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President's Notes: Challenge!

R. G. Colbert
U.S. Navy

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CHALLENGE !



In its *Strategic Survey for 1968*, the London-based Institute for Strategic Studies observed that the United States had lost its "desire and ability to be the universal and dominant power." Our experiences "at home and abroad had exhausted" our "confident sense of purpose and ability." In the subsequent *Survey*, the ISS noted that while the pace of the U.S. retraction during 1969 was measured, "the tendency of the national will was nonetheless clear." Seemingly discouraged with two and a half decades of free world leadership, our Nation appeared—at least to many allies—to be withdrawing into the isolation of the 1930's.

Sensing the national mood, the Nixon administration sought early in its tenure to assure the Nation that we would no longer be the unilateral world "policeman" and that "America cannot—and will not—conceive *all* the plans, design *all* the programs, execute *all* the defense of the free nations of the world." For to the average American, the vital issue of the day was no longer solely the Communist world challenge. More important seemed to be the issues of domestic law and order, the breakdown in our standards of morality, inflation, drugs, the intolerable pressures of contemporary urban and industrial life, exploding technology and the inexorable changes it was bringing to human life, and, finally, education and how it could be made relevant to the disenfranchised young.

Yet, despite these pressing internal domestic needs, the President also hastened to assure the world shortly after his inauguration that "America cannot live in isolation if it expects to live in

peace. We have no intention of withdrawing from the world."

If there is a potential conflict between these two lines of reasoning, it is in the area of what precise U.S. reactions are likely under a wide variety of circumstances.

But is a certain degree of ambiguity really unique in American foreign policy? Or does it actually represent a continuation of a postwar policy (now a traditional policy) which always contained a large element of uncertainty?

When he appeared before the National Press Club in Washington in early 1950, Dean Acheson seemed to delineate in specific terms those geographic areas which we considered to be outside our sphere of interest. Yet, when North Korea invaded South Korea 6 months later, President Truman's response was immediate, belying the impression the Secretary of State had earlier given that South Korean independence was not considered vital to U.S. interests in Asia. In 1956, NATO unity and our own disaffection with Nasser's Egypt notwithstanding, we shocked our British and French allies by refusing to support and by doing all we could to thwart their efforts to force militarily a re-opening of the nationalized Suez Canal.

Examples of our ambiguous foreign policy do not end there. Our policy toward Western Europe throughout the 1950's and 1960's surely embarrassed

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more than one European leader trying to adapt his own domestic stance to the gyrations of our own actions. In the late 1950's we backed tactical nuclear weapons for our European allies, a policy related to the massive retaliation strategy of the Eisenhower years which was initially resisted across the Atlantic. By the time the Europeans were accepting that policy in 1961, however, we pulled the rug out, shifting to an advocacy of conventional weapons. Within 3 years, under President Kennedy, we once again altered our stance, calling for creation of a NATO Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF), only to switch shortly thereafter under President Johnson to sudden withdrawal of support for MLF and backing for the Nonproliferation Treaty.

In an age of continuing technological, political, and military change, no nation—particularly a democracy—can afford to be bound by a set of concrete (and consistent) policy actions and reactions. One source of strength in our own foreign policy over the years has been its very flexibility—its ambiguity. No doubt this has frustrated our allies on all too many occasions and would certainly suggest U.S. policymakers ought to be more sensitive in this regard in the future.

More importantly, however, it has prevented potential foes from taking steps that might plunge the world into a fatal World War III. Certainly, specific statements such as the one issued by Secretary of State Acheson have been carefully avoided by our subsequent policymakers, and with good reason. In the competition with an astute cold war foe, our every word, action, and inaction is carefully watched and considered. While the American penchant for what would appear to be an *ad hoc* foreign policy has often managed to irritate our allies and frustrate students of international relations, it has managed to have one positive result:

keeping the enemy off guard and the world from the abyss of global war.

No potential aggressor today can have the same conviction that encouraged Hitler following Munich about the improbability of an effective American response.

Perhaps President Nixon's pledge that "We shall meet both" our foreign responsibilities and the needs of our people at home "or we shall meet neither" may have seemed unrealistic to the Communist world when he stated it. But the Cambodian operation, occurring at the height of antiwar activity in this country, when many felt that we had lost our "will and determination," certainly took the world by surprise and subsequently proved to be an unquestioned military success. Similarly, with a challenging Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean, the American 6th Fleet was moved decisively and quickly last October by our President and, through a strategy of interposition, insured against the fall of King Hussein and Jordan. Although today we can only speculate, historians of the future may show how this positive and prompt use of sea-power avoided a major war. The positive, dynamic, and unexpected moves of our Government these last years since the invasion of Czechoslovakia have without question recast the image of our country.

The ramifications of a fluid policy have not been lost on the Soviets. As Moscow's leading "Americanist" and Director of the Institute of the U.S.A., Georgi A. Arbatov has recently commented, "Washington is trying to secure for itself great flexibility to create a situation in which the President and the American Government would have the possibility of a wider option between participation and non-participation in... any conflict and would have a wider freedom of action."

Maybe what appears to be our crisis-by-crisis approach to the relations be-

tween nations is not, after all, indicative of a vacillating or a "Caspar Milquetoast" spirit, as so many foreign and domestic observers of our national will might suggest. As I see it, while our immediate sights are turned to a long overdue concentration on domestic needs, our peripheral view is not blind to the exigencies of today's world—our responsibility to meet the threats to the security of the world in which we live. The ultimate strength of ambiguity in our foreign policy is that it provides the President the leeway, the flexibility so necessary to ensure that the United States never becomes so predictable that

an enemy can exploit our "assured response." Today, in the light of strong U.S. leadership initiatives of recent years, the "Americanists" of the Kremlin must be in a quandary as they try to analyze the U.S. enigma.



R. G. COLBERT
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy
President, Naval War College