On Empathy and Critical Oral History: 
A Commentary

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I warmly welcome the efforts of James Blight and Janet Lang in recent years to stimulate interest in and, I hope, application of empathy in Cold War (and general) historiography. I do so as someone who has long sought to encourage and apply realistic empathy (in the 1950s in intelligence assessment, in the 1960s in the foreign policymaking process, in the 1970s in diplomacy and negotiation, and in the 1980s and 1990s in writing diplomatic histories of the Cold War). At the same time, I have some differing judgments on the role of empathy and on “critical oral history.”

The use of interactions by former adversaries to probe their own shortcomings (and those of their erstwhile colleagues and governments) in earlier historical episodes, which the authors make the centerpiece of what they term “critical oral history,” is an innovative variation on interviewing and traditional conference exchanges. By definition, it offers the possibility of ex post facto empathy—an important, albeit secondary, application requiring care in reaching conclusions about the causes of historical experiences.

I agree that policymakers and their advisers and negotiators too often fail to empathize adequately with adversaries (and with friends and others as well) and should do so if only to pursue their own objectives more successfully. Sometimes, as in the case discussed by Blight and Lang, the purpose of better understanding an adversary is to facilitate reaching agreement on issues on which both sides share sufficient common or compatible interests. Empathy is, however, also important—indeed, often more important—to understand-

ing why another party holds views or objectives that sharply conflict with one’s own. This can help in identifying possible ways to contain a clash of interests or aims—or, in the final analysis, to determine that they cannot be mitigated and contained, if such be the case. Empathy, in short, can help to dispel phantom threats or to identify real ones.

The authors charge that diplomatic historians of the Cold War have failed to recognize the significance of empathy. That charge is seriously overstated. Not all historians do so consistently, correctly, or even consciously, but recognizing the significance of empathy is an important element in studying diplomatic (and general) history. I, for one, cannot agree with the authors’ comment that empathy and “trying to identify misperceptions, missed opportunities, and lessons sounds rather mystical, even magical, and thus of questionable value to those of us who investigate the history of the Cold War.”

Critical oral history as described and illustrated in the Blight-Lang article can be a methodological tool, but it is not the only one necessary. Oral history can be one source, and although reminiscences (even confrontational ones) can enlighten historical reconstructions, they are a supplement to and no substitute for documentary sources and records. The authors are no doubt aware of this. They introduce a modicum of summary documentary history as background and engage some historians who have delved into such history along with veteran participants in the historical events. The nature of “reliving” the events, while undoubtedly useful, does not encourage or facilitate analysis of documentary and other evidence that remains the principal basis for historical analysis.

The case study of the U.S.-Soviet impasse over renewal of negotiation of a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) in March 1977, as presented in the article, is predicated on an assumption of a desire by both sides to reach early agreement and focuses entirely on finding misperceptions on each side that precluded such agreement. But it is also necessary to uncover and analyze each side’s misconception of the two sides’ objectives, not only misperceptions (which by definition can be corrected by discovering accurate perceptions, including through empathy). If the objectives of the two sides, and not merely reciprocal perceptions, are incompatible, then empathetic understanding can only confirm a standoff. The case study did illustrate misperceptions, and the sharp impasse in 1977 was indeed a serious blow to détente, although a SALT II agreement was signed after another two years of negotiation. But in explaining the reasons for the impasse, the critical oral history was less successful than conventional historical accounts that have found an incompatibility in the objectives of the two sides in the March 1977 meeting.

Significant differences among those who set the U.S. position for the March 1977 meeting played a key role in leading to the debacle. The record
clearly shows that the new U.S. administration had decided to abandon the negotiating positions taken by its predecessor. Negotiation from late 1972 to late 1974 had produced a stalemate that ended at a summit meeting in Vladivostok in October 1974. Soon, however, that “breakthrough” collapsed, and only renewed high-level negotiations modifying the Vladivostok accord by early 1976 had led to a new prospective agreement. President Gerald Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and the Soviet leaders all believed in February 1976 that an agreement was at hand. But Ford—on the defensive over détente and arms control in a close election campaign, and with strong opposition to the prospective agreement not only from Republican challenger Ronald Reagan but from his own defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and key Democratic senators—decided to put SALT on hold until after the election. In March 1976 he forbade Kissinger to return to Moscow to wrap up the accord, as had been planned.

In early 1977, the Carter administration’s unilateral repudiation of more than four years of negotiation was accompanied by two new proposals, both known to be unacceptable to the Soviet side. The new approach was, moreover, publicly trumpeted in advance of its presentation to Moscow. Why?

President Jimmy Carter badly wanted an early SALT II agreement. But he also wanted a more ambitious and far-reaching agreement than the prospective one that had been worked out by Ford and Kissinger. He therefore pressed for deep reductions. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance understood that Carter’s desire for an early SALT agreement would not permit ambitious arms reductions. He was well aware that the Soviet Union wanted to consolidate the previous four years of negotiation as soon as possible and before moving on. But other principal advisers to Carter included the JCS and, above all, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. The JCS did not want strategic arms control restraints at all, or at most minimal restraints on the United States and maximum constraints on the USSR. They opposed even the modest constraints in the version negotiated to near completion by Kissinger and agreed to deep reductions as favored by Carter only after insisting on a proposal for deep cuts lopsidedly favoring the United States. They also were prepared to accept an alternative made up by cherry-picking those elements of the compromise worked out by Kissinger and Soviet leaders by 1976 that favored the United States, while excluding those that favored the Soviet Union.

Brzezinski controlled the formulation of the U.S. proposals, and he had the president’s ear. Although he was not opposed to a SALT agreement, he

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saw to it that the JCS position was strongly presented to Carter. He, too, was opposed to picking up where Kissinger had left off in 1976 and did not want an early compromise accord. Brzezinski also had another objective: to show Soviet leaders that the new Carter (-Brzezinski) administration would be **tougher** than the Ford-Kissinger predecessor. As he candidly wrote in his memoir, staking out a strong new SALT proposal reflected “my feeling that the Carter Administration needed to project a tougher profile on the central issue of the American-Soviet relationship.” In lieu of empathy, he acknowledged that he had “grimmer assessments of the Soviet role” than did Vance, whom he regarded as “overoptimistic on our relations with the Soviets.”

Brzezinski at the same time encouraged Carter to pursue a challenging posture on Soviet human-rights issues, even though this exacerbated frictions and compounded Soviet suspicions of the U.S. stance on SALT and in general.

Brzezinski shaped the second or fallback U.S. SALT proposal as a partial modification of the Vladivostok-Kissinger version to meet U.S. but not Soviet interests. Although Brzezinski referred to the second U.S. proposal as “based on Vladivostok,” it was not based on Vladivostok 1974 nor on the subsequent negotiated near-agreement of 1976 but on a new one-sided U.S. alternative to Vladivostok and the 1976 position. (As Blight and Lang show, Brzezinski continued in 1994 to refer to this proposal as “based on Vladivostok,” implying a continuity with past negotiations, but he did not try to bridge the gap between U.S. and Soviet positions; quite the contrary.)

Vance took to Moscow in March 1977 instructions prepared by Brzezinski and approved by Carter that called for presentation of Carter’s favored deep reductions proposal, with the second proposal as a fallback if necessary (as it clearly would be). There was a “third option” closer to the Kissinger negotiated 1976 draft agreement, but when Vance urgently requested authority to introduce it, Carter (on Brzezinski’s strong advice) turned him down. The account of the Moscow meeting in the article does not mention the existence of the third option or Carter’s decision not to use it. Brzezinski, in his memoir, cites with evident satisfaction his personal journal from that day: “I think we can really put a lot of pressure on the Soviets. . . . I can well imagine that the Soviets feel in many respects hemmed in.”

The Carter administration was indeed demonstrating that it was tougher than its predecessor. Why, then, do Blight and Lang describe the U.S. delegation as seeing the cold Soviet rejection as a “plainly irrational Russian reac-

4. Ibid., pp. 29, 37.
5. Ibid., p. 162.
tion.” The Soviet Union had ample reason for decrying the unilateral abandonment of years of prior negotiation and the presentation, with great public fanfare, of two unilaterally designed and heavily biased U.S. proposals.

Although President Carter clearly had wanted to engage Soviet leaders constructively and to move quickly to a strategic arms agreement enhancing U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, the U.S. position did not serve those objectives. The Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, motivated in part by deep personal pique, believed that to maintain his domestic position he must sharply reject the U.S. attempt to gain unilateral advantages in the SALT negotiations. His response, with no counterproposals, through Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, may have been unwise, although it did not foreclose renewed negotiation and eventual U.S. acceptance of a more balanced agreement.

The authors draw as one of the principal lessons from their critical oral history analysis the key relationship between leaders—Carter and Brezhnev—and their “most experienced and able advisers on the issue at hand,” defining most experienced and able as “those who were best at empathizing with the adversary”: Vance and Gromyko. They berate Vance and Gromyko for “being ‘good soldiers’ carrying out orders” with what they both correctly anticipated would be negative (or even “disastrous”) results. They blame Carter and Brezhnev for being “insufficiently curious” (itself a curious finding) for not listening to these most experienced and empathetic advisers, and for not displaying “the humility to empathize with their advisers [?]—to listen to them, to recognize good advice, and to act on it” (emphasis in original). They also argue that “advisers, if they know they are being ordered, inadvertently, to act against their nation’s best interest, must find a way to be heard by those at the top” (emphasis in original).

But Vance, in office only a few weeks, and Gromyko, in office a few decades, did not see the coming train wreck in Moscow as the issue over which to fall on their swords and resign. Bad as it would be, and in fact it was, they (correctly) believed that it was better to soldier on rather than take their only remaining remedy: to resign. This is what Blight and Lang seem to recommend when they write, “The advisers who did know better [Vance and Gromyko, as the best at empathizing] did not go to the mat for what they knew should be done.” Both Vance and Gromyko believed that, unfortunate as the confrontation precipitated by the U.S. proposals in Moscow would be, the result would not be irretrievable. And, indeed, it was not. Two years later, a SALT II treaty was signed. I find it most doubtful that the course of history and détente would have been better served if Vance and Gromyko had resigned in March 1977.

Leaders, even if more aware of the importance of empathy than were
Carter and Brezhnev, cannot make decisions only on the advice of their most able empathizers. Brezhnev was surrounded by a coterie of comrades who were even less inclined than he was to empathize with the imperialist Americans. Carter was listening to the very influential adviser who he believed to be the most experienced and able on Soviet affairs: his pre-election mentor on such matters, Zbigniew Brzezinski. He also had to take into serious consideration other crucial advisers who were not empathizers but were essential if any strategic arms agreement were to be satisfied, above all the highly conservative and reluctant arms controllers in the JCS and the potentially powerful Senate Democratic hawks led by Senator Henry Jackson. Jackson had earlier persuaded candidate Carter to downplay détente in his election campaign and seized on Carter’s desire to have deep reductions to help lead him into proposing unequal deep cuts that the Soviet Union could never accept. The rejection of the proposal could then be used—as it was indeed used by Jackson and others—as an argument that the Soviet Union was not interested in serious arms limitation and reductions. Also, just days before the March meeting the Senate had confirmed Paul Warnke, a tough (and empathetic) negotiator, as head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency by only a 58 to 40 majority—less than the two-thirds that would be required for ratification of an arms control treaty.

Carter should have appreciated the need for empathy more than he did, and should have taken the advice of Vance (and the State Department professionals) more than he did. But he had to take account of the political realities. He would have been much wiser to move with something like Option 3 or Vladivostok-Kissinger 1976 instead of waiting until after the train crash. Brzezinski never told Carter that he wanted to shock the Soviet leaders and make them see the new administration as tougher than its predecessors, which was not Carter’s aim. In that sense, Carter was indeed not “sufficiently curious” about the negotiation plan he approved or the effects of his own inclination to make his more far-reaching arms limitation objectives public before even presenting them to his negotiating partners. Carter should have pursued his goals by giving more attention to those who best empathized with the Soviet Union, but he could not make empathy with Soviet thinking his only or even principal consideration.

The Blight-Lang “Virtual History of Détente” of 1977–1985 is imaginative and provocative and identifies some conceivable possibilities, but it is not “virtual history” and certainly not “the virtual history of détente after the events of March 1977.” At best it is one of many possibilities, perhaps the most optimistic.

Blight and Lang are well aware that a different path of historical events would not necessarily have followed the illustrative alternative they have out-
lined. Nonetheless, a serious problem with their design of “the virtual history” is that it changes only one, admittedly important, variable: mutual appreciation of mutual compromise to serve mutual interests in strategic arms control and its important byproduct of contributing to mutual trust and respect. But the history of 1977 and beyond includes many other important variables (as there always are!). Would Carter necessarily have been reelected, as in “the virtual history”? Would mutual trust on strategic arms control in 1977 necessarily have led to mutual trust on human-rights issues, the wars in Africa and Central America, Soviet relations with Cuba, events in Afghanistan, and a myriad of other potential conflicts of interest (and of perceptions)?

“The Virtual History of Détente” rests on an assumption that awareness of misperceptions by the two leaders, Carter and Brezhnev, would have led to resolving all serious differences between the two superpowers. Blight and Lang evidently assume that the smooth sailing of the virtual history “simply because U.S. and Soviet leaders are able to empathize so well with one another” would have easily marginalized the presumably few “Cold War hardliners in both the United States and Soviet Union whose popularity depends to a significant degree on their ability to demonize the enemy.” But the ideological, geopolitical, and systemic divides of the Cold War would not so easily have been dissolved “simply” because of the ability of leaders to empathize.

Leslie Gelb overstated matters when he claimed at the Musgrove conference that “there were no lessons to learn” from a review of March 1977. He himself was among those who had understood in 1977 that the Soviet side would flatly reject both U.S. proposals. Blight and Lang, however, state that the alternative to empathy means to believe that Carter and Brezhnev both would have taken sufficiently different positions, not just less provocative displays of their positions, in March 1977 if they had known how provocative their stances were. Empathy could, I believe, have blunted the harsh exchange of March 1977 and some of the subsequent friction. But Gelb is right that the underlying political factors (within as well as between the two governments) precluded drastically different policies between the two sides in the Cold War relationship of March 1977. Even if, as Blight and Lang posit, “the virtual history” alternative had led to reciprocal apologies by Carter and Brezhnev in March 1977, followed by a “frank but civilized and useful” summit, it is extremely unlikely that the remainder of the virtual history outlined would have followed (including the SALT II treaty “sailing through” the Senate).

Blight and Lang believe that the “inability to prevent the collapse of détente derived in large part from [Carter’s and Brezhnev’s] refusal to make the effort to empathize with one another.” I question whether a “refusal to make the effort,” rather than a failure to empathize adequately, was the fault, but far more important is the question of whether even very thoughtful and
deliberate efforts to empathize could have neutralized the fact that empathetic understanding, even successful mutual empathetic understanding, would have encountered serious differences in the objectives of the two sides, given the wide gap in ideological, psychological, political, and geostrategic conceptions and interests of the two superpowers in the 1977–1985 period.

Partly owing to this complexity of factors determining the course of historical events, I also question the Blight-Lang conclusion that “critical oral history is something like an operational definition of rigorous virtual history; It begins with history as it happened, then moves, in cross-questioning, to virtual history, followed by the drawing of lessons relevant to the discrepancy between actual history and virtual history” (emphasis in original).

This attempt to bridge the gap is, I believe, a bridge too far. First, there is no single “virtual history” to compare with the one and only actual history. A better option might be to think in terms of “alternative possible courses of events” rather than “the virtual history.” Not only is history too complex and virtual history too multifaceted to make comparison of the two possible, but reliance on oral history (through cross-questioning) is too constraining. Oral exchanges can, at best, bring out only some of the historical record and only conscious and articulated data on empathy and objectivity by the participants. This may yield insights that critical all-source historiography can examine, but it cannot be counted on to precipitate “the virtual history” (or, for that matter, the real history).

**Conclusions**

Empathy was necessary, but not sufficient, to sustain a policy and development such as U.S.-Soviet détente in 1977–1980. By the same token, failures to empathize adequately contributed to but did not alone cause the failure of détente.

Diplomatic historians should endeavor to determine whether policymakers succeeded or failed to exercise sufficient empathy in evaluating their counterparts in international politics—especially their adversaries.

Critical oral history featuring former participants in historical events (with others) can make a contribution to diplomatic history, including history of the Cold War, if adequately prepared. Such contributions can be useful but cannot supplant or substitute for “all-source” evidence and comprehensive analysis of historical events and developments in their full context. (So, too, for example, can psychological analysis of key decision-makers and advisers.)

The topic pursued by Blight and Lang is “Using Critical Oral History to
Reassess the Collapse of U.S.-Soviet Détente in the Carter-Brezhnev Years.” Yet apart from “the virtual history” excursion, the article discusses only one (admittedly important) episode at the start of the Carter-Brezhnev years. The critical oral history project did examine the full four years of the Carter administration. It was appropriate that Blight and Lang should have included only the important initial interaction of the two adversaries in March 1977, rather than attempting to summarize the whole four-year relationship in a single article.

The 1977 Moscow confrontation over the terms of strategic arms control was by its nature more dependent on mutual empathy (or, in the event, on its near absence). The four years of interactive diplomacy and growing confrontation, however, involved many episodes and issues that dealt with complex interactions with third parties and assessments (and misjudgments) of actions of the opposing sides that would not have been erased, or often not even alleviated, by mutual empathy. Yet many of them were instrumental in the collapse of détente, and their absence from the discussion here underlines the point that a wide range of issues and factors other than empathy were involved. Empathy had a role, or should have had a role, in them all. But gauging the cumulative impact of the full range of issues and factors is difficult if one assumes that a virtual history of the period (even covering a virtual second term for Carter extending through the rule of Brezhnev and two successors) was in effect predetermined by the initial confrontation in 1977 whose negative outcome was exacerbated by a deficiency of mutual empathy. The authors’ “virtual history” was intended to illustrate some possible favorable developments if mutual empathy had led to sustainable mutual trust. But a more rounded projection of alternative courses of history that included at least some room for interactions that were not based on mutual trust could have reflected some of the conflict and deterioration of détente over the years 1977 through 1980.

History is not comfortable with monocausal explanations, and misunderstandings are but one of many causes of friction. Incidentally, one lesson that the authors might wish to develop is the need for mutual empathy. The article treats mutual empathy as a presumably likely outcome of successful critical oral history conferences, leaving unexplored the problems of unilateral efforts at empathizing by policymakers.

To cite a current example, one reason for the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations in recent years is undoubtedly a reciprocal lack of empathy by leaders and publics. One cause of this worsening relationship is the fact that Vladimir Putin and many Russians today perceive the Gorbachev period as a disaster owing in part to what they perceive as unilateral, unreciprocated
empathy by Gorbachev for the West. In their view, the West (especially the United States) responded with policies and actions that took advantage of the weakness of the Soviet/Russian side and its preemptive concessions, thus leading to an unbalanced outcome for the two main protagonists of the Cold War. That, however, is a subject for another dialogue.