

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

Building a Stable International System?

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In 1969, the United States and the Soviet Union embarked on 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, 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 the existing 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 November 1974. After further lengthy and complex negotiations, a SALT II treaty was signed by Brezhnev and President Jimmy Carter in June 1979. Although that treaty was never ratified by either country, both sides complied with its terms until 1986.

Given the importance of SALT, the process was bound to attract a good deal of attention at the time. Indeed, several major works on the subject appeared even 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*.<sup>1</sup> The first volume of an extraordinary memoir by Nixon's national security adviser, Henry

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

Kissinger, which contained a good deal of information on SALT and related matters, came out in 1979.<sup>2</sup> Gerard Smith, who had headed the U.S. SALT delegation during Nixon's first term as president, published a book dealing directly with SALT in 1980.<sup>3</sup> 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 numerous articles as well) he devoted a good deal of attention to the SALT process.<sup>4</sup>

Although these books provided a fair amount of information on SALT, the early literature was never entirely satisfactory for the historian. The authors did not really indicate what the two sides were trying to do in the negotiations or what impact the SALT experience had on U.S.-Soviet relations at the time. This was partly because the arguments put forward in the literature were framed with an eye to political circumstances at the time they came out. But perhaps a more fundamental problem had to do with sources. Writers like Newhouse, Talbot, and Wolfe had to rely exclusively on the public record and on what they could learn from interviews, and such sources are rarely enough to convey a full sense of what was going on. Certainly most historians believe you cannot understand a subject like this until you see the documents that were secret at the time and not released until many years later.

But today the situation is very different. Some truly extraordinary collections of primary sources relating to SALT have become available in recent years, and scholars interested in making sense of the whole SALT experience now have a huge amount of material to work with. A plethora of scholarly works drawing on that material have already begun to come out.<sup>5</sup> As for the

2. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 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 Institution Press, 1985). A revised edition, taking account of the end of the Cold War, came out in 1994. See also Raymond Garthoff, "Negotiating with the Russians: Some Lessons from SALT," *International Security*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1977), pp. 3–24; Raymond Garthoff, "Mutual Deterrence and Strategic Arms Limitation in Soviet Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1978), pp. 112–147; and Raymond Garthoff, "SALT I: An Evaluation," *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1978), pp. 1–25.

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 (2019), pp. 353–377; 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

sources themselves, many are now readily available, either in print or online. The volumes on SALT and related matters in the U.S. State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series for 1969–1976 are particularly rich, in large part because of the wonderful job the editors did in transcribing some of the Nixon tapes.<sup>6</sup> The *FRUS* volumes can be supplemented with various other important collections—the Kissinger Transcripts collection, for example, on the Digital National Security Archive (DNSA) 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.<sup>7</sup> Some European sources can shed light on certain aspects of SALT; much of that material is also easily accessible, either in print or online.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, exceptionally important collections of declassified Soviet documents relating to SALT I became available at the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI) in August 2015, December 2018, and December 2019. Other declassified Soviet documents, mainly from the archive of the Russian Foreign Ministry, appeared in a collection of materials on the détente years published jointly by the U.S. State Department and the Russian Foreign Ministry in 2007.<sup>9</sup> In addition, crucial memoirs by former Soviet officials, including the long-time ambassador to the United States Anatolii Dobrynin,

Nixon's SALT Policy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2013), pp. 1090–1116; 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 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, 1969–1976*, Vol. XXXIII (SALT I), Vol. XXXIV (SALT II through 1979), Vols. XXXV and XXXVI (National Security Affairs), and Vols. XII to XVI (USSR), available online at <https://history.state.gov> (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers).

7. The Digital National Security Archive (available online at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/digital-national-security-archive>) is a subscription service, but access is available through many university and public libraries. The material dealing with early 1971 was published by the University of Virginia Press's Rotunda imprint as a digital edition in 2015, along with a descriptive essay by the editors. Patrick J. Garrity and Erin R. Mahan, eds., *Nixon and Arms Control: Forging the Offensive/Defensive Link in the SALT Negotiations, February–May 1971* (Charlottesville, VA: Rotunda, 2015), available online at <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu>.

8. See esp. the volumes in the *Akten zur auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* and the *Documents diplomatiques français* dealing with the period, and, for British material, the Adam Matthew digital collection *The Nixon Years, 1969–1974*, available online at <https://www.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk/Nixon>.

9. David Geyer and Douglas Selva, eds., *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969–1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).

appeared after the end of the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> Beyond that, in interpreting SALT one also needs to take account of 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 be to many people at the time, and arms control policy has to be analyzed with that key point in mind.<sup>11</sup>

So the time has come to take a new look at SALT as a whole—to stand back and try to understand what the SALT effort was really 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. Specifically, I try to make sense of U.S. policy during the period when Nixon was president of the United States (1969–1974). I begin by looking at the conceptual framework within which U.S. strategic arms control policy was devised at that time. The focus here is on the theory of strategic stability—on the idea that the most stable nuclear world was one in which neither side had an incentive to launch a first strike during a crisis—and on the related idea that the goal of arms control should be to move toward a world of that sort. The section after that is concerned with policy, looking in particular at whether policy was in any important way built on the stability theory. If it was not, what was it based on? The basic point that emerges is that the absence of a strong conceptual core had a good deal to do with the disillusionment that set in later on. This point is explored in the final section, which traces the long-term impact of the early SALT process on U.S.-Soviet relations, including certain perverse effects that have been scarcely noted in the historical literature on the subject. The final section emphasizes how the SALT experience tended in practice to undermine the *détente* policy, the very policy it was supposed to support.

## The Conceptual Matrix

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

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10. Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

11. See especially 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), pp. 47–51; and 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), esp. pp. 609, 618, 638–639.

a whole and that, whatever the political differences between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two sides had to do what they could to bring the military competition under control. The SALT process was not a thing apart, and U.S. policy on strategic arms control certainly has to be understood in the context of U.S. policy as a whole, above all, national security policy. As Kissinger, the most important U.S. policymaker dealing with SALT during the Nixon-Ford period (1969–1976), stated 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.”<sup>12</sup> This 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. In the 1950s under Dwight Eisenhower, a nuclear war was seen as a real possibility. Eisenhower did not believe that, in a war triggered by a Soviet attack on Western Europe, both sides would refrain 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, the United States needed to make sure that the Soviet Union could not inflict severe damage on the U.S. homeland, and this meant that the United States 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 had to be executed at the beginning of the war, perhaps even before conventional hostilities had begun in Europe and certainly before the Soviet Union was actually able to mount a nuclear attack.<sup>13</sup>

U.S. officials 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 and concentrated that attack was or how quickly it was mounted, and then go on to inflict “unacceptable losses” on the U.S. 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.”<sup>14</sup> In September 1963, President John F. Kennedy was informed by the Net Evaluation Subcommittee, the group within the National Security Council (NSC)

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12. Review Group Meeting, 29 May 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 98.

13. See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 159–165 (the quotation is on p. 161) and the sources cited there.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

responsible for assessing the damage that would result from a nuclear war, that the long-predicted “nuclear stalemate” had finally arrived. Even if the United States attacked first, the president was told, “surviving Soviet capability is sufficient to produce an unacceptable loss in the U.S.” This meant, as Kennedy himself pointed out, that preemption was no longer a viable option.<sup>15</sup>

How then could that situation be dealt with? The most common view was that the U.S. nuclear edge had been permanently lost and could never really be regained. This meant that a first strike was bound to be suicidal and that the “nuclear standoff” was here to stay, but it also meant that the “balance of terror,” as Winston Churchill had predicted years earlier, might lead to a relatively stable peace. Nuclear weapons, the argument went, served mainly to “deter their use by others.” The deterrent effect, to be sure, would be somewhat broader because it was always possible that a conventional war might escalate, whether political leaders wanted it to or not. But the basic assumption was that deliberately risking nuclear escalation for general political purposes was too dangerous, 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 with the United States no longer able to limit damage to itself in any meaningful way by launching a massive counterforce attack when war was imminent, a first-strike strategy was no longer viable. The United States 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 there was no point in placing such heavy emphasis on the counterforce mission and that the defense of Europe could no longer be based on the threat of deliberate nuclear escalation. Instead, European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would have to be defended mainly with conventional forces.

But an influential minority of national security experts in the United States never really accepted that line of argument. They basically denied that deterrence was more or less automatic once nuclear forces of a certain size had been built, and they argued instead 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 famous 1959 article titled “The Delicate Balance of Terror.” Numerous

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15. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

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 conventional and unconventional enemy attacks, but they had to be able to receive the order to retaliate, penetrate active enemy defenses, and destroy their targets despite whatever passive defenses the enemy had employed. Wohlstetter 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 some of them and that an effective system had to get over all of them.<sup>16</sup> 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. Analysts in this school tended to emphasize the eventual vulnerability of U.S. deterrent forces to Soviet attack—rallying support for a defensive policy was always easier—but they were also aware that the U.S. government itself might be able to take advantage of the “delicacy” of the balance. Indeed, because fixed-site, land-based intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs) accounted for the great bulk of Soviet strategic forces (whereas U.S. forces were 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 in which 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. 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. Thus, too tight a linkage between strategic forces and ordinary political life was to be avoided. If each side was trying to shift the strategic balance in its 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 the dovish camp that arms races were in themselves a great source of danger. That view was so widespread that even political leaders who did not share it felt obliged to use that kind of rhetoric. (President Nixon, for example, referred in some public remarks to the possibility that a nuclear war

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

“could be touched off by the arms race among the great powers.”<sup>17</sup>) 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. But the hope was that the two sides might 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 been made many times before, even in the pre-nuclear age. For example, Lord Grey, the British foreign secretary at the start of World War I, claimed in his memoirs that “great armaments lead inevitably to war.”<sup>18</sup> But the dovish analysts did not rely solely on arguments of this sort. Something 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 highly unstable—that a war could break out 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 threaten each other’s retaliatory capability. “Mutual deterrence”—the “mutual hostage relationship”—should be the paramount goal. Cities *should* remain at risk; 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 significant 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 was not developed to provide an intellectually respectable basis for arms control. The key idea, laid out by Wohlstetter in his 1959 “Delicate Balance” article, grew out of his deep concern about the vulnerability of U.S. strategic forces. But in that article he argued that, if each side’s 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

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

18. Grey of Falldon, *Twenty-Five Years*, Vol. 1 (New York: Stokes, 1925), pp. 89–90.



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.<sup>19</sup>

Wohlstetter's manuscript had been circulated in draft form to experts preparing for the Surprise Attack conference in 1958, which was where Thomas Schelling was first exposed to the idea. Schelling then did more than anyone else to develop the theory and show how it could serve as a basis for arms control. In 1961, he published a book (coauthored with Morton Halperin) on the subject. That same year two other influential books on the subject, developing similar ideas, also came out. By that point most academic analysts focusing on these problems had come to accept the basic theory.<sup>20</sup>

The reason the new thinking had such a powerful impact is not simply that it parted company with traditional views about disarmament. Rather, its appeal in the expert community stemmed mainly, one suspects, from its strong counterintuitive flavor. The whole idea that strategic forces should be protected and that populations should be left vulnerable to attack, no matter what was possible technologically, was 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.<sup>21</sup> Yet that meant that the theory had real bite—that the theorists were

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

20. See Thomas C. Schelling, "What Went Wrong with Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Winter 1985), 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; and my interview with Thomas Schelling, Cambridge, MA, 3 October 1983. For the books in question, see 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. The basic idea 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 of 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"), whereas killing weapons was bad (because targeting the enemy's strategic forces might spur him to strike before his forces were destroyed, and because that sort of targeting would lead to an arms race).

not just mouthing clichés but had something new and important to say about fundamental issues of policy.

It is tempting to assume that the stability theory was so powerful intellectually that it swept all before it—that a conceptual breakthrough had occurred and the new theory provided the only really compelling basis for dealing not just with arms control but with the nuclear problem in general. However, before that view is accepted, we must 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 believed that, in the world they then lived in, a major risk of “crisis instability” 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.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, by the time those words appeared in print, the United States had already begun to deploy weapons so capable of surviving a first strike that it was hard to see how the enemy could see any advantage in striking first.<sup>23</sup>

But even if there was a real or potential problem of “instability,” did attempting to deal with it through arms control (and not unilaterally) necessarily make sense? Formal arms control agreements, after all, had to be verifiable. This meant that weapons had to be countable, identifiable, and therefore targetable and destroyable. For 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. This 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.<sup>24</sup> Yet the commitment to arms control as an end in itself was so entrenched 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.<sup>25</sup>

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

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; and 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, in Digital National Security Archive, item NT00061 (henceforth cited in the form DNSA/NT00061).

25. Schelling, “What Went Wrong?” p. 229. For the claim that concealable weapons were “destabilizing,” see, for example, Newhouse, *Cold Dawn*, pp. 26, 124–125.

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 would otherwise be avoided, was a major concern. It implied in particular that the Soviet Union, in a crisis, might actually attack the United States 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 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 insisted, was close to insane. The assumption here was that neither side could hope to get a meaningful edge in the nuclear competition. The nuclear stalemate was inescapable because a nuclear war would inevitably be disastrous for all concerned. The strongest supporters of arms control often argued along those lines. McGeorge Bundy, for example, in his 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.” This situation, he maintained, was here to stay. But, as Robert Jervis has pointed out, if Bundy’s basic analysis here was correct, “there was no volcano to cap”—no risk that a war could break out because of what Schelling called “the reciprocal fear of surprise attack,” and thus there was no compelling need to reach agreements that would provide for a more stable nuclear relationship.<sup>26</sup>

The hardliners’ views on arms control were 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

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26. McGeorge Bundy, “To Cap the Volcano,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), p. 9; and Robert Jervis, “Security Studies: Ideas, Policy, and Politics,” in Edward Mansfield and Richard Sisson, eds., *The Evolution of Political Knowledge: Democracy, Autonomy, and Conflict in Comparative and International Politics* (Columbus: 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 multiple, independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) because of the premium they place on striking first. 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. Even today, one occasionally comes across the same sort of problem. Fred Kaplan, for example, wrote in 2016 that, given the size of both sides’ arsenals in the 1980s, the chance that either of them would have started a war was almost nil. On the other hand, he also wrote that MIRVing gave each side a real “incentive to launch a first strike with its ICBMs, if just to preempt the other side’s launching a first strike with its ICBMs.” Fred Kaplan, “Rethinking Nuclear Policy: Taking Stock of the Stockpile,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 5 (September–October 2016), pp. 18–20.

doubt whether the nuclear “arms race” was nearly as dangerous as the more dovish analysts seemed to think. To be sure, they recognized that each side, in working out its own military policy, had to take into account what the other side was doing, and in that sense a certain “action-reaction mechanism” clearly did exist. But 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 also 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 hardliners 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 dovish school seemed to think. Indeed, the very term “arms race” did not sit well with the hardline analysts. It implied a finish line that each side was trying desperately to reach in order to “win.” But that, in the hardliners’ view, gave a highly misleading impression of what was actually going on. As Wohlstetter noted, the United States and the Soviet Union were obviously “rivals,” but there was “no race.”<sup>27</sup>

But if the hardliners did not believe that the “arms race” as such was a serious problem, this did not mean they saw no point to arms control. They were deeply concerned about the vulnerability of U.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 both sides’ deterrents. If the Soviet Union were to accept measures that would make the U.S. force more secure, then the United States, for its 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 of the hardliners 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

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27. Albert Wohlstetter, “Is There a Strategic Arms Race?” *Foreign Policy*, No. 15 (Summer 1974), esp. p. 4; Albert Wohlstetter, “Rivals, but No ‘Race,’” *Foreign Policy*, No. 16 (Fall 1974), reprinted in *Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 16, No. 6 (1974), pp. 277–292, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396337408441511>; Albert Wohlstetter, “Optimal Ways to Confuse Ourselves,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 20 (Fall 1975), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148133>; and Albert Wohlstetter, “Racing Forward? Or Ambling Back?” in Robert Conquest et al., eds., *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), pp. 414–471.

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 an 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 hardliners, including Wohlstetter himself, were hostile to the stability theory and to the doctrine that was based on it: “mutual assured destruction” (or MAD, as first they and then everyone came to call 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 Soviet Union. Analysts were a bit reluctant to make this point too explicitly. After all, 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 an aggressive policy. But the hardliners’ 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, 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 the 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 passage in which Schelling described how war might begin in a world in which one side had 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.”<sup>28</sup>

So a war could come even though there was no fundamental (i.e., political) basis for it. Many hardline 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.”<sup>29</sup>

## The Impact on Policy

These two sets of views provided the intellectual framework within which U.S. arms control policy was worked out in the 1970s. But what exactly was the impact of these ideas on the measures adopted at the time? Many writers have claimed that the stability theory played a crucial role in shaping U.S. policy—up to 1972, at any rate. Schelling, for example, viewed the stability theory as not just an extraordinary intellectual accomplishment but also the basis for the policy that culminated in the signing of the ABM Treaty in 1972. 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, he wrote, “became the basis for U.S. policy and were ultimately implemented in the ABM treaty.”<sup>30</sup> Newhouse and Talbott went a bit further, arguing that U.S. policy on SALT as a whole had been based on the stability theory.<sup>31</sup> 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.”<sup>32</sup> Wolfe likewise maintained that the doctrine of “mutual assured destruction” was the “basic strategic rationale that has tended to inform U.S. SALT policy.”<sup>33</sup> That view is echoed in many other accounts written by

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

29. Donald Brennan, “Strategic Alternatives: II,” *The New York Times*, 25 May 1971.

30. Schelling, “What Went Wrong?” 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 really interested in banning MIRVs, which were, in his view, the most “destabilizing” weapons system. See *ibid.*, ch. 4.

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

analysts from both schools and even by scholars writing in the post-Cold War period.<sup>34</sup> The argument could be made because high-ranking 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.

But the declassified documents relating to these matters give a very different picture. These sources show that U.S. policy in the period leading up to the 1972 accords was *not* rooted in the theory of strategic stability.<sup>35</sup> 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 the most stable strategic relationship was one in which neither side could limit damage to itself in any major way (through either counterforce or population defense)—is not what drove U.S. policy. When U.S. policymakers considered ideas for limitations of various sorts, what mattered to them was whether a particular step would give an advantage to the United States, not whether it would contribute to “stability”—although concerns about stability did sometimes play a secondary role in these discussions.

Scholars did not have to wait for classified documents to be released to reach this conclusion. Steven Miller, in a superb dissertation completed in 1988, convincingly showed that the policies “prescribed and required by the modern theory of arms control” had “not been embraced by either superpower.”<sup>36</sup> 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 rapidly, whereas the United States was not building any new missiles and had no plans to do so

34. See, for example, Garthoff, “SALT I,” 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), pp. 162–163 (where he argues that U.S. policy was based on the stability theory, but that Soviet officials did not accept it). For later comments reflecting that view of U.S. policy, see, for example, 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; Michael Krepon, “Moving Away from MAD,” *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2001), p. 85; William Walker, “Nuclear Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (May 2007), pp. 435–436; 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.

35. See especially the *FRUS* volume on SALT I, 1969–1972: *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII.

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).

over the next few years. In discussions regarding 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 its own programs. The Soviet Union, Kissinger wrote, actually agreed to a deal of that sort, the five-year interim agreement on offensive forces that was half of SALT I. In exchange, the United States agreed to ban the large-scale deployment by both sides of ABM systems—but that was scarcely a concession, Kissinger argued, because Congress was not going to fund a major ABM program anyway. The aim had been not to “stabilize” the balance but to reach a deal that served U.S. interests—a goal that, 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.”<sup>37</sup>

The basic point here should not be surprising. It has long been clear that Nixon, as Kissinger put it in his memoirs, was “far from a zealot on arms control.”<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> An arms control agreement might be of value for both foreign policy and domestic political reasons, but he doubted that it would be substantively important.<sup>40</sup> The president certainly did not accept the stability theory. In June 1969, for example, he was presented with contending views about how the U.S. strategic posture should be designed. One was to place “emphasis on crisis stability,” and another was to place “additional emphasis on disarming attacks.” The latter view, he noted in the margin, reflected his own thinking.<sup>41</sup> 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

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

38. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 121. See also Francis J. Gavin, “Nuclear Nixon,” in Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 104–119.

39. National Security Council (NSC) meeting, 11 February 1971, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 708. See also NSC meeting, 25 June 1969, and Nixon-Kissinger-Haldeman meeting, 17 April 1971, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII, pp. 84, 445, respectively.

40. Nixon-Kissinger meetings (tape transcripts), 16 March, 17 April, and 23 April 1971, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII, pp. 429, 445, 455, respectively.

41. NSC paper, “U.S. Strategic Posture: Basic Issues,” 5 June 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 124.



that the stability problem would not bother him—Nixon remarked that it would not bother him either.<sup>42</sup> The president also agreed with the JCS view, not shared by other elements in the government, that U.S. forces should have the ability “to insure relatively favorable outcomes if deterrence fails”; “first strike, counterforce,” he pointed out, “can be an asset.”<sup>43</sup> 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.”<sup>44</sup> But he knew he was by no means a free agent in this area. Policy had to be shaped with an eye to domestic political realities, and the real reason for signing SALT I was that “we simply can’t get from the Congress the additional funds needed to continue the arms race with the Soviet [Union] in either the defensive or offensive missile category.”<sup>45</sup>

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.” This meant that Kissinger himself played the key role in the negotiations.<sup>46</sup> 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 MAD—Kissinger was quick to object. That claim, he said, was “preposterous”: “neither Richard Nixon nor his advisers were ever comfortable with that doctrine.”<sup>47</sup> In later writings, Kissinger often attacked the MAD doctrine, characterizing it at one point as marking “a deliberate flight from rationality in strategic theory.”<sup>48</sup> On

42. NSC meeting, 19 February 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 25.

43. NSC paper, “U.S. Strategic Posture: Basic Issues,” p. 128; NSC meeting, 18 June 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 141.

44. NSC meeting, 13 June 1969 (first quotation), and NSC meeting, 13 August 1971 (second quotation), in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, pp. 136 and 855, respectively. He made this point many times. See, for example, Nixon meeting with key advisers, 28 July 1970, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 534.

45. Nixon to Haig, 20 May 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII, p. 833.

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

47. Henry Rowen, “The Old SALT Gang Returns,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 November 1984, p. 28; and Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, “Old Wine in New Bottles,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 November 1984, p. 24.

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

the other hand, before coming to power he had not only accepted the stability theory but had even insisted that stability could be achieved *only* through arms control.<sup>49</sup> “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.”<sup>50</sup> In 1957, he even thought the prospect of a counterforce attack might induce the enemy to launch a counterattack 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 use it to deprive its opponent of the means to impose his will.<sup>51</sup>

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? The evidence suggests that by 1969 he had moved away from the doctrines and theories he had absorbed in academia. As he himself later wrote, the notion that the United States had an interest in ensuring that its population was vulnerable to Soviet attack was just one of those ideas “that sound impressive in an academic seminar but are horribly unworkable for a decision-maker in the real world.”<sup>52</sup> Practical considerations were far more important. The key thing was to try to put some limit on the Soviet nuclear buildup, especially on the Soviet threat to U.S. land-based forces, and arms control could be a means to that end.<sup>53</sup> Kissinger’s goal was to do so without putting meaningful limits on any major program the U.S. government was likely to get funded, no matter how “destabilizing” those U.S. programs were considered to be. During Nixon’s first term, Kissinger opposed a ban on MIRVs, which were widely viewed as the most “destabilizing” weapons system then being developed. A MIRVed force, the argument ran, could support a first-strike strategy. Because the number of warheads would greatly exceed the number of

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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), p. 511.

50. Henry A. Kissinger, “Arms Control, Inspection and Surprise Attack,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (July 1960), p. 560; emphasis added.

51. Henry Kissinger, “Strategy and Organization,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (April 1957), p. 388.

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

53. This point comes through clearly in *White House Years* and is confirmed by recent scholarship on the subject. See esp. Maurer, “An Era of Negotiation,” pp. 45, 155.

strategic targets and because the warheads were highly accurate in hitting targets, the attacker would have a good chance of disarming the enemy in a first strike.<sup>54</sup> If both sides developed MIRVed missiles, each would have a strong incentive to go first in a crisis—a very unstable situation. Given that problem, officials in the government who were most committed to the stability theory were eager to reach an agreement that would ban MIRVs. Smith, for example, felt that if MIRVs were “not included in the negotiations, then an agreement is meaningless.”<sup>55</sup> High-ranking military officers, on the other hand, did not accept the stability theory and were “utterly opposed to foregoing MIRV.”<sup>56</sup> Kissinger sided not with Smith but with the Pentagon on this issue.<sup>57</sup>

Was this because U.S. policymakers, including Kissinger himself, wanted to deploy a system that might in time give the United States a meaningful counterforce capability? Certainly the military’s highest officers believed that damage limitation continued to be an important objective—and to their mind, “damage limitation” meant having “a first-strike pre-emptive option.”<sup>58</sup> 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 un-MIRVed missile force would not provide the necessary degree of target coverage. As JCS Chairman Earle 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.”<sup>59</sup> The advent of MIRVs, he told the NSC a few months later, was “important to us not only as it concerns

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54. As one document pointed out, 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, in Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library (GRFPL), Melvin Laird Papers, Box 10, Folder MIRV 1–3, 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), p. 401, available online at <https://history.defense.gov/>.

55. NSC meeting, 10 November 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII, p. 158.

56. *Ibid.* 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), p. 61, available online at <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

57. See editorial note, *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, pp. 165–166.

58. Admiral Thomas Moorer (then Chief of Naval Operations, later JCS Chairman) in Defense Program Review Committee meeting, 26 April 1971, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 772. 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), pp. 16–20, available online at <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

59. Wheeler to Laird, 1 August 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII, p. 126. See also Wheeler’s remarks in NSC meeting, 18 June 1969, p. 67.

penetration” (i.e., overwhelming whatever ABM defenses the Soviets might deploy) but also because the United States needed to be able to hit many Soviet “hard targets which we are not able to hit now.”<sup>60</sup> Or as Admiral Thomas Moorer, by this point the JCS chairman, observed in December 1972, “qualitative improvements [a euphemism for MIRVing] should provide our strategic retaliatory forces with a hard target kill capability.”<sup>61</sup>

The idea was that the United States should try to attain what could reasonably be called “nuclear superiority.” That view was shared at least to a certain extent by some key civilian officials, including 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 against a slowly reacting Soviet Union.”<sup>62</sup> Years later, he explained even more explicitly what his thinking was at the time:

The key issue, in terms of hardware, 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 [the United States had produced] more nuclear warheads than in any year in history.<sup>63</sup>

All this is important because it sheds light on the kind of thinking that led to the emergence by the early 1980s of a U.S. military force with vastly improved “hard target kill” capabilities.<sup>64</sup>

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60. NSC meeting, 10 November 1969, p. 156.

61. Moorer to Laird, 12 December 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 1031.

62. Schlesinger address at the National War College, 21 August 1973, p. 6, in U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Electronic Reading Room, available online at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/>.

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,” 12 January 1972, in DNSA/NT01153, 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.

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. Soviet leaders understood that “under great provocation”—he had in mind here a massive Soviet assault on Western Europe—the United States could retaliate with an attack that avoided Soviet cities. That would place on the Soviet Union “the burden of responding to” the U.S. attack in a way that kept the war from escalating up to the counter-city level—that is, Soviet policymakers would have to “respond with restraint.” 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 greater the pressure would be on the Soviet Union to limit its response. In any event, the goal was deterrence. The aim was to provide some rational basis for linking U.S. strategic forces to the defense of Western Europe.<sup>65</sup>

The question of why a MIRV ban was opposed during the Nixon period thus has to be approached in this context. One gets the sense from the documents that in 1969 the main reason for opposing a ban on testing MIRVs was that the existing MIRV systems were not capable of destroying anything other than soft targets (like cities), whereas to “employ them in a counterforce role against hard targets” they had to be made more accurate, and this would require more testing.<sup>66</sup> The assumption was that developing at least some counterforce capability was important—and not just because the Soviet Union was 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 the United States had an “adequate capability to attack urban

“Until now,” he wrote, “we have avoided deliberately acquiring silo killing weapons,” and any change in that policy should be made by the president, not by Laird on his own. Odeon to Kissinger, 24 June 1972, p. 9, in DNSA/NT01378.

65. Interview with James Schlesinger, 16 December 1987, taped in connection with WGBH television series *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, WGBH Open Vault, available online at <https://openvault.wgbh.org/>. The basic point here comes out clearly in another part of the interview. Schlesinger told the interviewer that even if the new MX missile, a large ICBM designed for the counterforce mission, might be vulnerable to a Soviet first strike, that was not very important because the whole point of the weapon was to threaten a U.S. first strike. “The purpose of the MX,” he said, “was not to achieve invulnerability 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” (ellipsis in original).

66. MIRV Panel report, 23 July 1969, quoted in editorial note, *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 167.

industrial targets,” it did “not have a good counterforce capability,” adding, “we need to improve this.”<sup>67</sup>

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 is that the USSR was in principle much more vulnerable to a first strike than the United States was. Fixed-site ICBMs accounted for roughly 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.”<sup>68</sup> In 1976, the estimate was pretty much the same. Two of Kissinger’s aides told him that if the United States deployed the new missile being developed in this period (the large payload MX ICBM), Soviet leaders “could expect to lose *nearly 90 percent* of their *total* strategic warheads [i.e., not just those on 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.”<sup>69</sup> As one official pointed out in 1974, if Soviet commanders continued to place “large amounts of their missile throw weight in fixed land-based silos” and the United States continued to deploy a more diversified force, the USSR would “end up in a most disadvantageous position.”<sup>70</sup> The growing vulnerability of Soviet ICBMs was especially important because the small Soviet bomber force was not considered very effective and the U.S. Navy had developed anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities sufficient to wipe out Soviet strategic submarines at the start of a war.<sup>71</sup> The USSR had nothing equivalent. Because the United States had a survivable strategic force in the form of its

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67. NSC meeting, 19 August 1970, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, p. 589.

68. Kissinger to Nixon, 3 April 1973 (draft), in DNSA/NT01527.

69. Goodby and Lord to Kissinger, 16 November 1976, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 35, p. 459; emphasis in original. By around 1980, the basic point made 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 “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), p. 424. 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 would “achieve a full counterforce capability.” The 200 MX missiles, he calculated, would “be more than sufficient to destroy the whole Soviet ICBM force.” See Ball, “Future of the Strategic Balance,” pp. 126–127.

70. Weiss to Kissinger, 31 January 1974, in DNSA/NT01683.

71. See Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution That Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 37–39, 95–96, 127–129, 208–210. According to a former high-level U.S. intelligence official, the U.S. Navy in the 1970s “could

powerful submarine fleet—and planned to deploy submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) capable of destroying Soviet ICBMs—the United States might soon have both a first-strike and a second-strike capability, whereas the Soviet Union would have neither. In such circumstances Schlesinger and others believed it was not unreasonable for the United States to pursue 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 the United States needed the ability to go first with its strategic forces, especially for alliance reasons. During 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 U.S. ICBMs) was the most important problem the United States faced in its strategic nuclear policy.<sup>72</sup> The clear implication was that the United States would be better off if Soviet forces were vulnerable—that is, if the United States 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 respond by launching a nuclear attack on the USSR, something it could do only if it could limit the damage the Soviet Union could inflict in a retaliatory strike. The idea that the United States might be able 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 Soviet Union relying much more heavily 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.”<sup>73</sup>

Despite all that, the basic impression one gets 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 the United States

have taken out the entire deployed [Soviet missile-carrying submarine] fleet on a signal.” Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 37. See also Green and Long, “Stalking the Secure Second Strike,” pp. 47–51; and Green and Long, “The MAD Who Wasn’t There,” esp. pp. 609, 618, 638–639. That information about U.S. anti-submarine warfare capabilities was closely held at the time. See Anne Cahn, *Killing Détente: The Right Attacks the CIA* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 126–127; John Foster’s remarks in Ford meeting with members of President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 8 August 1975, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXV, p. 692; and report prepared by Foster, Galvin, and Teller, 1 April 1976, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXV, p. 746.

72. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The SALT II Treaty: Hearings*, pt. 3, 96th Cong. 1st Sess., p. 164.

73. Kissinger-Schlesinger meeting, 23 April 1974, p. 3, in GRFPL, Digital Collections, National Security Advisor: Memoranda of Conversations, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/>.

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 this regard, and, if the balance really did come under threat, it would be because the U.S. side, for domestic political reasons, would not make the necessary effort even if the USSR acquired a meaningful strategic edge. That, in fact, was one of Kissinger's main justifications for SALT in his final years in office. He told his closest advisers in 1974, "we should say that without SALT, both sides will race. What I really believe is that they will race and we will stop."<sup>74</sup> He often seemed apprehensive that domestic political constraints would prevent the United States from taking necessary measures and would leave the country 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 Soviet leaders put "most of their MIRVs into ICBMs," this "would give them a first strike counterforce capability."<sup>75</sup> But just as often he made the point that concerns of this sort were overblown. The United States, he said, was talking itself into a "psychosis" over these issues.<sup>76</sup> He viewed as "crazy" the very idea that the Soviet Union would ever launch a first strike against U.S.

74. Kissinger meeting with Sonnenfeldt, Hyland, and others, 11 September 1974, in DNSA/ KT01321.

75. Working notes from Kissinger Verification Panel Meeting, 29 August 1969, p. 4 (for the first quotation), in DNSA/ NT00294; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 274 (for another reference to the developing "strategic nightmare"); and NSC meeting, 24 January 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 166 (for the second quotation). Kissinger also states in *Years of Upheaval* that MIRVing would give the Soviet Union (and perhaps the United States as well) a "first-strike capability" (p. 265n). Note also in this context Kissinger's remarks in a 17 April 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." See Garrity and Mahan, eds., *Nixon and Arms Control*. 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 9 August. He elaborated on this point 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." See Kissinger meeting with Schlesinger et al., 9 August 1973, and Verification Panel meeting, 9 August 1973, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXV, pp. 96, 105–106, respectively.

76. Kissinger-Schlesinger meeting, 23 April 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXV, p. 165; and Verification Panel meeting, 23 April 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 251.



Minuteman missiles. Any such attack would entail great uncertainties, and Soviet leaders knew that the United States would retain other forces, especially on submarines, that could destroy the USSR as a functioning society.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, it seems that his core belief was that nuclear superiority had become a “largely chimerical” goal—for both sides.<sup>78</sup> That belief found expression in his oft-cited 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?”<sup>79</sup> To be sure, he later dismissed that comment as a mere product of “fatigue and exasperation.” But the fact is he took exactly the same line in a meeting with a group of journalists a month after the Moscow press conference, when he presumably was no longer exhausted from his trip to the Soviet capital.<sup>80</sup> He also made essentially the same point in a meeting with President Ford later that month. He told the president that even if Soviet missiles were able to wipe out the Minuteman force in a first strike, which was very unlikely given all the uncertainties involved, the United States 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 the United States 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 [deaths] can survive.”<sup>81</sup>

Kissinger’s basic approach to arms control does seem to have been rooted in assumptions of that sort. Deep down he did not really believe there was

77. Kissinger meeting with main advisers, 31 July 1974, p. 5, in DNSA/KT01266. 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 on which the “window of vulnerability” argument was based was “just plain ‘crazy.’” See Michael Getler, “The Specter That Fuels the Arms Race,” *The Washington Post*, 15 December 1974, p. B1. On these points see also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 119–120, 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.

80. Kissinger meeting with *Time, Inc.* journalists, 13 August 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 38, pt. 1, pp. 222–223.

81. Ford-Kissinger meeting, 28 August 1974, in GRFPL, Digitized Memoranda of Presidential Conversations, pp. 3–4. Kissinger often dismissed the “window of vulnerability” alarmism as baseless. See, for example, Kissinger-Schlesinger meeting, 23 April 1974, p. 165; 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*, 1969–1976, Vol. XVI, p. 226).

any major “stability” problem that needed to be dealt with through arms control. In the real world as it would exist for 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 U.S. 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 a meaningful nuclear edge. To be sure, Kissinger was against a ban on MIRVs, but that was not because he thought that technology could provide the United States 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 Soviet Union from a position of strength.<sup>82</sup>

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 for domestic political reasons 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. 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 Soviet leaders, as Kissinger put it in an important memorandum he sent to Nixon in 1970, could be tied “to the softer more optimistic line implicit in a SALT agreement.” For Soviet officials, SALT implied that the United States “would act more in parallel with the USSR,” and they wanted an agreement for that very reason. U.S. policy, he said, 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 revealing indicator of Kissinger’s true assessment of the “Soviet threat.”) If, however, the United States chose to take a tougher line, “the net gains from SALT over any long term might prove fragile.” Kissinger also seemed to think that the United States should opt for the first, more accommodating, course of action because that would help keep Soviet policy on a moderate path: “If a

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82. Transcript of interview with Henry Kissinger, 26 November 1986, taped in connection with the WGBH television series *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, WGBH Open Vault, available online at [https://openvault.wgbh.org/collections/war\\_peace/interviews](https://openvault.wgbh.org/collections/war_peace/interviews).

SALT agreement produced a generally conciliatory American attitude, including more generous economic policies toward the USSR, the Soviets would have a strong incentive to keep us on such a course.”<sup>83</sup> He argued in his memoirs that SALT not only provided the United States with “an opportunity to redress the strategic balance” but might also enable the two sides to “create the conditions for political restraint without which escalating crises were in [his] view inevitable.”<sup>84</sup> SALT could also have certain secondary political purposes, like “keeping the Europeans honest” (by stoking concerns about a possible U.S. “condominium” with the USSR if the Europeans went too far in pursuing their own détente policies) and outflanking the left at home. These points were always important considerations for Kissinger, but clearly his 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.

Thus, for Kissinger, détente was of value not so much because he was deeply committed to peace and to better relations with the Soviet Union as an end in itself. The policy was of value primarily because it would restrain the USSR and thus give the U.S. government greater freedom of action. The United States, Kissinger thought, had been able to push ahead in the Middle East only because Soviet leaders were so committed to putting their relationship with the United States 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.”<sup>85</sup> He believed that Soviet officials were genuinely interested in détente, but he said in 1975 that the United States had been “using it tactically.”<sup>86</sup> He made the same point in his memoirs. Détente, he wrote, “was a method for conducting the Cold War,” and in the Middle East in particular “our policy to reduce and where possible to eliminate Soviet influence . . . was in fact making progress under the cover of détente.”<sup>87</sup>

All of this may be true, and all the talk at the time about building a “lasting structure of peace” might well have been overblown. One gets the impression from the documents that the pursuit of U.S. national interests, in

83. Kissinger to Nixon, on “Implications of a Limited SALT Agreement,” 13 July 1970, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII, pp. 317–318. 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. 943–944.

86. Kissinger meeting with Israeli leaders, 22 August 1975, p. 60, in GRFPL, Digital Collection, National Security Advisor: Memoranda of Conversations, cited in Galen Jackson, “The Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israeli Problem, 1967–1979,” Ph.D. Diss., UCLA, 2016, p. 241.

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

a fairly narrow sense of the term, counted for far more than the public was led to believe at the time. This general point applies in particular to U.S. policy on SALT. Still, one of the most striking things about U.S. policy in this area is that Kissinger's thinking seemed to shift quite dramatically in the period after the SALT I agreements were signed in 1972. By 1973 he appeared to take the stability theory, and the related idea that something needed to be done about 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."<sup>88</sup> Although his real view was that the problem of ICBM vulnerability 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 each side could destroy its opponents' ICBMs would create "a massive element of instability"—as though the submarines, bombers, and so on no longer mattered.<sup>89</sup> Or, to give another example: on 6 March 1973 he told the head of the U.S. SALT delegation, 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."<sup>90</sup>

Even when Kissinger later wrote his memoirs, he made the point that with high throw-weight limitations and no limitations on MIRVs, "both sides would develop a first-strike capability." Agreeing to that kind of arrangement, he argued, would violate "every precept of arms control because in a crisis it would give each side an incentive to strike first."<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> He now seemed to think that the U.S. government's mindless policy had to be replaced with a policy based squarely on the stability theory and that the new policy should focus on finding some way to limit MIRVs. For if MIRVs were not restricted, 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?"<sup>93</sup>

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88. Verification Panel meeting, 15 August 1973, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 33, p. 109 (see also 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, in DNSA/KA09682.

91. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 265n, emphasis in original.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 270, and Verification Panel meeting, 15 August 1973, p. 107.

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

Why the shift? It was not as though Kissinger had suddenly awakened and for the first time was able to see how the MIRV issue was connected to this kind of problem. Numerous observers have argued that Kissinger had simply failed to understand how important this issue was when he first dealt with it in his early years as national security adviser, 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 thoughtfully in 1969 and 1970 than I did."<sup>94</sup> But that admission can scarcely be taken at face value. As Laurence Lynn, who worked closely with Kissinger on nuclear issues during 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.<sup>95</sup>

What this implies is that those remarks, and indeed the whole shift in Kissinger's position on the "stability" issue, need to be interpreted in political (i.e., instrumental) terms. The 1972 SALT agreements, and the détente policy they symbolized, were at first widely supported. But public enthusiasm faded rapidly, and that shift in opinion had a profound effect on the administration's ability to carry out its policy. The USSR had opted for a détente policy in large measure because of the economic benefits it hoped to achieve, but U.S. congressional opponents of détente were able to prevent those benefits from materializing. The problem then got worse after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, for which the Soviet Union (unfairly, in Kissinger's view) was blamed.<sup>96</sup> In such circumstances, as Kissinger saw it, U.S. policy on SALT 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 Brezhnev had not produced the results Soviet leaders had hoped for. It was therefore important that Brezhnev not be totally discredited in the eyes of his colleagues. If he were, the whole détente policy would unravel, and the United States would be confronted by 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."<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, if a SALT agreement were reached, that would

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

95. Interview with Laurence Lynn, 11 January 1987, taped in connection with WGBH television series *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, WGBH Open Vault, available online at [https://openvault.wgbh.org/collections/war\\_peace/interviews](https://openvault.wgbh.org/collections/war_peace/interviews).

96. See, for example, Kissinger meeting with key advisors, 1 August 1974, pp. 4–5, in DNSA/KT01268.

97. NSC meeting, 2 December 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 397.

help Brezhnev “claim that détente had become irreversible.”<sup>98</sup> The political factor was thus of fundamental importance. “SALT may give us no strategic benefits,” Kissinger said, “but it would give us political benefits.”<sup>99</sup>

But his ability to pursue the kind of SALT policy he had in mind was now quite limited. As the Watergate scandal unfolded, Nixon’s authority was draining away almost by the day, and Kissinger could exercise power only as the president’s agent. Nixon’s successor, Ford, was an unelected president subject to strong right-wing pressure from within his own party, preventing him from giving full support to the policy Kissinger seemed to have in mind, one that involved overriding the objections of military authorities and the top civilians at the Pentagon. Nor was Jimmy Carter, after being elected president in 1976, able to pursue an arms control agenda that would breathe new life into the détente policy. To be sure, in 1979 Carter and Brezhnev signed SALT II, 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 seen 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 subsequent years. 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. As people soured on détente, they also tended to sour on SALT as the great symbol of détente. But 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. After 1972, experts and ordinary people alike had difficulty grasping what the point of the whole arms control effort was. As Schelling later wrote, the focus after the ABM Treaty was signed had been on offensive weapons. But the negotiations on that issue had been “mostly mindless, without a guiding philosophy.” “What guiding philosophy there used to be”—here Schelling had the stability theory in mind—had gotten “lost along the way.” After 1972, arms control had been pursued for its own sake, not for the sake of stability. Indeed, if the goal was to promote

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98. NSC meeting, 17 September 1975, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 467.

99. NSC meeting, 22 December 1975, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 503.

strategic stability, the arms control mentality had in some ways become counterproductive. Putting cruise missiles on submarines was for Schelling a good case in point. A 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 this option 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. To his mind, the treaty had marked “not merely the high point but the end point of successful arms control.”<sup>100</sup>

The 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 an 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.”<sup>101</sup> The idea that SALT had essentially served to “codify,” “institutionalize,” or “legitimate” the arms race was 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,” Brezhnev said, “very little—in fact, almost nothing—had been done in terms of curbing the arms race.”<sup>102</sup>

This basic point had been clear to close observers for some time. Milton Leitenberg, for example, had noted in 1976 that the main effect of the

100. Schelling, “What Went Wrong?” pp. 223–225, 228–229.

101. Leslie H. Gelb, “A Glass Half Full,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 36 (Autumn 1979), p. 21.

102. Carter-Brezhnev meeting, 17 June 1979, in DDRS/CK2349073513, pp. 2, 4.

agreements had been to “bilaterally legitimize the continued buildups 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 this reason that the SALT II “ceilings” in the framework agreement reached at Vladivostok in 1974 were “as high as they are.”<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

His point applied not just to U.S. policy but to Soviet policy as well. “Even as [Brezhnev] put his name to SALT,” Sergey Radchenko notes, the Soviet leader “privately assured his party comrades that these agreements would ‘in no way obstruct the implementation of the existing programmes to further strengthen [Soviet] defence.’”<sup>105</sup>

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. This point was often noted at the time. To take but one example, Soviet Ambassador 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.” Kissinger, for his part, did not disagree.<sup>106</sup> Dobrynin’s observation about SALT I applied to

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

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, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 168.

106. Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, 9 August 1973, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 100. Kissinger claimed in the first volume of his memoirs that although 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.” See Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 821. He repeated that claim



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.”<sup>107</sup> That in itself was enough to sour many people on arms control.

But the disillusionment ran even deeper because the whole arms control process not only seemed to have done little to bring the “arms race” under control but had led to more spending on strategic weapons than would otherwise have been the case. This phenomenon was often attributed to three distinct mechanisms. The “bargaining chip” argument could play a decisive role in winning congressional support for particular weapons programs, but, once procured, the “chips” might not actually be “cashed in” at the bargaining table.<sup>108</sup> The decision to proceed with the development of cruise missiles is the main example usually cited in this regard. Kissinger had pressed the Pentagon to develop strategic cruise missiles as a “bargaining chip” for the SALT talks. The 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?”<sup>109</sup>

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

in the second volume of his memoirs, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 268: “After all, SALT I constrained no American program; it stopped several Soviet programs.” But in internal discussions at the time, 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.” See NSC meeting, 24 January 1974, p. 165 (emphasis added); and NSC meeting, 14 September 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, pp. 306. See also NSC meeting, 23 April 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 243.

107. See 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, under the auspices of the Carter-Brezhnev project.

108. See Miller, “The Limits of Mutual Restraint,” pp. 374–376 and the sources cited there.

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), pp. 77–79; and Garthoff, “SALT I: An Evaluation,” 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,” p. 78. Archival evidence indicates 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 clear that he intended to give it up in a final agreement and was prevented from doing so only by opposition from the military. See: Kenneth Werrell, *The Evolution of the Cruise Missile* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1985), pp. 154, 190, 214 n. 7.

control position has to be worked out in internal negotiations, and in that process “some participants often have to be bought off.”<sup>110</sup> 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 indicated that they would support the SALT I accords only if the administration supported “a broad program of strategic modernization.”<sup>111</sup> 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.<sup>112</sup>

Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served as Carter’s national security adviser, 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.”<sup>113</sup> All of this was well understood at the time. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in a long article on the SALT process published in *The New Yorker* in 1979, highlighted the bizarre way the arms control process had led to weapons like the MX, a counterforce missile being deployed by a country that (Moynihan believed) had based its strategic doctrine on avoiding counterforce and focusing instead on a secure second-strike counter-city capability. How ironic, he argued, that the SALT process had not only “failed to prevent the Soviets from developing a first-strike capability” but had also prompted “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

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

111. *Ibid.*, p. 82. On this episode, see also the documents cited in Kissinger to Haig, 25 May 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XIV, pp. 1114–1115, nn. 1–2.

112. Marshall Shulman, in “SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust,” transcript, p. 115. Shulman, a Columbia University professor, had been Secretary of State Cyrus Vance’s special adviser 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*, p. 235.

in ruins.”<sup>114</sup> Other observers, as Moynihan noted in the article, had already come to see things in much the same way.

The third presumed mechanism that made arms control a spur to the strategic “arms race” was the assumption that a SALT agreement would be negotiable only if it provided for rough parity in strategic forces. The numbers permitted in an agreement reflected an agreed view of what a balanced relationship would look like. To build fewer arms than one was entitled to under the agreement would therefore be to accept something less than parity. In the United States, this factor alone might create pressure on Congress to authorize funding for military programs allowed under the agreement. Kissinger seems to have had this sort of phenomenon in mind when he said that the administration probably had “a better chance of maintaining our programs with SALT than without it.”<sup>115</sup> He made the same point even more explicitly in a meeting with 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 Soviet Union. “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.”<sup>116</sup>

SALT thus meant higher military budgets, which was why, Kissinger thought, the military authorities had complained so little 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.”<sup>117</sup> Kissinger in his memoirs quotes from a memorandum he sent the president explaining why the United States should move ahead on SALT. One key argument was that “the prospective agreement has the advantage that it is premised on 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

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114. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The SALT Process,” *The New Yorker*, 19 November 1979. Moynihan sent a copy of the original article to Carter. That copy, with its original pagination, can be accessed via the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/>. The quotation is on p. 152.

115. Kissinger meeting with Sonnenfeldt, Hyland, and others, 11 September 1974, p. 3.

116. Kissinger-Deng meeting, 27 November 1974, 9:45 a.m., p. 11, in DNSA/KT01428.

117. Verification Panel, 15 February 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIII, p. 202. See also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 125.

come a long way from its original intention when it became a means to make possible new strategic programs rather than to limit them.”<sup>118</sup>

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 article, the treaty had “secured the acquiescence of the military in both countries because it ratifies the huge weapons acquisition programs both are pushing.” In the United States, in particular, SALT was “something to stir the hearts of generals, defense contractors and senators from states brimming with military reservations and arms plants.”<sup>119</sup> The sense of disillusionment, perhaps even of betrayal, was palpable.

But none of this meant that hawkish observers were particularly happy with the SALT process. From the start, the hardliners had been wary of strategic arms control. They might have recognized that in the post-Vietnam period Congress would not support a major U.S. military buildup. They also may have acknowledged, somewhat grudgingly, that in those circumstances an active arms control policy might be of value in limiting what the Soviet Union 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 this perhaps caused them to lean harder against détente than they otherwise might have. They certainly attacked SALT I for being tantamount to U.S. acceptance of Soviet strategic superiority (under the agreement the USSR could deploy a larger missile force than the United States could). Kissinger 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 analysts who were now denouncing SALT had been perfectly willing to live with such disparities. Why, then, was it so outrageous that the 1972 agreement was built on that reality? Was it not 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”?<sup>120</sup> If opponents of SALT were so concerned that U.S. missiles were not

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118. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 292. On the general issue of perverse effects, see the insightful analysis 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), chs. 2–3.

119. Richard Barnet, “Do We Want to End the Arms Race?” *The Washington Post*, 9 September 1979, p. A19.

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

big enough, nothing in the agreement prevented the Congress from authorizing the deployment of missiles with much larger throw weights. “If we want a bigger missile,” he said, “why aren’t we building one? Who’s stopping us?”<sup>121</sup> But the hardliners maintained that such 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. Any agreement that seemed to put a seal of approval on what the Soviet Union was doing, above all in the military area, did not sit well with them.

So the hardliners came to dislike the whole SALT process—not just the treaties and agreements it had led to but even more the ideology that had grown up around arms control. In 1974, Wohlstetter launched a full-scale 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 that led 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.” He also criticized 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.” In addition, he attacked 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 withstand scrutiny. 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 yield of the weapons in the U.S. arsenal had also fallen quite dramatically from its peak in around 1960. Even the total number of U.S. strategic warheads (including those designed for both defensive and offensive use) had, by 1972, declined somewhat from the peak in 1964—a decline accounted for mostly by the decommissioning of defensive warheads, “supposedly the most destabilizing” weapons in the U.S. arsenal. Instead of a continual tendency to overestimate the developing Soviet threat, the opposite had been done during one key period—the 1960s.<sup>122</sup>

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

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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?”; Wohlstetter, “Rivals, but No ‘Race,’” Wohlstetter, “Optimal Ways to Confuse Ourselves”; and Wohlstetter, “Racing Forward?” (2009).

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 the other during a crisis—that each side built forces only for retaliatory purposes and that neither side would threaten the other side’s retaliatory forces. If both sides accepted that kind of system, the argument went, the arms race could be stopped in its tracks. Reaching for damage-limitation, building counterforce capabilities to support that goal, and accepting a first-strike option, without which damage limitation could scarcely be effective, would necessarily trigger countermeasures on the part of the adversary and generate endless escalations of the arms race. Clearly, 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.<sup>123</sup> “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.”<sup>124</sup>

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. What he objected to was the thinking, especially outside government; the SALT process itself was not his main target. But the idea that U.S. policy on these issues had been based on the stability theory was amazingly widespread, and arguments of this sort were made both by opponents of the theory on the right and by its supporters on the left.<sup>125</sup> Such claims were often linked to the point that the Soviet Union not only had refused to base its policy on the MAD doctrine but had tended to take the opposite approach. Soviet leaders were “war-fighters”

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123. Wohlstetter, “Racing Forward?” (2009), p. 461.

124. Zarate and Sokolski, eds., *Nuclear Heuristics*, p. 385. For Wohlstetter’s views on MAD, see the essay he coauthored with his wife Roberta in 1985: Albert Wohlstetter and Roberta Wohlstetter, “On Arms Control: What We Should Look for in an Arms Agreement,” in Zarate and Sokolski, eds., *Nuclear Heuristics*, 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.” See 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, a memorandum he forwarded to Nixon 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.” See Defense Program Review Committee meeting, 10 August 1970, and NSC staff paper, c. 5 March 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXIV, pp. 539, 65, respectively.

who did not accept the view that nuclear weapons served only to deter their use by others. Nor did they accept the view that a stable great-power relationship could be based only on mutual deterrence. That disparity, as noted by many (including Thomas Wolfe in his well-known book on SALT), explained why arms control had accomplished so little.<sup>126</sup> The two major powers were simply not on the same wavelength on these issues.

Moynihan was among those who believed the Soviet Union and the United States held starkly different views. He considered the stability theory (which he called the “doctrine of deterrence”) “a stunning intellectual achievement.” But it had one great flaw. Its supporters had assumed the Soviet Union would understand the logic and “do as we did.” As it turned out, Soviet leaders never accepted the theory, and this was the real reason SALT had failed.<sup>127</sup> The leaders of the USSR were warfighters; 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.”<sup>128</sup> The implications were clear. If Soviet leaders had truly been interested in coexistence, they would have agreed with U.S. officials about the kind of nuclear capability both sides should have. 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 had other sources as well, that détente was a mirage and that the time had come for a much tougher U.S. policy.

We now know that this characterization of U.S. policy—as having been based on MAD—was essentially a myth, albeit one that was embraced at the time by both the left and the right for their own (very different) reasons.<sup>129</sup>

126. Wolfe, *SALT Experience*, pp. 106–113, 247–250. Wolfe felt that this was paralleled by a related disparity: the United States was more committed to arms control based on mutual deterrence than the Soviet Union was and was 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 Wolfe cited 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). He in fact presented evidence (pp. 12, 106) that pointed in the opposite direction: in two keys areas (SLBMs and forward-based forces), the Soviet Union was the party that had made the key concessions.

127. Moynihan, “The SALT Process,” pp. 114–116, 132.

128. *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 168.

129. Scholars 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 1984–1985), p. 23 n. 10; and John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 464

The myth was accepted in part because of the way U.S. strategic nuclear policy was presented to the public. U.S. leaders took it for granted, as Nixon himself argued, that they “shouldn’t tell the whole truth” about these matters.<sup>130</sup> U.S. policymakers wanted the public to believe that the United States was guided by a second-strike strategy based on “assured destruction.” Any move toward counterforce had to be rationalized as a response to the buildup of the Soviet Union’s 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. Yet, it would be wrong to suggest that the myth took hold simply because people were misled by the way the government explained its policies. Even people who knew better—people who had served in the government and knew very well what the real situation was—often claimed in public that U.S. policy had been based on MAD.

n. 169. Mearsheimer in his book 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.” Mearsheimer then notes 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 important publication, 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), pp. 465–472.

130. NSC meeting, 18 June 1969, p. 141. 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-ranking official in the Johnson administration told Desmond Ball in 1971, the basic war plan, with its great emphasis 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. The U.S. government’s tendency to play down its interest in counterforce continued even after some of the most basic facts were in the public record. Kissinger suggested in his memoirs that new U.S. programs, like the Trident submarine and the new Trident missiles that would be deployed on it, would simply enhance U.S. second-strike capabilities. 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 in fact one of the main purposes of the Trident force was to provide the United States with a major survivable counterforce capability. See Green, *Revolution That Failed*, pp. 33, 125, 131–132, 147. None of this was kept secret at the time. In April 1976, for example, Ford gave a speech in which he 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.” Scholars and journalists at the time understood that extreme accuracy was important only for attacking hard targets like ICBM silos; attacks on cities obviously did not have to be highly accurate. The Ford speech is quoted in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXV, p. 333, and is by no means the only example that could be cited. As Graham Spinardi points out, the Pentagon in 1976 openly stated that it wanted the new submarines to have the ability to “strike hard targets” as a “hedge against dependence on ICBMs.” See 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), p. 177.



The impression thus took hold that there was an enormous gulf between the U.S. and Soviet approaches to nuclear issues. The Soviet Union, it was said over and over again, still took nuclear warfighting seriously (which was essentially true), whereas the United States had tried to build its policy on the stability theory and had moved in the opposite direction only when it became clear that the Soviet approach was very different (which was not true at all). The whole SALT experience was interpreted in a way that underscored that basic point. The United States, the argument went, had tried to build a “stable structure of peace” (Nixon’s phrase); U.S. arms control policy, which sought above all to build a stable nuclear relationship, reflected that basic aspiration. But Soviet leaders had rejected the olive branch. They were not prepared to base their relationship with the United States on the idea that each side 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 superiority and, unlike the United States, still sought to build a politically usable nuclear force. So even for moderates like Moynihan, the SALT story seemed to show that the Soviet Union, unlike the United States, 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 the lesson was clear: The United States had to wake up and take vigorous action to counter the Soviet threat. Thus, the SALT experience of the 1970s 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.

### **Author’s Note**

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