The United States and Strategic Arms Limitation during the Nixon-Kissinger Period

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In 1969 the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a series of negotiations aimed at limiting the size of both countries' arsenals of strategic nuclear weapons. Those negotiations—the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, or SALT talks, as they were called—led to the signing in 1972 by President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev of the SALT I accords: a treaty sharply limiting the deployment of anti-ballistic missile [ABM] systems and an interim agreement freezing for five years the number of strategic ballistic missile launchers at its then-current level. SALT I was followed by a new series of talks aimed at producing a more permanent arrangement. To that end, an agreement outlining the framework for a SALT II treaty was reached between Brezhnev and Nixon's successor Gerald Ford at Vladivostok in 1974, and, after lengthy and complex negotiations, a SALT II treaty was signed by Brezhnev and President Jimmy Carter in 1979. Although that treaty was never ratified, both sides complied with its terms until 1986.

Given its obvious importance, SALT was bound to attract a good deal of attention at the time. And in fact a number of major works on the subject appeared in the 1970s, most notably John Newhouse's book *Cold Dawn* (on the process leading to the SALT I agreements), Strobe Talbott's *Endgame* (about the subsequent negotiations culminating in the SALT II treaty), and the RAND analyst Thomas Wolfe's book *The SALT Experience*.[1] An extraordinary memoir by Nixon's National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, which contained a good deal of information on SALT and related matters, came out in 1979.[2] Gerard Smith, who had headed America's SALT delegation during Nixon's first term as president, published a book dealing directly with SALT in 1980.[3] And Raymond Garthoff's *Détente and Confrontation*, which dealt with U.S.-Soviet relations as a whole from Nixon to Reagan, appeared just a few years later. Garthoff had been one of the SALT negotiators during Nixon's first term, and in that book (and in a number of articles as well) he devoted a good deal of attention to the SALT process.[4]

This article is scheduled to be published in the Fall 2022 issue of the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. The title there will be "The United States and Strategic Arms Control during the Nixon-Kissinger Period: Building a Stable International System?" The only real difference between the two versions is that this version contains direct links to many of the items cited in the footnotes.

[1] John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973); Strobe Talbott, *Endgame: The Inside Story of SALT II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); and Thomas Wolfe, *The SALT Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1979).

[2] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979).

[3] Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of the First Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

[4] Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American—Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1985). A revised edition came out in 1994. See also Raymond Garthoff, "Negotiating with the Russians: Some Lessons from SALT," *International Security*, Vol 1, No. 4 (1977); Raymond Garthoff, "Mutual Deterrence and Strategic Arms Limitation in Soviet Policy, *International Security*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1978); and Raymond Garthoff, "SALT I: An Evaluation," *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1978).

Although those works provided a fair amount of information on SALT, for the historian that early literature was never entirely satisfactory. Writers like Newhouse, Talbott, and Wolfe had to rely on what was available in the public record or on what they could learn from interviews. Most historians, however, feel you cannot really understand a subject like this until you see the documents that were secret at the time and were only released years later.

But today the situation is very different. Some truly extraordinary source material relating to SALT has become available in recent years, and scholars interested in making sense of the whole SALT experience now have a massive amount of material to work with. Indeed, a number of scholarly works drawing on that material have already begun to come out.[5] As for the sources themselves, many of them are now readily available, either in print or online. The volumes on SALT and related matters in the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series for 1969-76 are particularly rich, in large part because of the wonderful job the editors did in transcribing some of the Nixon tapes.[6] And those volumes can be supplemented with various other important collections—the Kissinger Transcripts collection, for example, on the Digital National Security Archive website, and the collection of audiotapes (with transcripts) dealing with Nixon's SALT policy in early 1971 published in digital format by Erin Mahan and Patrick Garrity in 2015.[7] Some European sources can shed light on certain aspects of SALT; much of that material is also easily accessible, either in print or online.[8] Even some Soviet sources have become available. Some Soviet documents, for example, appeared in a

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[5] See especially John Maurer, "An Era of Negotiation: SALT in the Nixon Administration, 1969-1972," Ph.D. Diss., Georgetown University, 2017; John Maurer, "Divided Counsels: Competing Approaches to SALT, 1969–1970," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (April 2019) (link); Arvid Schors, *Doppelter Boden: Die SALT-Verhandlungen 1963–1979* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016); David Tal, *US Strategic Arms Policy in the Cold War: Negotiations and Confrontation over SALT, 1969-1979* (New York: Routledge, 2017); David Tal, "'Absolutes' and 'Stages' in the Making and Application of Nixon's SALT Policy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2013); Matthew Ambrose, *The Control Agenda: A History of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); and James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For the very important NATO side of the story, see Ralph Dietl, *Equal Security: Europe and the SALT Process, 1969-1976* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013), and Ralph Dietl, *Beyond Parity: Europe and the SALT Process in the Carter Era, 1977-1981* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2016).

[6] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-76*, Vol. XXXIII (SALT I), Vol. XXXIV (SALT II through 1979), Vols. XXXV and XXXVI (national security affairs), and Vols. XII-XVI (on the USSR) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006-2014) (links to pdfs). Hereinafter cited as FRUS, with appropriate year and volume numbers.

[7] The Digital National Security Archive (https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/digital-national-security-archive) is a subscription service, but access is available through many university libraries. Material in this collection will henceforth by cited as DNSA with appropriate document number. The material dealing with early 1971 was published by the University of Virginia Press Rotunda Press as a digital edition in 2015, along with a descriptive essay by the editors: Patrick J. Garrity and Erin R. Mahan, *Nixon and Arms Control: Forging the Offensive/Defensive Link in the SALT Negotiations, February–May 1971* (https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/nixon_SALT). Access is also by subscription.

[8] See especially the volumes in the *Akten zur auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* and the *Documents diplomatiques français* dealing with the period (both available online) and, for British material, the Adam Matthew digital collection *The Nixon Years, 1969-1974: Sources from The National Archives, UK* (link).

collection of documents on the détente years published jointly by the State Department and the Russian foreign ministry in 2007.[9] And "vast quantities of important" Soviet material, Gerhard Wettig reports, were made available at the Russian State Archive of Recent History in August 2015.[10] Beyond that, in interpreting SALT one also needs to take account of some very important new work on the nuclear balance in the later Cold War, published mainly by Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long. As Green and Long show, the nuclear stalemate was not nearly as solid as it appeared to many people at the time, and arms control policy obviously has to be analyzed with that key point in mind.[11]

So the time has come to take a new look at SALT as a whole—to stand back and try to understand what the whole SALT effort was about and how SALT fits into the larger story of international politics in the later Cold War period. My goal here is to focus on one part of that problem. My aim is to try to make sense of U.S. policy in this area during the period when Richard Nixon was president of the United States (1969-74). I will begin by looking in the next section at the conceptual framework within which U.S. strategic arms control policy was worked out at that time. The focus here will be on the theory of strategic stability—on the idea that the most stable nuclear world was one where neither side had any incentive to go first in a crisis—and on the related idea that the main goal of arms control should be to move toward a world of that sort. The section after that will be concerned with policy. The fundamental question there is whether policy was in any important way built on the stability theory, and, if not, what was it based on? The basic finding there is that it was *not* built on that theory. And my basic claim, which is developed in the final section, is that the absence of a strong conceptual core had a good deal to do with the disillusionment that set in later on. That final section, which looks at the long-term impact of the SALT process that had taken shape in the early 1970s, is concerned above all with the effect it had on U.S.-Soviet relations down the road. The emphasis there will be on certain perverse effects, scarcely noted in the historical literature on the subject—that is, on how the SALT experience tended in practice to undermine the détente policy, the very policy it was supposed to support.

The Conceptual Matrix

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[9] David Geyer and Douglas Selvage, eds., *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2007).

[10] Gerhard Wettig review of Schors, *Doppelte Boden*, in *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2017), p. 237.

[11] See Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, Nos. 1-2 (2015) (link), pp. 47-51; Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2017) (link), esp. pp. 609, 618, 638-639; and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), esp. ch. 2.

Perhaps the most important point to emerge from the new scholarly work on SALT is that arms control was not pursued by either side as an end in itself—that is, out of a simple belief that the "arms race" was a threat to humanity as a whole, and that, whatever their political differences, the two main powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, had to do what they could to bring the military competition under control. The SALT process, in other words, was not a thing apart. U.S. policy in this area certainly has to be understood in the context of U.S. policy as a whole, and, above all, national security policy. As Henry Kissinger, the most important maker of America's SALT policy during the Nixon-Ford period (1969-76), put it at the time, national security policy and SALT "should be looked at together, with strategic force posture decisions being the theoretical basis for SALT preparations."[12] That means that U.S. arms control policy has to be understood in the context of the body of thought relating to nuclear issues that had taken shape during the early nuclear age.

The main ideas had been worked out by the beginning of the 1960s. Under Eisenhower, in the 1950s, a nuclear war was seen as a real possibility. Indeed, Eisenhower did not believe that in a war triggered by a Soviet attack on western Europe both sides would hold back from nuclear use for fear of retaliation. "It was fatuous," he said, "to think that the U.S. and USSR would be locked into a life and death struggle without using such weapons." But if nuclear weapons were to be used, it was important to make sure that the Soviets would not be able to inflict really heavy damage on the United States, and that meant that the Americans had to be able to destroy the USSR's nuclear forces while they were still on the ground. The counterforce mission—what was then called the "blunting" or "bravo" mission—thus had to have top priority. And that mission would have to be executed at the very beginning of the war, perhaps even before conventional hostilities had begun in Europe, and certainly before the Soviets were actually able to mount a nuclear attack.[13]

It was assumed, however, that sooner or later the USSR would be able to develop a force that could survive a U.S. attack, no matter how massive it was or how quickly it was mounted, and then go on to inflict "unacceptable losses" on the American homeland. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles put it in 1958, the "massive nuclear deterrent was running its course as the principal element in our nuclear arsenal."[14] And in September 1963 President Kennedy was told by the National Security Council's Net Evaluation Subcommittee, the group responsible for assessing

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[12] Review Group Meeting, 29 May 1969, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. 34, p. 98 (link).

[13] See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 159-65 (the quotation is on p. 161) and the sources cited there.

[14] Ibid., p. 185.

the damage that would result from a nuclear war, that the long-predicted "nuclear stalemate" had finally arrived. Even if America attacked first, the president was told, "surviving Soviet capability is sufficient to produce an unacceptable loss in the U.S." That meant, as Kennedy himself pointed out, that preemption was no longer a viable option.[15]

How then could that situation be dealt with? The most common view was that America's nuclear edge, now that it had been lost, could never really be regained—that from now on a first strike was bound to be suicidal, that the "nuclear standoff" was here to stay, but that that "balance of terror," as Churchill had famously predicted years earlier, might lead to a relatively stable peace. Nuclear weapons, in that view, served mainly to "deter their use by others." The deterrent effect, to be sure, would be somewhat broader, since it was always possible that a conventional war might escalate, whether political leaders wanted it to or not. But the basic assumption was that it was too dangerous to deliberately risk nuclear escalation for general political purposes, even if the fate of Europe was hanging in the balance. That kind of threat was a relic of the era when the United States could rationally strike first—an era when a first strike could be so effective that whatever damage Soviet retaliation might cause could be kept to "nationally manageable" proportions. But now that the United States was no longer able to limit damage to itself in any meaningful way by launching a massive counterforce attack at the very beginning of the war, a first strike strategy was no longer viable; America had to opt for a "second strike" strategy, one focused on deterrence through the threat of retaliation—that is, through the threat of responding to a nuclear attack on one's own homeland with an attack on the enemy's cities. This implied that it scarcely still made sense to continue placing such heavy emphasis on the counterforce mission; it also implied that since the defense of Europe could no longer be based on the threat of deliberate nuclear escalation, NATO Europe had to be defended mainly with conventional forces.

But there was an influential minority in America that never really accepted that line of argument. It basically denied that deterrence was more or less automatic once nuclear forces of a certain size had been built; the claim was that the strategic balance was in fact far more precarious than people had been led to believe. The nuclear strategist Albert Wohlstetter, the leading figure in this school, laid out the argument in a very famous 1959 article called "The Delicate Balance of Terror." A number of hurdles, Wohlstetter wrote, had to be cleared if a country's ability to strike back after an attack was to be assured. Not only did its forces need to be able to survive both massive and unconventional enemy attacks, but they had to able to receive the order to retaliate, penetrate active enemy defenses, and destroy their targets despite whatever passive defenses the enemy had employed. He then reviewed the many problems the retaliatory force would have in clearing these hurdles, noting that prizes were not given out for getting over just

[15] Ibid., p. 183.

some of them and that an effective system had to get over all of them.[16] His basic point was that deterrence was not easy, that counterforce targeting and strategic defenses might in some circumstances be effective, that in those circumstances a first strike might not be irrational, and that the strategic balance was therefore not meaningless. People in this school tended to emphasize the eventual vulnerability of America's deterrent forces to Soviet attack, since it was always easier to rally support for a defensive policy, but they were also aware of the fact that Americans themselves might be able to take advantage of the "delicacy" of the balance—indeed, because fixed-site land-based ICBMs composed the great bulk of the Soviet strategic force (whereas the U.S. force was much more diversified), counterforce targeting might be an even more attractive option for the United States than for the USSR.

Each of those approaches to the nuclear problem was associated with a particular approach to arms control. For the more dovish analysts, the point that nuclear superiority was beyond reach and the world was locked into a situation where neither side could develop forces that could rationally strike first in a crisis was not just something they had been reluctantly forced to acknowledge. That situation, as they saw it, had some clear advantages, since a world in which both sides could rationally reach for superiority was not at all to their liking. A superior force was one that might actually be used in a crisis. But the overriding goal in that camp was to make sure that a nuclear war never happened, so too tight a linkage between the strategic forces and ordinary political life was to be avoided. And if both sides were trying to shift the strategic balance in their favor, either as an end in itself or in response to what the other side was doing, the result would be an arms race, and it was an article of faith in those quarters that arms races were in themselves a great source of danger. Indeed, that view was so widespread that even political leaders who did not share that belief felt obliged to use that kind of rhetoric. (President Nixon, for example, referred in some public remarks to the possibility that a nuclear war "could be touched off by the arms race among the great powers."[17]) The idea was that the military competition made little political sense, that it was driven instead largely by an "action-reaction process," with each side reacting to what the other side was doing, or to what it feared the other side might do in the future. The hope was that the two sides might, however, be able to escape the "mad momentum" of the arms race through negotiated arms control agreements.

Those arguments about the dangers of the arms race had, of course, been made many times before, even in the pre-nuclear age. Lord Grey, the British foreign secretary in 1914, had, for example, claimed in his memoirs that "great

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[16] Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (January 1959), esp. pp. 216, 221 (link).

[17] Quoted in Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1994), p. 217.

armaments lead inevitably to war."[18] But the dovish analysts did not rely solely on arguments of this sort. Something very new was brought to the table at the end of the Eisenhower period. This was the idea that a world in which both sides had an incentive to go first in a crisis could be very unstable—that a war could come not for any real political reason but largely because both sides had an incentive to preempt—and that by reducing that incentive through arms control the great powers could bring about a less war-prone world. The idea was that what was called "strategic stability" or "crisis stability" should become the central goal of arms control: the two sides should agree not to develop the ability to destroy each other's retaliatory capability. "Mutual deterrence"—the "mutual hostage relationship"—was the paramount goal. Cities *should* remain at risk; the strategic forces *should* remain invulnerable; their effectiveness should not be compromised in any way. A first strike could not, in such a world, result in a meaningful reduction in the amount of damage a retaliatory attack could inflict; indeed, a first strike would for all practical purposes be suicidal; it therefore would not happen, and there would be no war.

The stability theory, it is important to note, was not developed to provide an intellectually respectable basis for arms control. The key idea was, in fact, laid out by Wohlstetter himself in his 1959 "Delicate Balance" article; it grew out of his deep concern with the vulnerability of America's own strategic forces. But in that article he did make the argument that if each sides' forces were vulnerable to attack, the resulting situation could be highly unstable:

> Suppose both the United States and the Soviet Union had the power to destroy each other's retaliatory forces and society, given the opportunity to administer the opening blow. The situation would then be something like the old-fashioned Western gun duel. It would be extraordinarily risky for one side *not* to attempt to destroy the other, or to delay doing so, since it not only can emerge unscathed by striking first but this is the sole way it can reasonably hope to emerge at all. Evidently such a situation is extremely unstable. On the other hand, if it is clear that the aggressor too will suffer catastrophic damage in the event of his aggression, he then has strong reason not to attack, even though he can administer great damage. A protected retaliatory capability has a stabilizing influence not only in deterring rational attack, but also in offering every inducement to both powers to reduce the chance of accidental war.[19]

Thomas Schelling picked up the idea from Wohlstetter well before the 1959 article was published. But Schelling went on to develop it in some very impressive ways, showing in particular how it could serve as a basis for arms control. The basic point was that the two sides could agree to structure their forces in such a way that neither had an incentive to go first in a crisis. In 1961 Schelling published a book (co-authored with Morton Halperin) developing that idea; that same

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[18] Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty-Five Years* (New York: Stokes, 1925), 1:89-90.

[19] Wohlstetter, "Delicate Balance of Terror," p. 230; emphasis in original text.

year two other books making similar arguments also came out. By that point most academic analysts concerned with these problems had come to accept that basic theory.[20]

The new thinking had a powerful impact not principally because it parted company with traditional views about disarmament. It had a strong impact on people's thinking mainly, one suspects, because of its strong counterintuitive flavor. The whole idea that populations *should* be left vulnerable to attack, no matter what was possible technologically—that the strategic forces should be protected but populations should remain at risk—was really quite extraordinary. A strategy based on the idea that "offense is defense, and defense is offense," that "killing people is good, and killing weapons is bad," seemed to turn traditional thinking on its head.[21] And yet that meant that the theory had real bite—that the theorists were not just mouthing clichés, but rather had something new and important to say about some very fundamental issues of policy.

It is tempting to take the view that the stability theory was so powerful intellectually that it swept all before it—that there had been a conceptual breakthrough and that the new theory provided the only really compelling basis for dealing not just with arms control but with the nuclear problem in general. But before that view is accepted, it is important to keep three points in mind. The first has to do with whether the theory focused attention on a major real-world problem. The analysts who developed the theory assumed that in the world they then lived in there was a major risk of "crisis instability" that had to be dealt with. According to Schelling and Halperin, for example, "the most mischievous character of today's strategic weapons is that they may provide an enormous advantage, in the event that war occurs, to the side that starts it."[22] And yet by the time those words appeared in print the United States had already

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[20] See Thomas C. Schelling, "What Went Wrong with Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Winter 1985) (link), pp. 220-223; Schelling's foreword to Elbridge Colby and Michael Gerson, eds., *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013), pp. v-vi (link); and author's interview with Thomas Schelling, Cambridge, MA, 3 October 1983. For the books in question: Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961); Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race* (New York: Praeger., 1961); and Donald Brennan, ed., *Arms Control, Disarmament, and National Security (*New York: George Braziller, 1961).+

[21] See Newhouse, *Cold Dawn*, p. 176. For those unfamiliar with this line of thought, let me unpack these concepts a bit. The basic idea here was that offense (in the sense of being able to attack the enemy's cities) was defense (because that kind of capability would deter an enemy from attacking in the first place). Defense (of one's own population), on the other hand, was offense (because it tended to neutralize the other side's deterrent capability and would thus weaken the adversary; and because it would facilitate a first strike by providing a degree to protection against a retaliatory attack mounted by whatever enemy forces survived the attack). Killing people, moreover, was good (in the sense that forces targeted on cities would deter an attack, whereas other kinds of targeting—especially the targeting of the other side's strategic forces—were "destabilizing"). But killing weapons was bad (because targeting the enemy's strategic forces might lead him to strike before his forces were destroyed, and because that sort of targeting would lead to an arms race).

[22] Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, p. 9.

begun to deploy weapons so survivable that it had become hard to see how the enemy would see any real advantage to striking first.[23]

But even if there was a real or potential problem of "instability," did it necessarily make sense to deal with it through arms control (and not unilaterally)? Formal arms control agreements, after all, had to be verifiable. That meant that weapons had to be countable, identifiable, and therefore (in many cases) targetable and destroyable. So from the point of view of the stability theory, the verifiability criterion could pose a real problem; it could lead to force structures more likely to invite a preemptive attack; arms control could thus actually be dysfunctional, even self-defeating. The problem was clear to theorists like Schelling; it was clear even at the time to key officials like John Foster, head of Defense Research and Engineering at the Pentagon from 1965 to 1973.[24] And yet the commitment to arms control as an end in itself was such that people were prepared to sweep problems of this sort under the rug. Indeed, some writers argued that deploying hard-to-find and thus hard-to-count weapons was actually "destabilizing" because it would make arms control agreements much harder to reach.[25]

But a third problem was more fundamental. The stability theory assumed that "instability," in the sense of both sides having an incentive to preempt so strong that it might lead to a war that could otherwise be avoided, was a major concern. That implied in particular that it would be perfectly rational for the Soviets, in a crisis, to attack the United States essentially because going first would be significantly better than going second. Yet in other contexts—especially when dealing with alarmist "window of vulnerability" arguments—the same people who took that view made exactly the opposite argument, claiming that the strategic balance was such that it would never make sense to try to disarm the enemy in a first strike. Such an attack they considered close to insane. The assumption here was that neither side could hope to get a meaningful edge in the nuclear competition; a nuclear war would inevitably be disastrous for all concerned; the nuclear stalemate was inescapable. The strongest supporters of arms control often argued along those lines. McGeorge Bundy, for example, in his famous 1969 article "To Cap the Volcano," wrote that given "the certain prospect of retaliation, there has been literally no chance at all that any sane political authority, in either the United States or the Soviet Union, would consciously choose to start a nuclear war." And from his point of view that world was here to stay. But, as Robert Jervis has pointed out, if Bundy's basic analysis here was correct, "there was no volcano to

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[23] The first Polaris submarine went on patrol in 1960; the first Minuteman missile entered service in 1962.

[24] Schelling, "What Went Wrong?" pp. 228-229 (link); Foster to Packard, "A Possible Conflict between our ABM Plans and the Arms Limitation Talks," n.d. but attached to Packard to Laird, 4 March 1969, DNSA/NT00061 (link).

[25] Schelling, "What Went Wrong?" p. 229 (link). For the claim that concealable weapons were "destabilizing," see, for example, Newhouse, *Cold Dawn*, pp. 26, 124-125.

cap"—no risk that a war could break out because of what Schelling called "the reciprocal fear of surprise attack.," and thus no compelling need to reach agreements that would provide for a more stable nuclear relationship.[26]

The conservatives' views on arms control were of course rather different. They did not really have a theory of their own about why efforts in this area were important. Their views took shape essentially in reaction to what the more convinced proponents of arms control were saying. They tended, first of all, to doubt whether the nuclear "arms race" was nearly as dangerous as the more dovish analysts seemed to think. To be sure, they recognized that in working out its own military policy each side had to take account of what the other side was doing, and that in that sense a certain "action-reaction mechanism" clearly did exist. But the writers who spoke about the dangers of the "arms race" claimed not just that each side was, to a certain extent, reacting to what the other side was doing, but that the weapons competition had a life of its own, that it went well beyond what was warranted by whatever political differences still existed, and that it could on its own generate such serious tensions (as each side mistakenly read aggressive intent into what its opponent was doing) that it might well lead to war. The conservatives, however, did not see things that way at all. The weapons competition in their view had to be seen in political context; it was not nearly as irrational, as self-propelled, or as dangerous as the more dovish school seemed to think. Indeed, the very term "arms race" did not sit well with the conservative analysts. It suggested that there was a finish line and that each side was trying desperately to win; but in their view that gave a very misleading impression of what was actually going on. As Wohlstetter put it, America and Russia were obviously "rivals," but there was "no race."[27]

But if the conservatives did not believe that the "arms race" as such was a serious problem, that did not quite mean that they felt there was no real point to arms control. They were very concerned with the vulnerability of America's strategic forces. This was a prominent theme in their writings on the nuclear issue from the 1950s on. And they recognized that the two major powers could agree in principle on measures that would ensure the survivability of

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[26] McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), p. 9 (link); Robert Jervis, in Edward Mansfield and Richard Sisson, eds., *The Evolution of Political Knowledge: Democracy, Autonomy, and Conflict in Comparative and International Politics* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. 118. With regard to Bundy, compare what he says in his book *Danger and Survival* about the "inevitability of mutual destruction in general nuclear war" with what he says two pages later about the "powerfully destabilizing effect" of MIRVs because of the premium they place on striking first. But why would a country have an incentive to strike first if doing so would lead "inevitably" to its own destruction? McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 548, 550.

[27] Albert Wohlstetter, "Is There a Strategic Arms Race?" (link) (esp. p. 4), "Rivals, But No 'Race'" (link), and "Optimal Ways to Confuse Ourselves" (link), in *Foreign Policy*, Nos. 15, 16 and 20 (Summer and Fall 1974 and Fall 1975); and Albert Wohlstetter, "Racing Forward? Or Ambling Back?" in Robert Conquest et al., *Defending America* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), reprinted in Robert Zarate and Henry Sokolski, eds., *Nuclear Heuristics: Selected Writings of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009) (link).

both sides' deterrents. Indeed, if the Soviets were to accept measures that would make the U.S. force more secure, then the Americans, for their part, would have to take steps to insure the survivability of the Soviet force. That situation could be accepted not because it was ideal—most conservatives would have preferred a world in which the United States had both a first-strike and a second-strike capability—but because, given current political and technological realities, a secure U.S. retaliatory force was the best they could hope for. Sometimes they went further and appeared to accept the stability argument—that is, to accept the idea that regardless of what was possible technologically both sides should have survivable deterrent forces, so that neither side would have any incentive to go first in a crisis. Wohlstetter, after all, had played a key role in the process that gave rise to the theory. But their support, by and large, was at best unenthusiastic, and as a general rule the conservatives, including Wohlstetter himself, were quite hostile to the stability theory and to the doctrine of "mutual assured destruction" (or MAD, as first they and then everyone came to call it) that was based on it.

The fundamental problem was that even if the point about the "delicacy" of the balance was correct, the policy implications were by no means clear. On the one hand, one could argue that it was important to try to stabilize the balance because the nuclear stalemate could not be sustained automatically. In that case, arms control could be based on the idea that the two great powers needed to take joint action to make sure that both sides' deterrent capabilities were secure. On the other hand, the delicacy of the balance also meant that the United States might be able to take measures that would improve its position—measures that would give it a real edge in the competition with the Soviets. People were a bit reluctant to make this point too explicitly, since no one wanted the United States to come across as an aggressive power—and to reach for anything like a first-strike capability was bound to come across as aggressive. But the conservatives' interest in keeping that option open was reflected in a certain coolness toward an arms control posture based on the stability theory—a certain coolness toward the banning of systems (like ABM systems and missiles with multiple, and highly accurate, warheads) that might in the long run make damage limitation possible.

But perhaps the most important reason why many conservatives did not put much stock in the stability theory, and thus had little enthusiasm for an arms control policy that took that theory as its point of departure, is that the theory of war with which it was associated struck them as somewhat mechanical and artificial. Consider, for example, the famous passage in which Schelling described how war could come in a world where there was a first strike advantage:

> If surprise carries an advantage, it is worthwhile to avert it by striking first. Fear that the other may be about to strike in the mistaken belief that we are about to strike gives us a motive for striking, and so justifies the other's motive. But, if the gains from even successful surprise are less desired than no war at all, there is no "fundamental" basis for an attack by either side. Nevertheless, it looks as though a modest temptation on each side to sneak in a first blow -- a temptation too small by itself to motivate an attack -- might become compounded through a process of interacting expectations, with additional motive for attack being produced by successive cycles of

> "he thinks we think he thinks we think . . . he thinks we think he'll attack; so he thinks we shall; so he will; so we must."[28]

So a war could come even though there was no fundamental (i.e., political) basis for it? Many conservative critics found it hard to believe that this was the case. To their mind, as one of them put it, the stability theorists had "been bemused by theoretical models of strategic interactions, models which seem sophisticated and intellectually appealing but which are in fact much oversimplified descriptions of reality."[29]

The Impact on Policy

Those two sets of views provided the intellectual framework within which U.S. arms control policy was worked out in the 1970s. But what impact exactly did these ideas have on what was actually done at the time? Many writers have claimed that the stability theory played the key role in shaping U.S. policy, up to 1972 at any rate. The theory, Schelling claimed, was not just an extraordinary intellectual accomplishment; the policy that culminated in the signing of the ABM treaty in 1972, he claimed, had actually been rooted in that body of thought. He saw a "remarkable story of intellectual achievement transformed into policy" unfolding in the period from the late 1950s to 1972: the ideas that had taken shape by 1960 "became the basis for U.S. policy and were ultimately implemented in the ABM treaty."[30] Newhouse and Talbott went a bit further. They each thought that America's SALT policy as a whole had been based on the stability theory.[31] Both Wolfe and Smith clearly shared that view. "A central American concern," Smith wrote, "was to assure that a stable state of mutual deterrence continue indefinitely to keep the risk of nuclear war as low as possible."[32] And according to Wolfe the doctrine of "mutual assured destruction" was the "basic strategic rationale that has tended to inform U.S. SALT policy."[33] That view was echoed in many other accounts written by analysts from both schools and even by scholars writing in the post-Cold War period.[34] And an argument could be made because high

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[28] Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 207 (link).

[29] Donald Brennan, "Strategic Alternatives: II," *The New York Times*, 25 May 1971 (link).

[30] Schelling, "What Went Wrong?" (link), p. 223.

[31] See Newhouse, *Cold Dawn*, esp. pp. 2-4, 9; and Talbott, *Endgame*, esp. pp. 22, 27-29

[32] Smith, *Doubletalk*, p. 123. It should be noted, however, that much of the discussion in the book points in the opposite direction. The United States, Smith thought, was not in practice really interested in banning MIRVs—multiple, independently-targetable reentry vehicles—in Smith's view the most "destabilizing" weapons system. See ibid., ch. 4.

[33] Wolfe, *SALT Experience*, p. 249.

[34] See, for example, Garthoff, "SALT I: An Evaluation" (link), pp. 3-4, 8 (where he suggests that both the United States and the Soviet Union accepted the stability theory); and Richard Burt, "The Relevance of Arms Control in the 1980s," *Daedalus*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (Winter 1981) (link), pp. 162-163 (where he suggests that whereas U.S. policy was based on the stability theory, the Soviets did not accept it). For later comments reflecting that view of U.S. policy, see, for example,

government officials, especially from the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, often emphasized the importance of "strategic stability" when defending the SALT agreements in public.

The declassified documents relating to these matters, however, give a very different picture. It is quite clear from those sources that U.S. policy in the period leading up to the 1972 accords was *not* rooted in the stability theory.[35] It was not as though the basic tenets of that theory were accepted as first principles, and that key officials then developed their proposals taking those principles as their point of departure. The fundamental idea that both sides should have survivable forces—that neither side should be able to limit damage to itself in any major way (through either counterforce or population defense) because that would make for the most stable strategic relationship—did not really drive policy. Instead, a number of ideas for limitations of various sorts were considered; and in deciding which of them to adopt, what really mattered was whether they were to America's advantage, not whether they contributed to "stability"—although concerns about stability did sometimes play a secondary role in these discussions.

But one did not have to wait for the documents to be released to reach this conclusion. Steven Miller, in a superb dissertation completed in 1988, was able to show quite convincingly that the policies "prescribed and required by the modern theory of arms control" had "not been embraced by either superpower."[36] And indeed the key point here should have been clear to anyone who read the first volume of Kissinger's memoirs, published in 1979. The main concern at the beginning of the Nixon administration, as it emerges from Kissinger's account, was that the Soviet missile buildup was proceeding quite rapidly, whereas the Americans were not building any new missiles and had no plans to do so over the next few years. In deciding on an arms control policy, the central U.S. goal was therefore to put some brake on the Soviet program—but in working toward that goal the United States would avoid putting any real limit on what it itself would be doing. And the Soviets, Kissinger wrote, actually agreed to a deal of that sort, the five-year interim agreement on offensive forces that was one-half of the 1972 SALT package. In exchange, the Americans agreed to ban the large-scale deployment by both sides of ABM systems—but that was scarcely a concession, Kissinger pointed out, because Congress was not going to fund a major ABM program in any case. The aim had been not to "stabilize" the

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Charles Glaser and Steve Fetter, "National Missile Defense and the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), p. 57 (link); M. Krepon, "Moving Away from MAD," *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2001), p. 85 (link); William Walker, "Nuclear Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment," *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (May 2007), pp. 435-436 (link); and George Lewis and Frank von Hippel, "Limitations on Ballistic Missile Defense—Past and Possibly Future," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* Vol. 74, no. 4 (2018), pp. 200-201 (link).

[35] See especially the FRUS volume on SALT I, 1969-72: FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXII (link).

[36] Steven Miller, "The Limits of Mutual Restraint: Arms Control and the Strategic Balance," Ph.D. Diss., Tufts University, 1988, abstract; see also pp. 225, 373-374 (link).

balance but to reach a deal that was in America's interest—and that goal, he insisted, had been achieved. The five-year "freeze on numbers" of missiles called for in the SALT agreement, he wrote, "stopped no American program; it did arrest a continuing Soviet program that was deploying over 200 ICBMs and SLBMs a year. In exchange for this we accepted a limit on ABM, our bargaining chip, which our Congress was on the verge of killing anyway."[37]

The basic point here should not be too surprising, since it has been clear for years that Nixon, as Kissinger put it in his memoirs, was "far from a zealot on arms control."[38] To be sure, the president recognized that because of what he called "the pathetic idealism on arms control in this country" one had to pay lip service to the idea.[39] An arms control agreement might be of value for both foreign policy and domestic political reasons, but he doubted whether it would be all that important in substantive terms.[40] The president certainly did not accept the stability theory. In June 1969, for example, he was presented with three views about how America's strategic posture should be designed; one was to place "emphasis on crisis stability" and another was to place "additional emphasis on disarming attacks." It was that latter view, he noted in the margin, that reflected his own thinking.[41] When the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS] said that he would like to have a "first strike capability" if it were technically and financially possible—that he would "advocate it, destabilizing or not," and that the stability problem wouldn't bother him—Nixon remarked that it wouldn't bother him either.[42] And he agreed with the JCS view, not shared by other elements in the government, that America's forces should have the ability "to insure relatively favorable outcomes if deterrence fails"; "first strike, counterforce," he pointed out, "can be an asset."[43] By that he meant an asset in political dealings with other countries. "We must recognize that this game is all about diplomacy," he said; "the main purpose of our forces is diplomatic wallop."[44] But he knew that he was by no means a free agent in this area; policy had to be shaped with an eye to

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[37] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 821.

[38] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 121. See also Francis Gavin, "Nuclear Nixon," in his book *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

[39] NSC meeting, 11 February 1971, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXIV, p. 708 (link). See also NSC meeting, 25 June 1969, and Nixon-Kissinger-Haldeman meeting, 17 April 1971, ibid., Vol. XXXII, p. 445 (link).

[40] Nixon-Kissinger meetings (tape transcript), 16 March, 17 April, and 23 April 1971, ibid., Vol. XXXII, pp. 429, 445, 455 (link).

[41] NSC paper, "U.S. Strategic Posture: Basic Issues," 5 June 1969, ibid., Vol. XXXIV, p. 124 (link).

[42] NSC meeting, 19 February 1969, ibid., p. 25 (link).

[43] NSC paper, "U.S. Strategic Posture: Basic Issues," 5 June 1959, ibid., p. 128 (link); NSC meeting, 18 June 1969, ibid., p. 141 (link).

[44] NSC meetings, 13 June 1969 (first quotation), and 13 August 1971 (second quotation), ibid., pp. 136, 855 (link). He made this point many times. See, for example, Nixon meeting with key advisors, 28 July 1970, ibid., p. 534 (link).

domestic political realities, and the real reason for signing a SALT agreement was that "we simply can't get from the Congress the additional funds needed to continue the arms race with the Soviet in either the defensive or offensive missile category."[45]

Nixon, however, was not the most important U.S. policymaker in this area. As Kissinger pointed out, the president was "bored to distraction" by the whole issue of what exactly a SALT agreement should look like; "his glazed expression" at one early NSC meeting "showed that he considered most of the arguments esoteric rubbish." That meant Kissinger himself ended up playing the key role in the negotiations.[46] And with him the story was more complex. On the one hand, after leaving office he often denied that the Nixon administration had based its arms control policy on the stability theory. When Henry Rowen, for example, accused him of setting out in 1969 "to lower incentives for a preemptive nuclear strike by reducing the threat to our forces while keeping populations vulnerable"—that is, of basing policy on the doctrine of mutual assured destruction—Kissinger was quick to object. That claim, he said, was "preposterous"; "neither Richard Nixon nor his advisers were ever comfortable with that doctrine."[47] And in his later writings he often attacked the MAD doctrine, characterizing it at one point, for example, as marking "a deliberate flight from rationality in strategic theory."[48] On the other hand, before coming to power he had not only accepted the stability theory but had even insisted that stability could *only* be achieved through arms control.[49] "To seek to protect the retaliatory force solely through unilateral measures," he wrote in 1960, "is almost certain to produce an arms race. If the goal is stability, negotiated arms control schemes *must* therefore accompany unilateral measures."[50] In 1957 he even thought that the prospect of a counterforce attack might force the enemy to launch a counter-attack preemptively: "Any attempt to deprive an enemy of his retaliatory force would inevitably bring on all-out war. Confronted by the prospect that it will be completely impotent once its retaliatory force has been destroyed, a Power will almost certainly decide to

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[45] Nixon to Haig, 20 May 1972, ibid., Vol. 32, p. 833 (link).

[46] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 542.

[47] Henry Rowen, "The Old SALT Gang Returns," and Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, "Old Wine in New Bottles," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 November 1984, p. 28 (link), and 12 November 1984, p. 24 (link).

[48] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 216; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 750, 779 (for the quotation).

[49] This point has not been universally recognized. According to one leading scholar, for example, Kissinger "had never been an advocate of arms control because he thought that nuclear weapons had both a strategic and tactical usefulness." Joan Hoff-Wilson, "'Nixingerism,' NATO, and Détente," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Fall 1989) (link), p. 511.

[50] Henry A. Kissinger, "Arms Control, Inspection and Surprise Attack," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (July 1960) (link). The quotation is on p. 560 in that article (emphasis added).

use it to deprive its opponent of the means to impose his will."[51] Those views were fairly extreme, even by the standards of the time.

Was his thinking still built on the stability theory during his early years in office? One has a distinct sense that by 1969 he had taken his distance from the doctrines and theories he had absorbed in academia. As he himself later wrote, the idea that it was to America's advantage to make sure that its population was vulnerable to Soviet attack was just of those ideas "that sound impressive in an academic seminar but are horribly unworkable for a decision-maker in the real world."[52] Practical considerations were far more important. The important thing was to try to put some limit on the Soviet buildup, and especially on the Soviet threat to America's land-based forces, and arms control could be a means to that end.[53] And his goal was to do so without putting any meaningful limit on any major program the U.S. government had any real chance of getting funded, no matter how "destabilizing" those U.S. programs were considered to be. It was for that reason that Kissinger, in Nixon's first term, did not favor a ban on MIRVs—"multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles," widely viewed as the most "destabilizing" weapons system then being developed. A MIRVed force, the argument ran, could support a first-strike strategy: the fact that there would be so many more warheads than strategic targets and that the warheads could be placed on target with a very high degree of accuracy meant that the attacker would have a good chance of disarming his enemy in a first strike.[54] And if both sides developed such a force, both sides, it was said, would have a strong incentive to go first in a crisis—a very unstable situation. Given that problem, those elements in the government who were most committed to the stability theory very much wanted an agreement that would ban MIRVs. Gerard Smith, for example, in fact felt that if MIRVs were "not included in the negotiations, then an agreement is meaningless."[55] The military authorities, on the other hand, did not

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[51] Henry Kissinger, "Strategy and Organization," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (April 1957) (link), p. 388.

[52] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 216.

[53] This point comes through quite clearly in *White House Years* and is confirmed by recent scholarship on the subject. See especially Maurer, "An Era of Negotiation," pp. 45, 155.

[54] Some officials thought that the United States should develop the capability to "limit damage to ourselves and our allies by a counterforce first strike," and that "MIRVs would contribute to this capability." Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, "MIRV Issues," 21 June 1969, Melvin Laird Papers, box 10, folder MIRV 1–3, Gerald Ford Library; reprinted in Richard A. Hunt, ed., *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military, 1969–1973: Documentary Supplement* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, 2016) (link), p. 401.

[55] NSC meeting, 10 November 1969, FRUS 1969-76, Vol.. XXXII, p. 158 (link).

accept the stability theory and were "utterly opposed to foregoing MIRV."[56] And Kissinger sided not with Smith but with the Pentagon on this issue.[57]

Was this because top U.S. officials, including Kissinger himself, wanted to deploy a system that might in time give the United States a meaningful counterforce capability? Certainly the military leadership believed that damage limitation continued to be an important objective—and to its mind "damage limitation" meant having "a first-strike pre-emptive option."[58] MIRVs were important in that regard because for a counterforce strike to be effective, the great bulk of the USSR's ICBMs would have to be destroyed, and only a MIRVed force could do the job. An unMIRVed missile force would not provide the necessary degree of target coverage. As JCS Chairman Wheeler pointed out in 1969, "the sufficiency of our current strategic forces is dependent upon the timely deployment of MIRV in order to regain coverage of the increased Soviet nuclear threat."[59] MIRV, he told the NSC a few months later, was "important to us not only as it concerns penetration" (i.e., overwhelming whatever ABM defenses the Soviets might deploy) but also because America needed to be able to hit many Soviet "hard targets which we are not able to hit now."[60] Or as Admiral Moorer, by this point the JCS Chairman, put it in December 1972: "qualitative improvements [a euphemism for MIRVing] should provide our strategic retaliatory forces with a hard target kill capability."[61]

The idea was that the United States should try to reach for what could reasonably called "nuclear superiority." And that view was shared at least to a certain extent by some key civilian leaders like James Schlesinger, Secretary of Defense from 1973 to 1975. Schlesinger clearly did not accept the view that damage limitation was essentially beyond reach and that counterforce could never be strategically meaningful. "We certainly desire," he declared in a classified talk at the National War College in 1973, "to develop a strategic edge in terms of hypothetical war-fighting capabilities

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[56] Ibid. (for the quotation). On JCS opposition to MAD, see, for example, Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1973–1976* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Office of Joint History, 2015) (link), p. 61.

[57] See editorial note, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXIV, pp. 165-66 (link).

[58] Admiral Thomas Moorer (then Chief of Naval Operations, later JCS Chairman), in Defense Program Review Committee meeting, 26 April 1971, ibid., p. 772 (link). For the JCS goal of damage limitation, see Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Office of Joint History, 2013) (link), pp. 16-20.

[59] Wheeler to Laird, 1 August 1969, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXII, p. 126 (link). Note also Wheeler's remarks in an 18 June 1969, NSC meeting, ibid., p. 67.

[60] NSC meeting, 10 November 1969, ibid., p. 156.

[61] Moorer to Laird, 12 December 1972, ibid., Vol. XXXIV, p. 1031 (link).

against a slowly reacting Soviet Union."[62] And years later, he explained even more explicitly what his thinking was at the time. "The key issue, in terms of hardware," he said, "was for us to be confident that we could destroy *all of their missile forces*. MIRVs certainly would help achieve that goal and, in 1972," he said, the United States produced "more nuclear warheads than in any year in history."[63] All this is important because it sheds some light on the kind of thinking that led to the emergence by the early 1980s of an American military force with vastly improved "hard target kill" capabilities.[64]

Schlesinger shed a bit more light on his thinking in a 1987 interview. Did he believe he had achieved his goal, the interviewer asked, "of being able to threaten an attack that would not call forth an immediate escalation?" "Oh, of course," he said. The Soviets understood that "under great provocation"—and he had in mind here a massive Soviet assault on western Europe—America could retaliate with an attack that avoided Soviet cities. That would place on the Soviet leadership "the burden of responding to" that attack in a way that kept the war from escalating up to the counter-city level—that is, it would have to "respond with restraint." And—although he was reluctant to make this point too explicitly and some of the things he said in that interview and elsewhere actually pointed in the opposite direction—his assumption probably was that the more effective the U.S. counterforce attack, the more powerful that pressure on the Soviets to limit their response would be. In any event, the goal was deterrence: the aim was to provide some rational basis for linking America's strategic forces to the defense of western Europe.[65]

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[62] Schlesinger address at the National War College, 21 August 1973, p. 6, Central Intelligence Agency Electronic Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01554R003500170001-9.pdf (link).

[63] Quoted in Gordon Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 181. Emphasis added.

[64] See Desmond Ball, "The Future of the Strategic Balance," in Lawrence Hagen, ed., *The Crisis in Western Security* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), pp. 126-127. The shift in Defense Department policy in this area took place in 1972, well before Schlesinger moved to the Pentagon. Melvin Laird, Secretary of Defense during the first Nixon administration, was the key figure here. The initial Defense Department policy, adopted under political pressure from Congress, was cool on counterforce; according to the official planning guidance, "we should not plan strategic offensive forces for the purpose of limiting damage to the United States in the event of a large nuclear attack." Quoted in NSC Defense Program Review Committee, "U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture: Executive Summary," revised 12 January 1972, DNSA/NT01153 (link), p. 6. But by mid-1972, Laird was pushing for the development of new warheads with an improved counterforce capability. One of Kissinger's assistants was worried by what seemed to be afoot. The only real strategic justification for those warheads, he wrote, "is to knock out Soviet ICBMs, which only seems sensible in a pre-emptive strike, and a pre-emptive strike does not appear sensible," even on the basis of the targeting study conducted by Laird's own office. "Until now," he wrote, "we have avoided deliberately acquiring silo killing weapons"; if that policy was to be changed, it was the President, and not Laird, who should make the decision. Odeen to Kissinger, 24 June 1972, p. 9, DNSA/NT01378 (link).

[65] Interview with James Schlesinger, 16 December 1987 (link), taped in connection with WGBH television series "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age," WGBH Open Vault (link). The basic point here comes out quite clearly in another part of the interview. It was not very important, Schlesinger told the interviewer, that the new MX missile, a large ICBM designed for the counterforce mission, might be vulnerable to a Soviet first strike, because the whole point of the weapon was to threaten an American first strike. "The purpose of the MX," he said, "was not to achieve invulnerability

The whole question of why a MIRV ban was opposed during the Nixon period thus has to be approached in this context. And one does get the sense from the documents that the main reason why a ban on testing MIRVs was opposed in 1969 was that whereas the current MIRV systems were good enough to destroy soft targets (like cities), to "employ them in a counterforce role against hard targets" they had to be made more accurate and for that more testing was required.[66] The assumption was that it was important to develop at least a certain counterforce capability—and not just because the Soviets were also going that route. It was also important for its own sake, and the administration's MIRV policy was rooted in that assumption. Thus, for example, in 1970 Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard answered the president's question about why the MIRV was of value by pointing out that whereas America had an "adequate capability to attack urban industrial targets," it did "not have a good counterforce capability," adding that "we need to improve this."[67]

Was it absurd for U.S. officials to think that the United States could actually achieve a meaningful strategic edge by developing its counterforce capabilities in that way? Many of them obviously did not think so, and the key point to bear in mind here was that the USSR was in principle much more vulnerable to a first strike than the United States was. Fixed-site ICBMs accounted for something like 85 percent of Soviet strategic warheads; if those missiles were attacked by a fully-MIRVed U.S. missile force, according to one document from 1973, "we could destroy over 90% of the Soviet ICBM force in a preemptive strike."[68] In 1976, the estimate was pretty much the same. If the United States deployed the new missile being developed in this period, the large payload MX ICBM, the Soviets, as two of Kissinger's aides told him, "could expect to lose *nearly 90 percent* of their *total* strategic warheads [i.e., not just those on their land-based ICBMs] from a US first strike in the mid-1980s." This, they wrote, was a "reasonably close approximation of a disarming first strike."[69] As one official pointed out in 1974, if the Soviets continued to place "large amounts of their missile throw

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in basing. That was desirable, but the purpose was to provide for the Soviet Union an indication that the United States, if it initiated, if it initiated... could go after the Soviet forces."

[66] MIRV Panel report, 23 July 1969, quoted in editorial note, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXIV, p. 167 (link).

[67] NSC meeting, 19 August 1970, ibid., p. 589 (link).

[68] Kissinger to Nixon, 3 April 1973 (draft), DNSA/NT01527 (link).

[69] Goodby and Lord to Kissinger, 16 November 1976, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXV, p. 459 (link). Emphasis in original text. By around 1980 the basic point here had become public knowledge. The former CIA analyst Willard Matthias, for example, wrote in 1980 that the MX missile had been "established as an Air Force requirement" in 1971 and that an "advanced development program was begun in 1973." That missile, along with other U.S. systems, would, he wrote, "give the United States a substantial first-strike capability against the largest and most vulnerable sector of the Soviet strategic force—the Soviet missile forces in silo." Willard Matthias, letter to the editor, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Winter 1980) (link), p. 424. And Desmond Ball, a leading academic specialist in this area, saw things much the same way. "With the deployment of the MX ICBM force of 200 missiles in 1986-9," he wrote in 1982, the United States

weight in fixed land-based silos" and America continued to deploy a more diversified force, the USSR would "end up in a most disadvantageous position."[70] What made this point particularly compelling was that the small Soviet bomber force was not considered very effective and the U.S. Navy had developed the ability to essentially destroy the Soviet submarine force at the start of the war.[71] The USSR had nothing equivalent; because with its submarine fleet the Americans had a survivable force—and indeed planned to deploy submarine-based missiles able to destroy Soviet ICBMs—the Americans might soon have both a first-strike and a second-strike capability, whereas the Soviets would have neither. In such circumstances people like Schlesinger felt that it was by no means absurd for America to reach for what was sometimes called a "theoretical war-winning capability."

But was that Kissinger's view? Had he opposed a ban on MIRVs because he sought nuclear superiority? He sometimes appeared to suggest that America, for alliance reasons especially, needed the ability to go first with its strategic forces—or, more precisely, to make a credible threat of that sort. In the SALT II hearings in 1979, for example, he argued explicitly that "the growing invulnerability of Soviet land-based forces" (and not the vulnerability of America's own ICBMs) was the most important problem the country had to deal with in this area.[72] The clear implication was that the United States would be better off if Soviet forces were vulnerable—that is, if America could develop a meaningful counterforce capability. That view could be justified by the simple point that to deter a Soviet attack on Europe, the United States needed to be able to threaten that it might in that case launch a nuclear attack on the USSR, something it could only do if it could limit the damage the Soviets could inflict in a retaliatory strike. And the idea that it might be possible to develop that kind of capability could have been based on his understanding that, given the asymmetrical ways in which the two sides had structured their forces (with the Soviets relying so much more heavily

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would "achieve a full counterforce capability." The 200 MX missiles, he calculated, would "be more than sufficient to destroy the whole Soviet ICBM force." Ball, "Future of the Strategic Balance," pp. 126-127.

[70] Weiss to Kissinger, 31 January 1974, DNSA/NT01683 (link).

[71] See Green, *Revolution that Failed*, pp. 36-39, 95-96, 127-29, 209-10. According to a former high-level U.S. intelligence official, the U.S. Navy in the 1970s "could have taken out the entire deployed [Soviet missile-carrying submarine] fleet on a signal." Quoted ibid., p. 37. See also Green and Long, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike" (link), pp. 47-51; and Green and Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There" (link), esp. pp. 609, 618, 638-39. That information about America's anti-submarine warfare capabilities was very closely held at the time. See Anne Cahn, *Killing Détente: The Right Attacks the CIA* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 126-27; and John Foster's remarks in Ford meeting with members of President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 8 August 1975, and report prepared by Foster, Galvin and Teller, 1 April 1976, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXV, pp. 692, 746 (link).

[72] U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *The SALT II Treaty*, part 3 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979) (link) p. 164.

on land-based missiles), MIRVing gave the United States on balance a clear advantage. As he told Schlesinger in 1974, for example, "we are the only ones who could gain in a first strike because most of their force is land-based."[73]

But despite all that the basic impression you get from the documents is that Kissinger did not really believe that nuclear superiority in any meaningful sense of the term was in the cards—certainly not for America and probably not for the USSR either. In all likelihood, both sides would do whatever was necessary to prevent the other side from developing a first strike capability. But there were no guarantees in that area, and if there was a real threat to the balance it would be because the U.S. side, for domestic political reasons, would not make the necessary effort, and the USSR would acquire a meaningful strategic edge. That, in fact, was one of his main justifications for SALT in his last years in office. "We should say that without SALT," he told his closest advisors in 1974, "both sides will race. What I really believe is that they will race and we will stop."[74] And he often seemed to take the view that because of those domestic political constraints the necessary measures would not be taken and America as a result would be in deep trouble a few years down the road. Increasingly accurate Soviet ICBMs, he said in 1969, were a "real nightmare worry"; in 1974 he said that if the Soviets put "most of their MIRVs into ICBMs," this "would give them a first strike counterforce capability."[75] But just as often he made the point that concerns of that sort were overblown. America, he said, was

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[73] Kissinger-Schlesinger meeting, 23 April 1974, p. 3, Ford Presidential Library, Digital Collections, National Security Advisor: Memoranda of Conversations (link).

[74] Kissinger meeting with Sonnenfeldt, Hyland, and others, 11 September 1974, DNSA/KT01321 (link).

[75] Working notes from Kissinger Verification Panel Meeting, 29 August 1969, p. 4 (for the first quotation), DNSA/NT00294 (link); Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 274 (for another reference to the developing "strategic nightmare"); NSC meeting, 24 January 1974, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXX, p. 166 (link) (for the second quotation). Kissinger also states that that MIRVing would give the Soviets (and perhaps the Americans as well) a "first-strike capability" in *Years of Upheaval*, p. 265n. Note also in this context Kissinger's remarks in an April 17, 1971, meeting with Nixon, as paraphrased by Patrick Garrity and Erin Mahan in the introduction to a collection of extracts from the Nixon tapes dealing with U.S. policy on SALT in early 1971. Soviet strategic deployments, Kissinger said, were "scary," and he "expressed concern that Moscow's nuclear buildup, especially its heavy ICBM forces, pointed toward a first-strike capability, which the United States could not counter in a timely fashion because of the potential for a Soviet breakout. In Kissinger's opinion, this enhanced capability would provide Moscow with enormous psychological leverage, especially during the President's second term. The danger would be compounded by the determination of the President's domestic critics to attack the U.S. military-industrial complex and undermine American strategic strength—a familiar theme in the White House conversations." Patrick J. Garrity and Erin R. Mahan, *Nixon and Arms Control: Forging the Offensive/Defensive Link in the SALT Negotiations, February–May 1971* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Rotunda Press, 2015) (link). In 1973, despite the SALT agreements, Kissinger was if anything even more pessimistic. "I think a serious crisis is almost inevitable with the world the way it is," he told Schlesinger on August 9. And he explained why in another high-level meeting later that day. "My nightmare," he said, "is that with the growth of Soviet power and with our domestic problems, someone might decide to take a run at us." "Someone else," he added, "will be sitting here in the late 1970s. By that time the Soviet systems will be more mature. Our successors will be living in a nightmare if we don't do what is right." Kissinger meeting with Schlesinger at al., and Verification Panel meeting, both 9 August 1973, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXV, pp. 96, 105-106 (link).

talking itself into a "psychosis" over these issues.[76] The whole idea that the Soviets would ever launch a first strike against the Minuteman missiles—despite all the uncertainties that such an attack would entail, and knowing that the United States would retain other forces, especially on submarines, that could destroy the USSR as a functioning society—he in fact viewed as "crazy."[77]

His core belief, it seems, was thus that nuclear superiority had become a "largely chimerical" goal—for both sides.[78] That belief found expression in his famous outburst in Moscow in 1974: "What in the name of God is strategic superiority? What is the significance of it, politically, militarily, operationally, at these levels of numbers? What do you do with it?"[79] To be sure, he later dismissed that comment as a mere product of "fatigue and exasperation." But he had in fact taken exactly the same line in a meeting with a group of journalists a month after the Moscow press conference, well after he had had a chance to recover from his exhausting trip to the Soviet capital.[80] And he made much the same point in a meeting with President Ford later that month. Even if the Soviets were able to wipe out the Minuteman force in a first strike, which was very unlikely given all the uncertainties involved, America, he told the president, would still have its bombers, submarines and forward-based forces. In such circumstances, he said, it was "hard to visualize what strategic superiority is." "We have to say we are second to none; to ourselves we must recognize that it is probably an unusable force"—and not just because of the threat of retaliation. Even if America got off scot-free with a first strike, the murdering of tens of millions of people would be unconscionable: "I don't think a political system which inflicts or accepts 20-90 million can survive."[81]

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[76] Kissinger-Schlesinger meeting and Verification Panel meeting, both 23 April 1974, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXV, p. 165 (link), and ibid., Vol. XXX, p. 251 (link).

[77] Kissinger meeting with main advisors, 31 July 1974, p. 5, DNSA/KT01266 (link). That this was his view was more or less public knowledge at the time. According to the *Washington Post's* military affairs reporter, for example, "one top official who always travels on Secretary of State Kissinger's airplane"—probably a roundabout way of referring to Kissinger himself—told him that the whole scenario that the "window of vulnerability" agitation was based on was "just plain 'crazy.'" Michael Getler, "The Specter That Fuels the Arms Race," *Washington Post*, 15 December 1974, p. B1 (link). On these points see also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 119-20, 126.

[78] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1009.

[79] Kissinger quoted in Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1987), p. 212 (link).

[80] Kissinger meeting with *Time, Inc.* journalists, August 13, 1974, FRUS 1969-76, Vol XXXVIII (pt. 1), pp. 222-23 (link).

[81] Ford-Kissinger meeting, 28 August 1974, Ford President Library, Digitized Memoranda of Presidential Conversations (link), pp. 3-4. Kissinger, in fact, often dismissed the "window of vulnerability" alarmism as baseless. See, for example, Kissinger-Schlesinger meeting, 23 April 1974, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXV, p. 165 (link), and Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 126. Note also his analysis of the issue in a 25 October 1974, meeting with Brezhnev, summarized in *Years of Renewal*, p. 276 (full notes of the meeting are available in FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XVI, p. 226; link).

And it does seem that his basic approach to arms control was rooted in assumptions of that sort. Deep down he did not really believe that there was any major "stability" problem that needed to be dealt with through arms control; in the real world, as it would exist in the foreseeable future, neither side would have any incentive to go first with a major nuclear attack. In that sense he parted company with many of his former colleagues in the academic world who felt that American policy in this area had to be based on the stability theory. On the other hand, he did not really agree with people like Schlesinger who were looking to achieve some sort of meaningful nuclear edge. To be sure, he was against a ban on MIRVs, but that was not because he thought that technology could provide America with something close to a first-strike capability. He wanted to keep that program in place because it was "the only offensive program that was going on in the United States" at the time and he wanted to bargain with the Soviets from a position of strength.[82]

For the key point to bear in mind here is that in dealing with nuclear arms control Kissinger was concerned above all with the political side of the problem. To be sure, whatever arrangements were reached would have a certain strategic significance, especially at the psychological level; perceptions of the balance, whether warranted or not, were also important in domestic political terms and in dealing with third countries. But given the nature of the nuclear balance, and given political realities on all sides, such concerns were ultimately of secondary importance, and what really mattered was that arms control policy was a lever that could be used in support of more general foreign policy goals.

The great hope was that by moving ahead in this area the USSR could be locked into a relatively moderate policy—that the Soviet leadership, as Kissinger put it in an important memorandum he sent Nixon in 1970, could be tied "to the softer more optimistic line implicit in a SALT agreement." For the Soviets, SALT implied that America "would act more in parallel with the USSR," and they wanted an agreement for that very reason. And American policy had to be framed with that in mind. "If we choose to move in a direction of more open cooperation with the Soviet Union," he wrote, "we would, of course, find the Soviet leaders responsive." (The "of course" is a very revealing indicator of Kissinger's true assessment of the "Soviet threat.") If, however, he went on, the Americans chose to take a tougher line, "the net gains from SALT over any long term might prove fragile." And he seemed to think that the United States should opt for the first, more forthcoming, course of action, because that would help keep Soviet policy on a moderate path: "If a SALT agreement produced a generally conciliatory American attitude, including more

[82] Transcript of interview with Kissinger for the WGBH series "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age," 26 November 1986 (link).

generous economic policies toward the USSR, the Soviets would have a strong incentive to keep us on such a course."[83] SALT, as he pointed out in his memoirs, provided America not just with "an opportunity to redress the strategic balance"; it also might make it possible to "create the conditions for political restraint without which escalating crises were in [his] view inevitable."[84] It could also have certain secondary political purposes, like "keeping the Europeans honest" (since it was bound to raise the specter of America moving toward a "condominium" policy with the USSR, if the Europeans went too far in pursuing their own détente policies), and outflanking the left at home, both always important considerations for Kissinger. But the main goal had to do with the USSR: if détente were strengthened the Soviet threat could be kept at bay—and SALT was the great symbol of détente.

A détente policy, in other words, was of value not so much because the top U.S. leadership was deeply committed to peace and thus to better relations with the Soviets as an end in itself. The policy was of value primarily because it would restrain the USSR and thus increase America's freedom of action. The United States, Kissinger thought, had been able to push ahead in the Middle East only because the Soviets were so committed to putting their relationship with America on a relatively friendly basis. "We would not," he later wrote, "have had such a margin for unopposed action in a period of open, across-the-board confrontation with the Soviet Union."[85] The Soviets, in his view, were genuinely interested in détente, but America, as he pointed out in 1975, had been "using it tactically."[86] He made the same point in his memoirs. Détente, he said, "was a method for conducting the Cold War"; with regard to the Middle East in particular, "our policy to reduce and where possible to eliminate Soviet influence in" that region, he wrote, "was in fact making progress under the cover of détente."[87]

Now, all this may be true, and all the talk at the time about building a "lasting structure of peace" might well have been overblown. One certainly gets the impression from the documents that the pursuit of America's own national interests, in a fairly narrow sense of the term, counted for far more than the American public was led to believe at the time. And that general point applies in particular to America's SALT policy. But still one of the most striking things

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[83] Kissinger to Nixon, on "Implications of a Limited SALT Agreement," 13 July 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXII, pp. 317-318 (link). These passages were left out of the long extract from this document quoted in Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 550.

[84] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 550.

[85] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 943-44.

[86] Kissinger meeting with Israeli leaders, 22 August 1975, p. 60, Gerald Ford Library Digital Collection, National Security Advisor: Memoranda of Conversations (link), cited in Galen Jackson, "The Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israeli Problem, 1967-1979," Ph.D. Diss., UCLA, 2016 (link), p. 241.

[87] Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 248, and *Years of Upheaval*, p. 594.

that emerges from a study of U.S. policy in this area is that Kissinger's thinking did seem to shift quite dramatically in the period after the SALT I agreements were signed in 1972. By 1973, in fact, he appeared to take the stability theory, and the related idea that something about to be done about the MIRVs, much more seriously. A situation, he said, in which each side "could wipe out the other's land-based missiles" would put "an unbelievable premium on the first strike."[88] Although his real view was that the ICBM vulnerability problem had been totally blown out of proportion, he now repeatedly argued along these lines. He claimed, for example, in April 1973 that a situation in which both sides could destroy its opponents' ICBMs would create "a massive element of instability"—as though the submarines, bombers, and so on no longer mattered.[89] Or to give another example: on March 6, 1973, he told the head of the U.S. SALT delegation at that point, the veteran diplomat U. Alexis Johnson, that "if we put no limits on [Soviet] MIRVs, we are going to have an unbelievable strategic problem. It doesn't do us any good if we get equally good MIRVs or even equally many, that just makes it a first strike world again."[90] And even in his memoirs he made the point that with high throwweight limitations and no limitations on MIRVs "*both* sides would develop a first-strike capability." Agreeing to that kind of arrangement, he had therefore argued, would violate "every precept of arms control because in a crisis it would give each side an incentive to strike first."[91] And because U.S. policy was not based on those precepts, he found it hard to understand "what the hell" the U.S. government was trying to do.[92] He now seemed to think that the present mindless policy had to be replaced by a policy based squarely on the stability theory, and that that new policy should focus on finding some way to limit MIRVs. For if MIRVs were allowed to run free, he wondered, what would that do to all those "fine theories of arms control based on discouraging a first strike by reducing the advantage of the attacker?"[93]

Why the shift? It was not as though Kissinger had suddenly woken up and for the first time was able to see how the MIRV issue was connected to this kind of problem. It is often suggested that he had simply failed to understand how important this issue was when he first dealt with it in his early years as National Security Advisor, and some remarks he made in a background briefing in December 1974 are often cited to support that view. "I would say in retrospect," he admitted at that briefing, "that I wish I had thought through the implications of a MIRVed world more

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[88] Verification Panel meeting, 15 August 1973, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXX, p. 109 (link); see also ibid., p. 105.

[89] Verification Panel meeting, 25 April 1973, quoted in Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 270.

[90] Kissinger-Johnson phone conversation, 6 March 1973, DNSA/KA09682 (link).

[91] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval,* p. 265n. Emphasis in original text.

[92] Ibid., p. 270, and Verification Panel meeting, 15 August 1973, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXX, p. 107 (link).

[93] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 270.

thoughtfully in 1969 and 1970 than I did."[94] But that admission can scarcely be taken at face value. As Laurence Lynn, who had worked closely with him on these issues in those early years, later told an interviewer, Kissinger had in fact put a great deal of thought into the MIRV problem in 1969 and 1970.[95]

What this implies is that those remarks, and indeed the whole shift in Kissinger's position on the "stability" issue, instead have to be interpreted in political—that is, in instrumental—terms. The 1972 SALT agreements, and the détente policy they symbolized, were at first widely supported. But the enthusiasm faded quite rapidly and that shift in opinion had a profound effect on the ability of the administration to carry out its policy. The USSR had opted for a détente policy in large measure because of the economic benefits it hoped that policy would bring, but opponents of that policy in the U.S. Congress were able to prevent those benefits from materializing. And the problem got worse after the 1973 Middle East war, for which the Soviets (unfairly, in Kissinger's view) were blamed.[96] In such circumstances, as Kissinger saw it, America's SALT policy had to shift. There had to be more meat on the bone. An arms control agreement had to have more substance to it, especially from the USSR's point of view. As it was, the "peace policy" championed by the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, had not produced the results the Soviet leadership had hoped for. And in that new situation it was important that Brezhnev not be totally discredited in the eyes of his colleagues. If he were, the whole détente policy would go down the tubes and America would have to face a much rougher international environment. If SALT became "like the trade issue," Kissinger said, "I think we will see a massive reversal of the Soviet position on détente."[97] On the other hand, if a SALT agreement was reached, that would help Brezhnev "claim that détente had become irreversible."[98] The political factor was thus of fundamental importance. "SALT may give us no strategic benefits," Kissinger said, "but it would give us political benefits."[99]

But his ability to pursue the kind of SALT policy he had in mind was now quite limited. As the Watergate affair unfolded, Nixon's authority was draining away almost by the day and Kissinger could exercise power only as the president's agent. And Nixon's successor Gerald Ford, as an unelected president subject to strong right-wing pressure from within his own party, could scarcely give full support to the policy Kissinger seemed to have in mind, one that

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[94] Kissinger background briefing, 3 December 1974, republished in "The Vladivostok accord," *Survival*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1975) (link), p. 195.

[95] Interview with Laurence Lynn, 11 January 1987 (link), taped in connection with WGBH television series "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age," WGBH Open Vault (link).

[96] See, for example, Kissinger meeting with key advisors, 1 August 1974, pp. 4-5, DNSA/KT01268 (link).

[97] NSC meeting, 2 December 1974, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXX, p. 397 (link).

[98] NSC meeting, 17 September 1975, ibid., p. 467 (link).

[99] NSC meeting, 22 December 1975, ibid., p. 503 (link).

involved overriding the objections of the military authorities and the top civilians at the Pentagon. Nor was the new president elected in 1976, Jimmy Carter, really able to pursue an arms control agenda that would breathe new life into the détente policy. To be sure, in 1979, during the Carter period, a new treaty was signed. But by then the bloom was off the rose. In 1972 the SALT I agreements had been welcomed as a major step toward international peace, but the 1979 SALT II treaty was widely viewed as a vestige of the now largely discredited policy of détente.

Souring on SALT, Souring on Détente

The SALT process that Nixon and Kissinger had helped launch in the early 1970s had a major impact on U.S.-Soviet relations in the years to come. The assumption around 1972 was that the SALT agreements and the SALT process more generally were cornerstones of what people hoped would be a relatively stable U.S.-Soviet relationship. But by the end of the decade a strong element of disillusionment had set in. It was not simply that as people soured on détente, they tended to sour on SALT as the great symbol of détente. The causal arrow pointed the other way as well. The SALT process itself had been discredited, and that in turn helped to discredit détente yet further. Indeed, after 1972 it became hard to understand what the point of the whole arms control effort was. After the signing of the ABM treaty, as Schelling later wrote, the focus had been on offensive weapons. But the negotiations in that area had been "mostly mindless, without a guiding philosophy." "What guiding philosophy there used to be"—and here he had the stability theory in mind—had gotten "lost along the way." After 1972, arms control had been pursued for its own sake, and not for the sake of stability; indeed, from the standpoint of the stability theory the arms control mentality had in some ways become counterproductive. Putting cruise missiles on submarines was for Schelling a good case in point. The cruise missile deployed that way would have been a superb second-strike weapon, "too slow for preemptive attack, yet difficult to defend against as it penetrates Soviet air space, impossible to locate on station because it can be based on submarines." And yet it was opposed by the arms controllers for the very reason it was attractive to people like Schelling: "if you cannot find them you cannot count them; if you cannot count them you cannot have verifiable limits; if limits cannot be verified you cannot have arms control." This was a good example of "what had gone wrong with arms control." The problem was that the U.S. effort after 1972 had apparently not been "informed by any coherent theory of what arms control is supposed to accomplish"; it was thus scarcely surprising that so little of real value had been accomplished. Schelling, in fact, thought that after the signing of the ABM treaty, essentially nothing had been

achieved: that event, to his mind, had marked "not merely the high point but the end point of successful arms control."[100]

That sense that arms control had not lived up to its promise, and indeed that little of value had been achieved in the 1970s, was fairly widespread, especially in left-of-center circles, the natural constituency for arms control and for the détente policy in general. To give but one example: Leslie Gelb, who had recently retired as head of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs at the State Department, began a 1979 *Foreign Policy* article with a quite extraordinary admission. "Arms control," he wrote, "has essentially failed. Three decades of U.S.-Soviet negotiations to limit arms competition have done little more than to codify the arms race."[101] And the idea that SALT had served essentially to "codify," "institutionalize," or "legitimate" the arms race was very common at the time. Even the leaders of the two governments that had signed the SALT II treaty understood that not much had been accomplished. The treaty, President Carter told Brezhnev, would allow "a massive buildup in nuclear arms and a buildup in warheads," and the Soviet leader agreed. "On the whole," he said, "very little—in fact, almost nothing—had been done in terms of curbing the arms race."[102]

The basic point here had been clear to close observers for some time. Milton Leitenberg, for example, had noted in 1976 that the agreements reached so far had served only to "bilaterally legitimize the continued buldups on both sides." "Since neither side," he pointed out, "wants to give up anything it already has, usually including those programs already under development, what is 'negotiated' is that level that permits both sides to have all its programs and then some." It was for that reason that the SALT II "ceilings" set in the framework agreement reached at Vladivostok in 1974 were "as high as they are."[103] And Leitenberg's interpretation was fully confirmed by Kissinger himself in his memoirs:

> High-flown theories about the moral significance of arms control notwithstanding, in the real world, the basic assignment of each side's negotiators became to protect those weapons which their planners were in the process of developing and eager to deploy. . . . In this sense SALT I served as a kind of acceptance by each side of the unilateral plans of the other. Certainly on the American side, SALT I stopped no program, existing or planned. The numerical inequality of weapons it ratified were the voluntarily chosen existing programs for the foreseeable future. SALT II began the same way.[104]

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[100] Schelling, "What Went Wrong?" (link), pp. 223-225, 228-229.

[101] Leslie H. Gelb, "A Glass Half Full," *Foreign Policy*, No. 36 (Fall 1979) (link), p. 21.

[102] Carter-Brezhnev meeting, 17 June 1979, DDRS/CK2349073513 (link), pp. 2, 4.

[103] Milton Leitenberg, "The SALT II Ceilings and Why They Are So High," *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (July 1976) (link), and reprinted in U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Arms Control, Oceans, and International Environment, *U.S.-Soviet Strategic Options* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977) (link), pp. 183, 187.

[104] Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 252. He reiterated the point on p. 277: "The overriding concern of both sides [in 1974] was the same as it had been all along: to protect its existing strategic programs, all of which had been designed before arms control negotiations had even begun."

And that point, one should note, applied not just to American policy but to Soviet policy as well. "Even as he put his name to SALT," as Sergey Radchenko notes, Brezhnev "privately assured his party comrades that these agreements would [and he quotes here from a speech the Soviet leader gave to the Central Committee at the time] 'in no way obstruct the implementation of the existing programmes to further strengthen [Soviet] defence.'"[105]

The implication was that arms control had not made much of a difference one way or another in terms of what each side ended up doing. The point was often noted at the time. To take but one example: the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, told Kissinger in 1972 that in the SALT agreements the two sides had just agreed "to do what we were going to do anyway," and Kissinger, for his part, did not disagree.[106] And that point about SALT I applied to the SALT process more generally—a point many of those involved in these matters later confirmed. Gelb, for example, looking back in 1994, saw trends in both countries in the late 1970s "making the whole arms control process more of a dance for each side to keep whatever strategic programs it was already developing."[107] And that in itself was enough to sour people on arms control.

But the disillusionment ran even deeper, because it seemed that the whole arms control process had not just done little to bring the "arms race" under control but had actually led to more spending on strategic weapons than would otherwise have been the case. There were three distinct mechanisms that people pointed to in this connection. The "bargaining chip" argument, first of all, could play a decisive role in winning Congressional support for particular weapons programs, and once procured the "chips" might not actually be "cashed in" at the bargaining table.[108] The decision to proceed with the development of cruise missiles is the main example cited in this context. Kissinger, it was often said, had pressed the Pentagon to develop strategic cruise missiles as a "bargaining chip" for the SALT talks; the

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[105] Sergey Radchenko, "The Soviet Union and the Cold War Arms Race," in Thomas Mancken, Joseph Maiolo and David Stevenson, eds., *Arms Races in International Politics: From the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 168.

[106] Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, 9 August 1973, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXX, p. 100 (link). Kissinger, of course, claimed in his memoirs that while the SALT I interim agreement had "stopped no American program," "it did arrest a continuing Soviet program that was deploying over 200 ICBMs and SLBMs a year." Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 821. And he repeated that claim in the second volume of his memoirs: "After all, SALT I constrained no American program; it stopped several Soviet programs." Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 268. In internal discussions at the time, however, he was more cautious, claiming only that the agreement "*may* have stopped several Soviet programs," and noting in another meeting that it was "open to some argument whether we stopped the Soviet program" or just "froze their existing program." NSC meetings, 24 January and 14 September 1974, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXIII, pp. 165, 306 (emphasis added) (link). See also NSC meeting, 23 April 1974, ibid., p. 243.

[107] In the transcript of the discussion at a conference on "SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust," p. 149, held at Musgrove, St. Simons Island, GA, 7-9 May 1994 (link), under the auspices of the Carter-Brezhnev project.

[108] See Miller, "The Limits of Mutual Restraint" (link), pp. 374-376 and the sources cited there.

military authorities, who had initially been unenthusiastic about the idea, later came to see the weapon's strategic value and were very reluctant to give it up in the bargaining. "How was I to know," Kissinger later complained, "the military would come to love it?"[109]

A second mechanism had to do with the domestic politics of arms control, in the sense both of the bureaucratic politics of proposal development and of the politics of treaty ratification. As Miller points out, a country's arms control position has to be worked out in internal negotiations, and in that process, "some participants often have to be bought off."[110] When the agreement is finally signed, "internal critics will usually have to be paid for their public support of the treaty." Thus, for example, the JCS made it clear that they would support the SALT I agreement only if the administration supported "a broad program of strategic modernization."[111] The same mechanism seemed to be at work during the Carter period. As one former Carter administration official noted in 1994:

> On repeated occasions when we were approaching negotiations that looked promising with the Soviet Union, the price of that progress was for us to agree to additional military programs—for example, the agreement to proceed with the R&D and eventual deployment of MIRVs. That was part of the price paid in order to get the positions accepted by the Chiefs or the military services for progress in SALT. And similarly on many other programs, such as the MX. A deployment program for MX was part of the price of SALT.[112]

Zbigniew Brzezinski, formerly Carter's national security advisor, basically agreed. The MX decision, he said, "was heavily driven, in addition to its own strategic merits, by the thought that this would ensure a higher degree of probability for SALT ratification, which otherwise was very problematical in the United States."[113] And all this was clear enough at the time. Senator Pat Moynihan, in a long piece on the SALT process which he published in the *New Yorker* in 1979, was struck by how bizarre it was the arms control process had led to weapons like the MX, a counterforce

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[109] See, for example, Robert J. Bresler and Robert C. Gray, "The Bargaining Chip and SALT," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Spring 1977) (link), pp. 77-79, and Garthoff, "Salt I: An Evaluation" (link), pp. 21-23. For the Kissinger remark, see Leslie Gelb, "Another U. S. Compromise Position Is Reported on Strategic Arms," *The New York Times*, 17 February 1976, quoted in Bresler and Gray, "The Bargaining Chip and SALT" (link), p. 78. The archival evidence supports the point that Kissinger in mid-1973 urged the Pentagon to develop the weapon at least in part for SALT-related bargaining purposes, but it is by no means totally clear that he intended to give it up in a final agreement and was only prevented from doing so by opposition for the military. See Kenneth Werrell, *The Evolution of the Cruise Missile* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1985) (link), pp. 154, 190, 214 n. 7.

[110] Steven E. Miller, "Politics over Promise: Domestic Impediments to Arms Control," *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Spring 1984) (link), p. 82, and the source cited there.

[111] Ibid., p. 82. On this episode, see also the documents cited in n. 2 appended to Kissinger to Haig, May 25, 1972, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XIV, p. 1115 (link).

[112] Marshall Shulman, in Musgrove Conference transcript (link), p. 115. Shulman, a Columbia University professor, had been Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's special advisor on Soviet affairs during the Carter period.

[113] Ibid., p. 133. That this was his view at the time is confirmed by newly released archival evidence. See Green, *Revolution that Failed*, pp. 235-36.

missile being deployed by a country which (Moynihan believed) had based its strategic doctrine on avoiding counterforce and focusing instead on a secure second-strike counter-city capability. How ironic it was, he thought, that the SALT process had not only "failed to prevent the Soviets from developing a first-strike capability," but had also led "the United States to do so." "The process," he wrote, "has produced the one outcome it was designed to forestall. And so we see a policy in ruins."[114] Other observers, as Moynihan noted toward the beginning of the article, had already come to see things in much the same way.

Finally, there was a third way in which arms control might have acted as a spur to the strategic "arms race." A SALT agreement would be negotiable, presumably, only if it provided for a rough parity in strategic forces. So the numbers permitted in any agreement that was actually reached reflected an agreed view of what a balanced relationship would look like. To build less than one was entitled to under the agreement would therefore be to accept something less than parity, and there might be a certain pressure on Congress to approve military spending programs authorized by the agreement for that reason alone. Kissinger, it seems, had something of the sort in mind when he said that that the administration probably had "a better chance of maintaining our programs with SALT than without it."[115] And he made the same point even more explicitly in a meeting with the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping a few days after the Vladivostok summit meeting, outlining for him the arms control arrangement that had just been worked out with the Soviets. "In terms of our domestic situation," Kissinger said, "it is, strangely enough, easier to get Congress to give funds for limits in agreements than to get funds for the same amounts without an agreement."[116]

SALT thus meant higher military budgets, which was why Kissinger thought there had been so little complaining from the military authorities about the SALT process. "We haven't heard a word from our military," he said in 1974, "since they figured out how SALT could get them a bigger military establishment. It's the best legitimization of Trident they have. (Senator) Symington has told me they don't know how many SALT agreements we can afford."[117] And in his memoirs he quoted from a memo he had sent the president explaining why America should move ahead on SALT. One key argument was that "the prospective agreement has the advantage that it is premised on

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[114] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The SALT Process," *The New Yorker*, 19 November 1979 (link). Moynihan sent a copy of the original article to Carter; that copy, with its original pagination, is available online (link). The quotation is on p. 152 of that original version. See also Moynihan's testimony in U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "The SALT II Treaty," part 5 (September 1979) (link), esp. pp. 236-37, 239, 247-48.

[115] Kissinger meeting with Sonnenfeldt, Hyland, and others, 11 September 1974, DNSA/KT01321, p. 3 (link).

[116] Kissinger-Deng meeting, 27 November 1974, 9:45 a.m., p. 11, DNSA/KT01428 (link).

[117] Verification Panel, 15 February 1974, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXIII, p. 202 (link). See also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 125.

carrying out the Trident and B-1 programs, thus improving the chances for their survival in Congress." The irony did not escape him: "Arms control had come a long way from its original intention when it became a means to make possible new strategic programs rather than to limit them."[118]

So for many people, especially on the left, the conclusion seemed inescapable. The arms control process was a sham, a fraud. The SALT II treaty was not disarmament, or even arms control. It would simply pave the way for yet more military spending. As Richard Barnet, a former Kennedy administration official, put it in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece, the treaty had "secured the acquiescence of the military in both countries because it ratifies the huge weapons acquisition programs both are pushing." In America in particular, SALT was "something to stir the hearts of generals, defense contractors and senators from states brimming with military reservations and arms plants."[119] The sense of disillusionment, perhaps even of betrayal, was palpable.

But none of this meant that the right, for its part, was particularly happy with the SALT process. From the start, the conservatives had been wary of strategic arms control. They might have recognized, in the early 1970s, that in the post-Vietnam period the Congress would not support a major U.S. military buildup, and they might have acknowledged, somewhat grudgingly, that in those circumstances an active arms control policy might be of value in terms of limiting what the Soviets would otherwise do. But they thought SALT would have a certain lulling effect and make it harder for people to see the Soviet threat for what it was, and that perhaps led them to lean harder against détente than they otherwise might have. With regard to arms control, they certainly attacked the SALT I agreement for being tantamount to an American acceptance of Soviet strategic superiority, and indeed under the agreement the USSR could deploy a larger missile force than the United States could. Kissinger, to be sure, felt all this was deeply unfair. Those inequalities, he pointed out, were the result of policies each side had adopted long ago, and before 1972 people had been perfectly willing to live with those disparities. Why, then, was it so outrageous that the 1972 agreement was built on that reality? Wasn't it absurd that "force levels unilaterally established by the United States for over ten years by administrations of both parties—without opposition" were suddenly "declared 'dangerous' when embodied in an agreement"?[120] And if people didn't think America's missiles were big enough, there was nothing in the agreement to prevent the country from building missiles with much larger throwweights. "If we want a bigger missile," he said, "why

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[118] Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 292. On the general issue of perverse effects, see the very interesting analysis in chs. 2 and 3 in Bruce Berkowitz, *Calculated Risks: A Century of Arms Control, Why It Has Failed, and How It Can Be Made to Work* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

[119] Richard Barnet, "Do We Want to End the Arms Race?" *The Washington Post*, 9 September 1979.

[120] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1007. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1245.

aren't we building one? Who's stopping us?"[121] But from the conservatives' point of view those arguments missed the point. SALT was the great symbol of détente, and it was the détente policy itself that was the real target of their complaints. The whole idea of developing a friendly relationship with the USSR they found deeply distasteful. And an agreement which seemed to be putting America's seal of approval on what the Soviets were doing, above all in the military area, did not sit well with them at all.

So the conservatives came to dislike the whole SALT process—not just the treaties and agreements it had led to, but even more the whole ideology that had grown up around arms control. In 1974 Wohlstetter launched a quite extraordinary attack on many of the key claims associated with that ideology: on the idea that the arms competition, driven by "runaway technology," "worst-case" thinking leading to "invariable U.S. overestimation" of the Soviet threat, and a kind of mindless "action-reaction mechanism," tended to take on "an explosive life of its own"; on the idea that all this had led to a never-ending growth in nuclear firepower, to ever-larger levels of overkill, and to a dangerous "arms race" that would in itself make "war much more likely"; and on the notion that only strenuous and indeed risky arms control efforts could "cap the volcano" [an allusion to the Bundy article] and keep the "race" from ending in disaster. Many of those claims, he showed, simply did not stand up in the light of the evidence. U.S. spending on strategic forces had fallen, after adjusting for inflation, by almost two-thirds since its peak in the late 1950s. The total explosive power of the weapons in the U.S. arsenal had also fallen quite dramatically from its peak in around 1960. And even the total number of U.S. strategic warheads (including those designed for both defensive and offensive use) had, by 1972, declined somewhat from its peak in 1964—a decline accounted for mostly by the decommissioning of the defensive warheads, "supposedly the most destabilizing" weapons in the American arsenal. And instead of a constant tendency to overestimate the developing Soviet threat, during one key period—the 1960s—exactly the opposite error had been made.[122]

But Wohlstetter was trying to do a good deal more than just show that many standard views were not supported by the evidence. What he really objected to was what he saw as the mindless way in which many people, especially on the left, dealt with strategic issues. The basic idea that there was an "arms race" that had to be stopped was linked to the idea that the way to stop it was to make sure that neither side had any incentive to preempt in a crisis—that each side would build forces only for retaliatory purposes, and that neither side would threaten the other side's

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[121] Verification Panel meeting, 27 April 1974, quoted in Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1027.

[122] Wohlstetter, "Is There a Strategic Arms Race?" (link), "Rivals, But No 'Race'" (link), and "Optimal Ways to Confuse Ourselves" (link), and Wohlstetter, "Racing Forward? Or Ambling Back?," in *Nuclear Heuristics*) (link).

retaliatory forces. If both sides accepted that kind of system, it had been argued, the arms race could be stopped in its tracks; the reaching for damage-limitation, the building of counterforce capabilities that could support that goal, and the acceptance of a first-strike option, without which damage limitation could scarcely be effective, would necessarily trigger counter-measures on the part of the adversary, and all that would simply lead to endless escalations of the arms race. It was clear, therefore, that the stability theory had provided, for many people, the conceptual basis for arms control. But Wohlstetter was deeply opposed to what he called "perverse current dogmas" of that sort.[123] "At the core" of Wohlstetter's "disparagement of arms control," as Richard Perle pointed out, was "his view that the underlying rationale for treaties limiting the numbers, types, and technologies of strategic forces served only to reinforce MAD doctrine, a doctrine he deplored on both prudential and moral grounds."[124]

Wohlstetter, however, was careful not to claim too much, and he never quite said that U.S. arms control policy, let alone U.S. nuclear weapons policy more generally, had been rooted in the MAD doctrine. It was the thinking, especially outside of government, that he objected to; the SALT process itself was not his main target. But the idea that U.S. policy in this area had been based on the stability theory was amazingly widespread, and arguments to that effect were made both by opponents of the theory on the right and by its supporters on the left.[125] And claims of this sort were often linked to the point that the Soviets, on the other hand, had not only refused to base their policy on the MAD doctrine, but had tended to take the opposite approach. In terms of doctrine, they were "war-fighters"; they did not accept the view that nuclear weapons served only to deter their use by others, or that a stable great-power relationship could only be based on mutual deterrence. And that disparity, it was often said (by Thomas Wolfe, for example, in his

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[123] Wohlstetter, "Racing Forward? Or Ambling Back?," in *Nuclear Heuristics*) (link), p. 461.

[124] *Nuclear Heuristics*) (link), p. 385. For Wohlstetter's views on MAD, see the unpublished paper he co-authored with his wife Roberta in 1985, "On Arms Control: What We Should Look for in an Arms Agreement," ibid., esp. pp. 474, 482-484.

[125] Even Kissinger often argued along these lines. "The Johnson Administration," he wrote in his memoirs, "had had a strategic doctrine of 'assured destruction.' *Abandoning counterforce*, it calculated our program on the basis of our ability to inflict industrial and civilian damage." Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1232; emphasis added. But he certainly knew what the real story was. He had, for example, noted in passing at a high-level meeting in early 1970 that the new Nixon administration had "been told that over 85% of the force is targeted in a damage-limiting role." Indeed, within weeks after taking office in 1969, he forwarded to Nixon a memorandum describing the then-existing strategy which pointed out that "we plan to use our Minuteman to destroy Soviet forces and thereby limit damage to us and our allies," and so "we want to preserve at least some of the damage limiting capability of our Minuteman force." Defense Program Review Committee meeting, 10 August 1970, and NSC staff paper, c. 5 March 1969, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXIV, pp. 539, 65 (link).

well-known book on SALT), explained why arms control had accomplished so little.[126] The two major powers were simply not on the same wavelength on these issues.

That was certainly Moynihan's view. He considered the stability theory (which he called the "doctrine of deterrence") "a stunning intellectual achievement." But to his mind it had one great flaw. Its supporters had assumed the Soviet leadership would understand its logic and "do as we did." But the Soviets simply did not accept that theory, and that was the real reason SALT had failed.[127] The Soviets were war-fighters; they believed in counterforce; they were reaching for superiority; they were already giving signs, Moynihan said, "that it is their intention to control our defense policy."[128] The implications were clear. If the Soviets had been truly interested in coexistence, they would have agreed with the Americans about the kind of nuclear capability both sides should have, so their failure to do so suggested that they intended to pursue more aggressive goals. Indeed, the whole SALT experience tended to confirm the view, which of course had other sources as well, that détente was a mirage and that the time had come for a much tougher American policy.

Today, however, we know that the whole notion that U.S. policy had been based on MAD is essentially a myth—although one that was embraced at the time by both the left and the right, albeit for very different reasons.[129] The myth was accepted in part because of the way U.S. policy in this area was presented to the public. America's leaders

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[126] Wolfe, *SALT Experience*, pp. 106-113, 247-250. Wolfe felt that this was paralleled by a related disparity: the Americans were more committed to arms control based on mutual deterrence than the Soviets were, and they were more willing to make concessions in order to reach agreements: "if a prime asymmetry in the SALT negotiating approaches of the two sides can be identified, it would appear to be that the Soviet Union has displayed less inclination to alter its own basic positions and to accommodate itself to the concerns and preferences of the other party for the sake of achieving agreements than has the United States." Ibid., pp. 253-254. But the evidence he gave to support that view (on p. 95) was very thin, and, as he himself noted, the material then available was not ample enough to allow a solid judgment about how conciliatory each side was on some key issues (pp. 95, 104). And he in fact presented evidence that pointed in the opposite direction: in two keys areas (SLBMs and forward-based forces) it was the Soviets, he pointed out, who had made the key concessions (pp. 12, 106).

[127] Moynihan, "The SALT Process" (link), pp. 114-116, 132.

[128] Ibid., pp. 141, 168.

[129] Scholars, of course, have been aware of this point for years. See, for example, John Mearsheimer, "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1984-85) (link), p. 23 n.10, and John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 464 n.169, and the sources cited in both footnotes. In the second one Mearsheimer quotes Senator Malcolm Wallop as claiming in 1979 that for the past fifteen years the U.S. government had "built weapons and cast strategic plans well nigh exclusively for the purpose of inflicting damage upon the enemy's society." He then goes on to note that "it is now well established among students of the nuclear arms race that this claim is a groundless myth perpetrated by experts and policymakers who surely knew better." The "seminal piece exposing this myth," he points out, was Desmond Ball's *Déjà Vu: The Return to Counterforce in the Nixon Administration* (Santa Monica: California Seminar on Arms Control and Foreign Policy, December 1974). This very important paper, however, was not widely circulated at the time. For another summary judgment about the myth of MAD, see Donald MacKenzie and Graham Spinardi, "Anthony Giddens on Nuclear Strategy: A Comment," *Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (August 1991) (link).

certainly took it for granted, as Nixon himself put it, that the government "shouldn't tell the whole truth" about these matters.[130] People had to be led to think that America's great preference was for a second-strike strategy based on "assured destruction"; any move toward counterforce had to be explained in terms of the need to respond to Soviet efforts to build up their own counterforce capabilities; no U.S. government wanted to admit too openly that it sought to develop a first-strike option for general political purposes. But it would be a mistake to think that that myth took hold simply because people had been taken in by the way the government had packaged its policy. For it is important to note that even people who should have known better—including people who had served in the government and knew very well what the real situation was—often claimed that America's policy had been based on MAD.

The impression thus took hold that there was an enormous gulf between the American and the Soviet approach to nuclear issues. The Soviets, it was said over and over again, still took nuclear war-fighting seriously, whereas the Americans had tried to build their policy on the stability theory and had moved in the opposite direction only when it became clear that the Soviet approach was very different. And the whole SALT experience was interpreted in a way that underscored that basic point. The Americans, it was said, had tried to build a "stable structure of peace" (to use Nixon's own term); their arms control policy, which looked above all to building a stable nuclear relationship, reflected that basic aspiration. But the Soviets, the argument ran, had rejected the olive branch. They were not prepared to base their relationship with the United States on the idea that both sides should respect the core interests of the other—and above all its interest in having a secure, survivable deterrent force. They were instead still reaching for nuclear

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[130] NSC meeting, 18 June 1969, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXIV, p. 141 (link). This should not be understood as a quirk of Nixon's personality. U.S. officials had deliberately sought to mislead the public about these matters well before Nixon came to power. As a former high Johnson administration official told Desmond Ball in 1971, the basic war plan, with the great emphasis it placed on counterforce, had not been changed in any fundamental way since 1962, but "all public officials" had "learned to talk in public only about deterrence and city attacks. No war-fighting, no city-sparing." See Ball, *Déjà Vu,* pp. 16-17. And the playing down of America's interest in counterforce continued even after some of the most basic facts were in the public record. Thus Kissinger suggested in his memoirs that America's new programs, like the Trident submarine and the new Trident missiles that would be deployed on them, would simply enhance America's second-strike capability. The Trident program, he wrote, "gave us no counterforce capability because SLBMs were generally not accurate enough to pinpoint silos and presented technical problems of simultaneous launching." Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 273; see also pp. 262, 1008. But one of the main purposes of the Trident force being developed was in fact to provide America was a major survivable counterforce capability. See Green, *Revolution that Failed*, pp. 33, 125, 130-131. And none of this was kept secret at the time. Ford, for example, in an April 1976 speech boasted that his administration had "laid the keel for the first of a new class of nuclear submarines to be armed with the most accurate submarine ballistic missiles in the world. The Trident missile fleet will be the foundation for a formidable, technologically superior force through the 1980s." It was widely understood that accuracy was important only for attacking hard targets like ICBM silos; attacks on cities obviously did not have to be too accurate. The Ford speech is quoted in FRUS 1969-76, Vol. XXXV, p. 333 (link). This is by no means the only example that could be cited. As Graham Spinardi points out, in 1976 the Pentagon openly stated that it wanted the new submarines to have the ability to "strike hard targets" as a "hedge against dependence on ICBMs." Graham Spinardi, "Why the U.S. Navy went for Hard-Target Counterforce in Trident II: (And Why it Didn't Get There Sooner)," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990) (link), p. 177.

superiority and, unlike the Americans, still sought to build a politically usable nuclear force. So even for moderates like Moynihan, the SALT story seemed to show that the Soviets, unlike the Americans, still wanted to build the sort of nuclear force that could support an aggressive foreign policy, for how else (given their assumptions about U.S. policy) could the failure of SALT be explained?

That whole line of argument about SALT thus supported a more general view about why détente had proved so disappointing—and about who was to blame for what had happened. For many Americans the lesson was clear: the country now had to wake up and take vigorous action to counter the Soviet threat. In that way the SALT experience of the 1970s, and the arguments and ideas that had grown up around it, helped pave the way for the rise of the Reaganite right in the United States and for the hardening of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union in the early 1980s—scarcely the result supporters of nuclear arms control had hoped for a decade earlier.