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Presidential Power in Foreign Policy:
Richard Nixon and the Era of Détente with the
Soviet Union and China

A Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of
Bard College

by
Gregory Drilling

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Abstract

This project analyzes the role and limits of the presidential policy-making in foreign policy through an examination of President Richard Nixon's policy of détente with the Soviet Union and China during the 1960s and 1970s.

I will ultimately present a set of four components that I argue played a role in enabling Nixon to pursue détente at the time he did. The four consequential factors include the following: First, domestic conditions exist in which the general public is focused primarily on domestic policy. Second, the existing international conditions allow for a change in foreign policy. Third, when a president is personally in a position to take advantage of the "informal powers" of the presidency and take leadership over public opinion. And fourth, when a president assumes office at a moment in which a previous "regime" of foreign policy is failing.

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Introduction

By the time President Richard Nixon was sworn into office in 1969, the Cold War had been well underway for over 20 years. At this time, the United States and the Soviet Union, known as the world's "great power" countries, seemingly had two choices: Either they could continue intimidation tactics and risk an all-out nuclear war, or the two countries could simply agree to disagree and work together on finding common ground in areas of mutual interest. Nixon and his then National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, chose the latter strategy. They called this calming of tensions *détente*. The Nixon administration's approach to *détente*, primarily led and influenced by Henry Kissinger, was not simply about war and peace in one region. Rather, in the most direct sense, it was about the future of the global order. Furthermore, the competing theories about the United States' policy of *détente* play a significant role in how we see and approach issues in international affairs today.

This project analyzes the role and limits of the presidential policy-making in foreign policy through an examination of President Richard Nixon's policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union and China during the 1960s and 1970s. I will ultimately present a set of four components that I argue played a role in enabling

Nixon to pursue détente at the time he did. The four consequential factors include the following: First, when domestic conditions exist in which the general public is focused primarily on domestic policy. Second, when the existing international conditions allow for a change in foreign policy. Third, when a president is personally in a position to take advantage of the “informal powers” of the presidency and take leadership over public opinion. And fourth, when a president assumes office at a moment in which a previous “regime” of foreign policy is failing.

I. President Nixon's Background

In understanding how Nixon was able to arrive at détente, it is important to speak of his background, which directly relates to the often-used proverb “only Nixon could have gone to China.” This phrase refers to the ability of ‘hard-liner’ politicians – such as a staunch anti-communist, in Nixon’s case – to take some sort of action or confront political taboos that would normally draw criticism if that same action had been taken by a politician that did not have a similar background or set of experiences that legitimized their authority. Then-Congressman Richard Nixon first gained his anti-communist credentials while serving on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which at the time focused its efforts on investigating potential infiltration of Communist Party members or sympathizers into the U.S. government. It was the HUAC’s high profile case of Alger Hiss – an accused

Communist and Soviet Spy eventually convicted of perjury – that thrust Nixon into the spotlight.¹ One example of how Nixon utilized the relative fame he garnered from the Hiss investigation would be a slogan he used on flyers during his 1950 campaign for U.S. Senate: “The Man Who Broke the Hiss Case!!”

Building even further onto his newly found reputation as a staunch anti-communist, Nixon devised a clever campaign strategy against his Democratic opponent for the U.S. Senate seat, Helen Gahagan Douglas. Fellow Democrat Manchester Boddy, who was about to run against Ms. Gahagan in the Democratic primary, unleashed a personal attack on her by labeling her “The Pink Lady.”² (“Pink”, of course, referring to someone who may not be “red”, like a ‘true’ communist, but rather someone who may be sympathetic to communism.) Nixon found an opening here, and used this opportunity to not only build on Boddy’s characterization of Ms. Douglas, but to also prop up his anti-communist credentials in order make a clear contrast to the voters. Nixon won the Senate seat and was tapped by Dwight Eisenhower to be his running mate in the 1952 Presidential

¹ Weinstein, Allen. 1971. “The Alger Hiss Case Revisited”. *The American Scholar* Vol. 41 (No. 1). The Phi Beta Kappa Society. 121.

² Morris, Roger. *Richard Milhous Nixon: the Rise of an American Politician*. Holt & Co., 1990. 581

Election in large part thanks to the strong anti-Communist reputation he had built for himself.³

After Nixon's tenure as Vice President, he mounted his own presidential campaign in 1960. However, his presidential aspirations came to a halt after losing to Democrat John F. Kennedy by less than 120,000 votes, which amounted to 0.2% of the popular vote.⁴ Following another disappointing loss just two years later in his race for Governor of California, Nixon moved to New York City and returned to practicing law. Although out of public office, Nixon did not shy away from the spotlight. He often commented on the policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations while also appearing on the campaign trail for fellow Republicans. Additionally, Nixon "retained the support of many Republicans across the country who respected his knowledge of politics and international affairs, a reputation enhanced in 1967 by Nixon's article "Asia After Vietnam" in the eminent journal *Foreign Affairs*."⁵

Nixon decided in late 1967 to run for the White House a second time, but he was cautious and believed the 1968 presidential elections would be just as close as they were in 1960.⁶ He also believed that the Vietnam War issue was enough to not

³ <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/thelife/apolitician/thevicepresident.php> "The Vice President." (Accessed May 1, 2016)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. "Wilderness Years."

⁶ Parment, Herbert S. *Richard Nixon and His America*. Little, Brown, 1990. 502.

just hurt the Democrats, but may even be enough to get a Republican elected president.⁷

Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign was very much based on the idea of bringing Americans together through an emphasis of focusing on domestic political issues. Furthermore, although Nixon was widely seen as the "foreign policy expert" of the Republican Party, he was advised to soften his stance on the Vietnam War.⁸ The reason for this, of course, was because the unpopularity of the Vietnam War had become a crucial issue in American political discourse and, in particular, the 1968 Presidential Elections. Nixon's emphasis on domestic issues was certainly a noteworthy strategy. After all, as Chapter 2 will discuss in further detail, the U.S. was deeply entrenched in what became known as the era of unrest and "counterculture," which, among other things, included several years of ongoing civil rights and anti-war protests that often turned violent, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, and the assassination of Bobby Kennedy two months later. As a result, in addition to campaigning as a populist in issues pertaining to foreign policy, Nixon placed a particularly strong emphasis on

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Novak, Robert; Evans, Rowland, "Nixon Firm in Vietnam Stand", *The Free-Lance Star* (Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1967) 3.

domestic issues in the U.S., such as a fear of rampant crime – whether it was or not was beside the point.⁹

Similar to Nixon’s own U.S. Senate campaign 18 years prior, Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew, Nixon’s running mate, painted Hubert Humphrey as someone soft on communism.¹⁰ This, combined with the baggage of the disastrous ongoing Vietnam War – a war intensified by Humphrey’s boss, President Johnson – hurt Vice President Humphrey’s campaign. With Humphrey on the defense, “it was Nixon’s message of ‘law and order’ that secured him the presidency.”¹¹

II. Outline of the Project

Chapter 1 of this project serves as a literature review of the leading debates surrounding the role of presidential power and decision-making abilities. The four texts to be analyzed include Donald Snow’s *United States Foreign Policy: Politics Beyond the Water’s Edge*, Richard Neustadt’s *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, Arthur Schlesinger’s *The Imperial Presidency*, and Stephen Skowronek’s *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*. Chapter 2 serves to answer the question of

⁹ Black, Conrad. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*. PublicAffairs, 2008. 550.

¹⁰ “Nation: The Counterpuncher.” *Time*, September 20, 1968.

¹¹ Hanhimäki, Jussi M. *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Potomac Books, Inc., 2012. 34.

what the policy of détente was and why was it initiated. In answering this question, I will discuss the political context at the time Nixon initiated détente with a particular emphasis on the policy of “containment” and the role it played in the pursuit of détente. Additionally, this chapter will define what the strategy of détente was and what its broader implications were. Chapter 3 will address why Nixon was able to initiate this drastic change in foreign policy strategy at this particular moment. This question will be answered through analyzing both the international and domestic conditions of the time. In Chapter 4, I will draw from my research in Chapters 2 and 3 in order to formally introduce my hypothesis of the four factors I would argue enabled Nixon to pursue the policy of détente. Additionally, Chapter 4 will connect my discussion on these four factors with the literature review in Chapter 1. Finally, I will end this project with a concluding section that will summarize my argument and findings, which will be based off of my research and analysis from previous four chapters.

In conclusion, Nixon’s reputation as a staunch anti-communist is quite interesting when considering it in association with his actions. For the previous reasons mentioned, Nixon was certainly an unlikely and unusual character to be pursuing this particular foreign policy strategy. Indeed, the claim “only Nixon could go to China” directly relates to this relationship between Nixon’s reputation and his actions. The strategy of détente was not only intended to apply to the Soviet Union. Rather, cases such as the “Basic Treaty” (which involved West and East Germany in

1972) and the Helsinki Accords make it clear that at this time in American history, there was a clear and decisive choice to make détente a key mandate of American foreign policy.

As previously mentioned, this project analyzes the role and limits of the presidential policy-making in foreign policy through the examination of President Richard Nixon's policy of détente. One of the puzzles at hand is uncovering and understanding how and why Nixon was able to pursue détente at the time he did. Throughout the chapters, the evidence of my argument will take shape and ultimately lead to my thesis, in which I will argue that four components played a role in enabling Nixon to pursue the policy of détente.

Chapter 1

In this chapter, I present a literature review of the leading debates surrounding the role of presidential power and decision-making abilities. The four texts analyzed include Donald Snow's *United States Foreign Policy: Politics Beyond the Water's Edge*, Richard Neustadt's *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, Arthur Schlesinger's *The Imperial Presidency*, and Stephen Skowronek's *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*.

I. Snow: Formal and Informal Powers of the Presidency

The United States Constitution delegates foreign policy powers to both the president and congress. According to Donald Snow, the Founding Fathers contemplated "a vigorous executive branch *and* a vigorous legislative branch with separate views and powers that would *together* set the country's course in international affairs."¹² In other words, Snow argues that neither body has sole authority over America's foreign policy strategy. Rather, the system was designed so the two bodies would be required to work together. In terms of the abilities of the

¹² Snow, Donald M. *United States Foreign Policy: Politics Beyond the Water's Edge*. 3rd ed. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005. 90.

President, Snow defines the two different types of powers the Commander in Chief possesses: the “formal powers of the presidency” and the “informal powers of the presidency.”¹³ As these two terms are used throughout the project, their definitions and implications are necessary to examine.

“Formal powers”, according to Snow, are the powers the U.S. Constitution directly allocates to the president. These formal powers include those associated with the formal roles of the President as set out in the U.S. Constitution including Chief Executive, Head of State, and the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States. Stated briefly, the Chief Executive oversees all federal agencies. The role of Head of State provides the president with “symbolic personification.” And as Commander in Chief, the President serves as the leader of the United States Military.¹⁴ Furthermore, additional “formal powers” allocated to the president include “enumerated powers over treaty negotiations, nomination and appointment of key personnel, and the recognition of foreign regimes.”¹⁵

Alongside the aforementioned “formal powers”, Snow offers four examples of what he describes as the “informal powers of the presidency.” Principally, these four powers include “presidential singularity”, the ability to shape public opinion through media access, international diplomacy and world leadership, and “president

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. 90-92.

¹⁵ Ibid. 91.

doctrines.”¹⁶ “Presidential singularity” refers to the president’s unique position as a singular entity voted for by the entire American public. As Snow writes, “The president’s greatest advantage over Congress is the fact that he is a single, universally known leader, whereas the Congress is inherently a comparatively faceless corporate body comprising 535 members.”¹⁷ This singularity the president possesses, combined with the formal (yet symbolic) title of “Head of State,” gives the president a unique platform when “the country instinctively looks to the president for strength and reassurance about the future.”¹⁸ This power is best exemplified by the support the president often receives during moments in American history where we have seen the “rally ‘round the flag effect” take place. An early example would be former President John F. Kennedy’s approval rating increasing by 14% from 61% in October of 1962 to 75% the following month following the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁹ A more recent example would be President George W. Bush’s approval rating surging from 51% on September 10th, 2001 to 86% on September 15th, 2001. One week later, President Bush’s approval rating reached 90%, which remains the highest approval rating of any sitting President in American history.²⁰ Of the sharp

¹⁶ Ibid. 95-96.

¹⁷ Ibid. 95.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Presidential Approval Ratings – Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends.” Gallup.com. (Accessed on May 1, 2016) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>

²⁰ Hetherington, Marc J., and Michael Nelson. "Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism." *Political Science and Politics* 36, no. 01 (2003): 37.

spike in President Kennedy's approval rating, a significant part of that is due in thanks to the Snow's next "informal power": the president's ability to shape public opinion through media access.

As a key benefit of "presidential singularity," the president has the unique ability to directly communicate whatever message or policy proposal he seeks to convey. As Snow notes, "Anything the President does or says is automatically national news," which is one of the key reasons Snow includes "shaping public opinion through media access" as one of the president's informal powers. Indeed, this unique ability of the president is attainable largely due to the fact that the White House has its own press corps, which consists of virtually all major media outlets (regardless of perceived political bias), and is tasked with reporting the president's every move. Undoubtedly, it takes a skillful politician to utilize this opportunity to his advantage. For example, some politicians are known for perceived charm and likability when the cameras are rolling. A prime example of this would be the first televised presidential debate in 1960 between Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard Nixon. During this debate, a visibly exhausted Richard Nixon was overshadowed by the relatively young, bright, and well prepared John F. Kennedy.²¹ Indeed, this first televised presidential debate is often credited as a

²¹ Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty! An American History*. Seagull Fourth ed. WW Norton & Co, 2013. 483.

moment that changed the way politicians take into account their perceived public image via media outlets.²²

According to Snow, the third informal power of the presidency is the visibility and credibility he gains through his role in international diplomacy and world leadership. Indeed, the sheer visibility presidents gain from this informal power adds an enormous amount of legitimacy and credibility to their public image. Among U.S. presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt arguably serves as an appropriate example as a U.S. president who possessed a substantial amount of credibility in world leadership at the time. While his credibility was certainly enhanced due to serving as president during World War II, FDR and other world leaders at that time, such as Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, remain internationally recognized figures due their leadership roles and during the Second World War. Due to the fact that the United States played such a prominent role in World War II, I would argue that assuming the conditions (and end result) of America's involvement in the war were the same, any president who served at that time would have had the same lasting legacy FDR possesses to this day. As Snow would argue, it is in this informal power that U.S. presidents are positioned to gain a tremendous amount of international credibility – and thus, legitimacy – due to their role in significant global affairs.

²² Webley, Kayla. "How the Nixon-Kennedy Debate Changed the World." Time. September 23, 2010. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2021078,00.html>.

Snow's fourth and final informal power of the presidency is "the president's ability to put his distinctive stamp on policy by unilaterally proclaiming doctrines bearing his name."²³ Indeed, many presidents have their own self-named doctrines, and these doctrines remain historically significant when studying respective presidential legacies. For example, those who study the presidency of Harry Truman are certain to learn of one of the key pillars of his legacy: the "Truman Doctrine." Introduced in 1947, the Truman Doctrine was President Truman's proclamation that U.S. foreign policy would shift in a direction aimed at containing the global spread of communism. As is discussed in Chapter 2 of this project, the Truman Doctrine created a lasting impact on U.S. foreign policy decision-making through the Johnson Administration, nearly twenty years later. As was the case with Truman and other presidents with doctrines that bear their names, these men succeeded in exemplifying this informal power by – in Snow's words – "seiz[ing] and defin[ing] the essential direction of the country's foreign policy through [their] capacity to command wide attention, speak with a single voice, and conduct [themselves] as the broadly defined national leader that so many now expect American presidents to be."²⁴

Though Snow's "formal powers" certainly have significance in term of the president's influence on foreign policy, such as the president's ability to nominate

²³ Snow, *Politics Beyond the Water's Edge*. 96-97.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 97.

ambassadors and formally recognize foreign regimes, Snow's argument suggests that presidents who display significant strength in the foreign policy arena have learned to utilize – and therefore benefit more from – their “informal powers.” Indeed, certainly since the mid-20th century, I would argue that the president's “informal powers” have proved to be more beneficial to his overall influence and the decision-making powers he yields.

II. Neustadt: *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidency*

In analyzing the role of the president in crafting and influencing American foreign policy, another important theme to discuss is the president's “power to persuade.” Similar to Donald Snow's “informal powers of the presidency,” the ability to persuade is one that certainly can be enabled by variety of outlets mentioned by Snow that a skilled president could tactfully use to his advantage, such as the previously mentioned televised debate performance of John F. Kennedy or Franklin Delano Roosevelt's revolutionary use of radio to reach the American public. However, a key difference between Snow's “informal powers” and Neustadt's “power to persuade” is that Neustadt is referring to the president's power to bargain with other officials rather than to shape public opinion.

Richard Neustadt introduces his theory of presidential persuasion in his book *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidency*. Stepping back for a moment, it is important to note that Neustadt and Snow seem to have a fundamental disagreement regarding the idea of the executive and legislative branches having “separate powers.” Snow writes the following:

“Both branches were given their own independent source of authority, and the powers of both were carefully checked and balanced by powers given to the other. In making public policy, including foreign policy, the Founding Fathers believed in *codetermination* by the two coequal elected branches, with neither branch dominant over or subordinate to the other.”²⁵

Snow adds to this, “... What the Founding Fathers contemplated was a vigorous executive branch *and* a vigorous legislative branch with separate views and powers that would *together* set the country’s course in international affairs.”²⁶ Neustadt, however, has a different take on the idea of “separate powers.”

In contrast to Snow, Neustadt writes that while the U.S. Constitution was supposed to have created a government of separate powers, “it did nothing of the sort.” “Rather,” Neustadt argues, “[the Constitution] created a government of

²⁵ Ibid. 90.

²⁶ Ibid.

separate institutions *sharing* powers.”²⁷ These two different understandings of “separate powers” vs. “shared powers” are relevant because they show how Snow and Neustadt framed their arguments in terms of how the president can best utilize his authority in order to maximize his effectiveness. Snow’s argument derives from the fact that the president inherits a set of “formal and informal powers,” and he is therefore responsible for maximizing his ability in navigating these powers in order to pursue his agenda. Neustadt, on the other hand, takes a different approach from Snow, which is more deeply analyzed in the following paragraph. In summary, though Neustadt and Snow disagree on the power structure of the executive and legislative branches, they do seem to agree on what Snow calls “codetermination.” Both men acknowledge the obvious fact that the president must work with the congress in order to pursue his agenda, but Neustadt adds to this by introducing his theory that the president must go further and make use of his “power to persuade.”

Neustadt’s theory surrounding the idea of the president’s “power to persuade” is perhaps best understood through a story he includes about former-Army General-turned-President Dwight Eisenhower’s realization of the limits of his ‘formal’ power. According to Robert J. Donovan’s *Eisenhower: The Inside Story*, Eisenhower often learned the hard way that running the executive branch was nothing like his time in the Army. To further illustrate this point, Neustadt recalls an

²⁷ Neustadt, Richard E. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. Simon and Schuster, 1991. 29.

encounter in 1958 he personally had with an Eisenhower aide who made the following remark: "The president still feels that when he's decided something, that ought to be the end of it ... and when it bounces back undone or done wrong, he tends to react with shocked surprise."²⁸ This same acquaintance of Neustadt also mentioned, "I sit here all day trying to persuade people to do the things they ought to have sense enough to do without my persuading them.... That's all the powers of the President amount to."²⁹ Neustadt states that although the president has "an extraordinary range of formal powers", these anecdotes highlight the fact that "despite his 'powers' [the president] does not obtain results by giving orders-or not, at any rate, merely by giving orders." Furthermore, he adds, "despite his status [the president] does not get action without argument." This sets up Neustadt to present his thesis: "Presidential power is the power to persuade..."³⁰

As previously mentioned, in *United States Foreign Policy*, Donald Snow writes that the executive and legislative branches have 'separate' powers. Neustadt's argument, however, states that although those two branches of government are separate, they actually have *shared* powers, not *separate* powers. Furthermore,

²⁸ Ibid. 10.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. 11.

Neustadt argues that it is that “separateness of institutions and the sharing of authority” that “prescribe the terms on which a President persuades.”³¹

Neustadt also argues that due to the nature of the “shared powers” of the legislative and executive branches, the president is actually a relatively weak figure in the U.S. Government (in terms of having the autonomy to pursue his agenda without opposition or resistance). In order to effectively combat this inevitable resistance and to maximize his influence, Neustadt writes the following: “Effective influence for the man in the White House stems from three related sources: first are the bargaining advantages inherent in his job with which to persuade other men that what he wants of them in what their own responsibilities require them to do. Second are the expectations of those other men regarding his ability and will to use the various advantages they think he has. Third are those men’s estimates of how his public views him and how their publics may view them if they do what he wants.”³² In short, the core of Neustadt’s argument states that if the president is to successfully pursue and implement his agenda, he must utilize his persuasive skills, maintain a solid reputation, and protect and enhance his perceived public image.

There are many well-known examples of presidents utilizing this type of “persuasive power” described by Neustadt. One example that comes to mind is the reputation of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. LBJ’s reputation as arguably the

³¹ Ibid. 30.

³² Ibid. 150.

most effective Senate Majority Leader in U.S. history was “built upon two footings: he could ‘count heads,’ meaning that he knew where every senator stood on every important issue; and he was a renowned reputation ‘arm twister,’ meaning that he also knew the best way to approach each senator.”³³ Regardless of often being dismissed simply as the president who got the United States deeply entangled in Vietnam, President Johnson has a lasting legacy that most certainly is owed to his rather unorthodox style of negotiating (or, perhaps, “persuading”). After all, even considering his Vietnam blunder, LBJ was the man responsible for signing the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, and appointing the first African-American to the United States Supreme Court; hardly a simple task in the 1960s. Indeed, LBJ demonstrates there may very well be credibility to Neustadt’s theory of persuasion being a necessity in order to pursue (and ultimately implementing) one’s agenda.

President Johnson’s case brings up another theme related to the president’s power to persuade. Although LBJ’s well-known ‘backroom’ style of ‘wheeling and dealing’ undoubtedly worked to his advantage in many instances, one must wonder if the very stature of the office of the president commands a certain kind of authority or compliance. On this, Neustadt writes “A President’s authority and status give him great advantages in dealing with the men he would persuade.”³⁴ This “authority”

³³ Cowger, Thomas W., and Sherwin Markman. *Lyndon Johnson Remembered: An Intimate Portrait of a Presidency*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. 73.

³⁴ Neustadt. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, 30.

Neustadt writes of begs a question: Could that “authority” emanate a certain level of fear? Undoubtedly, this idea of “fear” is not one that needs to be directly exuded by the president in terms of intentionally threatening or intimidating. Rather, Neustadt argues that the president already exudes an ‘aura’, and this could make him appear to be intimidating or difficult to refuse. On this, Neustadt writes, “With hardly any exception, those who share in governing this country are aware that at some time, in some degree, the doing of *their* jobs, the furthering of *their* ambitions, may depend upon the President of the United States.”³⁵ Whether involving President Johnson or others, it must be the case that playing into these “fears” while seeking to persuade must certainly be a useful strategy of the president’s “power to persuade.” Indeed, as Neustadt later adds, “Their need or fear is his advantage.”³⁶

III. Schlesinger: *The Imperial Presidency*

In a contrast to Snow and Neustadt, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. takes a different approach to the debate of the powers of the presidency. In *The Imperial Presidency*, Schlesinger’s objective is to analyze the powers the president has at his disposal and determine whether or not those powers could potentially be threatening. More specifically, he writes that his book is neither intended to address “all facets and

³⁵ Ibid. 31.

³⁶ Ibid.

issues of presidential power” nor “deal primarily with the shift in the *political* balance between congress and the presidency...” The latter, of course, were the central themes previously discussed in the Snow and Neustadt pieces. Rather, Schlesinger’s book “deals essentially with the shift in *constitutional* balance – with, that is, the appropriation by the Presidency, of powers reserved by the Constitution and by long historical practice.”³⁷ Schlesinger argues that the role of the presidency has gotten out of control and distanced itself so far from its constitutional intent that at the time he was writing, the United States had entered an era of an “imperial presidency.” The implication of a so-called “imperial presidency”, Schlesinger writes, is that “unless the American democracy figures out how to control the Presidency in war and peace without enfeebling the Presidency across the board, then our system of government will face grave troubles.”³⁸

Due to the fact that Schlesinger’s argument is rooted in a fundamental understanding of the powers constitutionally bestowed upon the executive and legislative branches, he argues about what the Founding Fathers intended for the office of the president. Most notably, regarding foreign policy and war, he argues that the Founding Fathers deliberately “chose not to mention the President at all in connection with the war-making power.”³⁹ This, Schlesinger argues, was not simply

³⁷ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *The Imperial Presidency*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004. VIII.

³⁸ *Ibid.* X.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 5.

due to their naïveté. In making this claim, he cites the 23rd Federalist paper, in which Alexander Hamilton argues “the powers of self-defense ‘must exist without limitation, because it is impossible to foresee or define the extent and variety of national exigencies...’”⁴⁰ In simpler terms, the Founding Fathers certainly did not intend to make the case that the U.S. government (including the presidency) should be without the necessary powers to defend itself. Rather, this power must be allocated to the government “*as a whole* – for, that, is, Congress and the Presidency combined.”⁴¹ This is relevant because Schlesinger’s argument is based on the idea that the office of the presidency becomes “imperial” once it oversteps the constitutionally allocated powers originally bestowed upon the office.

As Schlesinger reminds us, Article I Section VIII of the Constitution clearly states, “The Congress shall have power to declare war.” Indeed, the Founding Fathers were cautious and determined to ensure that the powers of the presidency did not mirror those of the British King.⁴² Particularly regarding matters of foreign affairs, this conscious effort to establish a “balance of powers” sought to not let the president give too much autonomy over the congress. However, Schlesinger writes, “What does seem clear is that no one wanted either to deny the President the power to respond to surprise attack or to give the President general power to initiate

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. 3.

hostiles.”⁴³ It is in this predicament that Schlesinger believes those relatively new powers of the presidency have been prescribed. Certainly, the Founding Fathers did not seek to limit the executive branch in terms of its duty to protect the country. But Schlesinger argues that this quandary created a slippery slope much later where Congress’ separation of powers – which are intended to “check” the president’s powers – had been overrun. The result was a presidency with too much autonomy.

Schlesinger argues that we are now living in an era of an “imperial presidency” due to “... the circumstances of an increasingly perilous world as well as of an increasingly independent economy and society seemed to compel a larger concentration of authority in the Presidency.”⁴⁴ Moreover, he argues that the leading cause of the “imperial presidency” stems from issues of foreign policy, and more specifically, newly acquired “war powers.” These “war powers,” Schlesinger argues, have increased since the United States became a global superpower, and continue to increase through times of war. However, it wasn’t always this way. Schlesinger writes, “The assumption of [war-making power] by the Presidency was gradual and usually under the demand or pretext of emergency.”⁴⁵ However, he argues that there has since been gradual withering away of appropriate “checks” to the president’s war-making powers. And because these checks have withered away so much, Schlesinger writes, “By the early 1970s the American President had become

⁴³ Ibid. 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid. VIII-IX.

⁴⁵ Ibid. IX.

on issues of war and peace the most absolute monarch (with the possible exception of Mao Tse-tung of China) among the great powers of the world.”⁴⁶ Indeed, due to the fact that these new presidential powers are not in anyway allocated through the constitution, Schlesinger makes the case that the office of the presidency is greatly in need of restraint.

In concluding his argument, Schlesinger’s provides several examples that illustrate the consequences the “imperial presidency” has already had on United States’ foreign and domestic affairs. Among them include the “all-purpose invocation of ‘national security,’ the insistence on executive secrecy, the withholding of information from Congress, the refusal to spend funds appropriated by Congress, the attempted intimidation of the press, [and] the use of the White House itself as a base for espionage and sabotage directed against political opposition...”⁴⁷ In order to solve this problem, he argues, the United States needs to find a “middle ground between making the President a Czar and making him a puppet.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, such a task can only be completed if the American democracy discovers a way to create a “strong and purposeful Presidency with equally strong and purposeful forms of democratic control.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. X.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Using the Vietnam War to illustrate his example, Schlesinger refers to this point in American history when the presidency became “rampant.” The period of time when the president’s “mystique was in full glory” occurred when the United States began its military intervention in Vietnam.⁵⁰ This era began as a result of President’s Kennedy’s intervention, which, Schlesinger writes, “was limited and provoked no constitutional questions.”⁵¹ Moreover, Schlesinger argues that it was during this era of the “rampant” presidency when the congress, in some ways, lost power to the presidency. This loss of congressional power was part of the evolution (or rather, ‘adaption’) of the powers of the presidency that most certainly had a profound impact on presidential decision-making thereafter.

Schlesinger writes that President Lyndon Johnson was indeed one who exhibited the qualities of a “rampant” president. For example, under the pretext of preventing American casualties, “in the spring of 1965, Johnson ordered 22,000 American troops to the Dominican Republic without seeking congressional authorization.”⁵² Schlesinger notes that Johnson’s reasoning certainly fell within the norm of executive authorization with congressional approval. However, the “22,000 troops were about a hundred times more than were necessary for the specified purpose.”⁵³ It was later discovered that Johnson wanted to deploy that many troops

⁵⁰ Ibid. 177.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. 178.

⁵³ Ibid.

to intimidate communist governments from getting any ideas when, according to Schlesinger, he said, “we don’t propose to sit here in our rocking chair with our hands folded and let the Communists set up any government in the Western Hemisphere.”⁵⁴ This is a particularly noteworthy case for a number of reasons. However, what is arguably the most striking is that Johnson utilized what was considered the “traditional usage” of executive power for a political purpose. Indeed, it could be argued that his original intent of sending troops to the Dominican Republic in order to save American lives was, in fact, justified. And while I make no claim about that intention, it is undeniable that he used his leverage in an inappropriate way that arguably would not have sat well with the congress. Furthermore, this example shows how the president can use his powers to not outright ‘break’ the rules, but perhaps simply ‘bend’ them.

Schlesinger also credits President Johnson for shifting the public opinion surrounding the Vietnam War to “our war” from Kennedy’s original declaration that this was “their war.” (In this case, “our” being the United States, and “their” being Vietnam.) Indeed, by the end of Vietnam War, it had been the longest war in American history, second in expense only to World War II, and had caused “more Americans deaths in combat than any except the Civil War and the two World War.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 178-179.

Perhaps no other piece of legislation better symbolizes the “rampant” presidency than the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution”, officially known as the Southeast Asian Resolution. This resolution paved the way for President Johnson to authorize military force in Southeast Asia without congressional authorization or a formal congressional “declaration of war.” This piece of legislation, which Schlesinger would most certainly categorize as a vile insult to the Founding Fathers’ original intent, was so paramount because it was a clear attempt by the executive branch to bypass the legislative branch.

Schlesinger’s emphasis and concern regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was not simply rooted in the fact that he believed it was an irresponsible allocation of powers to the president. Rather, he emphasizes that this resolution served as a ‘slippery slope’ for presidential power that could (and ultimately did) have profound consequences. Schlesinger adds to this point by writing that under a theory like this, it “is hard to see why any future President would ever see any legal need to go to Congress before leading the nation into war.”⁵⁶

In contrast to Snow and Neustadt, Schlesinger argues that an effective congress with enough powers to “check” the executive branch is an absolute necessity in restraining the president. Additionally, similar to Snow and Neustadt, Schlesinger’s argument is rooted in his fundamental understanding of what he

⁵⁶ Ibid. 184.

views as the Framers' "intention" when they addressed the issue of presidential powers in the constitution. However, perhaps so as not to exhaust his theory of the Framers' intent, he invokes Abraham Lincoln to further justify his argument against a presidency with too much centralized power. "Lincoln," he writes, "had said that the view that one man had the power of bring the nation to war placed our Presidents where Kings had always stood."⁵⁷ Besides finding another well-known figure to essentially endorse his argument, his invocation of Lincoln also serves a different purpose. This purpose is to demonstrate that the concept of a relatively restrained executive branch was not just an idea of the Framers, but rather, it was well respected and commonly understood pillar of American political thought from 1787 until Lincoln served in the early 1860s.

Indeed, Schlesinger argues that the president is far more powerful than his formal powers found on paper would suggest. In this sense, there is a similarity between Donald Snow and Arthur Schlesinger. Both men believe that the president is stronger than his formal powers. For Snow, this power comes through the means of the president's "informal powers." And for Schlesinger, this power comes from a variety of "war-making" powers that have continually been provided to the presidency without appropriate checks and balances, and thus have resulted in an era of an "imperial presidency." In the case of Neustadt and Stephen Skowronek, who is discussed in the following section, they both argue that the president's

⁵⁷ Ibid. 187.

formal powers simply are not enough. As for Neustadt, he argues that the president must exercise his ability to persuade, maintain a solid reputation, and protect and enhance his perceived public image in order to effectively pursue his agenda.

Additionally, Schlesinger puts forth an argument that the president is so strong that he must be restrained. However, Skowronek argues quite the opposite. While he may not outright say that the president is “weak”, in his book *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*, Skowronek argues that regardless of a president’s power, he is still restrained by broad structural factors that are more often than not out of his control.

IV. Skowronek: *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*

Unlike, Snow, Neustadt, and Schlesinger, Skowronek’s analysis is not one that merely focuses on the powers of the presidency and the power relationship between the legislative and executive branches. Rather, as is evident in the title of his book, Skowronek seeks to better understand the ebbs and flows of presidential power throughout time and determine whether or not these powers follow larger patterns throughout “political time.”

Indeed, Skowronek acknowledges the fact that presidents are agents of change. However, this change is not something that is merely achieved by the

amount of power utilized or amount of charisma possessed by the Commander in Chief. While those traits may be of value, or perhaps even significant value, Skowronek argues that the most important factor a president faces when seeking to legitimize his actions or instigate change is where that particular president falls in relation to the broader political cycle throughout time. This cycle includes variables such as the style, successes, and failures of the previous president, as well as political patterns preceding them.

In a way, Skowronek's argument may seem to be at odds with Neustadt, who argues that effective presidents must utilize their persuasive skills and prestige of the office, among other things, to instigate change and unleash their optimum potential. I would argue that Skowronek does not actually refute Neustadt's claim, but actually builds upon it.

Depending on the conditions a president must serve in, Skowronek provides four examples of political identity that presidents encounter. These include the politics of disjunction, reconstruction, preemption, and articulation. The "politics of disjunction" refers to a time in which a president offers "the wrong message for their times."⁵⁸ This is often the result of being affiliated with a particular "vulnerable regime" whose unpopularity and lack of legitimacy drags them down. Prominent examples in this category include Jimmy Carter and Herbert Hoover.

⁵⁸ Skowronek, Stephen. *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*. University Press of Kansas, 2008. 90.

Skowronek also makes the point that though both of these men (and others who fall into this category) are often regarded as poor leaders, their own abilities are not the only thing to blame. Rather, when in a time of “disjunction”, these presidents had a near-impossible job due to the political environment and its result on public opinion.

The second type of political power, the “politics of reconstruction”, is a bit like being in the right place at the right time. These are presidents who enter office (or run for president) on the pretense that “the old order is indeed beyond all hope.”⁵⁹ Such leaders are able to build momentum off of a weakening regime and campaign (or govern) with the promise of creating new and meaningful change. Among presidents that fall into this category include, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan.

The third type of political power is the “politics of articulation.” As Skowronek notes, the majority of presidents fall within this category. These are presidents that are affiliated with a somewhat-resilient (or even strong) regime, and tasked with maintaining order and continuing a particularly vision that sits well with the public. Well known presidents that fall into this category include Truman, who succeeded FDR, and George H.W. Bush, who succeeded Reagan.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 92-93.

The fourth type of political power is the “politics of preemption.” This unique category is arguably the most difficult to classify. It features presidents who are relatively independent -- yet not completely detached -- from the existing regimes during which they come to power. The candidacy of Bill Clinton, who fits within this category, provides a good example of this category when campaigned on “third way.” Campaigning on such a promise demonstrated that Clinton acknowledges a failure of the Democratic Party for failing to stop the “Republican Revolution” that began around the time Reagan was elected in 1980.⁶⁰ It is not uncommon for presidents in this category to embrace a mainstream message that may go against the grain of what their particular “regime” is known for. Other presidents that fall into this category include Richard Nixon and Dwight Eisenhower.

Skowronek contributes to the discussion and debate on presidential power and decision-making by arguing that regardless of any inherited formal powers or informal powers, the president is still often restrained by broad structural factors that are more often out of their control. In contrast to the Snow, Neustadt, and Schlesinger, Skowronek’s analysis focuses on the fluctuation of presidential power throughout time and in order to determine whether or not these powers follow larger patterns throughout “political time.”

⁶⁰ Ibid. 105.

In sum, Snow separates presidential power into two separate categories: formal powers and informal powers. Neustadt argues that making use of the formal and informal powers of the presidency is not enough. In order to influence policy, presidents must make use of their power to persuade and bargain in order to influence public officials in the other branches of government. Schlesinger argues that the power of the presidency has expanded exponentially and drifted so far from its constitutional intent that we are now living in an era of an “imperial presidency.” Due to this fact, he argues that the president is in great need of restraint. Skowronek argues that the most important factor a president faces when seeking to legitimize his actions or instigate change is where that particular president falls in relation to the broader context of “political time.” These analyses on presidential power and decision-making are revisited in Chapter 4, in which I connect them with the case study of Richard Nixon and the era of detente in order to show how my argument fits into these leading debates and discussions.

Chapter 2

This chapter serves to answer what the policy of détente was and why it was initiated. In answering these questions, I discuss the context of American foreign policy strategy leading up to the time Nixon initiated the policy of détente. This context includes the policy of “containment” in the 20 years prior to the Nixon presidency and the role it played in the Nixon’s ultimate pursuit of détente. Additionally, this chapter addresses the broader implications of the policy of détente.

In analyzing Nixon’s foreign policy, one important factor that must be assessed is why Nixon decided to shift to such a dramatic change in foreign policy strategy once he assumed the presidency. Indeed, Nixon’s desire towards peace and a new direction in foreign policy was evident in his 1969 inaugural address when he declared:

“Let us take as our goal: where peace is unknown, make it welcome; where peace is fragile, make it strong; where peace is temporary, make it permanent. After a period of confrontation, we are entering an

era of negotiation. Let all nations know that during the administration our lines of communication will be open.”⁶¹

Although one may look back on this quote with skepticism – considering Nixon’s escalation of the Vietnam War – one cannot truly know or judge his intentions without mere speculation. If taken at face value, I would argue that this speech coupled with his efforts to deescalate the ongoing tense relations with the Soviet Union and China are indeed satisfactory examples that demonstrate Nixon’s efforts were part of a clear and decisive strategy to make the policy of Détente a key mandate in American foreign policy. Furthermore, in order to understand the significance of the policy of détente, it is necessary to examine Nixon’s decision making process through a lens which takes into consideration the U.S. foreign policy strategy of the twenty years prior to Nixon’s Presidential Inauguration in 1969 and where that foreign policy strategy had taken the country.

For approximately twenty years prior to Nixon’s détente, U.S. foreign policy strategy was one of “containment”, a policy that sought to thwart the spread of communism.⁶² The inception of this policy occurred with President Harry Truman’s March 12, 1947 address to a joint session of Congress in which he made the case

⁶¹ Inaugural Address of Richard M. Nixon. Washington D.C. January 20th, 1969. (Accessed May 1, 2016)

<http://www.inaugural.senate.gov/swearing-in/address/address-by-richard-m-nixon-1969>

⁶² Litwak, Robert S. *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976*. CUP Archive, 1986. 11.

that the U.S. should aid the Greek and Turkish governments against communist-led or influenced threats and takeovers. On Greece, Truman said, "The very existence of the Greek state is today threatened by the terrorist activities of several thousand armed men, led by Communists, who defy the government's authority at a number of points, particularly along the northern boundaries."⁶³ And on Turkey, Truman noted, "Since the war, Turkey has sought financial assistance from Great Britain and the United States for the purpose of effecting that modernization necessary for the maintenance of its national integrity. That integrity is essential to the preservation of order in the Middle East."⁶⁴ The origins and motives of this policy, otherwise known as the "Truman Doctrine," are still debated. It is certainly worth noting that this speech to the joint session of Congress in 1947 occurred during the 80th United States Congress. At the time, Truman, a Democrat, was dealing with Republican majorities in both the House and the Senate. According to Deborah Larson, Truman felt compelled to show the Republicans that he was indeed a strong leader – particularly in the foreign policy arena – and that he was capable of making strong and sound decisions.⁶⁵ Regardless of its origins, the Truman Doctrine and its ultimate goal of stability "became the driving force behind an American policy of

⁶³ President Harry S. Truman's Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947. (Accessed May 1, 2016) <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=81>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Larson, Deborah Welch. *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation*. Princeton University Press, 1985. 147, 302.

global containment which viewed Communist ideology and Soviet Power as a monolithic force.”⁶⁶ It was this driving force, Robert Litwak argues, that “served to foster a psychological environment in which the American conception of national interest, traditionally a minimalist notion governed largely by economic criteria, came to be transmuted into the most expansive and ambiguous *national security interest*.”⁶⁷

President Truman’s involvement of the United States in the Korean War was his first “operational signal” to the international community that the United States was committed to pursuing this policy of containment.⁶⁸ The framing of this war drew on the threat of spreading communism Truman warned against, with the U.S. presenting its involvement in the Korean War as precisely to prevent communist North Korea from taking over South Korea. Additionally, Truman’s desire for involvement in the Korean War comes as no surprise when considering the significance of the ‘fall of China’ to communism that followed his March 12, 1947 speech and presaged the North Korean invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950. The timing of the Chinese Communist Revolution certainly must have served as a tremendous blow to the Truman Administration. Only two and a half years after his 1947 speech proposing a U.S. foreign policy strategy of containment in order to fight against the spread of communism, Mao Zedong officially declared the establishment

⁶⁶ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*. 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 21.

of the communist People's Republic of China. But beyond what was happening with China and the rest of the international community, by getting involved in Korea, Truman sent an important message to the Soviet Union that the U.S. was willing to "counter the Soviet threat by proxy along the Eurasian periphery."⁶⁹

President Truman's successor, President Dwight Eisenhower campaigned in 1952 on the idea that the Soviet Union was a tremendous aggressor towards the United States, and that he was fully committed to containing Soviet and other communist influence. Although in agreement with Truman that communism must be contained, Eisenhower's messaging was certainly not complementary to Truman's policies. Rather, he advocated for a stronger approach to confronting the Soviet Union. This new national security policy, which later became known as the "New Look," involved utilizing nuclear deterrence as a strategy for preventing the spread of communism.⁷⁰

An interesting outcome of Eisenhower's foreign policy strategy was his frugality regarding his approach to a global U.S. military presence. The Eisenhower Administration was not only committed to its foreign policy priorities, but was also concerned with the financial health of the United States and its commitment to reduce spending.⁷¹ Cutting taxes and spending thus reduced the presence of

⁶⁹ Ibid. 21-22.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid. 26.

American conventional military strength around the globe. Due to this decrease in troops around the world and the benefit of possessing nuclear arms, Eisenhower utilized the principle of “M.A.D.” (mutually assured destruction) as his primary approach towards the Soviet Union at that time in the Cold War.⁷² An additional motive to adjusting his foreign policy strategy was the fact that Eisenhower was encountering the problem of “harmonizing foreign and defense policies within the bounds of the constraints imposed by this confluence of political and technological circumstance.”⁷³

By failing to clearly distinguish the United States’ stance on conventional and nuclear warfare, Eisenhower wanted his adversaries to believe that the use of a nuclear weapon was very much an open and real option for the United States. After all, it was Eisenhower’s predecessor, Harry Truman, who signed off on the use of two atomic weapons against the Japanese during World War II. And on top of that, Eisenhower had a rather brash Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, known for calling of communism “Godless terrorism”, and for his borderline irresponsible statements, such as his well known “massive retaliation” speech given in 1954, in

⁷² Gaddis, John Lewis. *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy since 1945*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 1999. 97.

⁷³ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*. 22.

which Dulles argued for more proactive American foreign policy approach towards communism that depended on “massive retaliatory power.”⁷⁴

The key take away from the shift of Truman’s foreign policy to Eisenhower’s was that both Administrations believed that communism was a threat that needed to be contained. However, the Eisenhower Administration – and especially his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles – viewed Truman’s approach towards communism as reactive rather than justifiably aggressive and forthright.⁷⁵ More specifically, Dulles believed the “initial Communist miscalculations in Korea had been the direct result of the failure of American declaratory power,” and the “global extension of collective defense arrangements would affirm American resolve and lessen the likelihood of such political miscalculation.”⁷⁶

President John F. Kennedy strayed from President Eisenhower’s confrontational strategy of nuclear deterrence to one that became known as “Flexible Response.” Kennedy realized that due to the technological advances since John Foster Dulles first introduced the idea of “massive retaliation,” solely relying on the strategy of nuclear deterrence was not a sustainable strategy.⁷⁷ In fact, Robert Litwak notes that the Eisenhower Administration also “acknowledged the need for

⁷⁴ Gadis, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb*. 100.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 65.

⁷⁶ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, 26.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 30-34.

both a doctrine and the forces for limited war as it sought a way to overcome the inherent strategic immobility of massive retaliation.”⁷⁸ However, due to economic and security demands, Eisenhower failed to come up with a solution to “finance the simultaneous development of a limited war capability and the improvement of American strategic capabilities.” Therefore, by the end of Eisenhower’s tenure and the inauguration of President Kennedy, this issue had still gone unresolved.⁷⁹

One technological advance at the time Kennedy assumed the presidency included intercontinental ballistic missile delivery systems. This new delivery system now ensured that the Soviet Union could retaliate against the U.S. (or one of its allies) if the U.S. were to strike the Soviet Union. This obviously undermined the leverage the U.S. once possessed. Additionally, improved transportation and communications capabilities now existed, which would allow the US to utilize a conventional military presence around the globe in an efficient manner. Due to these technological advancements complicating the previous foreign policy strategy of nuclear deterrence, this is where the ‘flexibility’ of the “Flexible Response” strategy comes into play: by opening the U.S. back up to the possibility of fighting smaller-scale wars that did not involve nuclear weapons, the Kennedy Administration believed the U.S. would possess the ability to have more

⁷⁸ Ibid. 29.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

proportional deterrence options at their expense.⁸⁰ In other words, if the United States didn't respond in a scenario where the Soviet Union called the United States' bluff that the U.S. would launch a nuclear strike, it could potentially undermine the United States' credibility in the international community.

Following the assassination of President Kennedy, Doris Kearns writes that President Lyndon Johnson not only inherited an office, but also a "world view," and that "beside him were advisers who shared that view, and who represented that difficult to determine group of men – the foreign policy establishment – who ... had developed, applied, and believed in the entire model of reasoning that had dominated and given continuity to American foreign policy."⁸¹ Therefore, President Lyndon Johnson largely continued the same foreign policy strategy as his predecessor, believing that conventional war could still be fought – even with the presence of nuclear weapons in the international community. Johnson's decision to deploy American troops into Vietnam is an example of his commitment to continuing that strategy.⁸² Additional key indicators of Johnson's commitment to continue Kennedy's foreign policy strategy include his decision to keep the same

⁸⁰ Ibid. 31.

⁸¹ Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream: The Most Revealing Portrait of a President and Presidential Power Ever Written*. Macmillan, 1991. 225.

⁸² Hanhimäki, Jussi M. *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Potomac Books, Inc., 2012. 2.

Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and other key national security advisors that worked under and advised Kennedy, such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

Johnson felt that the war in Vietnam must be fought because he viewed it as “a decisive test case both of American will and the instrumentalities of America.”⁸³ Robert Litwak argues that the desire to fight in this war was more than a mere case test. He writes, “[The Vietnam War] was the logical culmination (perhaps the inevitable consequence) of the American policy-making process characterized above – that is, wedding of the undifferentiated, well-institutionalized image of the international system with an instrumental approach to foreign policy problems.”⁸⁴ In other words, since Truman first introduced this policy, it had been building up until that point.

As the war continued, support for it in the United States waned. Johnson won reelection in 1964, but soon after began enduring domestic and international criticism. On the domestic side, one indication of Americans’ frustration at the time was the losses that Johnson’s own Democratic Party suffered in both the House and the Senate in the 1966 Midterm Elections (although still maintaining slight majorities). Additionally, Johnson’s ambitious “Great Society” plan was being attacked from both sides of the aisle.⁸⁵ At this time, Jussi Hanhimaki notes that

⁸³ Litwak, 38.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Hanhimaki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente*. 2.

Johnson “was being challenged not only by adversaries abroad and critics at home, but also by allies as French president Charles de Gaulle distanced his country from America’s leadership.”⁸⁶ These building complications led to President Johnson announcing on March 31, 1968 that he would not be running for a second full term as president. American involvement in Vietnam grew from 200,000 troops in 1965 to 500,000 in 1968, and the U.S. continued onward until the last troops pulled out on April 30th, 1975 -- nearly 7 years after President Johnson’s televised announcement.⁸⁷

I. What was Détente?

After winning the presidential election of 1968, President Nixon was faced with the monumental challenge of keeping his campaign promise to secure “peace with honor” regarding the Vietnam War. At this time, he found himself in what Robert Litwak describes as “a juncture in history in which chaos appeared to threaten.” In addition to the general public’s discontent, intellectuals and foreign policy elites began to acknowledge that the policy of containment was not working and offered new policy proposals as alternatives. Securing peace and changing the course of American foreign policy would undoubtedly require strong staff to assist

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 18.

in his foreign policy decision-making endeavors. Among the most notable new members of Nixon's foreign policy team included Henry Kissinger, a foreign policy scholar who had been actively exploring foreign policy alternatives. On this, Robert Litwak writes the following passage regarding a piece Kissinger wrote a number of years earlier:

“Henry Kissinger, then serving as a rapporteur for a Council on Foreign Relations study group, followed the seminal works on limited war by Kaufmann and Brodie with an exploratory piece focusing upon the problems of defending the so-called ‘gray areas.’ In this article, whose policy prescriptions bear a striking resemblance to the Nixon Doctrine proposals of a quarter century later, Kissinger argued that the prerequisites of effective local action by the United States lay in the establishment of stable indigenous governments.”⁸⁸

Certainly Kissinger was not the only foreign policy expert offering proposals or critiquing the policy of containment and the reckless rhetoric that often came along with it. For example, Robert Osgood argued that the John Foster Dulles line on massive retaliation “was the logical outgrowth of an American tradition which knew no experience of war, save total.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid. 28.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 28-29.

Considering the aforementioned unpromising conditions the United States had found itself operating in, “the Nixon presidency undertook a systematic attempt to shape the emerging pattern of international relations through what, in his inaugural address, Nixon defined as an era of negotiations.”⁹⁰ This “era of negotiations” also included the forging of a “new structure of peace”, which sought “a stable equilibrium in which the philosophy and practice of American policy would be altered to meet the complexities and exigencies of the new epoch.”⁹¹ This newly proclaimed foreign policy strategy became known as the policy of détente.

When discussing Nixon’s policy of détente, it is essential to analyze the influence of Henry Kissinger, considering that Nixon’s foreign policy strategy is often referred to as the “Nixon-Kissinger Strategy” in many academic circles.⁹² Additionally, analyzing Kissinger’s philosophy is necessary for better understanding why Nixon and Kissinger sought to pursue détente – a rather unorthodox policy – considering its relative unpopularity.

Kissinger’s theory, further discussed in the following section, involves the principle of a global equilibrium, or “balance of powers.” Evidentially, Nixon shared this same philosophy at the time of his presidency. This was demonstrated in the

⁹⁰ Kissinger, Henry. Forward to *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years (1969-1972)* (Accessed May 1, 2016) <http://www.henryakissinger.com/articles/fwddetente1007.html>

⁹¹ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*. 1.

⁹² *Ibid.* 48.

following *Time* magazine interview on January 3, 1972 when Nixon responded to the critics of his new foreign policy strategy:

“We must remember the only time in the history of the world that we have had any extended periods of peace is when there has been a balance of power. It is when one nation becomes infinitely more powerful in relation to its potential competitor that the danger of war arises. So I believe in a world in which the United States is powerful. I think it will be a safer world if we have a strong, healthy United States, Europe, Soviet Union, China, Japan, each balancing the other, not playing one against the other, an even balance.”⁹³

As the quotation suggests, Kissinger’s ideas were foundational for the policies developed by Nixon and his Administration. In order to better understand these ideas, the following section examines Kissinger’s (and ultimately Nixon’s) approach to détente according to his realist philosophy through examination of the former’s own writings.

Contrary to an “idealist” philosophy of international affairs, Kissinger believed that a foreign policy overly guided by moral impulses and steadfast ideals was far too dangerous. Rather, he realized that the United States had certain interests that must be pursued, sometimes with a cold and calculated sense of realism. In order to understand Henry Kissinger’s approach to détente, one must

⁹³ Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. Simon and Schuster, 2012. 705.

first understand his concept of “Realpolitik”, or realism, and how his philosophy of international affairs shaped the strategy of détente.

Henry Kissinger’s well-known theory of “world order” is drawn from Europe’s history of containing independent nation-states. Each of these states held sovereignty over their own religion, foreign policy, and other issues within their own territory. These states would not interfere with the internal affairs of other states, and knowledgeable statesmen would ideally be held responsible for maintaining order. These statesmen, or “diplomats”, would focus on national interests and work towards a global balance of power between nations. More specifically, as Robert Litwak notes, “In [Kissinger’s] *A World Restored*, praise is reserved for those post-Napoleonic statesmen, specifically Metternich and Castlereagh, who recognized and accepted the finite limits of their power and who subsequently chose diplomacy, buttressed by the adroit application of force, to achieve their objectives.”⁹⁴

In order to maintain “world order,” Kissinger firmly believes that a global equilibrium, or ‘balance of power’, must exist between nations. On this, Kissinger writes, “The balance-of-power system did not purport to avoid crises or even wars. When working properly, it was meant to limit both the ability of states to dominate others and the scope of conflicts. Its goal was not peace so much as stability and

⁹⁴ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*. 57.

moderation.”⁹⁵ As addressed later in this chapter, these goals of stability and moderation explain why Nixon and Kissinger sought a period of détente with the Soviet Union and China.

As pragmatists, Nixon and Kissinger understood that the United States could not simply strong-arm other countries into doing whatever was in its best interests. Consequently, the critics of détente were unhappy with the Nixon Administration’s decision to work with the Soviets.⁹⁶ This criticism was fueled by the ideological belief that the West should not and cannot compromise with communists. However, Kissinger believed that this sort of idealistic mindset was not a practical long-term strategy. He was well aware of the world’s constantly changing power dynamics. Certainly stemming from the lessons of détente with the Soviet Union, Kissinger writes, “What *is* new about the emerging world order is that, for the first time, the United States can neither withdraw from the world nor dominate it. America cannot change the way it has perceived its role throughout its history, nor should it want to.”⁹⁷ I find that this passage, written quite a while after Kissinger’s tenure as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, perfectly encapsulates his approach towards détente. I would summarize this theory as follows: Realpolitik takes into account the interests of others. Aggression and bravado can only go so far. Finally, at some point, a nation must show accommodation and engage in diplomacy.

⁹⁵ Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. Simon and Schuster, 2012. 21.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 740, 746.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 19.

II. Détente in Action: The Soviet Union

Due to Nixon's desire to ease Cold War tensions, the Soviet Union had been on his Administration's radar from the very beginning. At that time, in addition to the feud with the Soviet Union, the United States was dealing with over 500,000 troops entangled in Vietnam, broken diplomatic relations with Arab countries after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and non-existent relations with China. Regarding the Administration's approach to removing US troops from Vietnam, Nixon hoped that by diplomatically reaching out to the Soviet Union (and eventually China), both of the communist superpowers would begin to reduce their support for their communist ally, North Vietnam. In an ideal situation, the Nixon Administration believed that this could potentially lead to an expedited American withdrawal from the war. And while Nixon was also more generally interested in a broad-based opening of diplomacy, this seemed like an ideal time to try something with the Soviet Union. Kissinger had informed Nixon early on in his first term that the Soviets were interested in engagement, and that they should indulge them and "come to grips with the real sources of engagement, notably in the Middle East, but also in Vietnam."⁹⁸ Furthermore, the timing seemed just right, as Kissinger insisted "the new administration could use diplomacy to manage Soviet behavior, to channel it

⁹⁸ Hanhimäki, Jussi M. *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*. Oxford University Press, 2004. 39.

into certain directions by using the policy of linkage.”⁹⁹ In the Forward to *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years (1969-1972)*, Kissinger provides a detailed account of the actual process of “linkage” with the Soviets through a so-called “channel” and how this channel had to be handled with a very cautious and calculated strategy.

The channel between the Soviets and the Americans began when President Nixon met with Anatoly Dobrynin, then Soviet Ambassador to the United States, in February of 1969 and explained to him that he wished to create a direct White House link to top Soviet officials regarding the pressing issues of the time. The most frequent use of this channel was between Dobrynin and Kissinger. Kissinger writes of the meetings, “At first, the Channel dealt with the general state of the U.S. - Soviet relationship, Vietnam, and, after the arms control negotiations began, discussions of the strategic views of each side. Since we were determined to avoid crises developing by their own momentum, we resorted to ‘thinking out loud’ sessions, designed to enable Soviet leaders to study our thinking informally before being confronted with specific proposals.”¹⁰⁰ Opening up a channel with the Soviets was part of a larger grand strategy that the Nixon administration executed. This “era of negotiations” allowed for the U.S. to regain its diplomatic legitimacy during the

⁹⁹ Hanhimäki, Jussi M. *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Potomac Books, Inc., 2012. 48.

¹⁰⁰ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. 705.

Vietnam War. Additionally, Nixon believed that the building tension between the Soviet Union and China would persuade the Soviets to consider negotiating with the U.S., so they would not have enemies on two separate fronts. With opening up relations with the Chinese in the back of their minds, Kissinger and Nixon believed that these talks with the Soviets, although risky, could give them leverage in the future of Sino-American relations. Ultimately, this hypothesis proved correct.

An essential aspect of the negotiations with the Soviets was that Nixon and Kissinger did not see the relationship as “zero sum.” As Kissinger writes, “[Nixon] endeavored to weave together all of the many elements of the superpower relationship into an overall approach that was neither totally confrontational nor totally conciliatory.”¹⁰¹ Their plan was to work with the Soviets on areas of mutual agreement, then use their cooperation as “leverage to modify Soviet behavior.” It was this way of working, Kissinger writes, that the Nixon Administration understood *détente*.

However, the linkage between Washington and Moscow certainly had its challenges. Perhaps the most obvious example is arms control policy. Though conventional wisdom would suggest that mutually assured destruction (M.A.D.) would deter any possible nuclear threat, Kissinger notes that there was an ongoing fear of a preemptive strike due to the fact that airplanes and relatively few locations

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 714.

contained most of the nuclear weapons.¹⁰² These increasing fears lead to much domestic political pressure that pulled Nixon in many different directions. And although the Americans and Soviets were able to come to an agreement and sign the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I), the SALT II treaty did not end in success. Many media sources at the time attributed the failure of SALT II to Nixon's overambitious attempt to tie strategic arms negotiations with other political issues.¹⁰³

Though subject to many hiccups, I would argue that the period of détente with the Soviet Union was ultimately a success. By 1971, The Soviet Union was still largely seen as a foe to the United States, with nearly half of U.S. citizens (48%) displaying deep skepticism of working with the Soviets.¹⁰⁴ Opening up the so-called "channel" allowed Nixon to negotiate and make his policy positions clear. Though the signing of SALT I was mostly symbolic, it represented a mutual effort between the United States and the Soviet Union to work towards cooperation and coexistence. Additionally, as part of the Kissinger/ Nixon strategy, the timing of opening up U.S. relations with China successfully applied pressure on the Soviets. As Kissinger writes, "Linkage began working because the Nixon Administration managed to create a major incentive for Soviet moderation by achieving a dramatic

¹⁰² Ibid. 715.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Holsti, Ole R. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 68.

opening to China.”¹⁰⁵ This opening put the Soviet Union in a position where they felt they could not afford to have two enemies on two different fronts. Therefore, as the following section explains, improving Sino-American relations became vital to the Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy.

III. Implementing Détente as a Strategy: China

Perhaps the most significant accomplishment achieved through reaching out to China was the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué. The Communiqué acted as a symbol of a new Sino-American relationship that clearly defined the countries’ ideological agreements and disagreements and provided a framework needed to work together on areas of common accord. The document affirmed that first, progress toward the normalization of relations between China and the U.S. is in the interests of all countries; Second, both countries wish to reduce the danger of any international military conflict; And third, neither country should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, and each is opposed to efforts by any other country to establish such hegemony; and 4. Neither country is prepared to negotiate on behalf

¹⁰⁵ Kissinger. *Diplomacy*. 719.

of any third party or to enter into agreements or understandings with the other directed at other states.¹⁰⁶

After the signing of the communiqué, Kissinger and Nixon felt that the United States was in a promising position with China as long as the Chinese feared the Soviet Union more than they did the United States. In other words, if China were to act in its own self-interest, they would almost be required to work with the US. Meanwhile, by successfully reaching out to the Chinese, the Nixon Administration applied the kind of needed pressure to the Soviet Union that required them to rethink their hostility towards China. If the Soviets initiated a war with the Chinese, it would likely only result in strengthening the newly developed U.S./China relationship. Therefore, as Kissinger notes, “The Soviet Union’s best option became seeking its own relaxation of tensions with the United States.”¹⁰⁷

Ultimately, in showing arguably the greatest symbol of détente, Nixon’s trip to China was indeed a “week that changed the world”. Since the end of the Chinese Civil War in the late 1940’s when the Communist Party came to power, Sino-American relations had been completely frozen. Furthermore, the Nixon Administration’s strategy to open up relations with the Chinese took the world by surprise, considering that Nixon had a reputation for being a staunch anti-

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 728.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 730.

communist. And although Nixon's visit did not officially restore diplomatic relations with China, it put the two countries on a new, positive track.

The greatest lesson learned from opening a period of détente with China was that diplomacy is vital to peace and cooperation. Both China and the United States took a major risk. However, they were aware that if the summit went well, both countries would benefit from cooperation. On nearly every issue that China and the United States disagreed on prior to Nixon's visit, they continued to disagree on after. But more importantly, opening up a dialogue allowed the U.S. and China to come together on areas of mutual interest. Détente seemed to be the tool needed in order for the United States to engage actively with the two Communist superpowers. As Kissinger writes, "The Nixon Administration's concept of international relations was far more realistic than the one it had inherited and, in the long run, represented a necessary adjustment of American foreign policy."¹⁰⁸

In conclusion, the political context of the time – and the policy of containment, in particular – played a significant role in Nixon's pursuit of détente. Approximately twenty years before the Nixon presidency, United States foreign policy was one of "containment." The policy of containment, which had taken a variety of different forms from the Truman Administration to the Johnson

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 761.

Administration, ultimately lead to the Vietnam War. The war in Vietnam arguably served as the culmination of the policy of containment.

The policy of détente was a foreign policy strategy intended to forge a “new structure of peace” and sought “a stable equilibrium in which the philosophy and practice of American policy would be altered to meet the complexities and exigencies of the new epoch.”¹⁰⁹ Henry Kissinger played an extremely crucial role in shaping (and ultimately pursuing) the policy of détente. Kissinger’s theory of international affairs – which was shared by Nixon – invoked the principle of a global equilibrium, or “balance of powers.” Kissinger believed that when working properly, a system of balanced powers limited “both the ability of states to dominate others and the scope of conflicts. Its goal was not peace so much as stability and moderation.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*. 1.

¹¹⁰ Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. 21.

Chapter 3

This chapter addresses why Nixon was able to initiate this drastic change in foreign policy strategy at this particular moment. This is addressed by analyzing both the domestic and international conditions of the time, and will lead to me arguing that both of these conditions were crucial in providing Nixon with the opportunity to pursue détente with the Soviet Union and China. More specifically, in terms of domestic conditions, the role of the Vietnam War and domestic unrest created conditions that allowed Nixon to run a presidential campaign primary focused on addressing domestic issues. Furthermore, Nixon acknowledged the overwhelming public opinion that surrounded the Vietnam War and recognized that the U.S. needed a newer, smarter foreign policy strategy. In terms of the international conditions that allowed Nixon to initially pursue détente, I will first argue that the Kennedy Administration paved the way for Nixon in providing the critical first steps in an ongoing dialogue with the Soviet Union. Second, I will argue that the border dispute between the Soviet Union and China created favorable conditions for Nixon to pursue détente with China.

I. The Domestic Context of Détente

Once the 1968 presidential elections were in full swing, Americans were hungry for change. On top of the Vietnam debacle and ongoing anti-war movement, the country was in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and had just witnessed the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 and Bobby Kennedy only two months later. Essentially, the fabric of civil society appeared to bursting at the seams. This had a profound impact on American society and fueled the anger and discontent directed towards America's foreign policy strategy, primarily due to the ongoing failure in Vietnam that claimed so many American lives. Furthermore, Hanhimaki writes that there was a basic question that struck fear into the minds of U.S. policymakers: "How does one reconcile the glaring contradiction between the idea of America as a model of democracy and the reality of America as a segregationist, racist society?"¹¹¹ In other words, the general discontent among the American public showed that there was an urgent need for a new approach to United States' domestic and international policy.

The 1968 presidential elections coincided with the American public's increasing anger and frustration over the war in Vietnam. Nixon believed the Vietnam War disaster might be enough to get a Republican elected to the White

¹¹¹ Hanhimaki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente*. 19.

House.¹¹² Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign was very much based on the idea of bringing Americans together through an emphasis of focusing on domestic political issues. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, one issue included putting a stop to increasing rampant crime.¹¹³ This campaign strategy of emphasizing domestic issues was certainly noteworthy. The reason for this strategy, of course, was because the Vietnam War was a crucial issue in American political discourse and, in particular, the 1968 Presidential Elections. Nixon's inspiring messaging throughout the campaign sought to be the much-needed antidote to alleviate some of the rising tension in American society. At the time, domestically, the U.S. was deeply entrenched in what became known as the era of unrest and "counterculture," which, among other things, included several years of ongoing civil rights and anti-war protests that often turned violent, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, and the assassination of Bobby Kennedy two months later.

Furthermore, although Nixon was widely seen as the "foreign policy expert" of the Republican Party, he was advised to soften his stance on the Vietnam War.¹¹⁴ As a result, in addition to campaigning as a populist on issues pertaining to foreign policy, Nixon placed a particularly strong emphasis on domestic issues in the U.S.

¹¹² Parmet, Herbert S. *Richard Nixon and His America*. Little, Brown, 1990. 502.

¹¹³ Black, Conrad. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*. PublicAffairs, 2008. 550.

¹¹⁴ Novak, Robert; Evans, Rowland, "[Nixon Firm in Vietnam Stand](#)", *The Free-Lance Star* (Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1967), p. 3

Nixon recognized this desire for change, and adjusted his positions based on public opinion.

Similar to Nixon's own U.S. Senate campaign eighteen years prior, Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew, Nixon's running mate, painted Democratic Nominee Hubert Humphrey as 'soft on communism.'¹¹⁵ This, combined with the baggage of disastrous ongoing Vietnam War – a war intensified by the Administration in which Humphrey had been a part of – put Humphrey on the defensive. Nixon emerged as the frontrunner and ultimately defeated Humphrey by a narrow margin of victory in the popular vote, but a 3 to 2 margin of victory in the Electoral College.

With Nixon now President, it was time for him to make good on his promise to end America's involvement in the Vietnam War. However, after being sworn in as President in 1969, Nixon had more on his mind than ending the Vietnam War. In addition to dealing with over 500,000 troops in Vietnam, the United States was in the midst of the Cold War feud with the Soviet Union, broken diplomatic relations with Arab countries after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and non-existent relations with China. This meant he needed to assemble a wise and experienced team of foreign policy advisors. Nixon tapped foreign affairs scholar Henry Kissinger as his National Security Advisor. At the time, Kissinger was known in Republican circles due to his advising of Governor Nelson Rockefeller through his three separate presidential

¹¹⁵ "Nation: The Counterpuncher." *Time*, September 20, 1968.

campaigns (1960, 1964, and 1968). In his memoir, *White House Years*, Kissinger wrote that at the time, he shared a sense of urgency that the United States must find a strategy to exit Vietnam, as it deeply threatened to undermine the American foreign policy in the global context.¹¹⁶ Kissinger later became President Nixon's (and Ford's) Secretary of State and is widely regarded as the chief architect of Nixon's foreign policy, which principally included the policy of détente.¹¹⁷ Considering the unpromising domestic and international conditions the United States had found itself in, "the Nixon presidency undertook a systematic attempt to shape the emerging pattern of international relations through what, in his inaugural address, Nixon defined as an era of negotiations."¹¹⁸ This "era of negotiations" began what would become known as the policy of détente.

II. The International Context of Détente

What added a rather surprising element to the initiation of détente was the very nature of its timing. In the years following the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Cold War rivalry between the two superpowers was arguably at its highest point of tension, the policy of détente suddenly arose and surprised the international

¹¹⁶ Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. Simon and Schuster, 2011. 64.

¹¹⁷ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*. 48.

¹¹⁸ Kissinger, Henry. Forward to *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years (1969-1972)* <http://www.henryakissinger.com/articles/fwddetente1007.html> (accessed March 5, 2016).

community by seeking to create a more secure international environment. While Kennedy's effort to negotiate with the Soviet Union was unheard of at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which will be discussed later, it did not necessarily signal a definite departure from the current state of Soviet-American relations of the time.

When the Nixon Administration began to pursue the policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union, the two countries were still largely hostile towards each other. Opening up talks with the Soviets was also politically difficult to do considering the zero-sum mindset that dominated the American narrative.¹¹⁹ Conventional wisdom suggested that the Soviets could either be our adversaries or allies. And because they most certainly were not our allies, the idea of working with them or simply seeking areas of mutual interest was viewed as appeasement, and thus, simply out of the question.

In terms of the international conditions Nixon operated in, it is vital to understand that Richard Nixon was not the first President to pursue an easing of tensions with the Soviet Union. In fact, the Kennedy Administration paved the way for Nixon to provide the critical first steps for an ongoing dialogue with the Soviet Union.

In the case of the Kennedy administration, a critical point of conflict occurred in October of 1962 when American U-2 spy planes flew over Cuba and discovered

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 714.

Soviet ballistic missile sites. This discovery resulted in Kennedy appearing on national television to inform the American public of what had been discovered. In addition to demanding that the Soviet missiles be removed, President Kennedy ultimately ended up quarantining Cuba to “prevent Soviet shipments from reaching their destination.”¹²⁰ In the days following the televised address, the U.S. and the Soviet Union appeared to be on the brink of war. However, in the end, then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy was able to strike a deal with the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, which required the Soviets to remove their missiles from Cuba in exchange for the Americans removing their missiles from Turkey. This conflict-turned-compromise was a crucial turning point in U.S.-Soviet relations, particularly due to the development of nuclear weapons. Regarding what both countries must have known, Jussi Hanhimäki writes that “[w]ar against each other was simply not an option; avoiding situations that might provoke a war with catastrophic consequences – nuclear annihilation – was a necessity.”¹²¹

The aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated that the Nixon administration was not the first administration to pursue a de-escalation of tensions with the Soviet Union. Had Kennedy not been willing to negotiate with the Soviets during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Nixon administration would have likely not been

¹²⁰ Hanhimäki, Jussi M. *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Potomac Books, Inc., 2012. 7.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 8.

in the position to initiate the policy of détente. This, I would argue, is due to the fact that the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis ultimately opened up a line of communication with higher levels of government on the U.S. and Soviet side that previously had not been utilized by the American and Soviet leadership. Specifically, this “line of communication” I speak of was the so-called “channel” mentioned in Chapter 2 of this project. Indeed, the “channel” was essential to the policy of détente because it allowed the U.S. and Soviet leadership to handle their negotiations in a careful and cautious way that was designed to give each side the opportunity to informally study the other’s way of thinking.¹²²

The experiences of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations both served as ‘models’ for Nixon on how to approach the Soviet Union while also creating conditions between the two countries that were necessary for Nixon to pursue détente at the time he did. In other words, I would argue that Kennedy’s handling of Cuban Missile Crisis prepared the Nixon Administration to pursue détente with the Soviet Union due the aforementioned conditions Kennedy’s handling of the situation had created between the two countries. Kennedy’s ‘model’ of approach was one that understood that both countries had vested interests at stake, and he was eventually able to negotiate with the Soviet leadership and come to an agreement. His approach during the Cuban Missile Crisis most certainly did not result in a friendship between the two countries, but it did show the potential for Americans

¹²² Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. 705.

and Soviets to work together. Furthermore, as the next section explains, the experiences of President Kennedy and Johnson were not the only conditions set in place that were pivotal for Nixon to pursue détente. When Nixon assumed the presidency, tensions between the Soviet Union and China quickly began to escalate.

In March of 1969, only two months after Nixon's inauguration, a border dispute that took place along the Ussuri River in Siberia led to severe tensions between the Soviets and the Chinese. U.S. intelligence had reasonable evidence to suspect that the Soviets were gearing up for a possible ground invasion. Nixon feared that the "Soviet military intervention in China would signal the most serious threat to the global balance of power since the Cuban missile crisis."¹²³ Indeed, their suspicions were not far off. A secret meeting between Chinese Premier Zhou En-Lai and Alexei Kosygin took place one month after the border dispute, and the two countries agreed to draw back just before a war likely would have broken out.¹²⁴ Nixon saw this as an opportunity to reach out to the Chinese in order to modify the Sino-American dialogue. The purpose of this dialogue was to determine (and potentially transform) the power relationship between the USSR, China, and the U.S. As Kissinger notes, if he and Nixon were correct in their assumption that China and the Soviet Union feared each other more than they feared the U.S., "an

¹²³ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. 722.

¹²⁴ Westad, Odd Arne, ed. *Brothers in Arms: the Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963*. Stanford University Press, 1998. 29.

unprecedented opportunity for American diplomacy would come into being.”¹²⁵

Therefore, the U.S. began to show its willingness to open up to China by implementing a number of strategic initiatives including eliminating the travel ban to the PRC and relaxing strict trade policies. Though seemingly trivial, these gestures were intended to be symbolic and convey the United States’ willingness to ease existing Sino-American tensions.

At this time, American public opinion on China varied greatly. However, Nixon and Kissinger were firm believers that opening up relations with the Chinese would be a positive strategic move that would give the United States leverage on the international stage, particularly involving negotiations with the Kremlin. They believed that “[e]xcluding a country of the magnitude of China from America’s diplomatic options meant that America was operating internationally with one hand tied behind its back.”¹²⁶ These heightened Sino-Soviet tensions included the Soviet Leadership viewing Mao’s China as a “clear and present danger.”¹²⁷ Interestingly, there is also a view that states that the Nixon Administration was not solely interested in leveraging American power against Soviet power simply by opening up relations with China. Rather, as scholars like Evelyn Goh write, “[opening up diplomatic relations with China] would favor a strong PRC which help act as

¹²⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. 722.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 720-721.

¹²⁷ Hanhimäki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente*. 50.

counterweight against the Soviet Union.”¹²⁸ Goh’s point here is that the Nixon Administration was willing to increase Chinese power in order to balance Soviet power. This plays right into the Chapter 2 discussion about Nixon and Kissinger’s philosophy of a global equilibrium, or “balance of power.”

Additionally, in a pivotal moment, Nixon issued a statement that showed that the U.S. would not stand idly by if the Soviets were to attack the Chinese:

“We do not seek to exploit for our own advantage the hostility between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic. Ideological differences between the two Communist giants are not our affair. We could not fail to be concerned, however, with an escalation of this quarrel into a massive breach of international peace and security.”¹²⁹

This statement conveyed a number of things. However, most importantly, it showed the Chinese (and the Soviets) that the U.S. recognized China’s independence as significant to the global balance of power. Kissinger adds to this, “Nixon’s warning to the Soviets was also a tangible expression of his Administration’s new emphasis on basing American policy on the careful analysis of the national interest.”¹³⁰ By simultaneously hosting talks and developing diplomatic relations with the USSR and

¹²⁸ Goh, Evelyn. “Nixon, Kissinger, and the “Soviet Card” in the US Opening to China, 1971–1974.” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 3 (2005): 478.

¹²⁹ Kissinger. *Diplomacy*. 724.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

PRC, the U.S. had positioned themselves in such a place where both countries feared the U.S. would move into support for their adversary. This gave both China and the Soviet Union an incentive to work with the United States.

What is most noteworthy about case is that the 'rift' between the Soviet Union and China served as a favorable condition to the Nixon Administration in their ultimate pursuit of détente as a more robust foreign policy strategy. Had the border dispute in March of 1969 not taken place, one must wonder if the U.S. would have found a better (or even comparable) time to reach out to the Chinese.

In conclusion, I would argue that the domestic and international conditions of time were crucial in providing Nixon with the opportunity to pursue détente.

In terms of domestic conditions, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the Vietnam War became a significant issue in the American political discourse particularly during the 1968 Presidential Elections. As discussed in Chapter 2, soon after Johnson's reelection in 1964, he began facing domestic and international disapproval due to his handling of the war. Johnson later decided against running for a second full term. The Vietnam War essentially served as the culmination of the policy of containment, which had dominated United States foreign policy strategy for the nearly twenty years preceding the Nixon presidency.

Former Vice President Nixon, who had been out of politics since his failed 1960 presidential campaign, saw an opening and began mounting a serious

campaign after the increasing unpopularity of the Vietnam War and the general disconnect of the American public. Nixon recognized that the policy of containment was not working, the country had little foreign support (in addition to being in debt), and a new strategy was needed. After running a campaign focused on calling for a change in foreign policy strategy as well as addressing domestic issues dividing the country, Nixon won the 1968 presidential election.

Acknowledging the need to keep his promise in changing the course of American foreign policy, Nixon pursued the policy of détente. The policy of détente allowed the United States to uphold its interests without resorting to war. These specific interests were outlined in the so-called "Nixon Doctrine", which made three important proclamations: First, the United States would honor their existing treaty agreements. Second, the United States would provide a nuclear umbrella to their allies and other such countries deemed vital to U.S. national security. And third, the United States would help supply arms and aid in the development of their allies, but would not be dragged into taking upon themselves the responsibility of personally defending every nation that became involved in armed conflict.¹³¹

In terms of the international conditions that allowed Nixon to initially pursue détente, I would first argue that the Kennedy Administration paved the way for

¹³¹ Richard Nixon: "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. (Accessed May 1, 2016) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2303>.

Nixon in providing the critical first steps in an ongoing dialogue with the Soviet Union. Had Kennedy not been willing to negotiate with the Soviets during the Cuban Missile Crisis, I would argue that the Nixon Administration would not have been in a position to pursue the policy of détente. Moreover, I would argue that the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis ultimately created the conditions necessary to have a so-called “channel” with higher levels of government on the U.S. and Soviet side, due to a previously non-existent line of communication. Kennedy understood that both countries had vested interests at stake, and he was eventually able to negotiate with the Soviet leadership and come to an agreement. While Kennedy’s approach during the Cuban Missile Crisis did not result in a friendly U.S.-Soviet alliance, it did demonstrate the potential for the Americans and Soviets to work together. Lastly, the border dispute between the Soviet Union and China created a wedge between the two countries that served as a favorable condition to Nixon in enabling him to pursue détente with China.

Chapter 4

Ultimately, this chapter serves as my concluding analysis of this project, in which I explore four hypotheses of what enabled Nixon to pursue the policy of détente. I work through and expand on each of these four hypotheses by analyzing the previous discussion and research in Chapters 2 and 3 and connecting them with the literature review in Chapter 1 in order to better understand what this case tells us about presidential power in foreign policy. The four consequential factors that I argue enabled Nixon to pursue détente include the following: First, when domestic conditions exist in which the general public is focused primarily on domestic policy. Second, when the existing international conditions allow for a change in foreign policy. Third, when a president is personally in a position to take advantage of the “informal powers” of the presidency and take leadership over public opinion. And fourth, when a president assumes office at a moment in which a previous “regime” of foreign policy is failing.

I. Factor 1: General Public Focused Primarily on Domestic Policy

The first factor I argue that contributed to Nixon's success in pursuing détente was due to the fact that the domestic conditions were in such a way that the general public was focused primarily on domestic policy, which created an opportunity for Nixon to shift to a drastically different foreign policy strategy with minimal public backlash.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, during the 1968 presidential elections coincided with the American public's increasing anger and frustration over the war in Vietnam. Nixon, considering another run for president, believed the Vietnam War disaster might be enough to get a Republican elected to the White House.¹³² Interestingly, although Nixon was widely seen as the "foreign policy expert" of the Republican Party, he was advised to soften his stance on the Vietnam War.¹³³ After all, Nixon had served eight years as Vice President in the Eisenhower Administration, which pursued the policy of containment. As a result, Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign was very much based on the idea of bringing Americans together through the emphasis of focusing on domestic political issues. For example,

¹³² Parmet, Herbert S. *Richard Nixon and His America*. Little, Brown, 1990. 502.

¹³³ Novak, Robert; Evans, Rowland, "[Nixon Firm in Vietnam Stand](#)", *The Free-Lance Star* (Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1967), p. 3

as mentioned in the introduction, one issue included putting a stop to increasing rampant crime.¹³⁴

Due to such a high level of domestic unrest – including two high-profile assassinations and widespread urban riots – Nixon was given more freedom to pursue a foreign policy strategy that would certainly be seen as a drastic change. Undoubtedly, I would argue that détente was also more palatable to the general public because it was seen as an antidote to the policy of containment, which was the policy that led to the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

II. Factor 2: International Conditions Allowing for a Change in Foreign Policy

The second factor I argue that contributed to Nixon's success in pursuing détente was due to the fact that international conditions were in such a way that they allowed for a change in foreign policy. More specifically, I argue that President Kennedy's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis created the conditions necessary to pursue détente with the Soviet Union, and the 1969 border dispute between China and the Soviet Union created the conditions necessary to pursue détente with China.

¹³⁴ Black, Conrad. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*. PublicAffairs, 2008. 550.

In the case of President Kennedy's during the Cuban Missile Crisis, I argue that Kennedy's handling of the negotiations with the Soviet Union opened up a line of communication between the two countries that previously had existed. Specifically, this "line of communication" I speak of was the so-called "channel" mentioned in Chapter 2. Indeed, the "channel" was essential to the policy of détente due to the fact that it allowed U.S. and Soviet Leadership to handle their negotiations in a careful and cautious way that was designed to give each side the opportunity to informally study the other's way of thinking.¹³⁵ As is mentioned in Chapter 3, I argue that while Kennedy's approach to the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis did not result in a friendship between the two countries, it did show the potential for American and Soviet cooperation.

In the case of pursuing détente with China, I would argue that the border dispute between the Soviets and Chinese along the Ussuri River created the conditions necessary to pursue détente with China. As Kissinger writes, "Soviet military intervention in China would signal the most serious threat to the global balance of power since the Cuban missile crisis."¹³⁶ Nixon saw this border dispute as an opportunity to drive a wedge between the Soviets and Chinese in order to modify the Sino-American dialogue. Indeed, this dialogue was ultimately utilized to transform the power relationship between the United States, China, and the Soviet

¹³⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. 705.

¹³⁶ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. 722.

Union. Had this border dispute not occurred, Nixon arguably would not have found an appropriate time to initiate a dialogue with the Chinese.

III. Factor 3: Utilizing “Informal Powers” to Influence Public

Opinion

The third factor I argue that contributed to Nixon’s success in pursuing détente was due to the fact that Nixon was personally in a position to take advantage of the “informal powers” of the presidency and take leadership over public opinion. This third factor that I have introduced touches on a number of themes from Chapter 1. First, I will show that Nixon’s actions fit within the “informal powers” framework of Snow, specifically the latter’s claims about presidential leadership in public opinion. Nonetheless, Nixon’s ability to use these informal powers in the way he did relied upon his own ability to take advantage of his skills and background in crafting a public image that could lead public opinion on détente. It is in this second point that the case of Nixon and détente falls within the frame of Neustadt’s argument that a president must utilize his power to persuade in order to maximize his influence.

Beginning with the Donald Snow piece, he separates presidential power into two separate categories: formal powers and informal powers. Formal powers

include allocated authorities such as the ability to nominate key personal and recognize foreign regimes, in addition to possessing a variety of formal titles, such as “Head of State,” which provides the president with “symbolic personification.” In analyzing my case study, however, I would argue that Snow’s so-called “informal powers” of the presidency proved to be more beneficial to Nixon and his ambitious foreign policy agenda than the “formal powers.” Snow’s “informal powers” include the following: “presidential singularity”, the ability to shape public opinion through media access, international diplomacy and world leadership, and “president doctrines.”

In the four examples of informal powers provided by Snow, I would argue that two of them, including the president’s ability to shape public opinion through media access and the president’s role in world diplomacy and world leadership, often intertwined in Nixon’s case and presented him with meaningful opportunities that he capitalized on. In terms of media access, as mentioned in Chapter 1, then-presidential candidate John F. Kennedy was considered by viewers to have won the first televised presidential debate in American History between himself and Richard Nixon in thanks to the coolness and confidence he exuded.¹³⁷ Though one can not know what was going to Nixon’s head in the nearly 8 years from the time of that

¹³⁷ Webley, Kayla. "How the Nixon-Kennedy Debate Changed the World." *Time*. September 23, 2010. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2021078,00.html>.

televised debate to the launching of his 1968 president campaign, I would first argue that Nixon not only understood the value of public perception nearly a decade after the televised debate, but he also demonstrated through his actions that he valued public opinion. In particular, public opinion seemed to have a significant amount of influence on Nixon when one considers how he adjusted his foreign policy positions during the 1968 president campaign.

Many scholars have noted the role of public opinion as a presidential constraint. Mayhew has suggested that politicians are motivated to act in ways that sustain an electoral constituency,¹³⁸ and there are clear indications that Nixon acted in such a fashion. One specific example would include Nixon's adoption of a policy to withdraw troops from the enormously unpopular Vietnam War. Certainly, this was a position that deeply resonated with the general public at the time.

Nixon's acknowledgement of the ongoing failure of the Vietnam War and the need for a change in foreign policy strategy was certainly uncharacteristic of him at the time, considering the reputation he had previously built for being a staunch anti-communist. Furthermore, I would argue that Nixon's adjustment on this particular policy position demonstrated his willingness and keen interest in maintaining a strong public image, which in turn may have brought him to the point where

¹³⁸ Thomas, Paul G. "David R. Mayhew, Congress: The Electoral Connection. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974, pp. vii, 194." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 01 (1976): 161-162.

maintaining favorability with the general public was more important to him than preserving a particular ideological belief. Perhaps this tells us that in Nixon's case, an overwhelmingly populist position or maybe even just a majority 'consensus' of discontent among the general public) plays a significant role in the way presidents pursue (or don't pursue) a particular foreign policy strategy.

Nonetheless it would be a mistake to regard Nixon as only reacting to public opinion. As Snow suggested in his discussion of presidential power, the President's "informal powers" extend to the ability to influence public opinion. However, along with that particular ability, would be the case of Nixon and détente demonstrates that Presidents who know how to effectively utilize their "informal powers", such as the credibility and legitimacy they gain due to their role in international diplomacy and world leadership, are better positioned to engage in significant foreign policy endeavors. In Nixon's case, it involved dramatically shifting the direction of American foreign policy strategy. In the following section, I will provide examples of how a few of Snow's so-called informal powers aided Nixon in his pursuit of détente with the Soviet Union and China.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the power a president enjoys in maintaining a prominent global presence in the arena of international diplomacy and world leadership increases his sheer visibility and adds an enormous amount of legitimacy and credibility to his public image. One photograph that fits that description would

be the now-infamous image of President Nixon shaking the hand of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai shortly after landing in Beijing during his 1972 visit to China. Indeed, Nixon knew exactly how momentous this occasion would be not only for himself and his perceived leadership in the world, but for the future of American foreign policy. For this reason, Nixon wanted his visit to China to be heavily publicized, which is why his plane was carefully planned to land in Beijing at 11:30am, so the occasion could be broadcast on primetime television in the United States at 10:30pm Eastern standard time.¹³⁹

In terms of the power a president yields in maintaining a prominent global presence in the arena of international diplomacy and world leadership, the case of Nixon and the era of détente arguably represent the pinnacle of how a president's impact in international diplomatic and world leadership efforts can have a lasting and important impact on their legacy. An example of that directly relates with the last of Snow's informal powers that I will briefly engage with: "presidential doctrines."

Snow includes "presidential doctrines" as an informal power of the presidency, and defines this power as "the president's ability to put his distinctive

¹³⁹ Smith, Craig R. *Silencing the Opposition: Government Strategies of Suppression*. SUNY Press, 1996. 204.

stamp on policy by unilaterally proclaiming doctrines bearing his name.”¹⁴⁰ As is noted Ch. 1 in the provided example of the “Truman Doctrine”, many presidents had (and continue to have) their own doctrines. These doctrines remain historically significant not only when studying respective presidential legacies, but also in understanding the dynamics and evolution of American foreign policy strategy. Due to this, the idea of “presidential doctrines” as an informal power is particularly relevant to my case study of Nixon and the era of détente.

One of the key pillars of Nixon’s legacy is the so-called “Nixon Doctrine.” The Nixon Doctrine made three important (and previously mentioned) proclamations, which allowed the U.S. to continue pursuing its agenda without resorting to war. Furthermore, the Nixon Doctrine was particularly significant when one considers the historical context of its introduction. As is discussed in Chapter 2, the Nixon Doctrine was intended to shift the course of American policy strategy away from the prevailing “policy of containment.”

The power Nixon exuded through the introduction of his doctrine fits in remarkably close with Snow’s characterization of how presidential doctrines can be seen as a source of power. Just like the example of President Truman and the Truman Doctrine in Chapter 1, and now with the case of President Nixon and the Nixon Doctrine, these men succeeded in exemplifying this informal power.

¹⁴⁰ Snow, Donald M. *United States Foreign Policy: Politics Beyond the Water's Edge*. 3rd ed. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005. 96-97.

My argument that Nixon's informal powers proved to be more beneficial than his formal powers is rooted in my argument that Nixon's "informal powers" played a significant role in his ability to persuade. However Nixon's ability to persuade, which is the main theme of the Richard Neustadt piece, must be seen in the context of Nixon's somewhat unique ability to exercise public opinion leadership in this area.

Comparable to Snow's "informal powers" and the different forms they come in, the power to persuade can certainly be tactfully utilized by a skilled president through a variety of outlets mentioned by Snow. On the "power to persuade", I would argue that one's ability to exercise power and influence is dependent upon their character and reputation. In the case of Nixon and his political background as a leading anti-communist (which is highlighted in the introduction of this project), I would argue that he was positioned in such a way to convey to the American people that détente was the right strategy to pursue. Had a 'softer' politician initiated the policy of détente, I would argue they would not have been in a position to gain the amount of legitimacy or credibility necessary to pursue a drastic change in foreign policy strategy due to Democratic President Johnson's tremendously unpopular Vietnam War.

Richard Nixon was no ordinary staunch anti-communist, but rather, when considering his background mention in the introduction of this project, I would

argue that Nixon's identity as one of America's leading anti-communist voices in American politics provided him with a unique (if not ideal) platform to pursue the policy of détente with the Soviet Union. I would argue that pursuing the policy of détente – a policy that many of its critics viewed as appeasement to the Communists, certainly required a particular kind of messenger – one with a certain sense of legitimacy – to persuade congress and the American people that seeking to ease tensions and work diplomatically with the world's leading communist superpower was the right course for America to take. I would argue that a number of key moments positioned Nixon in such a way that he later had the unique authority, and thus persuasive ability, to champion the policy of détente. These moments in his career include serving on the communism-busting House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and his highly visible role in the Alger Hiss case, which was outlined in the introduction. In terms of needing a 'unique messenger' to champion the policy of détente, I would argue that a strong example of someone who could not have effectively pursued a change of course in American foreign policy strategy would be Nixon's democratic challenger in the 1968 presidential election, Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Due to the ongoing blunder in Vietnam that his boss, President Johnson, continued to get the U.S. more and more entangled in, Humphrey's foreign policy credentials were largely tattered. On top of that, as in mentioned in the introduction, the Nixon campaign portrayed Humphrey as "soft on communism." It would be hard to imagine a candidate gaining the

sufficient about of legitimacy to drastically alter American foreign policy when the popularity of his boss (the President) and his political party steadily grew more and more unpopular.

This idea of Nixon's legitimacy and credibility being sufficient enough to pursue the policy of détente relates to another one of Neustadt's arguments about a president's "status." On his argument about presidential power being the power to persuade, Neustadt writes, "despite his status [the president] does not get action without argument."¹⁴¹ Furthermore, because Neustadt believes the president is actually a relatively weak figure in the U.S. government (in terms of having the autonomy to pursue his agenda without opposition or resistance), he must do the following in order to maximize his influence: he must do the following in order to maximize his influence:

"Effective influence for the man in the White House stems from three related sources: first are the bargaining advantages inherent in his job with which to persuade other men that what he wants of them in what their own responsibilities require them to do. Second are the expectations of those other men regarding his ability and will to use the various advantages they think he has. Third are those men's

¹⁴¹ Neustadt, Richard E. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. Simon and Schuster, 1991. 11.

estimates of how his public views him and how their publics may view them if they do what he wants.”¹⁴²

In other words, Neustadt argues that in order to successfully pursue and implement his agenda, the president must utilize his persuasive skills, maintain a solid reputation, and protect and enhance his perceived public image.

Crucially for Neustadt, the President’s ability to act is tied other actors’ perception of him. As noted in the literature review, Neustadt writes that the “President’s authority and status give him great advantages in dealing with the men he would persuade.”¹⁴³ This “authority”, I would argue, includes a type of ‘aura’, or “legitimacy” as previously described, that comes with the office of the president. Nevertheless, it is not associated with the office alone. I would argue that a president first requires a sense of legitimacy and credibility, which, in the case of Nixon, was a result of both his own personal background as well as the background of his national security advisor-turned-Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who had earned his credibility in Republican circles not only as a well-respected and innovative academic, but also and as an advisor on the 1960, 1964, and 1968 presidential campaigns of then-Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller. I would argue that Kissinger added ‘gravitas’ to Nixon’s legitimacy and credibility, which

¹⁴² Ibid. 150.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 30.

made it possible for him to pursue this drastic change in American foreign policy strategy.

IV. Factor 4: Assuming Office at the Time of a Failing Regime

The fourth factor I argue that contributed to Nixon's success in pursuing détente was due to the fact that he assumed office at a moment in which a previous 'regime' of foreign policy was failing. This fourth factor strongly relates to the Skowronek piece.

In Presidential Leadership in Political Time, Skowronek argues that regardless of a president's power, he is still restrained by broad structural factors that are more often than not out of their control. In contrast to the three previous scholars, Skowronek's analysis seeks to better understand the ebbs and flows of presidential power throughout time and determine whether or not these powers follow larger patterns throughout "political time."

Although Skowronek certainly acknowledges that presidents can achieve change, this change is not something achieved simply by the amount of power utilized or amount of charisma possessed by the Commander in Chief. Skowronek argues that the most important factor a president faces when seeking to legitimize his actions or instigate change is where that particular president falls in relation to

the broader political cycle throughout time. This cycle includes variables such as the style, successes, and failures of the previous president, as well as political patterns preceding them. It is this analysis of Skowronek's that I would argue has a relevant connection to Nixon and his pursuit of détente.

Skowronek focuses on how presidents fall within a certain pattern of "party regimes" and how a president's style and ability to effect change is greatly dependent on upon timing. Indeed, I would argue that this analysis is also applicable to the case of Nixon and détente. Just as Skowronek writes about "party regimes", I would also argue that there are 'regimes' that exist in foreign policy. And as previously mentioned in Chapter 2, the introduction of the policy of détente arrived at the culmination of a 20-year long period of 'containment' failure. Skowronek argues that the opportunity for a president to present a new kind of politics occurs when party regimes fail, and I would argue the same principle applies to foreign policy regimes. An example of this would be when we saw the policy of détente replace the policy of containment. Due to the failure of containment, Nixon had the opportunity to create a new 'regime' due to the fact that he assumed the presidency at the end of what was seen as a failing 'regime.' For this reason, I would argue that a president has the option of creating a new 'regime' when he enters office at the end of a failing regime.

Conclusion

This project has analyzed the role and limits of the presidential policy-making in foreign policy through an examination of President Richard Nixon's policy of détente with the Soviet Union and China during the 1960s and 1970s. I have provided evidence for the four factors that played a role in enabling Nixon to pursue to policy of détente. Backed up by the research in Chapters 2 and 3, the four consequential factors included the following: First, when domestic conditions exist in which the general public is focused primarily on domestic policy. Second, when the existing international conditions allow for a change in foreign policy. Third, when a president is personally in a position to take advantage of the "informal powers" of the presidency and take leadership over public opinion. And fourth, when a president assumes office at a moment in which a previous "regime" of foreign policy is failing.

In terms of the leading scholarly discussions and debates surrounding the topic of presidential power and decision-making abilities, the case study of Richard Nixon and era of détente has most closely aligned with the writings of Snow, Neustadt, and Skowronek. However, this case study still contributes a meaningful discussion on the Schlesinger piece.

Schlesinger's argument in *The Imperial Presidency* is particularly interesting when analyzing it through a lens focusing on Nixon and the era of détente. Schlesinger argues that the leading cause of the imperial presidency stems from issues of foreign policy, and more specifically, newly acquired war powers. These war powers, Schlesinger argues, have increased since the United States became a global superpower, and continue to increase through times of war. A large part of Schlesinger's argument is that Nixon and Johnson got away with egregious offenses in the foreign policy arena because the institutions that were supposed to have restrained them domestically were not in a position to do so. This presents an interesting question: Could Nixon have pursued the policy of détente at the time he did if his presidential power had been more restrained?

In terms of the implementation of détente through the "channel," it is quite clear that Nixon's presidential powers were not constrained. However, I would also argue that the aforementioned domestic and international conditions of the time empowered him to pursue a dramatic shift in foreign policy strategy. Speaking on Nixon's approach of détente towards the Soviet Union and China, I would also argue that even if Nixon were more autonomous than Schlesinger believes he should have been, it was ultimately not a bad thing. In hindsight, I would argue that had the U.S. pursued a strategy more in line with the rhetoric of Eisenhower's former Secretary of State, John Dulles, which is discussed in Chapter 2, the security of United States would have been more uncertain. These security concerns would have been even

more pressing considering the ongoing nuclear arms race and a variety of technological advances in warfare, which occurred around the time President Kennedy was sworn into office and are described in Chapter 2 of this project.

Undoubtedly, the fall of Nixon was a consequence of an “imperial presidency”, due to a lack of presidential oversight. However, as I believe the case of Nixon and his pursuit of the policy of détente demonstrates, even if a president operates in an ‘imperial’ or undemocratic fashion, it does not necessarily mean that his actions will inevitably result in a more unstable or insecure domestic and international environment.

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