

Introduction

Never, perhaps, in the postwar decades was the situation in the world as explosive and hence, more difficult and unfavorable, as in the first half of the 1980s.¹

– Mikhail Gorbachev, February 25, 1986

“The main issue Kennedy is raising is leadership,” Carter mused. “The weekend newspapers were unbelievable, practically anointing Kennedy as the president and claiming the 1980 election is already over.” It was September 17, 1979, and “the Kennedy challenge” was on Carter’s mind.² An ABC–Harris Poll showed the Massachusetts senator leading the president by 61–34 percent in the race for the Democratic nomination.³ Carter’s prospects were cast into further doubt on November 4, when sixty-six Americans were taken captive in Iran. At the suggestion of his secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, Carter forwent a holiday tradition. The great Christmas tree south of the White House was left unlit to signify sorrow for the hostages’ plight. It seemed to cap a miserable year, which saw inflation and interest rates spiral amid a major oil crisis. Fuel shortages led to long queues at gas stations across America. Gallup polls in June and October gave the president an approval rating of 28 percent.⁴ Christmas brought little festive cheer. On December 25, Carter learned of another foreign emergency: the Soviet 40th Army had crossed into Afghanistan. ‘There goes SALT II!’ he exclaimed.⁵

Carter was excoriated by the political right, who accused him of weakness and inaction. He had sought to reorient U.S. foreign policy: pledging to curtail defense spending, scale back military engagement, and reduce nuclear arms. He bemoaned the “inordinate fear of communism”

and exaggerations of the Soviet threat.⁶ Such were the principles on which Carter had campaigned as a Washington outsider. Now, one by one, these were hastily dismantled. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he said, was “the most serious threat to world peace since the Second World War.”⁷ A string of new hardline policies were adopted, many of them at odds with the goals he previously espoused. Carter imposed a grain embargo against the Soviet Union and ordered a U.S. withdrawal from the Moscow Olympics. He promised to increase defense spending by 5 percent and reinstated draft registration. He unveiled the “Carter Doctrine”—extending the containment policy to the Persian Gulf and committing U.S. forces to defend American interests in the region, if necessary by military action. The U.S. ambassador to Moscow was recalled. A Rapid Deployment Force was activated. Covert military aid was approved for Afghan rebels and Pakistan. In July 1980, a year after signing the SALT II Treaty, Carter issued PD-59—an aggressive strategy designed to give U.S. presidents more flexibility in planning for and executing a nuclear war.⁸

A new and more dangerous Cold War was in motion. This power struggle would escalate into a confrontation so politically charged that within three years U.S.–Soviet relations had reached their nadir. By then, Ronald Reagan was embarking on the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history, leading an administration with the most avowed anti-communist agenda in at least two decades. A series of events in 1983 led to the worst phase of the conflict in a generation. It was the year in which the president denounced the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” having earlier declared Marxism-Leninism destined for the “ash heap of history.” Reagan upped the military ante with Moscow by unveiling the Strategic Defense Initiative—a proposal for a space-based missile defense system to protect the United States from nuclear attack. In early September, Soviet forces shot down a Korean airliner that had drifted into Russian airspace, costing the lives of all 269 on board. Among the victims were sixty-two Americans, including a member of Congress. In the following month, U.S. forces invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada and ousted its pro-Marxist government.

Worse was to follow. In early November, a NATO military exercise spanning Western Europe was misinterpreted by Moscow as a possible prelude to a U.S. nuclear strike. Soviet leaders prepared their forces for a retaliatory attack. Oleg Gordievsky, the deputy KGB chief in London (who doubled up as a spy for Britain’s MI6), reported to Westminster and Washington on the state of panic in the Kremlin.⁹ Reagan was briefed by

his advisers on the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), which outlined the U.S. procedures to wage nuclear war. “It was,” he recalled, “a scenario for a sequence of events that could lead to the end of civilization as we knew it.”¹⁰ Two weeks later, the first U.S. intermediate-range nuclear missiles were deployed in Western Europe; NATO’s response to the Soviet SS-20 deployments. The Soviet Union withdrew from arms control talks. Reagan, like Carter, would enter election year amid an international crisis.

As the real 1984 loomed, journalists drew parallels with George Orwell’s fictional world: a militarized culture, propaganda, and the specter of war. In the United States, bomb shelter sales were on the rise. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) designed elaborate evacuation plans to help save communities from potential radiation sickness.¹¹ Domsday scenarios were portrayed in print and film, illustrating the likely effects of nuclear catastrophe. Antinuclear activists took to the streets across America and Western Europe. Participants numbered in the hundreds of thousands, beseeching Reagan to halt the arms race. In the Soviet Union, signs indicating the location of air raid shelters were ubiquitous. Several times a day, Kremlin-approved broadcasts on the radio and television suggested the possibility of a U.S. nuclear attack.¹² Far from abating, the Cold War showed every sign of intensifying.

Yet abate it did. Like Carter, Reagan’s foreign policy would be transformed during his fourth year in office. Within weeks of these events, Reagan used a televised address to announce a change in outlook. He depicted a fictional Ivan and Anya crossing paths with Jim and Sally, sheltering from a rainstorm and speaking in a common tongue. The theme was cooperation, not confrontation. “Together we can strengthen peace, reduce the level of arms,” Reagan declared. “Let us begin now.”¹³ As 1984 progressed, Reagan—who had not met with a Soviet leader—pursued diplomatic exchanges and bilateral agreements as never before. In September, the president made his first direct contact with a top-ranking Soviet official (Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko) during nearly four years in office. “For the sake of a peaceful world,” Reagan said, “let us approach each other with ten-fold trust and thousand-fold affection.”¹⁴

Few could have foreseen the events to follow. Within three years a major disarmament agreement was achieved. Two years further on, communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed, followed by the Berlin Wall. Decades of repressive rule were ended, families and friends were reunited. By the end of 1991 the USSR itself had ceased to exist. It was an astonishing transformation. The pace of change seemed to defy

explanation. Even the protagonists were caught by surprise. “Did you ever expect this to happen?” a journalist asked Reagan, days after the Wall fell. Reagan shrugged. “Someday,” he replied.¹⁵

How did the Cold War begin anew, and why did it escalate? Why did tensions start to recede? What led both presidents to adopt policies in their fourth year that were so at odds with the course they had earlier pursued, and on which they staked their reputation? These questions led me to examine the actions of American policymakers. I focus chiefly on what some historians call the “Second Cold War”: the roughly six-year time frame between 1979 and 1985 which followed the era of *détente*.¹⁶ This period witnessed the most serious challenges of the second half of the Cold War. The course of events was highly contingent (three Soviet leaders dying within three years), and it would not have taken an extraordinary stretch in circumstances to have produced a scenario in which U.S.–Soviet relations had deteriorated irretrievably, rendering a later breakthrough impossible. As fears of nuclear war were raised, so the domestic schisms deepened. The largest peacetime military buildup was challenged by the largest peacetime peace movement. The conflict began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979. It concluded with the meeting of Reagan and Gorbachev in Geneva in late 1985—the first summit since Carter and Brezhnev had kissed cheeks in Vienna, six and a half years earlier.

THE DECLINE OF POLITICAL HISTORY

The end of the Cold War caught scholars by surprise. To explain the events, historians have assessed U.S.–Soviet relations at a state-to-state level, or within a wider global context.¹⁷ More recently, the “transnational turn” has seen an emphasis on the role of non-state forces, such as human rights groups and peace movements. The prevailing argument today—though by no means a consensus—is that the Cold War ended because of the courageous efforts of citizens across Eastern Europe, and the reformist thinking of a new generation of Soviet leaders who took power in 1985. Led by Gorbachev, they saw that the arms race had placed an unsustainable burden on the Soviet economy, drained by the Afghan War and long-term structural problems. Reagan subsequently engaged, and their determination to reduce the nuclear threat was the catalyst for change.¹⁸

But what of the years *preceding* Gorbachev’s arrival—one of the most fraught periods in East–West relations and the greater fraction of the late

Cold War? Studies on this era have been dwarfed by those on the Reagan–Gorbachev rapport. The trend is regrettable for several reasons. Firstly, the confrontation of the early 1980s offers important lessons for crisis management. U.S.–Soviet relations worsened to the point that a nuclear exchange appeared more likely than at any stage since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Why this did not materialize, and how tensions began to ease, are questions which warrant examination. The path which led to the events of 1986–89 was highly contingent. It was not preordained that the East–West crisis would be defused, or that war would be avoided. Secondly, the policy reversals of successive U.S. presidents merit far greater scrutiny. These symmetrical shifts had a huge bearing on the direction of the late Cold War, yet have rarely been explored. For most of Carter’s presidency and most of Reagan’s first term, both presidents pursued a course which seemed to reflect their convictions. Yet, in their fourth year in office, both adopted policies that bore little resemblance to what had gone before. Their turns—Carter to the right, Reagan to the center—helped lead to the rise and fall of the last great Cold War struggle. How and why they occurred are questions at the heart of this book. A third drawback has been the misconception that the change in U.S. policy and easing of tensions began only with the arrival of Gorbachev as Soviet leader. The “new thinking,” combined with a greater readiness to reduce nuclear arms, led Reagan to believe that in Gorbachev the Soviets at last had someone with whom he could “do business.” The conventional wisdom is that only then did Reagan reconsider his foreign policy approach.¹⁹ It is demonstrated here that this was not so.

The lack of attention to these questions owes something to the decline of political history as a field of study.²⁰ The disorderly nature of politics is at odds with the academic ethos, which tends to reward neat, conceptual frameworks. (Hal Brands terms this “the elegance of theory versus the messiness of reality.”²¹) In recent decades most historians have looked abroad to examine American foreign policy. Their work has focused on transnationalism, the role of non-state actors, and global interdependence.²² The trend followed the rise of globalization. It breathed new life into the field, incentivizing scholars to pursue topical global issues. Many took the form of social or cultural studies at the expense of the political. The aim was to de-center the United States and engage with perspectives from around the world. To contend with a more interconnected, competitive academic market, younger historians were drawn toward research which could demonstrate transnational themes. A number of fine studies emerged, expanding our knowledge of how overseas actors influenced U.S. foreign policy.

But the “transnational turn” has come at a price. Lost in the discourse is the role of domestic politics. The result is a distorted portrayal of how decisions were reached. Presidents are cast less as politicians than global statesmen, whose rationale is based on strategic factors or an ideological hue. Only by examining the full landscape—international *and* domestic—can we truly grasp how the key figures operated: what influenced their risk calculus; why they chose certain policies and discarded others; or why they decided to change course at a given time. Long before Gorbachev’s arrival, pressures closer to home presented constraints and incentives against which Carter and Reagan acted.

As Fredrik Logevall and Campbell Craig have argued, the trend toward internationalizing the study of American foreign relations is compounded by the fact that the United States, post-1945, was no ordinary actor. It was the sole superpower, with an unrivaled military, political, and economic reach. Studies which privilege the foreign over the domestic run the risk of becoming ahistorical, by ascribing greater importance to various overseas actors than they in fact warrant. Too much agency becomes assigned to the international sphere, without a corresponding examination of domestic forces, and the parameters they set for foreign policy. What is lost is the “intermestic” dimension of policy, where the international and domestic agendas become entwined.²³ If the Cold War ended largely because of events overseas, the fate of the six-year conflict which preceded it rested as much on how American decision-makers wielded power. Understanding why U.S. policy changed in 1980 and 1984, and with it the Cold War, is to understand that domestic variables—public opinion, election campaigns, congressional restraints, party politics, personal ambition—figured as much in their calculus as did proximate external factors.

The path of American foreign policy was not so linear as to follow global patterns. It was a more complex, messy process, subject to the push and pull of domestic pressures, prone to change for reasons distinct—though never independent—of international events. Foreign and defense issues frequently developed into partisan tug-of-wars: arms control; strategic defense; U.S.–Soviet relations; the Panama Canal treaties; intervention in Central America and Lebanon. In the post-Vietnam era, foreign affairs were matters of interest to an increasingly decentralized political constellation: Democratic and Republican Party hierarchies, members of Congress, interest groups, and labor unions, from the Committee on the Present Danger to the AFL-CIO. Added to this was the media and a public audience more attuned to events abroad than ever before. All presented pressures that shaped the context in which foreign policy was discussed.

For Carter and Reagan, success rested on their ability to master this international–domestic nexus. Managing the legislative demands, monitoring public opinion, and anticipating partisan challenges became as much a part of their thinking as did attitudes in the Kremlin.

None of which is to ignore the significance of external matters. It was precisely because of the purchase of globalization, and the expanding contours of U.S. policy, that domestic actors sought a more active engagement in foreign affairs. One example was human rights, where a complex of liberal and conservative humanitarian issues animated different constituencies.²⁴ Foreign policy decisions seldom have monocausal roots. This book by no means suggests that every position taken by Carter and Reagan was driven by partisan wrangling, electioneering, or personal ambition. Rather, it integrates discussion of domestic politics into an interpretative framework which also gives attention to geostrategy and ideology in explaining the course of the conflict.²⁵ Both presidents had profound ideas about how American power should be projected overseas. Both were strongly antinuclear, and targeted arms control agreements with Moscow using particular strategies. Some policies were the result of mainly external factors (Reagan’s support for the Polish Solidarity movement, for example). But all major initiatives were taken only after the choices had been carefully measured against the consequences back home. Even the most strategic and ideological decisions, such as SDI or aid to the Contras (“Reagan’s obsession”), were bound up with party politics, public opinion, and other domestic considerations. Not least the role of Congress, characterized by Reagan as a meddling “committee of 535.”²⁶

THE POLITICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The notion that foreign policy is always a matter of domestic politics would be a truism for many nations.²⁷ In the United States, the foreign–domestic nexus is axiomatic. Nowhere among major Western democracies is a political system so decentralized, where national security or foreign trade impacts upon congressional districts across the country. Representatives and senators, career politicians, cater to the interest of their constituents as it pertains to foreign policy (e.g., an economic group, ethnic lobby, or industry), often with little regard for events overseas.²⁸ During the Cold War, regions dependent on military bases or weapons industries were typically prone to exploitation. But the openness of the U.S. system could also work in reverse. It ensured, for example, that the

grassroots, antinuclear movement in Reagan's first term found easy access to political elites, with a freeze resolution adopted by the House in 1983.²⁹ Moreover, there are few (if any) nations in which the election cycle affects the foreign policy outlook of decision-makers as much as it does in the United States, where the campaigning never stops. Nor does any comparable nation have an executive branch whose external policies operate against such legislative oversight. Watchful units such as the Senate's Foreign Relations, Intelligence, and Armed Services committees are entrusted with vital tasks: blocking or passing treaties; monitoring aid and arms sales; authorizing foreign intervention and declaring war.³⁰

A glance at America's Cold War should dispel any doubt about the weight of politics on the course of events. The two presidents who used tape recorders for the majority of their terms, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, revealed personal ambition, candid thinking, and a preoccupation with the domestic implications of foreign affairs.³¹ Candidates, presidential and congressional, wrestled with the temptation to play politics with policy. With the Truman Doctrine of 1947, the East–West dichotomy was fertile ground for politicians looking to prove their anti-communist bona fides. Even during the “bipartisan age” of Senator Arthur Vandenberg, partisan wrangling shaped the treatment of foreign issues; politics never stopped at the “water's edge.”³²

The stances which proved risk averse with votes at stake were those which denounced communism, talked up the Soviet threat, or called for a greater military arsenal. In election season there were few drawbacks to creating alarmist impressions or labeling opponents weak. John F. Kennedy made the Republican handling of foreign policy the focal point of his campaign against Nixon in 1960. He charged the Eisenhower–Nixon administration with presiding over a decline in U.S. military power, and for allowing a “missile gap” to develop, with the Soviets “outproducing” America in nuclear weapons. “Never before have we experienced such arrogant treatment at the hands of our enemies,” Kennedy declared, attacking Nixon's vice presidential leadership as one of “weakness, retreat, and defeat.”³³

America's costliest wars were among those issues most susceptible to political maneuvering. The Korean War, which stalemated as the battle lines held, coincided with the 1952 presidential campaign. Harry Truman, who faced criticism for not doing more to combat anti-communism at home, was under pressure to avoid appearing “soft” on Soviet expansionism. As election season neared, Republicans attacked the administration's military and diplomatic strategies, as well as the credentials of Democratic

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candidate Adlai Stevenson. Talk of negotiating an armistice was criticized as weakness and appeasement. Republicans called for a “rollback” of communism to replace the more cautious policy of containment. Dwight Eisenhower, the party candidate, claimed that Democrats were willing “to barter away freedom in order to appease the Russian rulers.”³⁴ Democrats were blamed for the loss of China, for the Soviet atomic buildup, and for allowing the Communists time to regroup their forces in Korea. The weight of criticism led the Truman administration to conclude that the safer political option would be to “hang tough” in Korea, rather than compromise.³⁵

The scope of America’s commitment in Vietnam also became contingent on how decision-makers grappled with priorities at home. As the war effort foundered, successive presidents (Johnson and Nixon) contemplated how military realities would impact their electoral prospects. Johnson’s decision to increase the U.S. role in 1964 owed much to his obsession with winning the election in November of that year. The subsequent “Americanization” of the war stemmed from concern that the administration’s political credibility (and Johnson’s personal credibility) would be irreparably damaged if the United States failed to sustain the military effort.³⁶ Nixon, as tape recordings reveal, sought to withhold an earlier exit from Vietnam in order to extract maximum benefit for the 1972 election. Between January and November his administration gradually modified its negotiating position. Troop withdrawals took place periodically, timed to remind the war-weary public that U.S. involvement was winding down, and to stifle criticism from Democrats. But a final settlement was delayed, so that any problems which resulted would occur too late to affect the election.³⁷ “Winning an election is terribly important,” Nixon told Henry Kissinger, in August 1972. The national security adviser agreed. “We’ve got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two,” he replied. “After a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater. If we settle it this October, by January 1974 no one will give a damn.”³⁸

It was during the 1970s that the relationship between the executive and legislative was transformed. This was the symptom of a trauma. Conduct of the war in Vietnam, together with Watergate, produced a crisis of confidence in the government among Congress and the public. It ushered in legislative acts designed to restrict the executive’s room for maneuver, ending the notion of an “imperial presidency.” These changes had major consequences for foreign policy. The War Powers Act set limits on the ability of the president to send American armed forces into combat areas

without congressional approval. The amendment to the Trade Reform Act made U.S. trade with other nations conditional on the right of citizens to free movement. Pressure from Congress to link foreign policy to human rights resulted in the formation of a bureau of human rights within the State Department.

The measures promised to bring accountability to the policymaking process. But other consequences emerged. With a more assertive Congress (and the proliferation of subcommittees), special interest groups began wielding greater power in domestic and foreign affairs. Senators and representatives capitalized on the new political landscape, often for their personal concerns. The number of moderates in both parties diminished. Harvard professor Samuel Beer described the trend as “a new and destructive pluralism,” which disorganized public policy and set group against group.³⁹ Ideological schisms widened between liberals and conservatives. The Democratic Party was itself divided between the “neoconservative” wing that favored a large military buildup, and those of a liberal persuasion who advocated diplomacy, détente, and a freeze on nuclear weapons. As liberals campaigned for the reorientation of U.S. power, conservatives perceived a crisis, in which Soviet expansion was being met with retreat and submissiveness. By 1976, groups such as the Committee on the Present Danger were on the rise. They cast détente as weakness and appeasement that was “doomed to failure.”⁴⁰ Notions of Soviet military supremacy were peddled, external threats were inflated, and American strength was consciously downplayed. Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, charged liberals with being so traumatized by Vietnam that they had turned into “isolationists.” He decried the limits on presidential authority, which “damaged the main institutional capability for conducting an overt fight against the spread of Communist power.”⁴¹

Carter’s promise of U.S. military restraint met with a firm response. Interest groups mobilized to frustrate reform and campaign for new defense programs, anxious to protect long-existing policies and the military-industrial complex. To conservatives in both parties, Carter’s pursuit of a SALT treaty with Moscow symbolized the way in which policymakers had throttled back power. Their lament would become the platform on which Reagan launched his presidential campaign. By 1980, many neoconservatives were switching party allegiance, with their convictions more aligned with the Republican candidate. Paul Nitze, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Eugene Rostow, Richard Pipes, and Elliott Abrams would all defect to hold key roles in the Reagan administration. As Carter took