... to do what Asian boys should be doing for themselves"\textsuperscript{13}. With the exception of planning to use nuclear weapons, Johnson was however "approving the very steps that he was publicly attacking Goldwater for recommending"\textsuperscript{14}. He saw Vietnam very much as a test case, a means of stopping Eisenhower's "domino theory" from becoming a reality. The advisor to Kennedy and Johnson, Walt Rostow, summed up the administration's views on Vietnam, China's influence and America's necessity to contain the sweeping march of communism when he said in 1964:

> It is on this spot [i.e., Vietnam] that we have to break the liberation war - Chinese type. If we don't break it here we shall have to face it again in Thailand, Venezuela, elsewhere. Vietnam is a clear testing ground for our policy in the world.\textsuperscript{15}

The assumptions implicit in Rostow's comments had rarely been questioned in US foreign policy circles since the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine. That Johnson did not do so was hardly surprising as his Vietnam policies

\textsuperscript{12} Nathan and Oliver, United States Foreign Policy, p.349.

\textsuperscript{13} Johnson, undated citation in Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.284.

\textsuperscript{14} Nathan and Oliver, United States Foreign Policy, p.362.

\textsuperscript{15} Rostow, cited in Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.287.
"were the culmination of nearly three-quarters of a century of American foreign policy". It took the immense foreign policy crisis in the four years following his re-election before those assumptions were rigorously assessed - and found wanting.

III

The US became heavily involved in fighting in Vietnam for a number of reasons that were the outcome of successive Presidents' commitments to the assumptions of the Truman Doctrine. The reasons included the beliefs that the defence of South Vietnam was crucial to the maintenance of world order, that force could be applied in Vietnam with precision and discrimination, that US military performance could be accurately evaluated, and that military involvement in Vietnam would enhance America's power, prestige and credibility in the world. America's involvement failed to realize any of these beliefs.

Both Kennedy and Johnson stressed that their Vietnam policies were totally consistent with US foreign policies since 1947, that is, a show of US force to demonstrate that aggression did not pay. In couching US involvement in Vietnam in terms of the supposed obligations of the Truman Doctrine, they allowed the rhetoric of the Doctrine to cloud their judgement and obscure a rational evaluation of the nature of the Vietnamese conflict and America's ability to shape the conflict's outcomes, and indeed even how to relate US abilities to ends. Johnson, and Kennedy before him, became deluded by US military power and eschewed the other tools of foreign policy. Whereas George Kennan, the architect of containment, "had sought to maintain the global balance of power by applying a combination of political, economic, 

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Lafeber, America, Russia and the Cold War, p.242.
military and psychological leverage in carefully selected pivotal areas ... Johnson by 1965 was relying almost exclusively on the use of military force in a theater chosen by adversaries."  

In seeking to incrementally increase the military pressure on North Vietnam, through both strategic bombing and increased numbers of combat troops, the US found itself reacting to strategic and tactical decisions taken by its adversary. In fighting a guerilla war with conventional military forces the US was always likely to be militarily frustrated and essentially unsuccessful. As Herring noted, "The United States never developed a strategy appropriate for the war it was fighting, in part because it assumed that the mere application of its vast military power would be sufficient. The failure of one force level quickly led to the next and then the next, until the war attained a degree of destructiveness no-one would have thought possible in 1965."  

The US view of the situation in South-East Asia originated with National Security Council resolution 68 (NSC 68), passed in April 1950, which had "shifted perceptions of threat from the Soviet Union to the international communist movement". In choosing to justify US involvement in Vietnam in terms of a fight against expansionist international communism, the US effectively created its own "obligation" to participate in that fight - and by constantly finding new "threats" (as in Vietnam) virtually ensured the...

17 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, pp.238-239.  
18 Herring, America's Longest War, p.145.  
19 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, p.238.
obligations could never be met. Thus they ended up "both deterring aggression and being held hostage to it".20

US strategy in Vietnam was based on a rejection of the "massive retaliation" doctrine of Dulles and Eisenhower. Kennedy had already sought military capabilities allowing a "flexible response" to varying situations, and the Johnson administration's military approach in Vietnam of "calibration" or fine tuning, was consistent with that. However, in eschewing the use of massive retaliation the US was forced to demonstrate the extent of its resolve against all levels of threat. Thus the Viet Cong could, and did, call America's bluff, forcing a constant escalation of US military power until the evident ineffectiveness of that power in achieving stated goals caused the collapse of the whole policy. "Calibration" could work only against a single target, whereas the target of US policies in Vietnam was multifarious and indistinct. Was it Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, or a combination of all three? And how did "calibration" work in defusing dissent both in South Vietnam and at home in the US? Although seeking carefully to limit the level of US involvement, "calibration" actually caused the eventual massive US presence by inviting the enemy to continually seize the initiative and increase the "stakes". Deterrence works best when an aggressor is uncertain of his ability to control the risks he is taking, but US policies in Vietnam largely removed any element of uncertainty from the minds of its adversaries. As Gaddis says, "To proclaim that one intends to do only what is necessary to counter aggression and no more is, after all, to yield control over one's actions to those undertaking the aggression".21

20 Ibid., p.240.

21 Ibid., p.251.
Thus in Vietnam the US was no longer containing its adversary and the back-bone of the Truman Doctrine was crumbling.

The details of US involvement in Vietnam are of less concern here than the reasons for that involvement and its eventual effects. As has already been suggested, Johnson fought the 1964 presidential election campaign on a platform of non-escalation while simultaneously planning that very escalation. The pretext for heavy involvement was obtained prior to the election when North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly attacked US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin (the Senate later found the alleged incidents were largely fabricated\(^{22}\)), allowing Johnson to rush a resolution through Congress (the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution") giving him virtually unchecked powers to widen the war. The resolution was the legal rationale for all subsequent Johnson administration policy in Vietnam, eventually allowing over half a million US servicemen to be engaged in undeclared warfare.

Johnson's continued confidence about the efficacy of US military might was a product not only of Kennedy's foreign policy successes, but also of his own success using military force in the Dominican Republic in 1965. In that year Johnson sent the Marines and the Army's 82nd Airborne Division into the Dominican Republic to stop a leftist revolution against the ruling military junta. He had decided that American interests were threatened in the Republic and therefore throughout Latin America, and that Castro was probably behind the "conspiracy". His action, although widely criticized (in the words of a former popularly-elected president of the Dominican

\(^{22}\) Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, p.284.
Republic, "This was a democratic revolution smashed by the leading democracy in the world"\textsuperscript{23}, successfully restored the status quo ante.

The assumptions that prevailed in the relatively minor instance of the Dominican Republic dominated American thinking in Vietnam. It was "assumed that America's needs included worldwide stability and order, which in practice meant the preservation of the status quo"\textsuperscript{24}. The Johnson administration failed to agree with Kennan that nationalism could be a powerful force against Soviet-inspired communism. For all the high rhetoric of Presidents from Truman to Johnson, there was an underlying paradox in that "in turning to the military and others of a conservative bent in the developing world, the United States was aligning itself with those least predisposed to a world of diversity and social justice"\textsuperscript{25}. This paradox combined with strategic stupidity to cause the failure of US policy in Vietnam. There was never any clear notion of the goal of US policy beyond the containment of communism and, as has been shown, the strategy that was followed actually undermined containment. There was "a disproportionate fascination with means at the expense of ends"\textsuperscript{26} in Vietnam, an assumption that the ends would somehow be an automatic consequence of the means. Eisenhower had repeatedly argued that the processes of defence should never be allowed to over-shadow the purposes of defence, but this "sensitivity to the need to keep ends and means in balance was precisely what was lacking in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations; there was instead a preoccupation

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p.295.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p.297.

\textsuperscript{25} Nathan and Oliver, \textit{United States Foreign Policy}, p.315.

\textsuperscript{26} Gaddis, \textit{Strategies of Containment}, p.238.
with process at the expense of objectives ...", resulting in a strategic vacuum and a total collapse of policy.

IV

Just as US strategic policy in Vietnam was fatally flawed, undermining the post-war foreign policy consensus based on containment of communism, so too did global economic factors work to the detriment of American power and influence in the 1960s. The Truman Doctrine was closely linked to the Marshall Plan, the program of US-backed European economic recovery and reconstruction, and subsequent US economic policies were geared to an assumption of global US economic dominance. However, by the time of Johnson's Presidency Europe was emerging as a strong competitor for the US and the Japanese "economic miracle" was underway, threatening US economic hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.

The impact of the Vietnam war served to exacerbate America's domestic economic problems, fuel inflation both in the US and abroad, and reduce its international economic competitiveness. In choosing to fight the war without increasing taxes while simultaneously massively increasing defence expenditures, Johnson chose an economic path dominated by high inflation, high interest rates and a growing budget deficit. These factors all flowed through to the international economy, clearly one of the most enduring legacies of US involvement in Vietnam. The preoccupation of the Johnson administration with the war, while neglecting even the short-term economic effects, blinded it to wider global developments and trends.

27 Ibid., p.273.
European nations were becoming increasingly affluent by the mid-1960s and few of them shared the US perception of the threat posed to global, or even regional, security by the Vietnamese situation. France had withdrawn from Indo-China in 1954 and was totally unwilling to again become militarily involved in the region. Britain was reducing its overseas commitments. The government of Harold Wilson was not disposed to new overseas deployments, instead choosing to try quiet diplomacy in an effort to encourage the two superpowers to impose a settlement on their respective Indo-Chinese allies. The rest of Europe viewed the situation with a singular lack of enthusiasm and, in the end, the only countries which sent troops to Vietnam with America were Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and the Philippines - the last two receiving a significant financial benefit for doing so.28

America's preoccupation with Vietnam occurred at the same time as serious strains emerged in the Atlantic Alliance.29 In 1966 French President Charles de Gaulle said that US policies were increasingly provocative to the Soviet Union and the PRC and were "increasingly menacing the peace of the world".30 In the same year he decided to remove France from the integrated NATO structure, requiring NATO headquarters to move from Paris to Brussels and forcing US bases from French soil. This, combined with Britain's increasing isolationism, puzzled Washington at the time the US was looking to its old European allies for moral and materiel support. The result was a further stretching of US military resources as they attempted to

28 Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.161.

29 The alliance, militarily based on NATO, of Western Europe and the US.

counterbalance the withdrawals of France from NATO and Britain from east of Suez.

Just as America's preoccupation with Vietnam did not allow it to give sufficient attention to changing circumstances in Europe, so too Washington took inadequate account of the implications of emergent nationalism throughout the Third World. It had misjudged the strength and character of that nationalism, as in Vietnam, mistaking leftist nationalist revolutions for expressions of pro-Soviet or pro-Chinese sentiment. Under Johnson the world was still seen in strictly bipolar terms, and the earlier Sino-Soviet split was either not recognized at all or its implications were not understood. In such a situation, with just two superpowers, only the Soviet Union stood to gain from United States myopia and analytical inertia. The Cold War had entered a new phase "rendering outmoded the assumptions of the policy of containment", 31 and the US was left with incorrect preconceptions, a failing policy, increasingly independent and critical friends, and a Cold War adversary of growing confidence and capabilities.

The Soviet Union was very content to see the US bogged down in Vietnam, and was able to make "a dramatic recovery in world affairs between 1965 and 1971" 32 , with the post-Khrushchev leadership anxious to reduce the strategic gap with the US. "Moscow did nothing to mediate the war ... because the conflict - as long as it remained limited - drained the United States and benefited the Soviet Union". 33 Without Vietnam draining its resources, the


32 Lafeber, America, Russia, and the Cold War, p.255.

33 Ibid., p.256.
US might well have chosen to attempt to maintain the strategic superiority that it had achieved under Kennedy and McNamara. By improving its strategic situation, the Soviet Union not only narrowed the gap between itself and the US but also increased its own ascendancy over China by, among other things, ensuring that they were the primary outside influence on Hanoi.

Increased Soviet confidence and capabilities eventually allowed it to extend its influence into Africa and the Middle East, albeit with varying degrees of success. Ultimately they were to gain access to the former US bases in Vietnam, greatly extending their operational capabilities in the Pacific and Indian Oceans - ironic and bitter evidence of the failure of America's containment policy.

By late 1967 and into early 1968 it was increasingly clear that the US strategy in Vietnam was not working. Over half a million combat troops and more bombs than had been dropped in the whole of World War II\(^{34}\) were not stopping supplies reaching the North Vietnamese troops and Viet Cong operating in South Vietnam. Perhaps more importantly, the political instability in Saigon continued to worsen, a key fact of which US policy never seemed to take due account. Despite the overwhelming evidence that US policy was failing to realize its objectives, the US military commander in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, insisted in late 1967 that America would win "within two years".\(^{35}\) Despite mounting domestic criticism and protests the administration insisted that the war would be won, thus denying the

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\(^{34}\) Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.291.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., p.303.
possibility of failure for their policies. Some officials even claimed that China's reluctance to get involved on behalf of North Vietnam (and also the failure in 1965 of a communist coup in Indonesia) was "proof" that containment was working. Although by late 1967 Johnson was beginning to think of reducing troop levels, the administration's credibility was finally destroyed by the Viet Cong's "Tet offensive" in early 1968.

The Tet offensive of January and February 1968 involved an audacious push by the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong deep into US-controlled areas of South Vietnam, even to the grounds of the fortified US embassy in Saigon. Although the communists suffered heavy casualties and were eventually repelled, the news of their push had a devastating impact on American domestic opinion because it contrasted so markedly with the confident predictions which had always come out of Saigon and Washington. As Kissinger wrote later that year, "The Tet offensive marked the watershed of the American effort ...[T]he prevalent strategy could no longer achieve its objectives in a period or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people".

The impact of Tet was no less profound on Johnson. On 25 March 1968 he convened a two day meeting of respected strategists and advisors from the past, chaired by Dean Acheson. All were former Cold War "hawks" but their recommendation was unanimous: de-escalate the war. On 31 March Johnson announced a reduction in the bombing and, taking everyone by surprise, his

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36 Herring, America's Longest War, p.177.


38 Nathan and Oliver, United States Foreign Policy, p.371.
decision not to seek re-election. The war had finally broken him. Johnson, always amazed that the US could not defeat, in the words of Walt Rostow, "a collection of nightriders in black pyjamas," became trapped in the dilemma US policies had created. Further escalation could not guarantee success, yet withdrawal would be a humiliation and an abrogation of all that containment was trying to achieve. His successor was elected, in part, to find a solution to that dilemma.

In Vietnam the US had been pitted against a fanatical foe fighting a guerilla war for which US tactics were entirely ill-suited. The US effort had always been inhibited by the possibility of Soviet or Chinese intervention, so even conventional strategic bombing raids were carefully prescribed to exclude the major North Vietnamese centres of Hanoi and Haiphong, arguably the most appropriate targets for the kind of war the US was waging. Its ally, South Vietnam, had a succession of governments following Diem's fall, all lacking popular support. The people resented the massive US presence and the social and economic dislocations it caused. The South Vietnamese army suffered from low morale, a high rate of defections and poor fighting abilities. South Vietnam was, in short, an exceedingly bad place for the US to take a "stand" and invest its men, materiel and credibility.

The US ultimately suffered by raising South Vietnam to the status of a "vital interest". The dangers of over-stretching resources and of misreading what was essentially a nationalistic revolutionary situation

39 The decision was in part influenced by anti-war campaigner Eugene McCarthy's strong showing in the New Hampshire primary and by Robert Kennedy's decision to seek the Democratic nomination.

40 Rostow, undated citation in Nathan and Oliver, United States Foreign Policy, p.375.
arising out of anti-colonial feelings with virtually no parallel to the ideological dichotomy existing in Europe were fully demonstrated in Vietnam. The US never clearly defined its "vital interests" and hence made itself vulnerable to any appeal from repressive regimes that "communists" were threatening the status quo, and hence challenging those ill-defined "vital interests". "The tendency had been to define the nation's vital interests as any area in which the United States had political, economic, or military influence, which meant that America's vital interests were always moving outward."\(^{41}\) The folly of such an open-ended definition had been proven by the time Johnson left the Presidency, a situation his successor moved to rectify in mid-1969.\(^{42}\)

Involvement in Vietnam had over-stretched US military resources to the extent that they might have been unable to respond adequately if needed in another serious crisis. Soviet strength had grown dramatically. Economic matters had been given inadequate attention and Johnson's "Great Society", his vision of social justice and urban renewal, fell victim to the war's fiscal and political exigencies. Relations with Europe had been strained and those with Latin America, so important to Kennedy, had been neglected. At home violence and protests reached unprecedented levels.

Yet it would be wrong to blame Johnson alone for all these outcomes. Since the declaration of the Truman Doctrine all US Presidents had "opted for expanded involvement that attached American prestige more deeply, bequeathed to their successors more dangerous and intractable problems, and significantly narrowed subsequent choices. Without minimizing the

\(^{41}\) Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.297.

\(^{42}\) With the enunciation of the Nixon, or Guam, Doctrine. See next chapter.
importance of Johnson's 1965 decision [to commit combat troops to Vietnam and bomb the North], it seems fair to conclude that his predecessors must share responsibility with him for the eventual outcome.\textsuperscript{43}

It fell to Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, to extricate the US from Vietnam and, by breaking from the certainties and assumptions of the past, to forge a new consensus on how the US should conduct its global relations.

\textsuperscript{43} Herring, in \textit{Johnson Years}, ed. Divine, p.41.
CHAPTER IV

THE PRESIDENCY OF RICHARD NIXON:
DE TENTE AND THE SEARCH FOR GREATNESS.

The greatest honour history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honour now beckons America ... If we succeed, generations to come will say of us now living that we mastered our moment, that we helped make the world safe for mankind. This is our summons to greatness.


... I am confident that the world is a safer place today, not only for the people of America, but for the people of all nations, and that all of our children have a better chance than before of living in peace rather than dying in war.


I

The five and a half years of Richard Nixon's Presidency saw the most profound changes in US foreign policy since World War II. Most of the key assumptions which had underlain the containment policies from Harry Truman's time were overturned in Nixon's quest to find more appropriate means of achieving American foreign policy goals. The Vietnam experience, where US military power was negated by lightly armed guerillas and American political will was weakened by domestic dissent and international opprobrium, was the catalyst for the quest. Existing assumptions were questioned; means and ends were reassessed; potential adversaries were re-evaluated; and US goals were re-examined.
Working with the enigmatic Henry Kissinger, Nixon achieved a virtual revolution in US foreign policy. Although his domestic transgressions later tarnished his reputation, perhaps irrevocably, and although his foreign policies had been largely overturned within a decade of leaving office, Nixon's achievements in the field of international relations were substantial.

II

Richard Nixon came to the Presidency as a keen student and practitioner in the field of international affairs. Foreign policy had been the key focus of his public life ever since, as a Congressman immediately following World War II, he toured Europe with a Congressional committee assessing America's potential role in the post-war recovery. He was elected to the Senate in 1950, and two years later Eisenhower chose him as his vice-presidential running mate. At Eisenhower's request, in 1953 he toured twenty-one countries, the most extensive trip that had ever been undertaken by either a President or Vice-President.¹ Further extensive travels ensued in his eight years as Eisenhower's deputy, and he gained added prestige and experience with his heightened profile during Eisenhower's three periods of incapacity (in 1955, 1956 and 1957). By the time of his inauguration as President in 1969, Nixon had visited seventy-three countries, as an individual or a public figure.²

Such travelling did not, of course, guarantee wisdom, but it did open Nixon to a wide variety of viewpoints, give him a global network of contacts, and


² Ibid.
enable him to gain first-hand experience of world problems. His grasp of foreign affairs served him well after his election to the Presidency when, for the first time since 1945, a new presidential term began without a bipartisan foreign policy consensus. That consensus had been broken by the Vietnam ordeal under Johnson, with disagreements about how America got so deeply involved in the conflict and how best it could get out. That debate dominated a campaign marred by death and violence, concluding with Nixon only narrowly defeating Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey by 43.4% to 42.7%. (A third candidate, George Wallace, got 13.5%.)

During the campaign Nixon had deliberately avoided outlining his Vietnam policy, instead saying he had a "secret plan" for peace. In reality, he was faced with four options:

- He could withdraw all US forces more or less immediately (as Eisenhower had done in Korea);
- He could continue Johnson's military policies of bombing the North Vietnamese without invading them;
- He could increase the bombing of North Vietnam, mine its harbours, invade it with ground troops, and contemplate using nuclear weapons;
- Or he could "Vietnamise" the conflict, making the South Vietnamese do all the fighting, using American equipment.

Hanoi was likely to invade the South in the wake of a US withdrawal, so the first option was out. The second option was demonstrably a failure having effectively forced Johnson from office, therefore it had nothing to recommend it. The potential political costs of the third option almost certainly ruled it out. Therefore only "Vietnamisation" - Nixon's "secret plan" - remained, offering the possibility of an avoidance of defeat and of
ultimate victory. Politically, it partially appeased the anti-war movement in the US, while retaining the option of escalating the conflict if it became militarily desirable and politically acceptable to do so. Thus, after taking office Nixon was able to announce that "his secret plan to end the war was in fact a plan to keep it going, but with lower American casualties".3

In deciding to supply the materiel for the South's war effort rather than the men, Nixon echoed Roosevelt's call for America to become the great arsenal of democracy. In Ambrose's words, "Nixon proposed to contain the Communist aggressors by extending lend-lease to South Vietnam".4 Hitherto, US ability to contain communism had been based on US military power and economic strength. Nixon inherited a faltering economy, (weakened by inflation and balance of payments difficulties caused by Johnson's decision to fight the Vietnam war without raising taxes - i.e., without substantially raising revenue to cover the massively increased defence expenditures) and near-equality with the Soviet Union in strategic matters. As he said in 1969, "Now the nuclear equation is in balance, you cannot rely on superiority in decision-making any more".5 Therefore, if superior military power had been the decisive factor in giving credibility to America's global exercise of political will in the decades since Truman, Nixon was forced to find an alternative means of achieving US objectives for a favourable world order by the knowledge that strategic superiority no longer belonged to the US.

3 Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p. 3/2.

4 Ibid.

5 Nixon, cited in Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.198.
The knowledge of the increasing impotence of the US military in achieving global political ends was dramatically driven home by America's Vietnam experience, where a considerably less sophisticated and smaller military force was able to totally frustrate the achievement of American aims. This, combined with the Soviet Union's increased strategic abilities, made Nixon realize that the emphasis in East-West relations had to be on negotiation rather than confrontation. However, he also realized that to negotiate openly with communist powers ran the risk of his being labelled "soft" on communism - something every President had feared since Truman "lost" China. Accordingly, "... the President and his advisors began to erect a new structure of peace based on secret Metternichian balance of power diplomacy".6

III

The key architect of Nixon's "Metternichian balance of power diplomacy" was Henry Kissinger, the Harvard academic surprisingly chosen as the administration's National Security Advisor. A refugee from Nazi Germany, Kissinger had established a reputation in academic circles with his analysis of post-Napoleonic Europe, A World Restored, in 1954. His second book, Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy, which elicited a congratulatory note from Vice-President Nixon in 1957, further established his reputation as a significant strategic analyst. Work as a part-time consultant to President Kennedy followed, plus more writing, and official trips to Vietnam in 1965 and 1967. In 1968 he was foreign policy advisor to presidential-aspirant Nelson Rockefeller, publicly scorning the intellectual qualities of Richard Nixon.7

6 Mooney and Bown, Truman to Carter, p.198.

7 Tad Szulc, The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years
Being schooled in the history of European balance of power diplomacy Kissinger sought to construct a stable world order based on common interests shared among the key powers. In an immediate sense, to satisfy Nixon's political requirements, his goal had to be to find a satisfactory conclusion to the war in Vietnam. In the longer term both he and Nixon had a desire to see a viable alternative to containment as a means of preserving US interests in the world.

Apart from their keen interest in foreign affairs, Nixon and Kissinger shared a contempt for the bureaucratic side of government and a resultant desire to concentrate as much decision-making as possible in their own hands. This had repercussions for both: in Kissinger's case in facilitating the secret negotiations and "shuttle diplomacy" that were the hallmarks of his success; in Nixon's case in establishing a method and style of governing that led directly to his eventual resignation.  

During Nixon's first term the Secretary of State, William Rogers, was completely overshadowed by Kissinger. Kissinger ensured that the entire national security apparatus was redesigned, with himself in full control. His relationship with Rogers was established from the day of Nixon's inauguration when, deliberately not informing the new Secretary of State, Kissinger sent secret messages to the leaders of the Soviet Union, France, Yugoslavia, and Rumania - "the first step in establishing total White House tyranny and secrecy over the conduct of foreign policy".  

By repeatedly by-passing the bureaucracy and Nixon's other advisors and by clever


That is, Watergate, which is discussed below.

restructuring of the national security apparatus, Kissinger effectively made himself indispensible to both Nixon and to the conduct of US foreign policy.

Outwardly dissimilar, Nixon and Kissinger neatly complemented each other: Nixon the broad strategist, and Kissinger the tactician who shared Nixon's taste for decision-making. Each needed the other. Nixon needed a lieutenant who closely shared his outlook and methodology, and Kissinger needed the political will that flowed from strong executive approval in order to protect himself from Nixon's anti-intellectual coterie of White House advisors. (Ultimately the conflict between Nixon's "California clique" - Haldeman, Erlichman, and others - and Kissinger and his team of liberal foreign policy-makers was another important factor in Nixon's downfall.)

IV

Apart from the phased reduction of US forces in Vietnam, there were three key foreign policy achievements of the Nixon administration which underlay the move away from containment thus clearly distinguishing the administration from its predecessors. Each was related to the other two and each, in turn, was related to the question of the US involvement in Vietnam. Firstly, there was Nixon's enunciation in 1969 of the Guam Doctrine (also known as the Nixon Doctrine); secondly, there was the opening of relations with the People's Republic of China; and thirdly, there was the detente with the USSR.

Nixon's press conference in Guam in July 1969 for the first time gave explicit limits to US overseas involvements, in effect providing a rationale for the gradual reduction in US troop deployments in the Asia-Pacific
region. While agreeing to maintain America's treaty commitments and to provide a nuclear deterrent if an ally or "vital interest" was threatened, Nixon said that in future the US would provide military and economic assistance when requested but would "look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility for providing the manpower for its defense". This announcement provided both the rationale for the ensuing "Vietnamisation" policy, whereby the US increasingly provided the materiel but not the personnel for the South Vietnamese war effort, and also a more general warning that in future the US would not so readily involve itself in an Asian war. Nixon was effectively saying that communism in future would be contained without immediate resort to military means. The Doctrine asserted that the US still continued "to define its broadest aim as the achievement of an international order congenial to American values," but its method of achieving that order would henceforth be very different from the methods used since 1945. Gone was the massive retaliation doctrine of John Foster Dulles and the later bold rhetoric of John F. Kennedy.

Nixon's Guam Doctrine was of comparable significance in many ways to the Truman Doctrine (even allowing for the fact that the former was focussed primarily on Asia and the latter on Europe). For the first time since World War II a President was explicitly limiting the scope of US global involvements and was warning allies of their need not to place total reliance on US support. Clearly the Vietnam experience had been chastening


11 Osgood in Osgood et al., Retreat From Empire?, p.3
and the new President was looking for alternative means of achieving US policy goals and thwarting the ambitions of potential adversaries.

The means Nixon chose involved establishing a meaningful modus vivendi with both the PRC, hitherto something of an international pariah, and the USSR, America's long-time Cold War adversary. Diplomatic overtures to the USSR were not unprecedented but the move to open relations with China was totally unexpected, not least because Nixon had built his public reputation as one of the leading spokesmen for the anti-communist Right. "Of the entire generation of post-war presidential politicians, Nixon had seemed most encumbered by the hostility with Communist China", observed a former administration employee.

Nixon's motives in breaking the twenty year bipartisan China policy ranged from the political (i.e., the possibility of visiting Peking would present a vote-winning opportunity to appear statesmanlike) through the economic (the prospect of enhancing trade with 800 million Chinese was obviously enticing) to the psychological (Nixon was keen for a bold and dramatic gesture that would secure his place in history). But the greatest impetus for the move was the Sino-Soviet split and the possibilities that existed for exacerbating the division by playing each side off against the other to America's eventual advantage. In the words of one writer, "No impetus was more earnestly denied in later public or private explanations of the China policy, yet none was more central than Nixon's evolving view of the Sino-Soviet rivalry". In appreciating both the scope and the significance of the break between the two communist powers, Nixon showed an appreciation


of the realities of world politics which his two predecessors had lacked: "For two terms, the supposedly shrewder, more enlightened John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had pursued the old China policy with occasional rhetorical hints of change; more importantly, they had deferred to a senior officialdom, men like Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow whose obsession with Vietnam sprang from fearful ignorance of China and the new tides in world affairs".14

By creating uncertainty in both Moscow and Peking as to US motives, Nixon hoped he could gain the diplomatic initiative and turn the focus of the communist powers' strategic developments away from the US and towards each other. This in turn would allow the US to withdraw from Vietnam with less likelihood of a collapse of South Vietnam under military pressure from a Hanoi either ideologically or materially backed by Peking and/or Moscow. It would also hopefully reduce the pressure on the US in other parts of the world, thus allowing the Guam Doctrine to be fully implemented. In overcoming decades of prejudice and ignorance about China, Nixon's move was arguably "the boldest, perhaps most sensible US initiative of the post-war era".15

The prevailing reasons for not recognizing the PRC had been twofold: on the one hand was the mistaken assumption that Peking was directly involved in the insurgencies in South-East Asia; and on the other hand there was the domestic political and bureaucratic pressure, dating as already mentioned from when Truman "lost" China, not to be "soft" on the communists. The latter point ensured that the preliminary negotiations to arrange Nixon's

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p.207.
visit to Peking remained the sole province of Henry Kissinger and a small group of National Security Council advisors, remaining secret from the other arms of the foreign policy bureaucracy - the characteristic Nixon/Kissinger approach to foreign affairs. The chosen secret avenue to China was through Pakistan. President Yahya Khan acted as mediator between Washington and Peking, facilitating a secret trip by Kissinger to the PRC in July 1971 to pave the way for Nixon's visit the following year - an election year. The Pakistanis were rewarded with resumption of American arms sales (curtailed since the 1967 Indo-Pakistan war).

Nixon's February 1972 trip to China was a diplomatic and political triumph. It was perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the demise of the long-standing philosophy of containment that was seen under the Nixon administration, because it was so unexpected and because it contrasted so sharply with the attitudes that had prevailed beforehand. Nixon had begun to see the world less in strictly bipolar terms, divided neatly into East and West, and his "developing concept of a 'pentagonal world power balance' ... presumed that he talk to China". Accordingly he was willing to compromise the existing US relationship with Taiwan to foster his multipolar diplomacy. Nixon's skill was evident in the joint communique issued at the end of his China trip. As one commentator remarked, "... the essential brilliance of the diplomacy inside China - the communique which accommodated sharply conflicting views by the device of separate US and Chinese paragraphs on controversial topics, the moderate tone of the discussions with the Chinese leaders - belonged ... to Nixon".

16 Mooney and Bown, *Truman to Carter*, p.211.

17 Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, p.207.
By shaking hands in Peking with Mao Tse-tung, Nixon surmounted America's "mindless posture of belligerence in Asia". Such a move would have had merit if it were merely aimed at improving US-PRC bilateral relations, but in using it as part of a broader foreign policy mosaic aimed at indirectly improving US multilateral relations in disparate regions of the world, Nixon showed a degree of sophistication and manipulative skill in foreign affairs that had been lacking in his predecessors. The other key aspect of Nixon's foreign policy regimen, which complemented his China initiative, was the move towards detente with the USSR.

V

Detente with the USSR was both easier and more complex than the move towards normalising relations with the PRC. It was easier because all Presidents since Truman had made some overtures towards the Soviet Union and hence there was something of a diplomatic tradition of US/USSR dialogue. It was more complex, however, due to the immensely complicated strategic relationship of the two superpowers, each with their nuclear arsenals.

A Soviet desire for East-West detente was not new. Kissinger himself had written that historically such moves sprang from weakness or dissension within the Soviet system itself:

On each occasion the reason for detente was some internal or external strain on the Soviet system. In 1924, it was the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky which was followed by the forced collectivisation of agriculture and the purges; in 1941-46 it was the German invasion; in 1956 it was the succession struggle after the death of Stalin; in 1959 it was part of a Soviet attempt to push the allies out of Berlin; since 1962 it has been caused by the shock of defeat in Cuba and the internal strains on the Soviet system.

Ibid., p.208.

Under Nixon, the American rapprochement with the PRC provided a spur for the Soviet Union to seek detente with the USA. The Soviet leadership did not wish to be left in the diplomatic cold and risk a possible marriage of convenience between the PRC and America being cemented with anti-Soviet attitudes and ambitions. They needed to gain a greater understanding of US policies through improved relations with Washington. They were uncertain regarding potential US responses if they were to attack the PRC. And, having achieved near-equivalence in strategic weapons with the US by the late 1960s, they wished to slow the arms race thus enabling greater concentration on domestic economic growth. After 1969, with the deepening Sino-Soviet hostility, the Soviets needed an improving relationship with the US to avoid the prospect of a double-fronted Cold War, an intolerable possibility for them.

America sought detente with the Soviet Union as a means of allowing reductions in US military expenditure and a narrowing of the margin of US strategic superiority without endangering US national security. The stage for a lessening of Cold War tensions came when the West German leaders gave up the post-war quest for a united Germany, formally recognizing the reality of the East-West division for the first time with the signing of the Helsinki accords in 1972. In essence, when America signed the accords, it accepted the outcome of the Second World War in East Europe and it agreed no longer to challenge Soviet hegemony in that region.

However, it was not easy for the Nixon administration to move towards detente with either the PRC or the USSR because the foreign policy bureaucracy (i.e., the State Department and the Pentagon) still were

20 Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, p.320.
affected by the uncompromising McCarthyite anti-communism of the 1950s. The professional careers of senior personnel had been built on a total commitment to the anti-communist cause, a commitment that had been the cornerstone of US policies. For the administration to overcome this bureaucratic outlook and forge meaningful treaties and links with the Soviet Union seemed at times to be as difficult as negotiating with the Russians themselves. The Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) signed in Moscow, by far the most important outcome of Nixon's trip, was a case in point: "For more than two years, by means of excruciating haggling, cajoling and deceptive ploys, through victories and defeats in which a Russian never entered the room, SALT was born of Kissinger's diplomatic virtuosity with his own colleagues". However, once in Moscow in July 1972 Nixon was able to sign a number of wide-ranging agreements with the Kremlin leadership in addition to SALT (e.g., cultural, sporting, scientific and educational agreements), the result of many months of preparatory work by Henry Kissinger.

The crucial agreement signed was, however, the SALT agreement. SALT was an attempt to codify détente but it eventually heightened scepticism among American "hard-liners" that the Soviet Union had somehow been given an unfair advantage by the limitations that had been placed on the US defence program. However in forcing a refocussing of the arms race from quantity to quality the US may have benefited from its technological superiority over the USSR. Counter-productive as the agreement was eventually widely recognized to be (in, for instance, ignoring the strategic significance of the development of missiles with multiple independently-targeted warheads (MIRV's) - indeed, in encouraging their development), SALT was nevertheless a diplomatic and political achievement of some magnitude. As diplomatic

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Morris, Uncertain Greatness, p.212.
"theatre" it initially overcame the inertia of the bureaucracy and the hostility of the rigidly anti-communist Right, as already mentioned. And, perhaps more significantly, it was an historically rare feat to reach agreement between the two superpowers on a subject as complex and vital as strategic arms limitation. The 1972 agreement was meant to be the first of a series of SALT agreements, so a charitable assessment might excuse its failings on the grounds that subsequent agreements were thought to be going to build on the original pact. Historically, it may come to be viewed as a symbolically important first agreement. (This paper does not concern itself with why only one further SALT agreement eventuated - even though the reasons lie in the failings of the first agreement.)

SALT was the key agreement to arise out of the US-USSR detente under Nixon. Detente itself was a direct attempt by the administration to manage global affairs in the new multipolar world that included the emerging China, a strengthened and increasingly independent Europe, and a vocal and increasingly anti-Western Third World. It was defined by Kissinger to Congress in 1974 as a "process of managing relations with a potentially hostile country in order to preserve peace while maintaining our vital interests". The focus of US foreign policy had to remain on the USSR, as it had been since the end of the Second World War, but that focus had to be placed in an entirely new context - that of a disparate and multipolar world.

VI

Central to what Spanier terms "the passing of bipolarity" was the

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23 Chapter 9, "The Passing of Bipolarity", in John Spanier, American
emergence of Western Europe as a new post-war economic power bloc, "both the product of America's policy of rebuilding Europe and proof of its success". Under the nationalistic leadership of de Gaulle, France and other continental countries were improving their domestic economies, shedding their empires (and hence much of the responsibility for preserving stability and security in those regions formerly under their control) and increasingly distancing themselves from a United States which they saw as increasingly likely to resolve its Cold War differences with the Soviet Union on European soil. "Hence", as Spanier notes, "at a time when its allies were essentially looking inward, seeking a new role, modernizing themselves, and groping toward a larger political identity, the United States found itself having to become concerned with those areas of the world previously under the controlling hand of Europe".

To attempt to maintain political ascendancy in the alliance in the face of resurgent nationalism among the "Six", the US supported Britain's attempts to gain entry to the European Economic Community (EEC), thus hopefully carrying the "special" Anglo-American relationship into Europe. Both de Gaulle and Germany's Adenauer feared that British entry into Europe might well lead to the original six being subordinated to the informal Anglo-American alliance, so Britain floated the possibility of sharing its nuclear expertise to help develop a "European bomb" as a means of overcoming

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24 Ibid., p.164.
25 Ibid., p.165.
26 That is, the original six-member EEC.
their suspicions. Eventually Britain chose dependence upon the US for nuclear technology, thus acquiring an "independent" nuclear deterrent (i.e., Polaris missiles in the early 1960s), another element, along with the French "force de frappe", which Washington had to consider in the new multipolar world.

While Nixon was faced with the growing economic power of both Western Europe and Japan, he faced a domestic economy in unprecedented decline. Inflation leaped upwards, fed by the massive expenditure on the Vietnam war, and America's trade balance deteriorated to the point that by Nixon's third year in office, "for the first time since 1894, Americans imported more merchandise than they sold abroad". "As the economy weakened, so did the dollar - the foundation that had undergirded the remarkable post-1945 global trading system", and hence America's global politico-economic dominance. The remarkable decline in America's economic performance (largely inherited by Nixon, although exacerbated by his fiscally irresponsible "Vietnamization" policies) increased the pressure to find alternatives to the existing foreign policies. It continued to work to America's disadvantage and hence undermine the new foreign policies Nixon sought to create. Nixon and Kissinger's lack of economic expertise remained a great hindrance to the development of the foreign policy mosaic they envisaged.

Nixon inherited an unenviable situation. Not only was America beginning a period of sharp economic decline but on the military front there were "half a million American troops in Vietnam, thousands of American prisoners in

27 Spanier, American Foreign Policy, pp.167-168.

28 Lafeber, America, Russia, and the Cold War, p.269.

29 Ibid.
North Vietnamese hands, and little hope of winning the war by any means that would be tolerated by American public opinion".\textsuperscript{30} Faced with these two overwhelming problems (the economy and defence being the two prime areas of concern to any President), Nixon's personality dictated that he adopt a "siege mentality" against opponents and supposed extremists, using illegal and extra-legal tactics to obtain political information about them. This approach ensured that Nixon's quest for greatness failed miserably, buried in the morass of the scandal and litany of misdeeds collectively known as "Watergate".

After securing overwhelming re-endorsement at the 1972 presidential election, aided by the seeming imminence of real peace in Vietnam and by a weak liberal Democratic opponent out of touch with the mainstream of American political attitudes, Nixon began the eighteen month road to humiliating resignation, a period marked by sharply declining US global prestige and effectiveness, with Kissinger increasingly the sole spokesman for the administration's foreign policies (especially after his appointment as Secretary of State in May 1973, an appointment not unconnected with Nixon's battle to stay in office and need of respected, untarnished figures of authority in his administration).

VII

It is not easy to evaluate the Presidency of Richard Nixon. In the years immediately following his resignation evaluations were overwhelmingly negative, but latterly he has achieved something of a comeback to

respectability as the memory of his misdeeds recedes and the scope of his achievements in international relations is sharpened by the mediocrity of his successors.

Obvious strengths were his building of ties across a wide spectrum, including strategic arms limitation, with the Soviet Union and the move towards normalizing relations with the PRC. These were significant moves in their own right (diplomatically startling in the case of China) made more significant by being fitted into a new American world-view, largely originated by Nixon and Kissinger. Their achievement was the realization (painful to generations of Americans secure with feelings of US omnipotence) "that in Indo-China and elsewhere there were real limits to American political, military, and economic power; that the countries of the Third World were a major factor in world politics; that the United States must learn to live in nuclear parity and nonconfrontation with the Soviet Union; that mainland China must be brought into the international polity; and that it was time to diminish America's role as world gendarme". 31 These realizations represented radical reassessments of America's place in the world - and, perhaps ironically, only a President with the impeccable anti-communist credentials of Richard Nixon could have achieved so much by way of destroying the assumptions of the old bipolar world.

Nixon's critics are plentiful. It is argued, with validity, that his wind-up of the Vietnam war was unnecessarily costly for all concerned (he authorized bombing of Vietnam at the rate of one ton for every minute he was in office 32) and that his openings to Russia and China were achieved via

31 Szulc, Illusion of Peace, p.7.
32 Lafeber, America, Russia, and the Cold War, p.268.
"unparalleled military brutality throughout Indo-China co-ordinated with skilful diplomacy in a half-dozen world capitals".\textsuperscript{33} Other critics point to his benign neglect of the Third World, a product of his concentration upon Soviet- and Sino-American relations and of "a Congress ever more hostile to foreign aid".\textsuperscript{34}

The ramifications of the Nixon Doctrine, his careful enunciation of reduced US global responsibilities, is not without criticism either in that it encouraged other, extremist, regimes to fill the vacuum, often using arms enthusiastically sold to them by Washington:

In all, the Nixon Doctrine encouraged a dangerous military build-up in the Middle East and southern Africa; nearly bankrupted some nations and encouraged others, as Iran, to raise oil prices rapidly to pay for inflation-priced US equipment; made those nations more likely to use force rather than negotiations to settle disputes; helped create dangerously strained relations with Japan when it refused to become Asian policeman; and caused Nixon to become a political bedfellow of the Shah and white supremist regimes in Africa.\textsuperscript{35}

If in relations with the USSR and China, Nixon had "risen out of his basest prejudices to become a statesman", his authorization of the overthrow of the leftist Allende regime in Chile in 1970 in favour of a pro-American military dictatorship showed that he also remained the "political everyman of parochial US politics, ordinary, bigoted, the lowest common denominator ..."\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Szulc, Illusion of Peace, p.9.

\textsuperscript{34} Howard Bliss and M. Glen Johnson, Beyond the Water's Edge: America's Foreign Policies (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1975), p.89.

\textsuperscript{35} Lafeber, America, Russia, and the Cold War, pp.266-267.

\textsuperscript{36} Morris, Uncertain Greatness, p.242.
In many ways Nixon appeared to have seen the need for decisive and imaginative action in the field of international relations in order to allow the US to reassert itself in a time of swiftly changing global relationships after the debacle of Vietnam under Johnson. His foreign policy lieutenant, Henry Kissinger, has come in for critical reassessment in recent years, but at the time his "shuttle diplomacy" in the Middle East and his secret negotiations over Vietnam and over Sino-US relations brought plaudits to an administration otherwise personified by the grubby pursuits of political "bag-men" and faceless "plumbers".

Nixon recognized his goal, his "summons to greatness", but ultimately the paranoia in the politician overwhelmed the vision of the statesman. Nixon left the White House a despised, almost tragic, figure and US foreign policies were not irrevocably changed despite the pressures that were building. The next elected Republican President was able to revert to the Cold War cliches of the 1950s. Perhaps the Presidency of Richard Nixon will be remembered as an era of missed opportunities. It was, certainly, a failed search for greatness.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The late 1960s, coinciding with Vietnam, marked the end of the period when America was overwhelmingly more powerful than any other nation, when we could assault problems alone and entirely with our own resources, when American initiatives were accepted without serious debate, when we could believe that our own domestic experiences, like the New Deal, were the automatic blueprint for economic development and political progress abroad. It marked above all the end of the era when we could imagine that any problems could be resolved once and for all and that solutions once achieved would permit us to end our international exertions.

Henry Kissinger
Arthur K. Salomon Lecture
New York University
19 September 1977

The preceding chapters have attempted to illustrate the fundamental change that occurred in US foreign policies during the Presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. For over twenty-five years prior to Johnson there had been a clear consensus in the US about the basic orientation of American foreign policies. The US moved out of its traditional isolationism during World War II guided by President Roosevelt, who had realized that America's interest in defeating fascism in Europe had to equal her desire to subdue the more immediate threat posed by Japan. Roosevelt's death before the war's conclusion means that the likely nature of his dealings with the Soviet Union after the war can only be conjectural, although there is some evidence that he may have been, initially at least, more conciliatory towards it than his successors proved to be.¹

Roosevelt was succeeded by the relatively inexperienced Harry S. Truman, a man particularly unskilled in the ways of foreign policy. Truman eagerly

¹ See footnote 2, chapter II.
adopted many of the observations made in George Kennan's famous telegram from Moscow\(^2\) as concrete articles of faith, suitable to form the foundation for the subsequent Truman Doctrine. The Doctrine's monolithic view of communism, designed as much for domestic political consumption (to provide a rationale for the Marshall Plan, for an initially sceptical Congress and people) as for a basis of a realistic foreign policy, subsequently served as the cornerstone of America's international relations until the re-evaluation of the late 1960s that was forced by the Vietnam experience.

Although Eisenhower, Truman's successor in 1953, did have considerable experience in international affairs, he did not attempt to depart from the foreign policy parameters set by the Truman administration. Containment of supposed Soviet expansionist tendencies in Europe remained the framework in which all other foreign policies were hung. Challenges to Western interests in other parts of the world were still invariably assumed to be masterminded from Moscow or Peking, and it was also assumed that those capitals were sharing identical goals. Eisenhower's Presidency was influenced by the strongly anti-communist domestic political climate engendered by Senator Joseph McCarthy. It was notable for the creation of the doctrine of "massive retaliation", the US threat to use nuclear weapons against the Soviet bloc (which was assumed to include the PRC) whenever the US perceived its vital interests to be irrevocably threatened. This policy was born of America's clear strategic superiority and Eisenhower's desire to reduce US defence spending without endangering national security.

Eisenhower brought a relatively sophisticated view of world affairs to the White House, which provided a timely bridge between the generation of

\(^2\) That is, Kennan's 8000 word telegram of February 1946, which sought to explain truculent Soviet behaviour.
American politicians whose world-view was essentially a product of World War II and its immediate aftermath and the subsequent youthful vision and bold rhetoric of John F. Kennedy and his advisors.

Kennedy's Presidency arguably represented the high point of American ideals, ambitions and rhetoric of the past forty years. Although he stumbled at the outset with the Bay of Pigs fiasco, foreign policy issues dominated his Presidency with, for example, the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, massively increased US expenditure on arms, and the beginnings of significant US military involvement in Vietnam. Under Kennedy's charismatic leadership, US feelings of omnipotence, which had been growing ever since the Second World War, were able to blossom. The assumptions of the Truman Doctrine still went unquestioned and Kennedy extended US commitments to unprecedented lengths.

Lyndon Johnson inherited both the burden of excessive American commitments and also the high expectations of US capabilities caused by the rhetoric and relative success of his predecessor. He was a traditional liberal Democrat whose strengths lay in his ability to manipulate Congress and get his legislative program passed (something he was far better at than Kennedy had been) and his vision of the "Great Society" to help overcome poverty and injustice in America. Like many Vice-Presidents, these strengths were founded in his understanding of domestic politics and he had only an imperfect knowledge of the complexities of foreign affairs. Vietnam was a foreign policy problem that would have severely tested any President. In Johnson's case the costs of America's Vietnam involvement eventually broke him, causing his premature retirement and the eventual re-thinking of America's foreign policies that resulted in the era of detente under Nixon and Kissinger.
It was Nixon's great achievement to move US foreign policies out of the Cold War parameters in which they had previously been set. This, ironically, meant moving backwards towards the more sophisticated nuances (either ignored or not understood by Truman) in George Kennan's original telegram suggesting that relations with the Soviet Union necessitated "not the containment by military means of a military threat, but the political containment of a political threat".\(^3\)

Nixon realized the necessity for new policies because of the evident failure of the old in not achieving stated goals in Vietnam and in not preventing increased Soviet global reach and power. US policies, simply, were no longer "containing" the Soviet Union and its allies, so an alternative had to be found.

An alternative to containment was detente, "a consciously chosen strategy for managing the superpowers' adversary relationship which would seek to secure American interests at a lower level of tensions and at a lesser cost than the extensive involvement, high-cost policy of cold war confrontation and frequent crises".\(^4\) Detente was an attempt to meet the realities of the Soviet Union's strategic nuclear parity with the US, the USSR's recently-acquired status as a genuine global superpower, and the evidence of America's diminished ability to manipulate foreign policy outcomes to its own advantage. Detente was much more complex than the simplistic bipolar relationship implicit in containment: "Detente as a state of existence which


\(^4\) Spanier, American Foreign Policy, p.182.
combined conflict and co-operation was harder ... to explain and understand than the cold war had been ...”

By Nixon's time the US "finally explained its actions on the international scene in the same terms as all great powers before it - that is, in terms of the logic of the balance of power". Despite his "search for greatness", Nixon was almost certainly driven more by pragmatism than altruism. He essentially sought to manage global affairs with the minimum cost and maximum benefit to the US. After Vietnam, America was clearly weary with its global role. During the Cold War US policies, although couched in noble terms to contrast with the allegedly wicked intentions of its adversary, were defensive and rigid. The Nixon-Kissinger "grand design and grand strategy were more positive and called for greater flexibility and maneuverability". This flexibility included bringing the PRC into the mainstream of international relations. The balance of power sought by Nixon and Kissinger, as the means of managing the new global complexities, was different from the simple bipolar balance sought by earlier generations of European statesmen. In the words of one writer,

[they sought] the acceptance of a tripolar configuration of power in the military-security issue area and a multipolar international economic system, the development of a moderate international system supported by the United States, the Soviet Union and China, and the halting of the spread of communism within the Western sphere of influence while simultaneously avoiding a direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union.

5 Ibid., p.217.
6 Ibid., p.180.
8 Ibid., pp.249-250.
It has not been the purpose of this paper to attempt to evaluate the success of the innovative Nixon-Kissinger foreign policies. Indeed, the weakening US commitment to detente after Nixon's resignation, the widespread perceptions of US indecision and weakness in foreign affairs under Carter, and the return to the language and postures of the Cold War under Reagan, which were so recently endorsed by the American electorate, may suggest that the Nixon-Kissinger approach will be seen as an historical oddity. They failed to forge a new foreign policy consensus despite the destruction of the old by the Vietnam imbroglio.

Nevertheless, Nixon's achievement was to break the existing confrontationist bipolarity, to move towards constructive dialogue with America's adversaries, to recognize the stupidity of ignoring the reality of 800 million Chinese, and to recognize the necessity for America to come to terms with the plurality and complexity of competing forces and interests in the latter part of the twentieth century. The present assertive and uncompromisingly self-confident nationalism dominant in Washington is yet to convincingly prove itself as a viable alternative to the more sophisticated global management techniques implicit in Nixon's detente approach to international relations.

Nixon had to try a new approach as the old policies, founded on the Truman Doctrine and the knowledge of Soviet strategic inferiority, were patently no longer achieving US policy goals. By 1969 the American strategic position had weakened. Vietnam had demonstrated the folly of the Pentagon's belief in the efficacy of technology and defence expenditure as the means of achieving military objectives. The US could no longer assume it had the ability to impose its will, as a last resort, by force over any adversary. Indeed it may be argued that the Vietnam experience was entirely counter-
productive in that it encouraged insurgency forces and anti-US interests in other parts of the world, and in that it diverted US resources away from any possible attempt to maintain strategic ascendancy over the Soviet Union.

Politically, America's ability to influence the domestic decision-making processes of other nations had declined by the time of Nixon's election. European countries were unenthusiastic about America's Vietnam policies and were increasingly independent in outlook. Domestically, European anti-US sentiment reached a new peak in the late 1960s. Third World countries grew sceptical about the value of supporting US policies, and they increasingly sought assistance from the USSR and the PRC.

The US was no longer the dominant factor it had once been in the global economy, matched as it was by the new affluence of the European Community and the amazing growth of Japan. On all fronts, strategic, political and economic, the age of American omnipotence seemed to be over. Therefore, in a very real sense, Nixon had to seek new policies if the US was to re-assert itself in global affairs.

Nixon brought innovation and vision to his approach to international affairs in the White House. Jettisoning the assumptions and certainties of the previous quarter century, and moving closer to America's two key ideological adversaries, was an achievement of some courage and distinction. History though will have to temper its assessment of that achievement with the knowledge that it ran parallel to great domestic abuses of presidential power and a White House paranoia about political opponents that was eventually totally self-destructive.
A President who sought to reshape US foreign policies for the good of his own nation, and in the interest of greater global security, eventually himself became the instrument by which American power and prestige reached an all-time low. America's main adversaries, instead of being offered positive reasons for willingly accepting a "tripolar configuration of power", gained by the wounds inflicted on the US by Richard Nixon.

Such a complex and contradictory character cannot possibly be evaluated in a paper of this brevity. All that can be said with certainty is that Nixon's Presidency marked a watershed in the development of US foreign policy that other politicians may not have been able to achieve. The failure of those policies to endure and his inability to forge a new bipartisan consensus in foreign affairs to match that which sprang from the Truman Doctrine was, for the most part, a result of the deviant domestic politics and contorted personality of Richard Nixon.

Aiming for greatness, using imaginative policies to reassert America's global power and influence, Nixon's eventual legacy was a national trauma which seriously damaged its ability to successfully exercise global power in all its forms. With the assistance of Henry Kissinger, one of the few people close to Nixon not to be badly scarred by the relationship, it was up to Gerald Ford to attempt to restore US predominance.

United States foreign policies, after the traumas and upheavals under Johnson and Nixon, still sought a definition and a direction equal to the global complexities of the 1970s.
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