

## Introduction

Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who ever have been, and ever shall be, animated by the same passions, and thus they necessarily have the same results.

Niccolò Machiavelli

In recent years, the relative decline of the United States has been a central topic in international debates. The economic crisis has put tight constraints on Washington's maneuvering space, with obvious consequences on foreign policy. In the early 1990s the United States may have been dubbed the "indispensable nation." In the immediate post-9/11 years America may have enjoyed a seemingly unlimited global outreach. But in the second decade of the twenty-first century the situation appears dramatically different. The decisions on the composition and deployment of US military forces need to be closely balanced against domestic concerns. Moreover, as the crisis of the US economy has deepened, the international competitiveness of the American model has been questioned and its influence and attractiveness to the rest of the world has progressively waned.

This evolution has triggered a wave of distinguished scholarship on the weakening of the United States and of the Western world in general. Such historians as Niall Ferguson, Charles Kupchan, and Alfred McCoy have recently published books on the decline of the West (and of America, still considered the leading exponent and exporter of Western ideals and values).<sup>1</sup> Although they differ on which reasons triggered the

<sup>1</sup> The reference here is to these books: Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); Charles Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the*

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current crisis and on the prescriptions for the future, these works all focus on the decline and eventual fall of the “American Empire” – a process considered more rapid and imminent than generally acknowledged. In a 2010 article titled “Empires Fall Abruptly, and the American Empire Is on the Brink” Ferguson, for example, argued that the US power position in the world was on the verge of collapsing because of the size of America’s economic debt. This would cause cuts in defense spending, ultimately leading to the US withdrawal from global affairs.<sup>2</sup> Expanding the argument to include educational and military as well as negative economic trends, McCoy further asserted that “the American Century, proclaimed so triumphantly at the start of World War II, will be tattered and fading by 2025, its eighth decade, and could be history by 2030.”<sup>3</sup> These gloomy scenarios build upon the central arguments of previous seminal works – such as Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*<sup>4</sup> and Fareed Zakaria’s *The Post-American World*<sup>5</sup> – which pose the question of whether America (and the West) can survive and redefine its power in the face of the “rise of the rest.” With the expanding influence of other “civilizations” – Islamic, Chinese, Russian – and the growing economic power of China, India, Brazil, and Russia (the so-called BRICs), is the decline of the United States (and of Western civilization with it) inexorable and inevitable? How can America face these complex new challenges to its predominant power position?

In addition to global negative trends beyond American control, in the last decade the United States – already, allegedly, in decline – has had to deal with the unprecedented consequences of the transnational threat posed by international terrorism. The September 11, 2001 attacks hit and devastated American cities for the first time in their history, causing a widespread sensation of impotence and vulnerability. How could the

*Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Alfred McCoy, Joseph Fradera, and Stephen Jacobson (eds), *Endless Empire: Spain’s Retreat, Europe’s Eclipse, America’s Decline* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Neil Ferguson, *The Australian*, July 29, 2010. The same argument was made at the 2010 Aspen Ideas Festival in July 2010 (see <http://www.eutimes.net/2010/07/harvard-professor-warns-of-sudden-collapse-of-american-empire/>).

<sup>3</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, “The Decline and Fall of the American Empire” in *The Nation*, December 6, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World. And the Rise of the Rest* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

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only remaining superpower be so surprisingly and shockingly struck by terrorists? Is the power of the United States inherently limited and helpless in face of the new security challenges of the twenty-first century?

The debate about the restraints on American resources and the limits of US power has shaken the country to its core. According to some, this is unprecedented. For the historian, however, the sense of imminent crisis, frantic overstretch, and near exhaustion is reminiscent of the late 1960s, a time when the dilemmas of the Vietnam War and growing strength of the Soviet Union unleashed the dramatic realization of the limits of American power. Those were the days when Democratic Senator William Fulbright denounced what he saw as “the arrogance of those who would make America the world’s policeman.”<sup>6</sup> Doesn’t this theme resound today? What will be the future American role in global affairs, given the Afghan quagmire, the rise of other economic powers, and the domestic crisis in the United States?

Despite the radically different international context (the post–Cold War era obviously poses different types of challenges compared to the bipolar Cold War system), the themes on the decline of the United States sound as strikingly familiar when related to the debates and the issues hindering American foreign policy during the 1970s. The deterioration of the US position following the problematic involvement in the Vietnam War; the rise of other centers of economic power, a consequence of the recovery of Western Europe and Japan; the emergence of China as a potential international partner for Washington after the Sino-Soviet split; the challenge posed to US supremacy by the growth of the Soviet Union’s nuclear capabilities; and the sense of crisis these issues created with the consequent need to adjust and redefine America’s role in order to face the combination of all these “new” threats to its global power position are all themes that were characteristic of the debates of the 1970s. The American response to the generalized perception of decline – then and in recent years – is also somewhat similar. As will emerge in the pages of this book, the presidents of the 1970s reacted to the weakening of the US position worldwide by seeking new ways to expand the American influence (in order to counter the Soviet one). In response to the post-Vietnam forced acknowledgment of limits, America conceived different means to maintain and at times increase its global outreach. At the dawn of the twenty-first

<sup>6</sup> J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966) quoted in Dana H. Allin and Erik Jones, *Weary Policeman: American Power in an Age of Austerity* (London: Routledge – for IISS, 2012), 15.

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century, the United States, far from retreating in face of the terrorist challenge, forcefully reacted and engaged in the so-called war on terror, which could be seen as another way to reassert American power, countering the image of impotence and vulnerability resulting from 9/11.

The search for the origins of some of today's most pressing issues hampering US foreign policy making was the initial trigger for this book. Can the study of America's response to its relative decline in the 1970s inform current debates and help put today's dilemmas into better perspective? Can the US involvement in the same critical "hot spots" of the world – such as Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa – and still problematic relationships – with Iran and, for different reasons, with China – be better understood by turning to the 1970s and unveiling the motivations of America's initial engagement in these areas and countries? Then, a specific interest in the 1970s – a decade which, because of its apparent contradictions and troubled legacy, distinguishes itself within the broad history of the Cold War – further and more deeply motivated this study. In fact, despite the voluminous scholarship dedicated to the Nixon administration, the debate on the objectives, meanings, and intended outcomes of the innovative policies undertaken by President Nixon is still ongoing among historians. Can the early 1970s really be considered a turning point in the evolution of the Cold War, as many scholars have argued?<sup>7</sup>

As pointed out by historian Robert Schulzinger, in 1972 even the critics in the United States and abroad "could only mutter and look embarrassed" as President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger "rewrote the script of post-World War II foreign policy."<sup>8</sup> However, this new course seemed not to endure the test of time. Only a few years later, Jimmy Carter was elected on the basis of a platform proclaiming far-reaching changes. At first sight, the policies of the Nixon administration – centered on a deemphasis of ideology and grounded on national interests – and those of the Carter administration – linked to democratic ideals and to the promotion and respect of human rights – are radically different. And, by the time Carter left office in 1981, nothing of the path of US-Soviet détente seemed to remain, as Ronald Reagan embraced a new Cold War posture. The evolution of American foreign policy between 1969 and 1981 was thus characterized by many ruptures

<sup>7</sup> Jussi Hanhimäki makes this basic point in the chapter "Ironies and Turning Points: Détente in Perspective" in Odd Arne Westad, *Reviewing the Cold War. Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Schulzinger, *Henry Kissinger: Doctor of Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 101.

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and turning points – 1969 with the election of Nixon and the pursuit of détente, 1975 with the fall of Saigon, 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for example – and by the consequent calls for change and new beginnings by the incoming presidents. These allegedly abrupt shifts in the American foreign policy lines make the 1970s a particularly interesting and challenging decade to study. Behind the surface of the repeatedly proclaimed changes, did the actual policies of the United States shift accordingly? Or was there, instead, more continuity than may at first sight appear? These are some of the central issues that this book will address. By searching for the legacy of the 1970s, it will also unveil whether there any lessons to be learned from those turbulent years of decline and renewal.

## RUPTURES, TURNING POINTS, ... OR MORE?

At the end of the 1960s, the changing dynamics of the international system necessarily imposed a rethinking of the US-Soviet relationship, the central aspect of American foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War. Moscow's near attainment of nuclear parity introduced a structural change in the balance of power between the superpowers and revolutionized the basic assumptions upon which the United States had based its Cold War posture. This occurred when the bipolarity of the international system, though still fundamentally governing the international scene, appeared to be less rigid – with the emergence of an economically more powerful Western Europe and increased tensions within the Communist bloc (particularly evident after the Sino-Soviet split). At the same time, the unstable nations of the Third World, which had only recently gained their independence, offered a potential new battleground for Cold War confrontations, posing the question of how to assure America's predominant influence on an increasingly global scale. In short, the United States needed to adjust to a context in which its dominance was no longer taken for granted.

In the early 1970s, the Nixon administration responded to the changed realities of the international balance of power with the celebrated, or denigrated, policy of US-Soviet détente. This has generally been characterized as a period of relaxation of tensions between the superpowers that enabled the conclusion of significant agreements (the SALT Agreements above all); an effort that was to a large degree in vain, as the new approach to relations with Moscow started to unravel after 1973. Thus, détente has been viewed as an attempt to chart a different course,

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which proved unsuccessful when faced with the combination of rising domestic criticism in the United States and a new assertiveness of the Soviet Union, particularly in the Third World.

The first goal of this book is to challenge these orthodox views on détente by setting forth a particular interpretation of the Nixon administration's foreign policy. Then, on this basis, the second objective is to interrelate the policies of the three presidents of the 1970s – Nixon, Ford, and Carter – tracing lines of continuity which, to this date, have been widely ignored (rarely, in fact, have Nixon and Carter been cited as having something in common). The broader scope of the book is to propose a reflection on the meanings and implications of the continuity of US foreign policy throughout the 1970s, while assessing its impact on the overall redefinition of America's international role.

Trying to look beyond the shortcomings of a design that, for a combination of reasons, crumbled only a few years after its celebrated climax, the central questions are: Did détente really mark a “moment of beginning”<sup>9</sup> or were the achievements of the early 1970s merely a series of significant, albeit isolated, diplomatic breakthroughs? More broadly, in Henry Kissinger's words, did the Nixon presidency successfully respond to the challenges it faced and guide “America through the transition from dominance to leadership?”<sup>10</sup> Was American power, in the long run, effectively transformed as a result of the policies pursued during the 1970s? If so, then US-Soviet détente may not have been just a turning point in the evolution of the Cold War, but much more.

## PERSONALITIES, IDEAS, AND POLICY MAKING

The 1970s saw the succession of three very unlike individuals to the presidency of the United States. Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter, in fact, had very different backgrounds, personalities, and world-views. With extensive experience at the top level of the American government, serving as Eisenhower's vice president for two terms, Nixon had a passion for and a remarkable grasp of international affairs, coupled with an innate conspiratorial mind-set and a penchant for secrecy.<sup>11</sup> At

<sup>9</sup> This is a reference to Nixon's 1969 inaugural address: “Each moment in history is a fleeting time, precious and unique. But some stand out as moments of beginnings, in which courses are set that shape decades or centuries. This can be such a moment.” *Public Papers of the Presidents, Richard Nixon, 1969*.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 704.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only. Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 350–351.

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the basis of Nixon's realistic approach to foreign relations was a deep understanding of the dynamics of geopolitics and an almost exclusive focus on the American national interest. The notions of balance of power, as an element producing stability, and of a strong America, as essential to global equilibrium, were central elements of his vision. This explained, at least in part, the choice of Henry Kissinger as his closest aid, given the Harvard professor's studies on the dynamics of the balance of power and its importance in effective foreign policy making.<sup>12</sup> At the same time and to a certain degree, surprisingly, the former president whom Nixon admired the most was Woodrow Wilson. Nixon considered American idealism an important feature in politics and shared Wilson's passionate internationalism. According to Nixon, the task for the American leadership was to redefine a sustainable role for an idealistic America in a new complex international environment, one in which *wilsonianism* and *real-politik* would have to merge.<sup>13</sup>

This book will confirm Nixon's fundamentally pragmatic and realistic approach to the management of the relationship with the Soviet Union. The American national interest and balance of power considerations were constantly at the basis of policy making, while the idealistic component rhetorically justified the "era of negotiation." Realizing that an acknowledgment of limits was the key to the development of an innovative and effective foreign policy, the Nixon administration elaborated its major initiatives – such as the Nixon doctrine, the China opening, the SALT agreements – by deemphasizing ideology and by pragmatically focusing on America's concrete geostrategic necessities. In this process, Nixon and Kissinger revealed their awareness that geopolitical strength, or vulnerability, had become the central element around which the competition with the Soviet Union would evolve. In the age of nuclear parity, whichever side was capable of posing challenges outside the nuclear-strategic domain would, over time, accumulate enough power and influence in order to, potentially, prevail. Therefore, the Nixon administration's central objective was "to prepare America for a role novel in its history but as old as the state system: preventing the accumulation of seemingly marginal geopolitical gains which, over time, would overthrow the balance of power."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The reference here is to Kissinger's first book *A World Restored. Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

<sup>13</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 705–707.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 751.



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Due to the Watergate scandal, in 1974 Gerald Ford assumed the presidency under extraordinary circumstances. He was the first vice president to be appointed, not elected, and then to occupy the White House after a president's resignation. As an individual, Ford's "open and uncomplicated personality could hardly have been more different from that of his predecessor."<sup>15</sup> Also, his political background greatly differed from Nixon's. He had been a member of Congress for more than twenty years, including eight years as the Republican minority leader in the House of Representatives, earning a reputation for integrity and candidness. However, in foreign policy he had an almost complete lack of experience. He was thus to rely heavily on Henry Kissinger as his chief adviser. For the most part, Ford agreed with the fundamental changes at the basis of the revolutionary foreign policy he had inherited.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, considering the rapid and unusual transition period, he chose not to disassociate himself from the policies of his predecessor. Kissinger's initial continued presence as both secretary of state and national security adviser symbolized the general and overall continuity of American foreign policy. However, in contrast to his forerunner (Watergate and the resignation cannot cancel the achievements of the summits in Moscow and Beijing), the Ford administration's foreign policy record is not generally considered successful – with the impasse in the SALT II negotiations and the debacles in the Third World, Vietnam, and Angola in particular. In fact, by 1975 the decline of détente seemed to be inexorable. Nevertheless, this book will point to the fact that, despite the setbacks, the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger years can be treated as a continuum.

While the Ford presidency was necessarily and intrinsically related to the Nixon administration, President Carter's proclaimed intentions instead promised radical changes. Having served two terms in the Senate of the state of Georgia, then becoming governor in 1971, Carter's political career was closely linked to the state, while he was virtually unknown nationwide. However, as the scandals of the Nixon administration had not yet been overcome by the American public, being an "outsider" became an asset during the 1976 presidential campaign. The nation's recovery was the central aspect of Carter's platform, with the promise of a "competent and compassionate" government, responsive and close to

<sup>15</sup> John L. Gaddis, "The Statecraft of Henry Kissinger" in Gordon A. Craig and Francis L. Loewenheim (edited by), *The Diplomats 1939–1979* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 570.

<sup>16</sup> John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 117.



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the expectations of the American people. Themes which, after the election, constituted the leitmotif of the president's inaugural address.<sup>17</sup>

In criticizing the excessive *realpolitik* that had shaped the Nixon-Kissinger-Ford years, Carter sought to restore consensus by reinvigorating the nation's moral purpose. He wanted to lead the country in a new direction, "openly, morally, and with an absolute commitment to human rights."<sup>18</sup> The realistic approach to international relations was rejected. The objective, instead, had to be the creation of a more humane world order, in which the traditional American democratic values were given priority. Furthermore, the obsession with the Soviet Union no longer had to dominate American policy and each nation's distinctiveness had to be recognized and respected. Therefore, while Nixon had placed the notions of balance of power and national interest at the center of his project, Carter sought to reassert American prestige through the restoration and promotion of liberal democratic values in an international context.

The different worldview and approach to foreign policy of the Republican administrations (Nixon and Ford) and of Carter's Democratic presidency are thus indisputable. These differences inevitably influenced the choice of foreign policy advisers and the decision-making mechanisms created by each administration. The absolute centrality of the White House during the first Nixon administration resulted from the president's near obsession with secrecy and reflected a deeply rooted distrust for the departments and, in general, of the bureaucracy. As a consequence, the National Security Council emerged as the main forum for American foreign policy making, with Henry Kissinger exercising a crucial role. All the major achievements of Nixon's first term were negotiated in secret back channels in which Kissinger had unchallenged authority, reporting exclusively and directly to the president. The unfolding of the Watergate drama further enhanced Kissinger's authority, then confirmed during the Ford administration. However, as his influence expanded and he increasingly became a public figure, his freedom to operate with few domestic constraints obviously diminished. As Kissinger himself acknowledged in his memoirs, it was impossible, and not recommendable, to continue with "the Byzantine administrative procedures of the first Nixon administration."<sup>19</sup> To make the foreign policy achievements permanent, they would

<sup>17</sup> John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency. A Re-evaluation* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power. American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 6.

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have had to be institutionalized, with all the consequences that this would have entailed.

In contrast to the stature and preeminence of Kissinger, which had immediately emerged during the Nixon administration and was (notwithstanding the necessary adjustments) in substance maintained during the Ford years, President Carter initially underlined collegiality and joint decision making. The different viewpoints of National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance were seen as balancing and complementary in what Carter hoped would be the overall direction of American foreign policy. Brzezinski's emphasis on the primacy of power and on the containment of the Soviet Union had to be balanced by Vance's penchant for diplomacy and negotiation. The structure set up for foreign policy decision making reflected the importance of collegiality. The Policy Review Committee (PRC) was chaired by the secretary of state and the Special Coordination Committee (SCC) by the national security adviser. Both analyzed issues and assessed the various possibilities for action, which were then passed on to the president at the weekly foreign policy "breakfasts" with the secretaries of defense and state, or during the meetings of the National Security Council.

From this brief snapshot of the Republican and Democratic presidencies of the 1970s asserting that, ultimately, similarities outplayed the differences and continuity prevailed over change seems, indeed, to be a tall order. This book, however, will tackle precisely this issue. In particular, did these apparently opposite and conflicting presidencies have common elements, in terms of concrete choices made and actual policies pursued in the management of the Cold War relationship with the Soviet Union? Did Carter's promise of change translate into actual policy, or did his administration, in the long run, adopt some of the policies initially so bitterly criticized? And, if continuity can be traced, what are its broader implications for the understanding of US foreign policy during the 1970s and beyond?

While in the United States the 1970s saw the succession of three presidencies; in the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev's leadership went unchallenged. Member of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee since 1952, Brezhnev, under the patronage of his predecessor Nikita Khrushchev, gradually became a dominant figure in the second half of the 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Odd Arne Westad, "The Fall of Détente and the Turning Tides of History" in Odd Arne Westad (ed), *The Fall of Détente. Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years* (Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 10.