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# Parity, What is it Good For? Jimmy Carter and the Legitimation of Nuclear Strategy

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Parity, What is it Good For?  
Jimmy Carter and the Legitimation of Nuclear Strategy

Colleen S. Larkin

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Prerequisite for Honors  
in Political Science  
under the advisement of Professor Stacie E. Goddard

April 2018

## Table of Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements .....                                      | 3   |
| Abstract .....  | 4   |
| Acronyms and People.....                                    | 5   |
| Chapter 1: Introduction .....                               | 6   |
| Chapter 2: Parity and the Carter Administration.....        | 35  |
| Chapter 3: The MX and the SALT II Ratification Debate.....  | 51  |
| Chapter 4: PD-59 and the Making of Nuclear Superiority..... | 77  |
| Chapter 5: Conclusions .....                                | 105 |
| Bibliography.....   | 113 |

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## Abstract

In 1976, Americans elected Jimmy Carter on a promise of arms control and a reduced role for nuclear weapons in U.S. military strategy. While Carter remained committed to arms control, he ultimately strengthened the damage limitation strategy laid out in the Nixon administration, pushing the U.S. toward nuclear modernization and an increased reliance on nuclear weapons. Why did the Carter administration adopt this strategy necessitating nuclear superiority? Using qualitative analysis of newspapers, private memos, and public government documents, I find conventional explanations of Carter's policy downplay the prominent domestic debates about nuclear strategy during this time. Drawing on theories of agenda setting and legitimation in national security, I argue Carter shifted his strategy partly because coalitions legitimated alternative policies and successfully mobilized against his initial vision. The tension between weapons modernization and arms control pervades the development of U.S. nuclear policy; this work suggests contradictions in U.S. nuclear strategy reflect contestation between domestic elites trying to frame their desired policy as the optimal deterrence strategy.

## Acronyms and People

ABM – Anti-Ballistic Missile  
ACDA – Arms Control and Disarmament Agency  
AIMS – Alternative Integrated Military Strategies  
ASC – American Security Council  
CPD – Committee on the Present Danger  
CTBT – Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty  
HTK – Hard-target-kill  
ICBM – Intercontinental Ballistic Missile  
JCS – Joint Chiefs of Staff  
LNO – Limited Nuclear Option  
MAD – Mutually Assured Destruction  
MAP – Multiple Aim Point  
MIRV – Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle  
MPS – Multiple Protective Shelters  
MX – Missile Experimental  
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
NIE – National Intelligence Estimate  
NSA – National Security Advisor  
NSC – National Security Council  
NSDM – Nuclear Strategy Decision Memorandum  
NUWEP – Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy  
NTPR – Nuclear Targeting Policy Review  
PD – Presidential Directive  
PRM – Presidential Review Memorandum  
RNO – Regional Nuclear Option  
SALT – Strategic Arms Limitation Talks  
SCC – Special Coordination Committee  
SIOP – Single Integrated Operational Plan  
SLBM – Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile  
START – Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty  
TNF – Theater Nuclear Forces

Jimmy Carter – President of the United States, 1977-1981  
Zbigniew Brzezinski – National Security Advisor, 1977-1981  
Cyrus Vance – Secretary of State, 1977-1980  
Edward Muskie – Secretary of State, 1980-1981  
Harold Brown – Secretary of Defense, 1977-1981  
William Odom – Military Advisor to the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981  
Paul Warnke – Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1977-1978  
Robert Byrd – Senate Majority Leader, Democratic Senator from West Virginia  
Henry Jackson – Democratic Senator from Washington  
Samuel Nunn – Republican Senator from Maine  
Paul Nitze – Chairman of Policy Studies, Committee on the Present Danger

## Chapter 1: Introduction

On January 20, 1977, Jimmy Carter pledged to decrease the role of nuclear weapons in United States military strategy, vowing, “We will move this year a step toward our ultimate goal—the elimination of all nuclear weapons from this Earth.”<sup>1</sup> Carter distinguished himself from previous Cold War Presidents with his forceful and public commitment to disarmament. He continued negotiating the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with the Soviet Union, the first major bilateral arms limitation between the two great powers. Carter successfully signed the second round of this agreement, SALT II, in 1979. Further, Carter assumed office during the period of strategic parity, or equivalence in U.S. and Soviet nuclear capabilities, and during a period of *détente*, or warming of U.S.-Soviet relations. Based on Carter’s well-known distaste for nuclear weapons, many expected him to seize this moment of parity as an opportunity to adjust the U.S. nuclear strategy to rely on fewer nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet attack.

Contrary to these expectations, however, Carter began a series of adjustments in military strategy that required nuclear modernization and even acquisition, increasing the role of nuclear weapons in defense strategy. The Richard Nixon administration had laid out a nuclear strategy relying on a nuclear arsenal capable of matching any level of nuclear exchange against Soviet military targets, and Carter embraced and strengthened this strategy. Although Carter canceled the production of the B-1 bomber, he approved the development of two new missiles, the submarine-launched Trident II and the land-based Missile Experimental (MX). In 1980, Carter signed Presidential Directive 59 (PD-59), which presented a *countervailing strategy* emphasizing attacks on Soviet leadership or military targets and the ability to deny Soviet victory at any level of nuclear war. This doctrine committed the U.S. to seeking nuclear superiority not only on an

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1977, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6575>.

<sup>2</sup> David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960,”

operational level, through an offensive strategy requiring significant weapons modernization and acquisition, but also on a declaratory level, through rhetoric affirming nuclear weapons' role in denying Soviet dominance. Despite Carter's commitment to arms control, he adopted a strategy which undercut this goal—it embraced the need for arms buildups to ensure the flexibility and survivability of U.S. forces in a nuclear war.

In this thesis, I seek to answer the following question: why did the Carter administration adopt this nuclear strategy necessitating nuclear superiority? While this thesis focuses on an historical case study of the Carter administration, it has general applications to the study of the politics of nuclear strategy. The disconnect between a President's preference for arms control and the choice of nuclear strategy pervades American foreign policy, manifesting in virtually every administration since the invention of nuclear weapons. After World War II, Truman was deeply disturbed by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and initially refused to conceive of the atomic bomb as "anything other than an apocalyptic terror weapon."<sup>2</sup> Through the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, he placed the use of atomic weapons under the President's sole authority, and he even flirted with the Baruch Plan, a plan to turn nuclear weapons over to international control and eventually eliminate them. Yet by the end of Truman's presidency, his administration had adopted a costly nuclear strategy of overkill, with two or three warheads assigned to a single target.<sup>3</sup>

John F. Kennedy also demonstrated this same tension between an aversion to nuclear weapons and the adoption of costly nuclear strategy; in his initial briefing on his inherited nuclear strategy, he expressed horror at this policy of *massive retaliation*, a strategy of launching

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<sup>2</sup> David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960," *International Security* 7, no. 4 (1983): 11. See also Larry G. Gerber, "The Baruch Plan and the Origins of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 6, no. 1 (1982): 69-95.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill," 5.



the entire nuclear arsenal immediately upon initiating war.<sup>4</sup> Yet Kennedy's own "flexible response" nuclear doctrine invested in a variety of weapons systems to develop multiple options in response to a Soviet attack. Most recently, Barack Obama echoed Carter's early sentiments in his 2009 speech in Prague, where he pledged to "seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons," and promised to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategy.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, he successfully negotiated another round of arms control measures with Russia, known as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). At the same time, however, Obama remained deeply committed to the modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Obama authorized expensive modernization programs for land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles, and strategic bombers—all three legs of the nuclear triad—which critics worried could provoke arms racing with other nuclear powers.<sup>6</sup> My research on Carter's arms control policy and nuclear strategy may provide some insight into why other Presidents demonstrated similar tensions between these aspects of their military strategy.

To understand this apparent shift in Carter's nuclear policy, this thesis will utilize a combination of archival documents, newspapers, and secondary sources, as well as qualitative text analysis. It will trace Carter's evolving nuclear strategy and the debates surrounding his policies over time. I argue Carter's shift in strategy can partially be explained as the result of Carter's failure to legitimate his desired strategy to a domestic audience. In both public and private settings, actors opposed to Carter's vision legitimated policies calling for nuclear superiority by arguing their strategies would strengthen deterrence and allow the U.S. to maintain political leverage over the Soviet Union. This rhetoric mobilized a domestic coalition

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<sup>4</sup> Scott D. Sagan, "SIOP-62: The Nuclear War Plan Briefing to President Kennedy," *International Security* 12, no. 1 (1987): 22–51.

<sup>5</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks in Prague," April 5, 2009, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85963&st=prague&st1=>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, William J. Broad and David Sanger, "As U.S. Modernizes Nuclear Weapons, 'Small' Leaves Some Uneasy," *New York Times*, January 11, 2016.

against Carter; Carter and others could not silence this opposition without facing accusations of undermining deterrence, and Carter shifted his policy to accommodate this coalition. The next section provides an overview of the nuclear policies of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Carter, showing how Carter's policy shifted to resemble that of his predecessors. Then I evaluate existing explanations of Carter's shift, arguing that accounts placing Carter in a group of policymakers pushing for nuclear superiority downplay his commitment to arms control and the lack of consensus about the necessity of superiority. Accounts arguing that domestic opposition forced Carter's shift highlight this lack of consensus, but they fail to explain the causes of successful domestic mobilization against Carter. Next, I develop my theory explaining how legitimation allows groups to mobilize and compete with each other to dominate policy planning. Successful legitimation wins support for one coalition while silencing the opposition, giving the winning group the power to shift policy towards their more legitimate preferences.

### **Nixon, Ford, and Carter: Nuclear Policy in the 1970s**

Carter initially tried to distinguish his nuclear policy from that of Nixon and Ford, but by the end of his term, he had embraced and strengthened these policies. This section will provide an overview of the trajectory of nuclear policy in the age of parity from Nixon to Carter. The Soviet Union had achieved strategic parity with the U.S. by the late 1960s, as 1965-1970 saw significant quantitative and qualitative improvements to Soviet nuclear forces. Most notably, the Soviet ICBM force grew from 224 to 1220 in this period, and the new ICBMs had increased accuracy and carried multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), meaning each missile could carry several warheads each directed at a different target. At the same time, the Soviet Union added 50,000 troops to Eastern Europe after its assault on Czechoslovakia in 1968,

raising U.S. allies' concerns about extended deterrence.<sup>7</sup> To meet these concerns, Nixon pressed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to spend more on defense, and he began talks with the Soviet Union to reduce conventional forces in what would come to be called the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions talks in 1973.<sup>8</sup>

On the nuclear side, Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger initiated the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), an attempt to encourage the Soviet Union to give up the “destabilizing” elements of its nuclear arsenal. Nixon and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev signed the accords in 1972, including the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the “Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms.”<sup>9</sup> The Senate generally accepted SALT, besides fierce opposition from Sen. Henry Jackson (D, WA). He criticized the agreement for not requiring equal numbers of weapons on both sides, attaching the “Jackson Amendment” to the treaty; this recommended future arms control be coupled with modernization to prevent U.S. “levels of intercontinental strategic forces inferior to the limits provided for the Soviet Union.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Ford began the next round of arms control talks, and Carter inherited ongoing negotiations for SALT II.

At the same time, the Nixon and Ford administrations began increasing U.S. nuclear forces, especially after a series of nuclear posture reviews from 1972 to 1974. These began with the Department of Defense's National Strategic Targeting and Attack Policy Review Panel, known as the Foster Panel, and National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 169, which were

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Auten, *Carter's Conversion: The Hardening of American Defense Policy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 44-46.

<sup>8</sup> These talks continued until February 1989, when they were renamed the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. “CFE Chronology: Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty,” Federation of American Scientists, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://fas.org/nuke/control/cfe/chron.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> These will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Office of the Historian, “Strategic Arms Limitations Talks/Treaty (SALT) I and II,” United States Department of State, accessed March 3, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/salt>.

<sup>10</sup> “Congress Approves SALT Offensive Arms Agreement,” in *CQ Almanac 1972*, 28th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1973), <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal72-1251467>.

formalized in National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 242 in January 1974. These studies concluded the U.S. needed more flexible targeting plans beyond the massive attack options in the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) in order to control escalation in a nuclear exchange. The Nixon administration examined Limited Nuclear Options (LNOs) and Regional Nuclear Options (RNOs) focused on counterforce targeting—targeting military assets—to counter potential Soviet moves in Western Europe.<sup>11</sup> To this end, Nixon initiated modernization and development programs for all three legs of the nuclear triad. In 1973, the administration approved the B-1 strategic bomber, which could track and target military assets, take off quickly from bases, carry more nuclear weapons, and fly fast and low to avoid Soviet radar detection. The bomber caused controversy as opponents preferred to modernize existing B-52 bombers—although Ford requested \$1.9 billion for production of 244 B-1s, Congress delayed the production decision until February 1977.<sup>12</sup>

The increased Soviet ICBM capabilities heightened concerns about U.S. ICBM survivability in a nuclear attack, so the Air Force wanted to improve the Minuteman ICBMs to reduce vulnerability and more effectively strike hardened military targets. The U.S. began enhancing its MIRV capabilities by developing the more accurate MK-12A reentry vehicle and began plans for the MX, a more accurate, MIRVed, and potentially mobile ICBM to replace the aging Minuteman forces.<sup>13</sup> In the submarine leg of the triad, the Nixon administration first updated its submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with the Poseidon C3, a MIRVed missile capable of carrying 14 RVs. After SALT II, Nixon approved the development of the new

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<sup>11</sup> William Burr, “The Nixon Administration, the ‘Horror Strategy,’ and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969-1972: Prelude to the Schlesinger Doctrine,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 3 (July 19, 2005): 69-76.

<sup>12</sup> For the case for the B-1, see John F. McCarthy, “The Case for the B-1 Bomber,” *International Security* 1, no. 2 (1976): 79-87. For the case against the B-1, see Archie L. Wood, “Modernizing the Strategic Bomber Force without Really Trying—a Case against the B-1,” *International Security* 1, no. 2 (1976): 102.

<sup>13</sup> Donald A. MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 217. See also Auten, *Carter’s Conversion*, 69-70.

Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) and began developing both the Trident I C4 and Trident II D5 SLBMs. These had greater range and accuracy, prompting some in Congress to deem Trident a “war-fighting” weapon; they cut funds for the Trident in 1975 and 1976.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Nixon began modernizing various theater nuclear forces (TNF), including the surface-to-surface missiles Pershing IA and Lance. These programs focused on improving accuracy, hoping to reduce collateral damage from strikes and therefore prevent escalation in limited nuclear targeting.<sup>15</sup> Thus, by the time Carter assumed office, the U.S. had made significant progress on both arms control and major nuclear modernization programs.

During Carter’s 1976 campaign, he championed arms control and criticized Ford’s defense spending, repeatedly promising to cut between \$5 and \$7 billion from Ford’s Fiscal Year (FY) 1978 defense budget of about \$123 billion.<sup>16</sup> Carter sought advice on military spending from the Brookings Institution, where consultants recommended cuts to the B-1, MX, and Trident programs, among others.<sup>17</sup> Carter appeared to espouse a MAD strategy departing from the nuclear posture set in motion by Ford and Nixon. He expressed skepticism of LNOs, saying, “Even if we could ensure that war would be kept ‘limited’ in nature, it would still face the prospect of approximately 10 million Americans being killed.”<sup>18</sup> Emphasizing the value of assured retaliation, Carter declared SSBNs “the most important strategic element in the entire defense mechanism of our country” because of their invulnerability.<sup>19</sup> Finally, he decried the logic of damage limitation, arguing, “There would be no possibility...that a first-strike capability

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<sup>14</sup> Graham Spinardi, *From Polaris to Trident* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146.

<sup>15</sup> Auten, *Carter’s Conversion*, 71-73.

<sup>16</sup> George C. Wilson, “Carter’s Pentagon Expected to Focus on Better Management,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1976; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “An Elusive Promise on Defense Spending,” *The Washington Post*, December 30, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> John D. Mini, “Forced Conversion: Civil-Military Relations and National Security Policy in the Carter Administration, 1977-1981” (Ph.D. diss., UNC-Chapel Hill, 2010), 43.

<sup>18</sup> *The Presidential Campaign, 1976* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 355-358.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Auten, *Carter’s Conversion*, 91.

could be adequate in preventing massive destruction on the country that originated the strike.”<sup>20</sup>

By the time Carter entered office, he promised to make major changes to the U.S. nuclear program.

Carter, however, entered office amid heated domestic debates about the current strategic environment of parity. The Nixon and early Ford administrations had witnessed a general feeling of détente, or warming, of U.S.-Soviet relations, as seen in agreements such as SALT. By the end of Ford’s term, a group of alarmists who rejected détente had gained public visibility, most notably in the “Team A/Team B” exercise. In 1974, University of Chicago professor Albert Wohlstetter believed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had systematically underestimated Soviet military capabilities in its annual National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs). Together with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and ACDA advisor Paul Wolfowitz, he persuaded Ford and the new CIA Director George H.W. Bush to set up an alternate inquiry to assess Soviet capabilities and intentions.<sup>21</sup> Working through the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board, this “Team B,” led by Harvard professor Richard Pipes, included other hardliners like Paul Nitze. Nitze had been involved in nuclear planning since the Truman administration; in 1957, he drafted the “Gaither Report,” known for creating perceptions of an illusory “missile gap” that prompted a major U.S. arms buildup.<sup>22</sup> Team B found the Soviet Union did not adhere to MAD and believed it could win a nuclear war. They also advanced the idea of the “window of vulnerability”: if the U.S. did not start re-arming, the Soviet Union would soon gain nuclear superiority. Although many at the time disputed the accuracy of Team B’s findings and the final NIE still believed the U.S. and Soviet Union would remain in roughly

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<sup>20</sup> *The Presidential Campaign, 1976*, 357.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Hessing Cahn, “Team B: The Trillion-Dollar Experiment,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 49 no. 3 (1993): 22, 24; Jerry W. Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 197-199.

<sup>22</sup> C. Robert. Zalnick, “Paul Nitze: The Nemesis Of SALT II,” *The Washington Post*, June 24, 1979.

equal balance, it included some Team B assessments; the NIE revised its estimate of Soviet military spending to 10-15 percent of its Gross National Product from 6-8 percent.<sup>23</sup> This Team A/Team B exercise leaked to the press during the transition, with the *New York Times* publishing Team B's findings on December 26, 1977. This unleashed debate about whether the Soviet Union accepted parity or sought superiority, as three Congressional committees called hearings about the findings.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the hawks of Team B gained public visibility in calls for the U.S. to increase the quantity and quality of its nuclear arsenal.

Despite this vocal opposition, Carter upheld his campaign promises during his first year in office, cutting back the defense budget as well as nuclear weapons programs. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown presented a modified FY1978 defense budget of \$120.3 billion to the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 24, reducing Ford's budget by about \$3 billion. The budget cut funding for the nuclear Lance missile, the B-1, and the MX, along with other conventional programs.<sup>25</sup> In particular, Carter expressed ambivalence about the future of the B-1, refusing to make a firm decision but saying he had "serious questions about whether or not the B-1 should be...the center of our airborne defense capability."<sup>26</sup> Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd (D, WV) urged Carter to cancel it, citing its enormous costs and how it would soon become vulnerable to improving Soviet radar technology. At the same time, Pentagon studies and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommended the B-1 as the best option to uphold this leg of the

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<sup>23</sup> Cahn, "Team B," 25. See also Central Intelligence Agency, *National Intelligence Estimate 11-3/8-76, 'Soviet Forces for Intercontinental Conflict Through the Mid-1980s'* (1976), 1-6. Team B's main objective seemed to be to push their own hardline agenda, and most of their findings turned out to be inaccurate. See Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 113-114.

<sup>24</sup> David Binder, "3 Sets of Senate Hearings Expected On Soviet Might and Strategic Aims," *New York Times*, January 8, 1977. For other coverage see Murrey Marder, "Carter to Inherit Intense Dispute on Soviet Intentions," *The Washington Post*, January 2, 1977; Murrey Marder, "'Worst-Case' Intelligence Hit," *The Washington Post*, January 19, 1977.

<sup>25</sup> George C. Wilson, "Carter Will Seek \$2.7 Billion Cut In Defense Budget," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 1977.

<sup>26</sup> Jimmy Carter, "The President's News Conference," February 23, 1977, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6887>

triad.<sup>27</sup> While still controversial, the House voted to fund the B-1 on June 28 without a decision from Carter.<sup>28</sup> Then, on July 1, Carter announced the B-1's cancellation, only saying he believed the U.S. would still have "an effective an flexible strategic force whose capability is fully sufficient for our national defense" even without the B-1.<sup>29</sup> Immediately after, Brown announced a major upgrade to the cruise missile to be fitted on existing B-52s, saving money while maintaining the effectiveness of the bomber force.<sup>30</sup> At this point, Carter still seemed poised to advance his arms control agenda set forth in the campaign.

Over time, Carter's decisions contradicted his original goals. Through 1978, he took other significant arms reduction measures by revising the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) negotiations, cutting funds for naval submarine building, choosing not to deploy the enhanced radiation warhead ("neutron bomb") in Western Europe, and cutting funds for the Minuteman III ICBM. His FY1979 Defense budget of \$126 billion also generated disapproval from Pentagon officials who complained about his cuts to important programs, but Carter remained committed to his budget and even vetoed Congress's higher budget proposal.<sup>31</sup> By fall 1979, Carter had signed a major arms control agreement in SALT II, but he had increased spending on other nuclear programs. He encouraged NATO's deployment of new theater nuclear forces (TNF), increased spending on Trident II, authorized construction of the MX and a new basing mode, improved command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) in

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<sup>27</sup> Letter, Robert Byrd to President, 6/23/77, NSA 7 – Subject File, "B-1: 6/11-30/77," Box 6, Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter cited as JCL); Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to President, "Joint Chiefs of Staff Recommendation on Strategic Bomber Modernization," n.d., NSA 7 – Subject File, "B-1: 6/11-30/77," Box 6, JCL; George C. Wilson, "Pentagon and Moscow Provide Arguments for Building B-1," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1977.

<sup>28</sup> Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R, CA) favored the B-1, saying it "keeps the Soviets off guard and keeps them from launching a first strike," while Rep. Joseph Addabbo (D, NY) called the B-1 "the most expensive white elephant ever proposed by industry and the services." Bernard Weinraub, "House Votes to Build B-1 Bomber As Carter Decision on Plane Nears," *New York Times*, June 28, 1977.

<sup>29</sup> "Excerpts From President Carter's Press Conference," *The Washington Post*, July 1, 1977.

<sup>30</sup> George C. Wilson, "Improved A-Missile Is B-1 Alternative," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 1977.

<sup>31</sup> Don Oberdorfer, "President Weighs Veto of Weapons Procurement Bill: President Weighs Vetoing Weapons Procurement Bill," *The Washington Post*, August 17, 1978; Edward Walsh and Mary Russell, "Weapons Bill Vetoed," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 1978.



nuclear weapons infrastructure, and updated the nuclear targeting policy in PD-59. The Defense budget increased in FY1980 and FY1981, as the administration requested \$129 billion and \$150 billion, respectively.<sup>32</sup> The Carter administration seemed to increase nuclear weapons' role in national security; the range of weapons selected and the new targeting policy suggested a significant departure from MAD and a striving toward nuclear superiority.

### **The Illogic of MAD? Carter and the Push for Nuclear Superiority**

As demonstrated above, Carter seemed to shift from policies calling for nuclear restraint to policies embracing nuclear superiority. Some scholars have attempted to explain this shift, usually asserting that tensions with the Soviet Union required the U.S. to increase the role of nuclear weapons in its foreign policy. One group of scholars argues the Carter administration “course corrected” in response to a perceived increase in the Soviet threat. For example, Brian Auten draws on neorealist theory to argue Carter’s shift in nuclear policy was a prudent balancing reaction to increasing Soviet aggression in the international system.<sup>33</sup> As the Soviet Union demonstrated its intent to fight a nuclear war, the U.S. adjusted its policy to deny Soviet victory. Another group of scholars locates Carter within a broader trend of policymakers pushing for nuclear superiority during the Cold War. This literature casts doubts on assumptions that U.S. policymakers always bought into the stability of deterrence by examining the evolution of nuclear strategy.

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<sup>32</sup> *Department of Defense Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1980: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Ninety-Sixth Congress, First Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 1; *Department of Defense Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1981: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Ninety-Sixth Congress, Second Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Auten, *Carter’s Conversion*. For a similar argument, see Richard C. Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1992). As Auten points out, however, for Thornton’s argument about a policy shift in response to Soviet missile developments to be correct, the shift would have needed to come much earlier.

Since the invention of nuclear weapons, strategists have debated the best way to deter a nuclear attack on the U.S. or its allies. While the U.S. can adopt a range of strategies, they can be grouped into two general categories. The first, *Mutually Assured Destruction* (MAD), rests on the assumption that nuclear weapons are a revolutionary weapon used strictly for deterrence: nuclear weapons allow both sides to inflict devastating blows, so neither side will strike the other. Nuclear weapons will prevent conventional war as both sides fear escalation to mutual annihilation. If it pursued a strategy of MAD, the U.S. would not need so many nuclear weapons; a few large weapons capable of retaliating against Soviet cities would sufficiently deter the Soviets because of their potential for unbearable devastation.<sup>34</sup>

The second type of strategy, *damage limitation*, assumes the U.S. must be able to destroy Soviet nuclear forces in order to have a credible deterrent. In a state of MAD, Soviets might engage in lower levels of aggression toward U.S. allies, believing the U.S. would not respond with an all-out nuclear attack and risk a Soviet response targeting the U.S. homeland. Damage limitation advocates argued the U.S. should build up its arsenal to engage in counterforce targeting, or targeting of Soviet military assets, to limit damage to the U.S. and its allies at any level of aggression. Recent scholars argue policymakers from the 1960s onward—including Carter—publicly accepted MAD in their declaratory policy, but tried to escape it because they attached some political value to possessing nuclear superiority and reaping the national security benefits of nuclear weapons through a damage limitation strategy.<sup>35</sup> According to these scholars,

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<sup>34</sup> For examples of this view, see Bernard Brodie, “War in the Atomic Age,” in *The Absolute Weapon*, ed. Brodie (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co. 1946), 18-61; Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Deterrence Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Kenneth N. Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (1990): 731-745.

<sup>35</sup> Keir A. Lieber, and Daryl Grayson Press, “The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 30, no. 4 (2006): 7-44; Lieber and Press, “The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 1, 2006; Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, “The Geopolitical Origins of U.S. Hard-Target-Kill Counterforce Capabilities and MIRVs” in *The Lure and Pitfalls of MIRVs*, ed. Michael Krepon et. al

concerns about U.S. leverage and its ability to credibly protect its allies motivated the belief that the U.S. required nuclear superiority and the ensuing push away from MAD.

First, the push toward superiority reflected concerns about the state of U.S. extended deterrence if the U.S. adopted a MAD strategy. If the U.S. reduced its arsenal down to a few nuclear weapons, allies might doubt the credibility of U.S. promises to deter a Soviet nuclear attack against them. Would the U.S. really face homeland destruction and use some of its few nuclear weapons to retaliate against Soviet aggression in Western Europe? The U.S. needed a sufficiently large nuclear arsenal to deploy theater nuclear weapons in Europe and develop capabilities to strike Soviet military targets, therefore controlling the escalation of a nuclear exchange. Second, the U.S. pushed toward nuclear superiority because it attached some political leverage to it. U.S. nuclear superiority helped explain its victory in previous crises, as the Soviet Union backed down because it knew the U.S. could bring overwhelming strategic force to bear in a confrontation. Perceptions that the Soviet Union planned to fight and win a nuclear war only accelerated the push for nuclear superiority, as policymakers believed superiority would allow the U.S. to deny any level of Soviet attack and prevent Soviet victory.

According to these scholars, this desire for superiority explains the U.S.'s embrace of damage limitation strategies during the late Cold War, which reinforced the need to build an arsenal to counter attacks at any escalation level. It also explains the force buildups and modernization during this period; the U.S. improved the lethality and accuracy of its nuclear weapons, added missile defense systems, built stealth bombers, and developed MIRV capabilities, among other programs. All of these capabilities suggest a discontent with MAD and a desire to surpass Soviet technology. Finally, this push for superiority explains the U.S. interest

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(Washington: Stimson Center, 2016), 19-54; Green and Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017): 606-641.

in arms control, as policymakers used arms control as an opportunity to make qualitative improvements to the remaining nuclear arsenal. This would codify U.S. advantages in order to pursue damage limitation strategies; arms control functioned as a tool to enshrine nuclear superiority.

It is true that many policymakers during the Cold War seemed to espouse strategies requiring nuclear superiority, as MAD was mainly championed by academics. These scholars, however, fail to explain the causes of this push for superiority, and this supposed inevitable shift away from MAD may not have been as clear or inevitable as they claim. At times, their evidence obfuscates the causality of their argument. Austin Long and Brendan Green argue that the need for superiority led to the development of hard-target-kill (HTK) capabilities, while also arguing the advent of HTK made counterforce possible and “clearly motivated many of the doctrinal and programmatic decisions that elevated the strategic arms race to new heights.”<sup>36</sup> They suggest the desire for damage limitation strategies led to this technological change, but they also suggest technological change prompted the embrace of damage limitation. If technological change led to this shift in strategy, it suggests that the desire for superiority did not drive the shift toward counterforce targeting and damage limitation.

Additionally, policymakers lacked consensus about the need for superiority; they debated both the utility and possibility of gaining nuclear superiority during this period. The authors assume all policymakers found some value in possessing nuclear superiority and did not believe the Soviet Union bought into MAD logic, but it is unclear that such a consensus existed. Even during the Kennedy administration, where the U.S. may have had nuclear superiority in some areas, decisionmakers doubted nuclear superiority mattered in crises. During the Cuban Missile

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<sup>36</sup> Green and Long, “The Geopolitical Origins of U.S. Hard-Target-Kill Counterforce Capabilities and MIRVs,” 20. HTK refers to the ability to strike military targets, which are hardened to resist destruction in an attack.

Crisis, Kennedy remarked, “What difference does it make? They’ve got enough to blow us up anyway.” Trachtenberg further argues, “There is no evidence at all in the documents that anyone believed that the U.S. could face a war with confidence because of its vast nuclear power.”<sup>37</sup>

When faced with the prospect of a nuclear showdown, Kennedy and his advisors did not believe having a superior nuclear arsenal would exert much influence on the Soviets’ behavior, as they still possessed the capability to inflict massive damage on the U.S. despite their inferiority.

Decisionmakers also lacked consensus about the possibility of even achieving nuclear superiority. As Schilling notes, every President since Eisenhower could have pushed the U.S. to achieve decisive nuclear superiority but all backed off, worried about exorbitantly high defense budgets and the potential detriment to domestic programs and Americans’ standard of living.<sup>38</sup> Lieber and Press even concede this point, saying strategies based on disarming the enemy, and thus requiring nuclear superiority, “Appeared impossible because the superpower arsenals were large and dispersed, and were considered easy to hide and protect.”<sup>39</sup> They still suggest, however, that policymakers ignored this point as they kept obliviously pushing for superiority. Some policymakers may have indeed favored pursuing nuclear superiority in response to the perceived military threat, but each President recognized this course of action was unfeasible because of its cost and potential to encourage dangerous arms racing. Not all policymakers believed in the necessity of pushing for nuclear superiority, so the U.S.’s embrace of damage limitation may not have stemmed from a collective recognition of the illogic of MAD.

Further, these scholars espouse a cynical view of arms control as a means to enshrine strategic superiority, but this downplays policymakers’ significant time and energy spent

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<sup>37</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, “The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis.” *International Security* 10, no. 1 (1985): 147-148.

<sup>38</sup> Warner R. Schilling, “U.S. Strategic Nuclear Concepts in the 1970s: The Search for Sufficiently Equivalent Countervailing Parity,” *International Security* 6, no. 2 (1981): 78.

<sup>39</sup> Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence,” *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017): 9.

pursuing major arms control agreements. These measures occurred concomitantly with the shift toward damage limitation—policymakers may have only used them to enshrine U.S. superiority, but arms control still placed major restrictions on the arsenal and hindered the U.S.’s ability to maintain the nuclear superiority required for extensive damage limitation. This assessment also downplays some policymakers’ serious dedication to arms control; Jimmy Carter believed deeply in the value of arms control, in one speech calling for both the reduction of arms and a freeze on modernization in order to produce “reciprocal stability, parity, and security.”<sup>40</sup> This genuine commitment to arms control does not seem to be a strategic ploy to codify U.S. advantages, so the overwhelming push for nuclear superiority cannot explain the major investments in arms control during this period.

Finally, these scholars draw conclusions about policymakers’ distaste for MAD by using evidence from some aspects of nuclear strategy, but they ignore declaratory policy. There are many levels of nuclear policy: declaratory, employment, operational, acquisition, and deployment. These scholars might contend that declaratory policy—the aggregation of public statements about nuclear posture—is irrelevant because it does not reveal policymakers’ true intent; leaders might continue to advocate MAD on the declaratory level while pursuing superiority at every other level. Indeed, public rhetoric from Presidents like Nixon and Carter often denied the importance of nuclear superiority in maintaining deterrence. This public rhetoric, however, has inherent significance, as policymakers deployed this language to send signals about the nature of U.S. nuclear posture to domestic and international audiences. Policymakers could have adjusted their rhetoric to explain the necessity of nuclear superiority, but they maintained language adhering to MAD; they must have ascribed some political value to

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<sup>40</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame,” May 22, 1977, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7552>.

this rhetoric. By de-emphasizing declaratory policy in their analysis of nuclear policy's evolution, these scholars divorce the outcome—damage limitation strategies—from the politics of formulating this strategy and shaping audience perceptions of it. Analysis assuming a collective push away from MAD ignores the contestation at every level of policy and cannot explain how this view of the importance of nuclear superiority came to dominate strategic planning.

### **Hawks and Doves: Domestic Politics and Nuclear Policy**

Some scholars have offered an alternative account of Carter's policy shift; they highlight the domestic politics influencing Carter's strategy to show the lack of consensus within the U.S. about the correct trajectory of foreign policy. These accounts, however, fail to explain why and how domestic coalitions mobilized against Carter, and why Carter's opposition seemed to sabotage his agenda. Some argue public disapproval of Carter inhibited him from carrying out his desired policies, forcing him to eventually capitulate and adopt a more hawkish policy to reflect public demand. Interest groups helped intensify this public opposition, which further increased the public backlash against Carter. Dan Caldwell argues Carter tried to sell the SALT II treaty to the public, but the treaty failed in the Senate because hawkish defense interest groups and public opinion hijacked Carter's desire for arms control.<sup>41</sup> Others point to Congressional opinion as the key factor undermining Carter's policy. A hawkish coalition in the Senate blocked Carter's initial policy goals, but in order for Carter to gain approval for any nuclear policy, he needed to appease this group. For instance, Fred Kaplan and Martin Sherwin

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<sup>41</sup> Dan Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

speculate that Carter approved PD-59 and other modernization programs because he had fallen out of favor with the Senate; he needed these programs to appease Senate hawks.<sup>42</sup>

While these accounts illustrate how Carter needed to balance demands from various domestic groups as he formulated his nuclear policy, they do not completely explain why Carter selected specific policies, nor why he could not prevent the mobilization of this opposition against him. Public opinion, for example, may not have had a direct causal effect on Carter's selection of nuclear policy, as a large segment of the domestic public remained uninformed and apathetic about it. The hostile public opinion likely created domestic pressure for Carter to address constituents' concerns, but Carter still could have combatted public accusations of weakness by demonstrating that his nuclear policy would, in fact, provide the U.S. with a strong defense. It is also not clear why interest groups were so successful at mobilizing this public opinion on issues like SALT if "most Americans did not perceive the issue of arms control as affecting their interests."<sup>43</sup> Without understanding why these groups mobilized against Carter, we cannot understand the underlying causes of Carter's shifting policy as he responded to this mobilization.

Similarly, the Congressional opposition explanation does not explain why this hawkish coalition mobilized so successfully against Carter's agenda. Both the House and the Senate had Democratic majorities through Carter's entire term, so he should have had more agency to push his nuclear policies through Congress. This suggests Carter faced a bipartisan coalition of opponents, but these scholars do not explain why this hawkish coalition gained strength and why Carter could not silence this opposition. Understanding these processes will shed light on why Carter may have shifted his nuclear policy in response to this domestic contestation. In the next

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<sup>42</sup> Fred Kaplan and Martin J. Sherwin, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control*, 92.



section, I advance a theory explaining how actors use legitimation to build coalitions and undermine opponents; this will clarify how the process of nuclear strategy debate allowed a coalition to mobilize against Carter and force him to shift his strategy.

### **Narrative, Coalition-Building, and Legitimation**

Nuclear policy, like other areas of domestic and foreign policy, is often the site of profound contestation, as different coalitions compete to justify their desired policy. I argue that unsettled moments, in which various groups advance narratives about the trajectory of future policy, offer the greatest opportunity for groups to mobilize public support for their vision. I draw from theories of agenda setting to understand this competition, as actors try to place their policies on leaders' agendas and define the dominant foreign policy narrative. First, I describe the concept of legitimation, the central mechanism by which actors gain or undermine support through their justification of policy to an audience. To gain support for their position, actors must use legitimation strategies that have resonance, meaning the rhetoric conforms to norms the audience deems acceptable. This legitimation can also undermine support for the opposition by demonstrating the illegitimacy of opponents' claims, denying them the ability to mobilize. One group eventually silences their opponents through this process of argumentation, building a coalition around their desired narrative until it dominates public debate.

Legitimation is central to the process of attracting support to one coalition and undermining another, as it allows coalitions to explain why audiences should prefer their policy options over others. I define *legitimation* as the process of justifying actions through rhetoric invoking existing norms and rules to appeal to an audience.<sup>44</sup> Even though some realists dismiss

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<sup>44</sup> Stacie E. Goddard, "The Rhetoric of Appeasement: Hitler's Legitimation and British Foreign Policy, 1938–39," *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 107. See also Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

rhetoric as “cheap talk,” they have historically recognized the importance of framing issues to gain public approval. For instance, Morgenthau knew the rise of mass politics required grand strategists to use rhetoric to articulate the national interest as a means to generate consensus.<sup>45</sup>

Foreign policy is often characterized by a debate between multiple factions articulating different visions of the U.S.’s role in the world, and these factions must explain why the public and domestic elites should support and adopt their viewpoint over others. Rhetoric and legitimation become central to both building a coalition and competing with others because the weaker side uses their arguments to reframe situations and make others sympathetic to their cause—in other words, “Structuring the world so you can win.”<sup>46</sup>

In fact, some scholars have recognized legitimation’s importance in foreign policy, even focusing on Carter’s failure to legitimate his original vision of foreign policy. David Skidmore describes Carter’s intended defense policy as a coordinated response to the U.S.’s hegemonic decline after the Vietnam War, arguing Carter shifted because he failed to legitimate his envisioned strategy.<sup>47</sup> Skidmore draws on Alexander George’s theory of legitimation, claiming legitimation must resonate with the public’s fixed interests.<sup>48</sup> The public was predisposed to favor more interventionist and confrontational policies, so Carter would have needed to either justify his policy to appeal to these fixed interests or bring about an entirely new consensus.

While I accept legitimation’s ability to shape policy outcomes, I argue that effective legitimation

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<sup>45</sup> Vibeke Schou Tjalve and Michael C. Williams, “Reviving the Rhetoric of Realism: Politics and Responsibility in Grand Strategy,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 37–60. See also Arthur A. Stein, “The Justifying State: Why Anarchy Doesn’t Mean No Excuses,” in *Peace, Prosperity, and Politics*, ed. John Mueller (Boulder: Westview, 2000), 235–55.

<sup>46</sup> William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986): ix. See also E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (Hinsdale, Ill: Dryden Press, 1960).

<sup>47</sup> David Skidmore, *Reversing Course: Carter’s Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and the Failure of Reform* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Alexander L. George, “Domestic Constraints and Regime Change in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Need for Policy Legitimacy” in *Change in the International System*, eds. O. R. Holsti, R. Siverson, and A. L. George (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 233–262.

does not require this consensus; successful legitimation can change people's opinions, and even then people can still recognize the legitimacy of their non-preferred options. Further, this account suggests Carter's legitimation was doomed from the beginning, failing to explain why Carter would have strategically selected such a strategy. By conceptualizing legitimation as a means to mobilize support, my theory will better explain the conditions under which effective legitimation affects policy outcomes.

Foreign policy legitimation during the Carter administration took place during a moment of deep uncertainty about the future of nuclear policy, as the U.S. and Soviet Union had reached strategic parity. As I will argue in Chapter 2, parity represented an "unsettled moment": a moment where multiple narratives about the current state of affairs coexist in public debate.<sup>49</sup> Policymakers could not agree on the foreign policy implications of parity, and the public accepted multiple interpretations of this moment. In this unsettled moment, Carter should have been able to weave a narrative about the stability of parity from his position of authority, using this interpretation to guide the U.S. toward a decreased role for nuclear weapons in national security policy. Why, then, did Carter fail to legitimate his strategy and bring clarity to the confusion about parity? Ronald Krebs, whose work examines why and how national security narratives come to dominate public debate, would argue Carter adopted the wrong type of rhetoric at this moment. He predicts that storytelling, rather than argumentation, allows Presidents to seize the opportunity in unsettled moments and bring their desired narrative to the fore.<sup>50</sup> On its face, however, Carter's rhetoric seems to fit this storytelling mode, as he

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<sup>49</sup> Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41-48. Krebs draws on Janice Bially Mattern's definition of narrative as "a particular process of representation through which an author tells events." Janice Bially Mattern, *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representational Force* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Storytelling emphasizes the explanation of a series of events to a confused audience. Arguments presume mutual understanding and thus emphasize persuading audiences of the correctness of actions; see Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 36. For a discussion of rhetoric as a strategic tool, see Chaim Perelman and Lucie

recognized the existence of differing views and strived to make sense of parity to generate a shared understanding of it. Thus, Krebs's theory incorrectly predicts the outcome in Carter's case.

Moreover, Krebs's theory does not consider how unsettled moments open up space for multiple legitimations and give other groups more power to mobilize against the President. Krebs assumes the structural context of public debate constrains Presidential oratory, but otherwise, the President has the authority to determine the national narrative. Presidents certainly have a platform granting them the ability to construct arguments and stories. At the same time, however, these messages must reach a receptive audience—the audience might respond to or challenge the narrative rather than always act as its passive receiver. Presidential rhetoric and the structural context alone cannot account for the creation or erosion of national security narratives, as unsettled moments give more power and agency to actors legitimating alternative narratives. This provides an audience of domestic coalitions the opportunity to unseat other narratives. Below, I characterize this process of narrative contestation and describe how legitimation serves as a key mechanism in this competition.

Some might question legitimation's relevance to nuclear policy, as debates about these issues take place largely in private. The public cannot be mobilized because they are uneducated about and indifferent towards foreign policy. I argue, however, that private planning often still becomes visible to the public in the form of speeches, Congressional hearings, leaks to the press, and more. This public visibility requires leaders to justify why their policy makes sense for achieving a political or military outcome. Additionally, the mechanisms of legitimation still function in the private sphere even if the audience of legitimation shrinks to only a few people.

In public and private settings, speakers care about using language their audience deems acceptable; they are constrained by “the civilizing force of hypocrisy”—they face backlash if they appear to support a policy out of narrow, parochial interests.<sup>51</sup> Greenhill defines these hypocrisy costs as “Symbolic political costs that can be imposed where there exists a real (or perceived) disparity between a professed commitment to...international norms and demonstrated state actions that contravene such a commitment.”<sup>52</sup> If legitimation only seems to appeal to the speaker’s self-interest, the audience doubts her commitment to serving the broader public. This hypocrisy causes others to question the speaker’s reputation and divert their support away from the speaker.<sup>53</sup> Even in private, leaders know they will eventually justify their policy to the public, so their private legitimation should bear similarity to that of the public sphere.

In both public and private, groups use legitimation to justify their views and mobilize a coalition of support. They inevitably compete with coalitions holding alternate views; to understand this process of contestation, I draw on theories of agenda setting from American Politics literature. Agenda setting conceptualizes the contestation over policy options as a political process in and of itself. According to Schattschneider, “The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power”;<sup>54</sup> certain policy problems and solutions become the focus of leaders’ attention through a process of debate and contestation. The groups who successfully explain their policy problems and attract public attention gain power because they

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<sup>51</sup> Jon Elster, “Deliberation and Constitution Making” in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 111.

<sup>52</sup> Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 52. See also Daryl Glaser, “Does Hypocrisy Matter? The Case of US Foreign Policy,” *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 251–68.

<sup>53</sup> Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn’t All It’s Cracked Up to Be,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 58–85.

<sup>54</sup> Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 66. Other work on agenda setting includes Thomas A. Birkland, *After Disaster: Agenda Setting, Public Policy, and Focusing Events* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997); Roger W. Cobb and Marc Howard Ross, *Cultural Strategies of Agenda Denial: Avoidance, Attack, and Redefinition* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers, *Agenda-Setting* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, Inc, 1996); Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012).

get to define the solutions to the problems, having isolated and silenced their opposition. While the theory focuses on domestic policy issues, it is also relevant to foreign policy.<sup>55</sup> The group who defines the policy agenda gets to determine the solutions, since articulating a particular vision of foreign policy dictates a specific range of concrete policy options. In this case, the winners of this competition can elevate their foreign policy narrative to become the dominant public narrative. Victory in this form of competition requires effective legitimation, which must achieve two tasks: gain support for their coalition's position and undermine support for the opposing coalition.

First, groups must gain support by justifying their position so that others recognize it as valuable or desirable. Audiences will only join a coalition if they find its policy justification acceptable, sensible, and relevant. In other words, successful legitimation must *resonate*, or have “pertinence, relevance, or significance” for the audience.<sup>56</sup> The most effective rhetoric has content appealing to some accepted principles, such as norms, interests, identities, or legal structures. It could also demonstrate expertise or authority on an issue, or make policies appear practical or feasible. Moreover, this legitimation must be “multivocal,” or resonate with multiple audiences—actors want to win skeptics to their coalition without alienating existing supporters.<sup>57</sup> Thus, they need to strategically select rhetoric that will appeal to multiple rules and norms in

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<sup>55</sup> With a few exceptions; see Dan B. Wood and Jeffrey S. Peake, “The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Agenda Setting,” *The American Political Science Review* 92, no. 1 (1998): 173–84.

<sup>56</sup> Fred Kniss, “Ideas and Symbols as Resources in Intrareligious Conflict: The Case of American Mennonites,” *Sociology of Religion; Washington* 57, no. 1 (1996): 7–23; quoted in Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). For more on resonance, see Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917; Rodger A. Payne, “Persuasion, Frames and Norm Construction,” *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2001): 37–61; Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611–39.

<sup>57</sup> For multivocal legitimation, see Goddard, *When Right Makes Might*. Her work draws on the definition of multivocality in John F. Padgett and Christopher K. Ansell, “Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400–1434,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 6 (1993): 1259–1319. Snyder’s work shows how speakers use rhetoric to hide internal contradictions in their vision as they build a coalition; see Jack Snyder, “Dueling Security Stories: Wilson and Lodge Talk Strategy,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 171–97.

order to draw the most support toward their coalition. To aid this legitimation, actors can try to increase their position's public visibility, attracting a potential audience to potentially mobilize. Scholars of agenda setting describe this as a process of "coalitional outbidding": by bringing debates into the public sphere and "expanding the scope of conflict," a weaker group can not only bring awareness to their policy alternatives but also mobilize support and attract allies to strengthen its position.<sup>58</sup> If groups gain this public visibility and use resonant legitimation, they can gain support, gain Congressional attention, and gain the ability to influence the President's agenda.

As actors use legitimation to gain support for their position, they must also use this legitimation to delegitimize and undermine support for their opponent's policy. As they expand the scope of conflict, groups also gain the opportunity to wrench support away from the opposition. Actors use *rhetorical coercion* to demonstrate the illegitimacy of opponents' claims and prevent a rival group from mobilizing a coalition with its own rhetoric. By using resonant rhetoric, actors can demonstrate that opposition rhetoric is contradictory or unacceptable within a particular normative framework, inflicting hypocrisy costs and depriving the opponent of the tools to create a publicly acceptable response.<sup>59</sup> Actors trap opponents with their own words, preventing them from successfully legitimating their policy and therefore preventing the opponent from mobilizing support. Eventually, this argumentation will completely silence the opposition, granting the remaining coalition the ability to carry out their policy agenda driven by

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<sup>58</sup> For expanding the scope of conflict see Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People*, 20; Donald P. Haider-Markel and Kenneth J. Meier, "The Politics of Gay and Lesbian Rights: Expanding the Scope of the Conflict," *The Journal of Politics* 58, no. 2 (1996): 332–49; for coalitional outbidding see William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (Westport: Praeger, 1984); Etel Solingen, "Domestic Coalitions, Internationalization, and War: Then and Now," *International Security* 39, no. 1 (2014): 44–70.

<sup>59</sup> This draws on works advancing a coercive conceptualization of rhetoric, including Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 35–66; Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 155–87.

their desired narrative. Rhetoric, then, becomes essential for building and destroying domestic coalitions and subsequently constructing a policy agenda—actors use legitimation as a strategic bid for power.

In sum, I argue policy outcomes can be explained by a process of contestation among domestic coalitions legitimating their desired strategies. In both the public and private spheres, actors mobilize support by using rhetoric that resonates with a wide audience by appealing to a variety of norms. They also use this legitimation to accuse their opponents of trespassing on these same norms, demonstrating the illegitimacy of the opposing view. This rhetoric silences and weakens other coalitions, as it denies them the ability to use resonant language to mobilize their own base of support. Unsettled moments provide the motivation and opportunity for groups to begin this process of contestation, as they provide the space for multiple groups to compete to define the dominant narrative and seize control of the policy agenda.

## **Methodology**

I test this theory of the role of legitimation and coalition-building in influencing policy outcomes alongside competing explanations of the dependent variable, Carter's nuclear policy choices. I will test the following hypotheses:

1. Carter's embrace of damage limitation policies resulted from opposing coalitions' increasing ability to successfully mobilize and legitimate their desired strategy
2. Carter's policies resulted from his recognition of an increasing Soviet threat and his concern for U.S. ability to deter attacks on its allies and the homeland
3. Carter's policies resulted from his response to increasing political weakness due to partisan and public opposition to his foreign policy



Under the first hypothesis, domestic actors should attempt to justify nuclear strategies to public audiences and to each other, appealing to norms like deterrence to legitimate their strategies. This public audience will include the mass public, Congressmen, and other prominent public figures in nuclear policy, such as leaders of defense interest groups. The process of debate and legitimation will also occur in private, but it should intensify as the debate gains public visibility. Actors may try to make their arguments visible to gain support for their coalition and publicly delegitimize their opposition. We should expect to see evidence of this process of legitimation: actors will try to impose hypocrisy costs on their opponents by pointing out contradictions or instances where their arguments violate existing norms and seem to undermine U.S. security. Conversely, groups should demonstrate their understand the dangers of violating these norms in their own legitimation and shift their rhetoric to avoid hypocrisy costs. Finally, each winning policy outcome will have the support of a significant coalition of government and non-government actors, and MAD-type policies will lose support as they come to be seen as less legitimate.

Under the second hypothesis, the Carter administration would embrace policies based on an optimistic view of parity during periods where they perceive the Soviets to be cooperating with the U.S. As they perceived an increase in the Soviet threat, they would reach a consensus that damage limitation would best counter these provocations. This policy shift would occur in response to either specific acts of Soviet aggression that the U.S. deems an attempted increase in Soviet geopolitical influence (such as conventional provocations in Third World countries), or to increases in Soviet capabilities which demonstrate they intend to fight and win a nuclear war. The administration would express dissatisfaction with MAD in light of concerns about U.S. extended deterrence in an age of strategic parity. Carter would reference his perceptions of this

threat in his policy justification, particularly when discussing the importance of extended deterrence, demonstrating his understanding that nuclear superiority would best allow the U.S. to counter a Soviet warfighting posture.

Under the third hypothesis, Carter would succeed in executing policies based on his optimistic view of parity when he has high levels of support in Congress and polls favorably among the American public on foreign or defense policy. We would see presidential weakness as Carter's poll numbers fall and he struggles to execute his legislative agenda. As Congressional opposition mounts and the public becomes increasingly alarmed about the Soviet threat, Carter moves toward damage limitation in an attempt to appease these groups and address their specific demands.

To test these hypotheses, I conduct process-tracing to follow the development of Carter's policy, taking care to reconstruct these historical events with as much accuracy as possible. To track debates about various policies and assess the roles of different coalitions, I use articles from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. While newspaper coverage does not convey the degree of public attention given to policy debates, newspapers provide context for the debates and allow me to use qualitative software to analyze patterns and changes in different actors' legitimation strategies. I consult Carter's speeches in *The American Presidency Project* to track his rhetoric and policy justification, and utilize other public documents like Congressional hearings to assess how other actors advocate for their desired policy. There are many levels of military strategy, including declaratory policy, acquisition policy, and deployment policy, and these documents may only reveal declaratory postures and obscure other levels of policy. The declaratory policy has inherent value, however, as it reveals the shifting narratives about parity and the messages actors want to convey to international and domestic audiences. Finally, I use

private documents from the National Security Archive and the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library to trace the private decisionmaking process and test whether the same dynamics of legitimation function in the private sphere. Many of these documents still remain classified, so I cannot capture all the details of the decisionmaking process. To mitigate this limitation, I corroborate across sources to obtain a general picture of different key actors' positions on the various issues and how the trajectory of debate changes over time.

This thesis proceeds as follows to test my theory of coalition-building and legitimation in Carter's nuclear policy. The next chapter establishes parity as an unsettled moment and discusses Paul Warnke's nomination as Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) demonstrate early mobilization of Carter's opposing coalition. Chapter 3 analyzes the failure of SALT II and Carter's approval of the MX, demonstrating how Carter's public rhetoric about arms control backfired and allowed a coalition to mobilize and hijack the debate about the treaty. Chapter 4 examines the private debate about nuclear strategy leading to PD-59, demonstrating how the lack of legitimation required in the private sphere prevented dissenters from mobilizing against this strategy. Finally, I conclude with a brief summary of my findings and a discussion of their implications for other cases and theories presented here.

## Chapter 2: Parity and the Carter Administration

*Senator Danforth: It seems to me that we are really voting for a philosophy even more than for an individual in this case.*<sup>60</sup>

Carter began his Presidency with ambitious goals to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in foreign policy, but by its end, he had bolstered their importance and taken steps to gain strategic advantages over the Soviet Union. Throughout his term, domestic debates swirled about the meaning of strategic parity, allowing a coalition fearful of this parity to gain visibility as they opposed Carter's agenda. This chapter establishes this context of parity as an unsettled moment, as parity forced actors to formulate interpretations of its meaning for the future of nuclear policy. One coalition offered a narrative of parity as an opportunity to reduce the arsenal and embrace a MAD posture. Meanwhile, another coalition offered a narrative of parity as a potential threat to national security because they feared the U.S. would lose political leverage; the U.S. needed a damage limitation strategy to prevent Soviet superiority. Their rhetoric needed to conform to the norm of deterrence as they legitimated their narratives, avoiding accusations of favoring unilateral disarmament or warfighting strategies. Next, this chapter describes the controversy over Carter's nominee for Director of the ACDA to show an early example of this debate about parity. In this case, opponents used rhetoric around the fear of unilateral disarmament to delegitimize Carter and Warnke's position of restraint, arguing it allowed Soviet superiority and undermined deterrence. A hawkish coalition broadened this debate to mobilize support for their narrative requiring the U.S. to deny Soviet advantages; Carter lost a chance to silence them and gain support for his narrative of parity.

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<sup>60</sup> *Warnke Nomination: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Fourth Congress, First Session, on Nomination of Paul C. Warnke to Be Director of the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, with the Rank of Ambassador during His Tenure of Service as Director, February 8 and 9, 1977* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 5.

## Parity: An Unsettled Moment

In order to test the theory described in Chapter 1, I will first demonstrate that the context in which Carter made policy decisions was, in fact, an unsettled moment. *Parity*, according to intelligence and military assessments, meant the U.S. and the Soviet Union possessed roughly equivalent nuclear arsenals in terms of both numbers and capabilities. By the time Carter arrived in office, debates about the meaning of this parity swirled about the public discourse on nuclear weapons.<sup>61</sup> I argue this numerical parity generated deep uncertainty about its implications for U.S. national security and the future of deterrence. I will show how this moment created space for coalitions to tell different narratives about parity, rendering it an unsettled moment. Within these narratives, actors had the freedom to legitimate various policy agendas with roughly equal public acceptance, although their rhetoric needed to adhere to existing norms of deterrence. The coalitions could use these bounds of legitimation to undermine opponents as they tried to transform their interpretation of parity into the dominant, settled narrative.

Most in the U.S. could agree the two superpowers had arrived at a moment of numerical parity, but the meaning of this parity remained unclear. Numbers of nuclear weapons did not objectively translate to particular political effects or war outcomes, so numerical parity did not immediately dictate specific political consequences for the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Government officials regarded parity as an event of “major political and military significance,” but they could not specify the nature of this significance.<sup>62</sup> The CIA declared in one NIE, “Parity in this sense cannot be objectively measured; it is essentially a state of mind.”<sup>63</sup> While the CIA was confident about the existence of the nuclear arsenals’ overall equivalence, they

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<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of this debate, see Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 120-133.

<sup>62</sup> Schilling emphasizes this point about the disconnect between measures of the strategic balance and actual war outcomes; see Schilling, “U.S. Strategic Nuclear Concepts in the 1970s,” 49, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *NIE 11-8-70--Soviet Forces for Intercontinental Attack* (24 November 1970), 5.

could not determine how parity would affect the actual conduct of a nuclear war, rendering the political and military effects of parity indeterminate. Documents associated with Presidential Review Memorandum (PRM) 10, one of Carter's nuclear policy studies, also expressed ambivalence about parity's implications for U.S. ability to use its nuclear forces for leverage over the Soviet Union: "The continuance of an American option to manipulate strategic forces for political purposes is, at best, uncertain."<sup>64</sup> Parity was less an objective fact and more a state of mind, because it lacked an inherent meaning and compelled actors to create their own narrative about parity's effect on future foreign policy.

Parity served as an unsettled moment because actors constructed two opposing narratives about its meaning, both of which were seen as legitimate by those involved in nuclear policy debates. If parity represented a settled moment, virtually all policymakers would have agreed on a particular interpretation of parity, and policies at odds with this narrative would seem illegitimate. Settled moments still permit policy disagreements, such as how much to increase or decrease nuclear forces, but the debates stay within one broad framework for understanding foreign policy. This moment of parity, however, better fits the definition of an unsettled moment, as it created a major rift between domestic coalitions as they struggled to interpret parity. In an unsettled moment, there is "no single storyline that serves the regnant common sense."<sup>65</sup> Multiple narratives about the meaning of such a moment feature prominently in public debate with roughly equal legitimacy.

The age of superiority still featured differing views about nuclear strategy, but they embraced a common narrative of the security of the U.S. deterrent. Parity, however, upended

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<sup>64</sup> "Political Uses of Military Force," 5, n.d., NSC Institutional Files, "PRM-10 [1]," Box 27, Jimmy Carter Library [hereafter cited as JCL].

<sup>65</sup> Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 33. Swidler defines these as moments where "cultural meanings are more highly articulated and explicit, because they model patterns of action that do not 'come naturally.'" Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 284.

this consensus as it forced the creation of narratives with vastly different implications for U.S. deterrence. During superiority, actors avoided major debates about the political utility of nuclear weapons. MAD advocates could argue the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal did not matter to maintaining deterrence, as deterrence only relied on at least one weapon's devastating retaliatory capability. Damage limitation advocates could argue nuclear superiority allowed the U.S. to deter the Soviet Union, because the Soviet Union would not escalate a crisis if the U.S. had overwhelming nuclear capability to match any level of nuclear attack on the U.S. or its allies. In the age of superiority, both groups had faith in the U.S.'s ability to deter, and they could debate nuclear strategy while avoiding major disagreements about the political meaning of nuclear weapons. Parity led these groups to vastly different conclusions about this meaning and placed their narratives in direct conflict with each other.

One narrative saw parity as a promising development while the other saw it as a potential threat, and each had implications for a specific trajectory of U.S. foreign policy. The MAD group viewed parity as a moment of opportunity and stability, as the U.S. and Soviet Union would recognize the rough equality in the destructive power of their nuclear arsenals. If the arsenals effectively canceled each other out, both sides could draw down the arms race and make cuts to their nuclear stockpiles.<sup>66</sup> Parity became an opportunity to finally embrace MAD and make progress on arms control, reinforcing the equality found in the balance of terror and vindicating nuclear weapons' primary role for deterrence. The damage limitation group, on the other hand, believed parity left the U.S. in a tenuous position as the Soviet Union actively sought superiority. They worried about parity's implications for U.S. extended deterrence; if the U.S. and Soviets were locked into nuclear equivalence, the Soviets might doubt U.S. commitment to

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<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Spurgeon M. Keeny and Wolfgang K. H. Panofsky, "Mad versus Nuts: Can Doctrine or Weaponry Remedy the Mutual Hostage Relationship of the Superpowers?" *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 2 (1981): 287–304.

escalation in response to Soviet conventional provocation. Bolstering U.S. counterforce capability could address these concerns by allowing the U.S. to thwart any level of Soviet attack via strikes against military assets.<sup>67</sup> This group viewed parity as a threat because they still attached political leverage to having nuclear superiority; nuclear weapons provided additional utility beyond deterrence, so the loss of this leverage in the age of parity would erode U.S. security. Overall, parity's ambiguity created the impetus for one group to demonstrate parity's potential threat while the other attempted to demonstrate parity's potential opportunity to enhance security.

These coalitions used rhetoric to justify their policy agendas within a particular parity narrative, but they still observed boundaries on the content of their legitimation. In particular, their rhetoric respected the norm of deterrence. Policymakers had constructed a set of ideas about how the U.S. ought to deter, and legitimate speech about nuclear policy had to conform to these ideas. Deterrence has been the centerpiece of strategy in the nuclear age: how can the U.S. prevent the massive devastation of a nuclear attack on the U.S. or its allies? From the beginning of the Cold War to the arrival of parity, policymakers, intellectuals, and military strategists developed and settled on interpretations of deterrence, combining them to create a collective understanding of deterrence to ascribe meaning to the reality of the nuclear age. Although deterrence existed objectively as long as no nuclear war occurred, the U.S. built entire strategies, weapons systems, and schools of thought around its beliefs about deterrence. Deterrence functioned as a norm in this regard, as it permitted a range of acceptable ideas about nuclear

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<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne, "Victory is Possible," *Foreign Policy* 14, no. 39 (1980): 14-27; Paul H. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," *Foreign Affairs* 56, no. 2 (1976): 207-232; Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary* 64, no. 1 (1977): 10-22.



weapons. Actors could craft and justify strategies that appealed to this norm and faced public criticism for strategies appearing to undermine deterrence.

The norm of deterrence created several bounds in rhetoric about nuclear strategy. First, those ascribing to the damage limitation school could justify strategies denying Soviet victory, but they could not call for a strategy explicitly seeking nuclear superiority. Opponents could accuse such a policy of violating norms of deterrence because it seemed to suggest the U.S. contemplated first use of nuclear weapons in a crisis. Why pursue costly force buildups to regain nuclear superiority if deterrence only required the U.S. to use its weapons in retaliation against a Soviet attack? Relatedly, actors could not justify strategies implying the U.S. had a concept of fighting and winning a nuclear war. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara faced public backlash from his 1962 “No Cities” speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he articulated a new strategy treating nuclear weapons like conventional weapons, saying, “The principal military objectives...should be the destruction of the enemy’s forces, not his civilian population.”<sup>68</sup> He recanted on this position as domestic audiences worried about the costs of this strategy and feared this declaratory policy implied the U.S. would strike first and thus initiate nuclear war.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, treating nuclear weapons like conventional weapons implied the U.S. could win a nuclear war as it had won conventional wars; it suggested the U.S. would be willing to wage nuclear war at the expense of its citizens. Even pessimists about parity insisted their strategies were not “war-winning,” recognizing that this type of speech rejected the idea of the nuclear revolution and violated the norm of deterrence.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Robert McNamara, “Commencement Address, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor,” June 16, 1962, <http://slantchev.ucsd.edu/courses/ps142j/documents/mcnamara-no-cities.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 165.

<sup>70</sup> Desmond Ball, “The Development of the SIOP, 1960-1983” in *Strategic Nuclear Targeting*, eds. Ball and Richelson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 70.

Second, optimists about parity could call for a MAD strategy reducing the size of the U.S. arsenal, but they could not justify these policies by citing nuclear weapons' complete lack of political utility. This notion differed from the claim that numbers of nuclear weapons did not matter—numbers were irrelevant because the U.S. only needed a few weapons to retaliate and maintain deterrence. If actors completely divorced nuclear weapons from political goals, however, they rejected the conviction that nuclear weapons were essential for deterrence. By renouncing the logic of MAD, such claims faced allegations that the policies would undermine deterrence. Similarly, actors also could not suggest the U.S. begin to disarm without seeking balanced reductions from the Soviet Union. As I will describe below, the suggestion that Carter's nominee for Director of the ACDA favored unilateral disarmament sparked heated domestic debates. Unilateral disarmament led to U.S. inferiority, a concept difficult for a country locked into a superpower arms race to accept. If the U.S. gave up the position of dominance it had enjoyed since the end of World War II, it would lose some leverage in the eyes of the Soviet Union, Allies, or the domestic population. Therefore, policy suggesting unbalanced reductions faced criticism it would leave the U.S. unable to deter a nuclear attack. The existence of parity did not inherently threaten deterrence, but coalitions adhering to both narratives of parity had to legitimate policies that did not threaten long-standing norms of deterrence.

This competition between parity narratives took place throughout Carter's term, as actors on both sides tried to legitimate their interpretation and justify a policy agenda without suggesting the U.S. accept inferiority or pursue war-fighting measures. Within these bounds, actors tried to make arguments that resonated with their audience to win support for their narrative. Elite support for both narratives afforded them some legitimacy. For example, in the Team A/Team B controversy, Kissinger argued the Soviet Union did not seek superiority, so the

U.S. could accept parity and did not need to aggressively counter Soviet actions. Meanwhile, people like Rumsfeld and Lt. Gen. George L. Keegan, Jr., former head of Air Force Intelligence, argued the Soviets did seek superiority so any U.S. restraint could be destabilizing.<sup>71</sup> The coalitions also legitimated their narratives by describing different roles for nuclear weapons in national security. Parity optimists believed parity affirmed nuclear weapons' sole purpose of deterrence—parity's stability implied the U.S. could reduce the arsenal and return to a strictly retaliatory strategy. Pessimists argued nuclear weapons had additional utility in addition to deterrence; possession of nuclear weapons afforded states additional coercive power, so the U.S. needed to prevent inferiority and the loss of this power. In both legitimations, actors respected MAD logic as they interpreted parity, placing their rhetoric within the norm of deterrence to avoid criticism from their opponents.

Media coverage further illustrated the scope of this debate; for example, the *New York Times* published the side-by-side editorials “The Promise of Disarmament” and “The Perils of Détente.” In the former, Richard Barnet of the progressive Institute for Policy Studies argued that superiority was unattainable and meaningless, so the superpowers should accept each other as equals and focus on arms cuts. In the latter, Walter Laqueur of the Center for Strategic and International Studies argued the Soviet Union sought superiority, and he feared allies would pivot to the Soviet Union if the U.S. lost the political leverage from its military superiority.<sup>72</sup> The paper also showcased side-by-side editorials from the American Committee on U.S.-Soviet Relations and Nitze's hawkish Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), in which the first group warned, “The dangers of restraint are less than those of an all-out weapons race.” The CPD

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<sup>71</sup> Drew Middleton, “Issue and Debate: American Security and Expanding Soviet Military Strength,” *New York Times*, January 21, 1977; for more hawkish views see Richard Pipes, “Strategic Superiority,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1977.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Barnet, “Promise of Disarmament,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1977; Walter Laqueur, “Perils of Détente,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1977.

warned instead that if the U.S. did not match Soviet weapons buildups, it would “find [itself] isolated in a hostile world, facing the unremitting pressures of Soviet policy backed by an overwhelming preponderance of military power.”<sup>73</sup> Domestic elites were divided on the meaning of parity, Soviet intentions, and the utility of nuclear superiority, with an increasingly vocal hawkish group warning of the consequences of incipient Soviet superiority.

Coming into office, Carter told the optimistic narrative about parity as he warned against arms racing to regain superiority and emphasized arms control. In his Inaugural Address, he observed, “The world is still engaged in a massive armaments race designed to ensure continuing equivalent strength,” and proposed instead devoting more energy to disarmament.<sup>74</sup> In May 1977, he called for maintaining parity by making substantial arms cuts along with a freeze on nuclear modernization.<sup>75</sup> By the end of his term, however, Carter’s rhetoric seemed to embrace both narratives of parity; the pessimistic view had gained a stronger foothold in the official narrative. For example, in one August 1980 speech, Carter both described the irrelevance of superiority and justified his nuclear strategy as a means to deny any Soviet advantage. On one hand, it was useless “to increase [nuclear] destructive power in search of a temporary edge or in pursuit of an illusion of absolute nuclear superiority”; on the other hand, his targeting policy, PD-59, required increased U.S. nuclear capability so that “no potential enemy of the U.S. should anticipate for one moment a successful use of military power against our vital interests.”<sup>76</sup> In other 1980 speeches, Carter boasted about reversing the Republican decline in defense while still

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<sup>73</sup> “On U.S. Dealings With the Soviet Union,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1977.

<sup>74</sup> Carter, “Inaugural Address.”

<sup>75</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame.”

<sup>76</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Boston, Massachusetts Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Legion,” August 21, 1980, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44925>.

urging a continued commitment to arms control.<sup>77</sup> Thus, Carter entered office in this unsettled moment but failed to elevate his vision of restraint and stability to become the dominant narrative. The rest of this thesis will evaluate the reasons for Carter's failure to mobilize support and gain widespread acceptance of his parity narrative. The next section describes the controversy over Carter's ACDA nomination to demonstrate the contestation between these narratives and the mechanisms by which the coalition against Carter gained legitimacy while undermining Carter's narrative.

### **Reciprocal Restraint or Unilateral Disarmament? The Nomination of Paul Warnke**

In January 1977, Carter sparked an unusually heated domestic debate when he nominated Paul C. Warnke as Director of the ACDA and chief negotiator for SALT II. The controversy over Warnke illustrates the unsettled nature of parity, as the actors involved in the debate based their opinions about Warnke on their conceptions of parity and deterrence. This nomination was one of Carter's first chances to make a clear statement about his arms control goals and define his desired narrative about parity as an opportunity for restraint. Although Warnke received Senate confirmation for both positions, the incident fomented the mobilization of hawkish domestic elites arguing that restraint in nuclear policy permitted Soviet superiority and violated norms of deterrence.

Before receiving Carter's nomination, Warnke had entered government during the Johnson administration and became the Undersecretary of Defense for International Security Affairs under Robert McNamara. Warnke also served as an adviser to Senator George

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<sup>77</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the 1980 Democratic National Convention in New York," August 14, 1980, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44909>; Carter, "The President's News Conference," September 18, 1980, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45082>.

McGovern during his 1972 Presidential campaign.<sup>78</sup> Though not a pacifist, Warnke had criticized the Vietnam War and became a strong advocate for arms control in the 1970s. His most famous article, a 1975 *Foreign Policy* piece called “Apes on a Treadmill,” decried the endless arms race and called for “reciprocal restraint;” he suggested the U.S. pause development of the B-1 and the Trident submarine for six months to encourage the Soviet Union to similarly curb its modernization programs.<sup>79</sup> Thus, Warnke seemed a good candidate to advance Carter’s goals, as he doubted the logic of a ceaseless push for nuclear superiority or the use of new weapons programs as bargaining chips in arms control. At the same time, this nomination signaled Carter’s exclusion of hawks like Nitze from his administration. Carter sent a signal that he would prioritize arms control and elevate people whose conception of parity meant an opportunity for restraint and stability.

Almost immediately, however, critics spoke out against Warnke with unusual vitriol, expressing particular alarm at Warnke’s views in the “Apes on a Treadmill” article. Several hawkish defense-oriented interest groups, most notably the Emergency Coalition Against Unilateral Disarmament, the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, and the CPD, circulated memos to Congressmen urging them to oppose the nomination. They argued Warnke favored unilateral disarmament and highlighted previous statements suggesting the irrelevance of nuclear superiority to claim that Warnke would negotiate arms control granting Soviet superiority.<sup>80</sup> Many in Congress, especially Democrats, grew alarmed at Warnke’s statements; although his confirmation fell under the purview of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, both the Senate and House Armed Services Committees called Warnke to testify as they feared the defense

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<sup>78</sup> “Paul C. Warnke, Arms Control Negotiator, Dies at 81,” *Arms Control Association*, last modified January 1, 2002, [https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002\\_01-02/warnkejanfeb02](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_01-02/warnkejanfeb02).

<sup>79</sup> Paul C. Warnke, “Apes on a Treadmill,” *Foreign Policy* no. 18 (1975): 27-29.

<sup>80</sup> “Democrats’ Group Admits Writing Warnke Critique,” *The Washington Post*, February 5, 1977; Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, 206-208.

implications of his nomination. Senators also demanded to split the nomination and take a vote on Warnke for each position rather than both together.<sup>81</sup>

What prompted this fierce objection? First, critics believed Warnke's statements contradicted Carter's pledges for a strong defense. They argued that the promise of a defense capability "second to none" was incompatible with even hints of unilateral restraint, calling into question Carter's actual commitment to safeguarding national security.<sup>82</sup> Second, critics used accusations of unilateral disarmament as a rhetorical tool to push Warnke's position outside the bounds of deterrence. Unilateral disarmament represented a major security threat because many feared the Soviet Union would not reciprocate U.S. restraint. In that case, the U.S. would permit Soviet buildups until the U.S. did not have sufficient forces left to retaliate after a Soviet first strike. By accusing Warnke of advocating unilateral disarmament, critics hoped to delegitimize his position as they convinced the public of his threat to deterrence and security. Moreover, critics deployed this rhetoric against Warnke to gain support for their coalition, displaying that their coalition believed U.S. strategic weakness undermined deterrence.

Newspaper assessments in February and March remained confident Warnke would receive enough votes to assume both arms positions,<sup>83</sup> but this did not stop the heated debate. Many Senators expressed doubts about Warnke as the chief SALT negotiator, and Byrd admitted many found Warnke too "soft" on arms control.<sup>84</sup> This skepticism stemmed from concerns about Warnke's belief in the unimportance of Soviet superiority, a view one critic called "engagingly childlike," and another characterized as having "little correlation with reality." Senator James

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<sup>81</sup> Lee Lescaze, "Both Sides Step Up Warnke Word War," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 1977.

<sup>82</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "A 'Full-Fledged Battle' Over Paul Warnke?" *The Washington Post*, February 3, 1977. This concern continued after the Warnke debate, as noted by Meg Greenfield: "There is much anxiety among military-minded Democrats that Carter has stocked the national security pond of his government with too many détente-minded fish." Meg Greenfield, "Arms and the Man," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1977.

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Lee Lescaze, "Warnke Hearings Skirt Basic Issues," *The Washington Post*, February 27, 1977; Lee Lescaze, "Warnke Surrogates Ruled Out," *The Washington Post*, February 28, 1977.

<sup>84</sup> Lee Lescaze, "Both Sides Step Up Warnke Word War," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 1977.

McClure (R, ID) asked, “Not believing that superiority matters, how can [Warnke] be expected to extract concessions from the Soviet Union in order to maintain a relative balance of forces?”<sup>85</sup>

Nitze delivered the most forceful objection, disputing Warnke’s qualifications for both positions and calling Warnke a “patsy” who did not understand the meaning of superiority or

equivalence.<sup>86</sup> Senate debate appeared to descend into hairsplitting when Senators accused

Warnke of doctoring a 1972 statement by dropping a comma before presenting it to the Senate.

The Senators believed the original 1972 statement read as follows:

“There is no purpose in either side’s achieving a numerical superiority, which is not translatable into either any sort of military capability or any sort of political potential.”<sup>87</sup>

Without its comma, this statement meant superiority was useless *unless* it could be translated into political or military potential; with the comma, the statement meant superiority was useless

altogether.<sup>88</sup> Senators now doubted Warnke’s credibility and integrity, but this exchange also reveals an enduring belief in superiority’s importance, as well as the mobilization of a group

convinced of nuclear weapons’ political utility even in an age of parity.

This criticism chipped away at some support for Warnke, but he was approved as ACDA director by 70 to 29 and as the chief SALT negotiator by only 58 to 40.<sup>89</sup> Part of the success of

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<sup>85</sup> *Warnke Nomination: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 117. See also George F. Will, “Warnke: ‘Aping’ Through Unilateral Abandonment,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1977.

<sup>86</sup> *Warnke Nomination: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 145; Lee Lescaze, “Senate Armed Services Foes Decide Against Warnke Vote,” *The Washington Post*, March 1, 1977. Senator Charles Perry (R, IL) called Nitze “the most forceful voice in opposition” to Warnke, and Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker (R, TN) believed Nitze’s testimony did hurt Warnke. See Lee Lescaze, “Debate on Warnke Sharpens,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1977. Other insults in the hearings came from Mark Lockman, head of the hawkish Liberty Lobby, who said nominating Warnke “would be like choosing a bull weevil to head the Department of Agriculture.” See *Warnke Nomination: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 135.

<sup>87</sup> *Consideration of Mr. Paul C. Warnke to Be Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and Ambassador: Hearings Together with Individual Views, Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Ninety-Fifth Congress, First Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 123.

<sup>88</sup> Spencer Rich, “Warnke Deliberations Begin,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1977; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Warnke’s Missing Comma,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1977.

<sup>89</sup> Spencer Rich, “Warnke Confirmed to Both Arms Posts Despite Harsh Debate,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1977.



this vote can be attributed to Carter, who put his full support behind Warnke. Carter assured reporters that he had “complete confidence” in Warnke, and called him “crucial to his administration.”<sup>90</sup> By the March confirmation, Carter had personally called about a quarter of the Senate asking for their votes.<sup>91</sup> Warnke also defended himself in the hearings, stressing his opposition to unilateral disarmament and reassuring Senators that he would negotiate arms control that preserved “rough equivalence.”<sup>92</sup> He denied allegations that he stood for a philosophy based on the irrelevance of superiority, saying,

“I don’t believe that I represent a fixed philosophical position on the issues of arms control. I’m a strong advocate of arms control. I’m also a strong advocate of a strong national defense. I believe the two to be totally consistent and indeed, complementary.”<sup>93</sup>

In the end, however, many Congressmen remained uneasy about Warnke’s appointment, and the debate had lasting ramifications for Carter’s nuclear policy. First, those opposed to Warnke sent a clear signal that they would not accept any arms control treaty that did not favor the U.S. or that suggested any sort of unilateral restraint. Less than two-thirds of the Senate voted for Warnke as the chief SALT negotiator, foreshadowing the contentious SALT II ratification debate. Second, critics used rhetoric to mobilize a coalition against Carter; they argued Warnke would erode deterrence by permitting strategic inferiority, contradicting Carter’s professed commitment to a strong defense. Their rhetoric spun Warnke’s position as unilateral disarmament and invoked fears of Soviet superiority, delegitimizing this position by framing it as

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<sup>90</sup> Jimmy Carter, “The President’s News Conference,” February 8, 1977, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7666>; “Democrats’ Group Admits Writing Warnke Critique,” *The Washington Post*, February 5, 1977.

<sup>91</sup> Lee Lescaze, “Warnke Nomination Seen Out of Danger,” *The Washington Post*, February 22, 1977; Spencer Rich, “Robert Byrd Sees Warnke as ‘Firm’ Negotiator on Arms,” *The Washington Post*, March 8, 1977.

<sup>92</sup> Lee Lescaze, “Warnke Rejects Charges Of Softness on Arms Issue: Warnke, at Confirmation Hearings, Stresses Strong National Defense,” *The Washington Post*, February 9, 1977; *Warnke Nomination: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 24; Lee Lescaze, “Warnke Hearings Skirt Basic Issues,” *The Washington Post*, February 27, 1977.

<sup>93</sup> *Warnke Nomination: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 16.

a threat to deterrence. Moreover, this rhetoric delegitimized Carter's arguments for restraint as he moved on from this incident; critics could now argue any restraint or force reductions would diminish the U.S.'s capability to deter. While Carter and Warnke wanted to focus on the issue of how many nuclear weapons the U.S. needed to ensure security, those opposed to Warnke instead focused on whether or not the U.S. would become inferior to the Soviet Union in terms of nuclear weapons, and therefore lose political or military leverage. This rhetorical maneuvering represented a significant blow to Carter's narrative, as critics tapped into fears of Soviet superiority to mobilize support for their narrative of parity. Thus, Warnke had awakened a new hawkish coalition bent on undermining Carter's nuclear agenda, and Carter would struggle to confront and silence this group throughout his term.

## **Conclusion**

Carter entered office when the U.S. and Soviet Union had achieved strategic parity, an unsettled moment with no clear consequences for the future of U.S. foreign policy. Carter tried to legitimate a narrative depicting parity as an opportunity to reassert the logic of MAD in the nuclear posture, while others legitimated a narrative of parity as a potential threat in light of incipient Soviet superiority. These groups competed for their narratives to dominate public debate, justifying their agendas by appealing to the norms of deterrence. The clash between these groups manifested in the debate over Warnke's nomination, as critics broadened this debate to a discussion of nuclear weapons' role in foreign policy. Critics delegitimized Carter's position of restraint in an age of parity by equating it with unilateral disarmament, which would erode the U.S. deterrent posture. Carter failed to silence this opposition and allowed the mobilization of a coalition pushing for policies to deny Soviet superiority. The next chapter will highlight the major debates about the MX and SALT II, demonstrating how these critics

continued to mobilize and hijack Carter's agenda in the public sphere by arguing Carter's intended policy choices would threaten U.S. national security in the age of parity.

### Chapter 3: The MX and the SALT II Ratification Debate

*Senator Biden: It seems as though this committee is being prepared to accept the concept of nuclear superiority as having any relevance...it seems to me that nuclear superiority is a meaningless concept.*<sup>94</sup>

In January 1979, the Carter administration continued their negotiations with the Soviet Union towards a major strategic arms limitation treaty, as Carter expressed doubts about the need for new nuclear weapons programs like the MX missile. Carter hoped SALT II would preserve parity, allowing the U.S. to maintain strategic forces equal to those of the Soviet Union and to maintain a stable strategic balance.<sup>95</sup> As the administration finished negotiating the treaty, they continued to debate whether or not to accelerate development of the MX, the land-based ICBM that Carter privately called “nauseating” and “a gross waste of money.”<sup>96</sup> By January 1980, however, Carter had withdrawn the SALT II treaty from consideration on the Senate floor and approved the development of the MX, seemingly abandoning his campaign commitments to arms control and forestalling new nuclear programs. Why did Carter approve the MX, and why did SALT II fail?

Scholars have identified both SALT and the MX as key milestones in Carter’s “hardening” nuclear policy, but most previous accounts have focused only on either the failure of SALT II or the MX decision.<sup>97</sup> Although the administration wanted their audience to consider these issues separately, debates about U.S. forces and the strategic balance at this time almost always considered both issues together as they captured both public and elite attention. As such,

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<sup>94</sup> *The SALT II Treaty: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Sixth Congress, First Session, Part 3* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1979), 265.

<sup>95</sup> Memo, Frank Moore to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 12/7/78, National Security Advisor – Press and Congressional Relations Files, “12/78,” Box 3, JCL.

<sup>96</sup> Edward C. Keefer, *Harold Brown: Offsetting the Soviet Military Challenge 1977-1981* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017), 170.

<sup>97</sup> For a discussion of SALT II, see Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics of Arms Control*; for the MX decision, see Auten, *Carter’s Conversion*.

I first describe the events leading up to the MX decision and the signing of SALT II, as well as the rhetoric during the ratification debate. Next, I demonstrate how Carter struggled to legitimate SALT II on its own terms, as critics of the treaty invoked fears of Soviet superiority in their legitimation to mobilize a coalition against Carter. Then I show that while perceptions of an increasing Soviet threat partially influenced the fate of MX and SALT II, they cannot explain why Carter waited to approve the MX or why he could not sell SALT to domestic audiences. Additionally, hostile domestic public opinion pressured Carter to successfully legitimate his decisions, but his policy shift stemmed from his inability to shift these perceptions and influence public opinion. Overall, I argue Carter initially tried to justify signing SALT II and halting the MX program based on ideas about the stability of parity and a reduced role for nuclear weapons in national security. The public nature of the debate allowed critics to gain visibility and support as they warned SALT II would undermine deterrence. Carter shifted his rhetoric to that of essential equivalence and approved the MX, but these measures failed to silence critics. This legitimation veered closer to that of Carter's critics, broadened debate beyond the treaty itself, and empowered critics to call for defense measures championing nuclear weapons as an essential component of national security. Carter could not refocus the debate and return to his original narrative of parity, allowing critics to hijack his initial vision and doom the SALT II treaty.

### **“A Strange Arms Debate”: MX, SALT II, and the Search for Essential Equivalence**

As the Soviet Union grew its ICBM force and approached strategic parity with the U.S. in the late 1960s, some U.S. policymakers expressed an interest in arms control to limit future force buildups. When the Soviet Union developed an Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) defense system, which undermined MAD by allowing Moscow to potentially survive a U.S. nuclear attack, President Lyndon Johnson called for the first SALT talks to control the ABM race. His

successor, Richard Nixon, and the Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev shared this interest in SALT, and they signed the first SALT agreement on May 27, 1972. This agreement placed a freeze on existing numbers of SLBMs and ICBMs and limited the number of each country's ABM sites.<sup>98</sup> The initial SALT talks did not include limits on MIRVs, so both sides could still affix multiple warheads to a single missile. After Nixon signed the first SALT treaty, negotiations for SALT II began in November of that year with two broad goals: agreeing on reduced but equal numbers of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, and constraining future qualitative improvements to nuclear weapons.

While the Nixon and Ford administrations made significant progress on these talks with the Soviets, several issues remained unresolved, specifically the issues of counting the Soviet Backfire bomber and U.S. cruise missiles in the countries' permitted delivery vehicle totals.<sup>99</sup> When Carter entered office, he sprung into action to uphold his campaign promises of arms control. He immediately moved to revive negotiations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which would ban all nuclear testing.<sup>100</sup> In March 1977, Carter sent Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to deliver to the Soviet Union a "comprehensive proposal" for SALT II. The proposal included: a reduction in total strategic launchers from 2400 to 1800-1200; cuts in large Soviet ICBMs from 308 to 150; a limit of 550 MIRVed ICBMs on each side; a ban on new ICBMs; and a range limit of 2500 km on all mobile ICBMs and cruise missiles.<sup>101</sup> Vance also

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<sup>98</sup> Office of the Historian, "Strategic Arms Limitations Talks/Treaty (SALT) I and II," United States Department of State, accessed March 3, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/salt>.

<sup>99</sup> The countries could not agree on whether Backfire was a medium or long-range bomber, which determined if it would be counted in SALT II. The Soviets argued the cruise missiles should be counted in the U.S.'s overall ceiling, but the U.S. argued only ballistic air-to-surface missiles should count. Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control*, 36-37.

<sup>100</sup> Carter even sent Warnke and Vance to raise the CTBT issue during SALT negotiations in Moscow; see Robert S. Rochlin through Thomas D. Davies to the Director, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, "CTB Discussions in Moscow," 22 March 1977, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb323/doc06a.pdf>.

<sup>101</sup> Murrey Marder and Robert G. Kaiser, "Carter and Arms Control: A Test of His Presidency," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1977; Richard Burt, "The Scope and Limits of SALT," *Foreign Affairs* 56, no. 4 (1978): 755.

brought a backup proposal similar to a more modest framework agreed upon in 1974 at Vladivostok, USSR. The comprehensive proposal outraged the Soviet negotiators, who disparaged Carter for announcing the proposal publicly before telling them and argued the greater burden to reduce forces fell on the Soviet Union.<sup>102</sup> This significantly hampered negotiation, as the Soviet Union refused to even consider the Vladivostok proposal after receiving Vance's comprehensive proposal. Vance would travel back for nine additional negotiation sessions before the two sides finally compromised to accommodate both the Vladivostok proposal and Carter's desire for more reductions. The final treaty, signed in Vienna on June 18, 1979, included, among other components, an equal aggregate limit of 1320 total launchers of MIRVed ballistic missiles and heavy bombers with long-range cruise missiles, and an equal aggregate limit of 820 MIRVed ICBM launchers.<sup>103</sup>

During these negotiations, the Carter administration devised plans to sell the SALT II treaty to the public and Congress. As early as May 1977, the White House communications team crafted a public strategy for SALT II, including hosting town halls and having the State Department create a SALT film, to prevent critics from monopolizing Senate commentary.<sup>104</sup> Carter's White House Communications Director, Jerry Rafshoon, advised Carter to make the case for SALT by emphasizing SALT's merits on its own terms: it allowed equal numbers of weapons for both sides, and without SALT II, the U.S. would continue a wasteful, dangerous arms race with the Soviet Union. If Carter presented the treaty as a means of strengthening national defense, the debate would "revolve around numbers, strategies and weapons systems

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<sup>102</sup> For Carter disclosing the proposal to the public, see Bernard Gwertzman, "CARTER SAYS VANCE, IN SOVIET, WILL SEEK DEEP WEAPONS CUTS," *The New York Times*, March 25, 1977. For Soviet pushback, see Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control*, 41.

<sup>103</sup> "Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II)," U.S. Department of State, accessed March 3, 2018, <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/5195.htm>.

<sup>104</sup> Memo, Landon Butler to Hamilton Jordan, 5/12/77, Caldwell donated material, "Government Documents [1]," Box 9, JCL.

that the public will never understand. The confusion and doubt created could very well endanger the treaty.”<sup>105</sup> Throughout the negotiations, Carter’s public speech highlighted the treaty’s inherent value as a means to maintain deterrence by preventing an arms race.

Before negotiations had even concluded, however, a coalition including Congressmen from both parties, interest groups, and the Pentagon began to mobilize against the treaty. They argued the treaty would destroy the state of parity, codify Soviet strategic superiority, and erode the U.S. deterrent posture. Senate hardliners, led by long-time arms control critic Henry Jackson, asserted that an agreement based on numerical equality would still permit Soviet qualitative advantages; these advantages would lead to Soviet superiority and permit Soviet coercive power over the U.S.<sup>106</sup> The JCS warned that failure to address issues like the Backfire bomber would give the Soviet Union a military advantage, and they hoped the U.S. could retain a mobile missile in the negotiations to preserve essential equivalence.<sup>107</sup> Finally, dozens of interest groups organized against SALT II—by December 1978, 68 organizations had formed to fight SALT ratification.<sup>108</sup> The most prominent of these, the American Security Council (ASC) and Nitze’s Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), distributed publications predicting impending Soviet superiority. They worried the treaty would restrict the U.S. from bolstering its ICBM capabilities and leave the Soviet Union with a greater number of missiles, claiming the

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<sup>105</sup> Memo, Jerry Rafshoon to the President, 12/6/78, Caldwell donated material, “Government Documents [1],” Box 9, JCL.

<sup>106</sup> Jackson’s initial memo to Carter in February 1977 argued that SALT II impeded U.S. defense efforts, especially those related to alliance commitments, and believed “some agreements may be worse than none.” See Letter, Henry Jackson to President Carter, 2/15/77, i, NSA 7—Subject File, “SALT, 1-2/77,” Box 52, JCL. Before the final negotiations, Jackson decried SALT as “appeasement in its purest form;” see Robert G. Kaiser, “Jackson Rips ‘Appeasement’ Of Moscow,” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 1979.

<sup>107</sup> George C. Wilson, “Joint Chiefs Chairman Says U.S. Needs a Mobile Missile,” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1978; Summary of a Meeting Between the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on SALT TWO and the FY 80 Defense Program, 12/19/78, Brzezinski Donated Material, “Serial Xs (9/78-12/78),” Box 36, JCL.

<sup>108</sup> Richard Burt, “Carter Steps Up Drive to Win Support for Arms Treaty: Part of Government Counterattack,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1978.



Soviets would be able to destroy the majority of U.S. forces in a first strike.<sup>109</sup> These groups, along with the anti-SALT Congressmen, also wanted to link the success or failure of SALT II to Soviet behavior in Africa, refusing to cooperate with the Soviet Union on arms control so long as they continued to interfere in the Horn of Africa. They argued the U.S. should only enter agreements with a cooperative Soviet Union; otherwise, the U.S. would further encourage Soviet aggression, allowing the Soviet Union to diminish U.S. power and prestige in its pursuit of a communist world order.<sup>110</sup> Carter and Vance resisted this “linkage,” urging Senators to consider SALT on its own terms separate from other aspects of the U.S.-Soviet relationship.<sup>111</sup>

As the Carter administration negotiated SALT II amidst this debate, they also began to discuss the fate of the MX, the land-based MIRVed ICBM capable of carrying up to ten nuclear warheads. The Air Force began developing the weapon in 1971 after discovering Soviet plans for the SS-18, a MIRVed heavy ICBM carrying up to ten warheads; the Air Force feared the Soviets could launch a devastating attack on U.S. forces with a few of these missiles and still have reserve forces to continue a nuclear war. Meanwhile, the U.S. possessed only the Minuteman III ICBM, which could only carry three warheads. Addressing these concerns, the Pentagon designed the MX to survive a surprise Soviet attack and retaliate against hardened enemy silos with a high degree of accuracy. In fact, the MX had a Circular Error Probable (CEP) of 0.06 nautical miles, making it twice as accurate as the Minuteman III, and it had

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<sup>109</sup> “SALT II Agreement Assailed by Nitze,” *The Washington Post*, December 6, 1978. For additional commentary on this debate, see “Cranking Up for SALT,” *The Washington Post*, December 4, 1978.

<sup>110</sup> Chalmers M. Roberts, “Reviving The Postures Of the Cold War,” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 1978. One columnist described the term “linkage” as a deliberately misleading rhetorical tool to increase SALT opposition—of course the U.S. should consider the treaty in terms of the broader U.S.-Soviet relationship. See “Linkage,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 1979. Many Senators, including Baker, Bellman, Nunn, Dennis, and Deoncini, insisted on linkage, hoping the Soviets would “clean up their act across the board” before the U.S. cooperated on SALT. See Clayton Fritchey, “‘Linkage’ Will Be Fatal to SALT,” *The Washington Post*, January 20, 1979.

<sup>111</sup> Letter, Cyrus Vance to Jacob Javits, “[Critical Foreign Policy Issues Confronting the Carter Administration],” March 17, 1978, Digital National Security Archive, <https://0-search.proquest.com.luna.wellesley.edu/docview/1679126596/abstract/5E95C5A736CC498APQ/13>.

increased HTK capability to strike hardened military facilities.<sup>112</sup> These features led some critics to denounce the MX as a first-strike weapon, arguing a weapon with the capability to knock out almost all Soviet ICBMs would only encourage a preemptive Soviet strike. Because of the MX's significant offensive capability and its ability to strike military targets, critics warned the MX would reverse the U.S.'s MAD strategic doctrine by moving away from a strictly retaliatory capability.<sup>113</sup>

Since the MX aimed to address a perceived U.S. ICBM vulnerability problem, the administration's internal debate about the MX focused on its basing mode—the type of silo in which the missile would be placed—and its size. The Department of Defense could either build a smaller missile to fit on submarines or a larger stand-alone missile. They also considered a variety of basing modes, including hardened fixed silos or different types of mobile basing. The Ford administration tentatively settled on a tunnel-based mobile basing system and allotted \$294 million for the MX in the FY1978 Defense Budget, with a proposed increase to \$1533 million in FY1979.<sup>114</sup> Upon entering office, however, Carter expressed doubts about the MX, and his administration was divided on the issue. Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense, and William Perry, Undersecretary for Research and Engineering, worried the MX's HTK capability would create incentives for a Soviet first strike, while Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor, believed Carter needed the MX to solve the ICBM vulnerability problem in light of intelligence reports about the increasing accuracy of Soviet missiles.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy*, 167.

<sup>113</sup> See, for example, "MXing Up SALT," *New York Times*, October 10, 1977; George C. Wilson, "Key Senators Offer Challenge to Carter On Defense Policy," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1977; George C. Wilson, "McIntyre Warns MX Missile Raises Nuclear War Danger," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1977.

<sup>114</sup> *Fiscal Year 1978 Authorization for Military Procurement, Research and Development, and Active Duty, Selected Reserve, and Civilian Personnel Strengths: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Ninety-Fifth Congress, First Session, on S. 1210* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 136.

<sup>115</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 173.

In Carter's revision of the FY1978 Defense budget, he cut \$160 million from the MX program and announced he would wait until December 1978 to make a final decision on the program's future.<sup>116</sup> In the interim, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy Frank Press led a study of the MX and its basing modes, finding the Air Force overstated the threat to the Minuteman III. Carter subsequently stalled MX production again; the administration added only \$24.2 million to the previous year's allotment of \$134 million, keeping the missile in an advanced research and development stage. Brown announced Carter would make his official decision on the MX in April 1979.<sup>117</sup>

In early 1978, the Soviets began testing new guidance systems to increase missile accuracy, generating greater alarm in the Pentagon even as Brown insisted, "We face no immediate crisis."<sup>118</sup> These Soviet developments did, however, launch a flurry of basing mode studies to solve the perceived ICBM vulnerability problem—the Department of Defense and contractors studied nearly 40 basing options. By April 1979, they had narrowed their options down to six: an air-mobile system placing 100 ICBMs on aircraft ready to launch on warning; a free mobile system moving ICBMs on trucks over interstate highways; Multiple Protective Shelter (MPS) basing, deploying 200 ICBMs among numerous Multiple Aim Point (MAP) shelters; improvements to existing Minuteman silos; or a program strengthening the other legs of the triad and decreasing reliance on ICBMs.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Bernard Weinraub, "CARTER CUTS FUNDS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF MOBILE MISSILES," *New York Times*, December 26, 1977; Auten, *Carter's Conversion*, 175.

<sup>117</sup> *Hearings on Military Posture and H.R. 1872 (H.R. 4040), Department of Defense Authorization for Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1980, and H.R. 2575 (S. 429), Department of Defense Supplemental Authorization for Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1979 before the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, Ninety-Sixth Congress, First Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 34; James Canan, "Appropriated But Unspent Defense Dollars Piling Up: The Pentagon's Simmering Kettle of Cash," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 1979.

<sup>118</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 173.

<sup>119</sup> Lauren H. Holland and Robert A. Hoover, *The MX Decision: A New Direction In U.S. Weapons Procurement Policy?* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 1985), 75-78; Eugene Sevin, "The MX/Peacekeeper and SICBM: A Search for Survivable Basing," Defense Systems Information Analysis Center, accessed March 3, 2018,

As the SALT II negotiations neared completion, a National Security Council (NSC) committee held three meetings in May 1979 to decide on the future of the MX. They relied on a report by Seymour Zeiberg, Perry's deputy, which argued that neither the "minimum modernization" of the Minuteman silos nor the refocusing to other areas of the triad would maintain essential equivalence. They arrived at two policy alternatives: an MPS system moving 200 MXs among 800 hardened silos while retaining 300 Minuteman IIIs in their existing silos, or developing a smaller missile to fit both Minuteman III silos and Ohio-class submarines. The Air Force and JCS strongly opposed the latter option, since the smaller missile could carry fewer warheads.<sup>120</sup> Carter met with the NSC on June 4, but he complained that Brzezinski was "jamming a decision down his throat." Although Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner believed the MX would encourage arms racing, most advisors supported MX deployment to some extent.<sup>121</sup> Carter approved the MX on June 8, choosing the largest missile variant: a 190,000-pound, 92-inch diameter missile capable of carrying up to ten 335-kiloton warheads.<sup>122</sup>

Just days later, on June 18, Carter and Brezhnev signed SALT II in Geneva and Carter submitted the treaty to the Senate for consideration. As criticism of SALT reached a crescendo, Carter shifted his rhetoric in justifying the treaty. This new legitimization assured that Carter would maintain "essential equivalence"—defined by Brown as preventing Soviet nuclear forces from becoming instruments of political leverage—by incorporating both the MX and SALT into overall national security strategy.<sup>123</sup> For example, in February 1979, the White House

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<https://www.dsiac.org/resources/journals/dsiac/winter-2017-volume-4-number-1/mxpeacekeeper-and-sicbm-search-survivable>.

<sup>120</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 174. See also *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1980*, 1406-1407.

<sup>121</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 176.

<sup>122</sup> George C. Wilson and Robert G. Kaiser, "Carter Decides To Build MX Mobile Missile: Carter Decides to Build MX Blockbuster," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1979.

<sup>123</sup> *Military Implications of the Treaty on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms and Protocol Thereto (SALT II Treaty): Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Ninety-Sixth Congress, First Session, July 23-26, 1979* (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1979), 12.

Communications staff and the NSC carefully planned Carter's framing of SALT II in a speech at the Georgia Institute of Technology: they still wanted to emphasize the merits of arms control, but they hoped to deflect criticism by framing SALT as an enhancement to overall defense strategy.<sup>124</sup> In the speech, Carter asserted SALT would permit weapons like the MX to "reverse the Soviet's numerical advantage."<sup>125</sup> On the opening day of the Committee on Foreign Relations hearings on SALT II, both Vance and Brown opened their arguments by stating SALT II would maintain essential equivalence, and that the U.S. would authorize the MX and other programs to prevent Soviet superiority and therefore maintain deterrence.<sup>126</sup>

Although critics appreciated Carter's decision to approve the MX, they still voiced fierce opposition to SALT II. Senators introduced dozens of amendments to the treaty, many requiring the administration to approve additional defense programs. The same coalition of Congressmen and interest groups continued to cast doubts about U.S. ability to deny Soviet superiority. For example, Nitze testified before the Committee on Foreign Relations that even with the MX, Carter's overall defense program would not deny Soviet strategic advantages, referencing the importance of U.S. superiority in its leverage in the Berlin and Cuban crises.<sup>127</sup> While Jackson maintained his opposition to the treaty, Senator Sam Nunn (D, GA) took up his mantle to lead the bipartisan Congressional opposition during the floor debate. His apprehension about U.S. ability to meet the Soviet threat had previously led him to call for increased defense budgets, but

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<sup>124</sup> Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Jerry Rafshoon to the President, 2/12/79, NSA 7—Subject File, "SALT, 2/79," Box 54, JCL.

<sup>125</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Remarks at a Special Convocation of the Georgia Institute of Technology," February 20, 1979, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=31937>.

<sup>126</sup> *The SALT II Treaty: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Sixth Congress, First Session, Part I* (Government Printing Office: Washington, 1979), 88 and 97.

<sup>127</sup> Robert G. Kaiser, "SALT Called Danger to U.S. Security, *The Washington Post*," July 13, 1979.

now he tied his vote for SALT to guarantees from Carter of 5 percent annual increases.<sup>128</sup> Carter continued to cite the MX as evidence that he would prevent Soviet superiority, but he began to face backlash from pro-SALT Senators, who criticized Carter's decision on the MX and accused him of pandering to the more hawkish Senators.<sup>129</sup>

Meanwhile, the administration did not decide on an MX basing mode until September, eventually settling on a road-mobile horizontal shelter system where 200 MXs moved between 4600 shelters in Utah and Nevada.<sup>130</sup> The SALT debate wore on, and on October 10, 1979, Carter agreed to the Byrd-Cranston compromise, a five-year commitment to increased defense spending with the provision that SALT III must make meaningful progress on arms control.<sup>131</sup> Yet by December, Carter still likely lacked the two-thirds Senate support required for ratification.<sup>132</sup> Carter pulled the treaty from the floor on January 3, 1980, after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.<sup>133</sup> On the MX front, the administration began trying to gain the support of citizens of Utah and Nevada to build the new basing system, a battle that would continue to plague the Reagan administration. By the time Carter left office, he had thrown his full support behind a new ICBM while he failed to sell his arms control agreement to domestic audiences.

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<sup>128</sup> Speech, Senator Sam Nunn to National Chamber of Commerce, 4/30/79, Caldwell Donated Material, "Evaluation of Senators Positions [2]," Box 10, JCL; Robert G. Kaiser, "Nunn Ties Vote On SALT to More Defense Spending," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1979.

<sup>129</sup> Report on Anne Wexler's Meeting with Pro-SALT Group on MX, Madeleine Albright to the File, 6/12/79, NSA 22—Press and Congressional Relations Files, "6-7/79," Box 4, JCL; "Big Missile, Little Security," *New York Times*, June 13, 1979; Richard Burt, "Issue and Debate MX Missile Could Mark Big Switch in U.S. Nuclear Policy," *New York Times*, June 16, 1979.

<sup>130</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 176.

<sup>131</sup> *U.S.-Soviet Relations During the Carter Administration: A Chronology of Events*, ed. Malcolm Byrne (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 1993), 90.

<sup>132</sup> December estimates only gave Carter 53-55 votes in support; see Robert G. Kaiser, "1979 SALT Debate Dead, Byrd Says," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1979.

<sup>133</sup> Letter, Carter to Robert Byrd, 1/3/1980, NSA 22 – Press and Congressional Relations Files, "1/80," box 5, JCL.

## Rhetoric, Coalitions, and the SALT and MX Decisions

Throughout the MX and SALT II debates, various coalitions within and outside the administration scrambled to legitimate their desired programs, often justifying their choices as a means to maintain parity as they tried to undermine support for the opposing view. In the process, Carter approved the MX but could not garner enough support for SALT II in the Senate. Why did Carter ultimately tie the MX to his legitimation of SALT, and why did critics successfully mobilize against Carter to prevent SALT II ratification? I argue Carter's initial legitimation of SALT II as a means to reduce arms racing and preserve stability was ineffective because critics feared the treaty would lead to U.S. strategic inferiority. The administration announced the MX decision to reinforce its new legitimation of SALT II as a means to preserve essential equivalence in response to these concerns. This new rhetoric, however, broadened the scope of debate about the treaty and empowered critics to call for additional arms buildups, mobilizing a coalition to undermine SALT II.

Carter's initial legitimation of SALT II focused on preventing arms racing and preserving numerical equality, separating the treaty from other national security concerns. Carter's calls for substantial arms reductions and even a freeze on modernization demonstrated his vision of parity as a moment of mutual stability and the perfect opportunity to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in foreign policy.<sup>134</sup> As he sent Vance and Warnke to the negotiations, he described the importance of arms control to "reduce the arms race...thus ending with rough parity on both sides."<sup>135</sup> Carter's communications team encouraged him to discuss SALT on its own terms as a major milestone in arms control, rather than a means to strengthen national defense. As stated

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<sup>134</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame;" Carter, "United Nations—Address Before the General Assembly," March 17, 1977, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7183>.

<sup>135</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "VANCE IS IN MOSCOW TO AFFIRM DETENTE AND SEEK ARMS CUTS," *New York Times*, March 27, 1977.

earlier, Carter and Vance also discouraged linkage between SALT and U.S.-Soviet cooperation in other areas. This type of legitimation, consistent with an optimistic narrative of parity, endorsed a MAD nuclear posture by promoting the idea that the U.S. could only use nuclear weapons for deterrence. Carter divorced SALT II from broader issues in the U.S.-Soviet relationship because the reduction of nuclear weapons only affected nuclear policy and the U.S. deterrent posture.

This mode of legitimation, however, did not prevent critics from mobilizing against the treaty. These critics linked the prevention of Soviet superiority to ensuring overall U.S. national security, implying nuclear superiority afforded some political leverage. They advanced the narrative that parity left the U.S. in a tenuous position and an unfair SALT agreement would destroy the existing balance. Hardliners in Congress asked, “If the Soviets are permitted to gain strategic superiority with or without SALT II, why [is] a treaty required to formalize the situation?”<sup>136</sup> Critics attacked rhetoric touting SALT II’s preservation of numerical equality, arguing the treaty still allowed Soviet qualitative advantages. Therefore, the treaty allowed Soviet superiority and would threaten the U.S. deterrent capability. If the Soviet Union believed it could win a nuclear war, SALT II needed to guarantee a parity ensuring the U.S. could deny any chance of Soviet victory. As such, these critics almost universally called for the development of new weapons systems like the MX. In their view, parity meant the U.S. had to limit Soviet advantages while strengthening and improving U.S. forces to maintain some sort of leverage. Brown later summarized this case for the MX, saying the U.S. needed the MX to maintain parity in the military balance for the future.<sup>137</sup> The huge spike in anti-SALT interest

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<sup>136</sup> “SALT II Would Allow Soviet Superiority, Panel Says,” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1978.

<sup>137</sup> Note that Brown switches positions on the MX, but it is not clear why or precisely when this shift occurred. George C. Wilson, “‘Counterforce’ Arms Attract U.S., Soviets: U.S., Soviets Developing ‘Counterforce’ To Destroy Each Other’s Land Missiles,” *The Washington Post*, June 1, 1979.



groups before June 1979 suggests this rhetoric did successfully mobilize people against the treaty, especially domestic elites. Critics' accusations that Carter would permit U.S. strategic inferiority seemed particularly damaging to Carter's legitimation, since they implied SALT II would afford Soviet coercive power over the U.S. and threaten the U.S.'s ability to defend itself. As Carter struggled to reconcile these accusations with his commitment to defense, his vocal critics dominated public discourse about the treaty.

Carter's shift to SALT II legitimation based on essential equivalence represents a rhetorical maneuver to quiet this criticism, and it correlated with his decision to approve the MX. It is true that the MX decision occurred after the JCS began expressing concerns about the increasing Soviet threat and the state of the U.S. ICBM force; the JCS advocated ICBMs' importance for security and future bargaining leverage. While Carter sometimes assured them he would proceed with programs like the MX, the JCS staunchly refuted the idea that they tied their support for SALT II to promises of ICBM modernization.<sup>138</sup> Additionally, David Jones, Chairman of the JCS, had called for a mobile missile as early as July 1978,<sup>139</sup> but Carter did not approve the MX until June 1979. The MX approval may have partly derived from these domestic trade-offs among bureaucracies, but the timing of the MX decision suggests it was part of a larger strategy to build a coalition of support for SALT II, a coalition that included the JCS.

While the administration dismissed portrayals of the MX as just a bargaining chip to buy Senators and secure SALT ratification, there is some evidence they recognized MX's utility in legitimating and building support for SALT II. The MX could demonstrate to SALT skeptics that the U.S. would continue making qualitative improvements to its arsenal, preventing Soviet

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<sup>138</sup> Summary of a Meeting Between the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on SALT TWO and the FY 80 Defense Program, 12/19/78, Brzezinski Donated Material, "Serial Xs (9/78-12/78)," Box 36, JCL. Earlier meetings may have occurred, see Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Two-Voiced Generals," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1979.

<sup>139</sup> George C. Wilson, "Joint Chiefs Chairman Says U.S. Needs a Mobile Missile," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1978.

advantages and maintaining deterrence even with additional arms control measures. Both Brown and Carter admitted there were both strategic and political motives for approving the MX; Brown said they needed to show the U.S. audience that the Soviets would not have a political edge under SALT II, and he admitted they would have struggled to secure SALT ratification without the MX.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, Madeleine Albright described in a memo to Brzezinski that while SALT critics wanted the MX decision to make the treaty more palatable, even the pro-SALT Senators wanted an MX decision before Carter signed the treaty so as not to be seen as buying off hardliners.<sup>141</sup> At a time when SALT criticism dominated public debate, the administration saw the MX decision as a tool to build consensus by winning over SALT II skeptics.

Regardless of the precise reasons for approving the MX, the decision linked the legitimization of both SALT and MX together in the administration's rhetoric, allowing the administration to argue SALT II maintained essential equivalence. Essential equivalence meant showing the Soviets that "they have no prospect of gaining meaningful superiority over us."<sup>142</sup> It is unclear what constituted "meaningful" superiority, but this rhetoric aimed to counter critics' arguments that SALT II would enshrine Soviet superiority and consequently erode U.S. deterrence. Carter needed to tie SALT II to overall defense strategy to show it would not threaten national security; linking the MX to this legitimization afforded him additional credibility as the MX demonstrated an active step toward denying Soviet superiority. Carter also signed

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<sup>140</sup> "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Carter's New World; Interview with Harold Brown, 1987 [1]," 03/26/1987, *WGBH Media Library & Archives*, [http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_7C627EF675ED4300AD2DA8A705BE1F42](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_7C627EF675ED4300AD2DA8A705BE1F42); "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Missile Experimental; Interview with Jimmy Carter, 1987," 01/27/1987, *WGBH Media Library & Archives*, [http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_332175FFE7084DEDA75E815B914A6192](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_332175FFE7084DEDA75E815B914A6192).

<sup>141</sup> Memo, Madeleine Albright to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 6/2/79, NSA 22—Press and Congressional Relations Files, "Weekly Reports 6-8/79," Box 2, JCL; see also Memo, David Aaron to Charles Duncan, n.d., Brzezinski donated material, "Serial Xs (9/78-12/78), Box 36, JCL. Many Senators tied their votes on SALT to MX approval; see for example Boren, Danforth, Deoncini, and Warner, Caldwell Donated Material, "Evaluations of Senators Positions [1]" and "Evaluation of Senators Positions [2]," Box 10, JCL.

<sup>142</sup> "Talking Points on MX Decision," n.d., Congressional Liaison Office, "MX Missile Correspondence, 5/9/79-7/1/79," Box 226, JCL.

PD-50 in August, stating that all future arms control must “contribute to achieving our defense and force posture goals.”<sup>143</sup> The essential equivalence rhetoric was multivocal legitimation: the administration also argued that approving the MX would allow for future arms reductions.<sup>144</sup> This rhetoric placated existing SALT supporters and placed the overall strategy within norms of deterrence by demonstrating essential equivalence did not mean the U.S. sought nuclear superiority. For the most part, however, the rhetorical shift toward essential equivalence co-opted critics’ negative view of parity to delegitimize SALT II opposition, showing SALT II and the MX could prevent encroaching Soviet superiority. This rhetoric signaled a major departure from Carter’s previous vision of nuclear weapons and advanced an entirely different narrative about parity. It is unclear if Carter himself believed this narrative as he decided to approve the MX, so his legitimation likely aimed to repudiate accusations that SALT II appeased the Soviet Union and undermined deterrence, thus silencing the anti-SALT coalition.

At first, this rhetoric seemed to quiet some critics, and the administration believed they were making a successful case for SALT.<sup>145</sup> By placing SALT within the broader national defense, however, Carter only further empowered critics to tie their support for SALT to guarantees of additional defense buildups. Even with the administration’s new legitimation, these critics continued the same type of attacks accusing Carter of weakening deterrence and national security. The Committee on Foreign Relations called Nitze, whom Vance deemed the most damaging voice to the ratification campaign, to testify, and he spoke within the bounds of parity set by the administration rather than calling for U.S. superiority. Citing Brown and Vance’s framing of the SALT issue, Nitze characterized the SALT debate as a debate about

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<sup>143</sup> Presidential Directive/NSC-50, “Arms Control Decision Process,” August 14, 1979, Federation of American Scientists, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/pd/pd50.pdf>

<sup>144</sup> Letter, Jimmy Carter to Mark Hatfield, 6/7/79, NSA 7—Subject File, “Missiles 5-7/79,” Box 43, JCL.

<sup>145</sup> Memo, Madeleine Albright to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 7/20/79, NSA 22—Press and Congressional Relations Files, “Weekly Reports 6/8-79,” Box 2, JCL.

whether the U.S. would “do those things which are necessary to keep the Soviets from getting [superiority].”<sup>146</sup> Nitze’s denunciation helped shift the debate further away from the treaty itself and toward broader criticisms of Carter’s defense policy; his and Lt. Gen. Edward Rowny’s objections dominated media coverage of the first week of SALT hearings.<sup>147</sup> Nunn’s rhetoric also amplified this shift, as he tied SALT to his concrete plans to augment defense expenditures beyond the MX. While Nunn also claimed to accept parity, he believed the U.S. had been “tranquilized” into thinking parity would continue without changing the current spending patterns.<sup>148</sup> Nunn’s position mobilized a coalition; by December 1979 Nunn led a group of 19 Senators in a letter to Carter worried about the slipping U.S. military position under SALT.<sup>149</sup>

Why did Carter fail to prevent the growth of this coalition against him, even when he shifted his rhetoric to deflect criticism? First, Carter had lost credibility in the eyes of Senators and the public as he struggled with other foreign policy crises in areas like the Horn of Africa and Nicaragua. Even as Carter tried to go on the rhetorical “offensive” and take control of the SALT debate, skeptics did not believe his assurances that SALT would bolster national security amidst other national security failures. Second, the administration’s rhetoric broadened the SALT debate and gave critics’ similar rhetoric more legitimacy. Although they claimed the MX development would lead to more substantial arms reductions, the administration’s justification of the MX as necessary to maintain the strategic balance lent credence to the narrative of parity as a

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<sup>146</sup> *The SALT II Treaty: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 515-516, 438. For Vance’s assessment, see “War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Haves and Have-Nots; Interview with Cyrus Vance, 1987,” 01/29/1987, WGBH Media Library & Archives, accessed January 29, 2018, [http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_A3D2B0C52B304484A8F58A699C2ABEC7](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_A3D2B0C52B304484A8F58A699C2ABEC7). It is difficult to assess the extent of Nitze’s influence on the Senate debate, but one administration official remarked, “Paul Nitze is worth a hundred bureaucrats,” and in that in order to ratify SALT, “Paul Nitze we will have to beat.” Robert Zalnick, “Paul Nitze: The Nemesis Of SALT II,” *The Washington Post*, June 24, 1979.

<sup>147</sup> Charles Mohr, “ARMS PACT FLAWED, CRITICS TELL SENATE,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1979; Robert G. Kaiser, “SALT Called Danger to U.S. Security,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1979.

<sup>148</sup> “The World: Three Senate Experts Discuss The Pros and Cons of SALT II” *New York Times*, July 8, 1979; Robert G. Kaiser, “Nunn Ties Vote On SALT to More Defense Spending,” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1979.

<sup>149</sup> Letter from Nineteen Senators to President Carter, 12/17/79, Congressional Liaison Office, “SALT II - Sen. Sam Nunn [Georgia], 4/30/79 -12/17/79,” Box 232, JCL.

potential threat and that the U.S. needed to add more weapons to maintain it. This apparent embrace of their narrative empowered critics: they took their cue from the administration's legitimization of SALT maintaining essential equivalence to critique the administration for not maintaining essential equivalence across its defense policy. They now had a range of issues on which to attack Carter and in turn weaken the case for the treaty, while the administration had to spend time and energy quieting concerns about other policies instead of SALT. Critics' rhetoric continued to effectively mobilize people by arguing the MX would still not prevent U.S. inferiority after SALT II. It became difficult for Carter to return to his original narrative and refocus this debate on the treaty itself because these critics used his own rhetoric of essential equivalence—silencing their arguments would require renegeing on this rhetoric and delegitimizing the treaty even further.

By August 1979, the administration was losing control of the SALT narrative; observers like Senator Joe Biden (D, DE) noted how the debate had shifted to the U.S.'s overall strategic position and away from the treaty itself.<sup>150</sup> Carter's coalition of support further deteriorated throughout the debate, especially after the discovery of Soviet troops in Cuba. Critics linked this incident to SALT, portraying it as an indicator of increasing Soviet aggression and the need for the U.S. to get tough on defense. When Carter tried to separate the event from SALT, critics called him a "gullible pacifist."<sup>151</sup> Carter had already linked SALT to the overall strategic balance by emphasizing essential equivalence, so now trying to separate SALT from the strategic environment created an image of appeasing the Soviets. Further, such separation would refute the idea that nuclear weapons were essential to other areas of national security, an idea Carter

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<sup>150</sup> *Congressional Record, 96<sup>th</sup> Congress, First Session* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1980), 2264.

<sup>151</sup> Robert G. Kaiser, "Carter's Speech May Have Cost SALT Some Ground in the Senate," *The Washington Post*, October 3, 1979. For additional coverage, see Don Oberdorfer, "A Small Soviet Brigade and Its Large Implications," *The Washington Post*, September 23, 1979.

had implicitly accepted in his shift to the rhetoric of essential equivalence. This rhetorical pivot to his critics' conception of parity also alienated SALT supporters; Senators like George McGovern (D, SD) saw the MX as escalating the arms race by moving toward a first-strike capability and grew alarmed that arms control would accompany a "shopping list" of weapons to maintain equivalence.<sup>152</sup> By the time Carter pulled the treaty from the Senate, support had waned to the point where he likely lacked the two-thirds majority required for its approval. Thus, rhetoric initially meant to win support for SALT had backfired and empowered critics to gain support for weapons modernization and acquisition.

### **International Politics, SALT II, and the MX**

Some might refute the above analysis by arguing that the strategic balance and perceptions of the Soviet threat prompted Carter to approve the MX and doomed SALT II. If changes in the strategic balance primarily caused Carter to proceed with the MX and pull SALT II from Senate consideration, the Soviet Union would have made significant strides in either weapons development or geopolitical influence. Such moves toward Soviet superiority would have prompted the Carter administration to take these steps toward U.S. nuclear superiority. This international politics theory partly explains the SALT II decision; perceptions of Soviet superiority clearly influenced SALT critics' thinking. In terms of geopolitical influence, the Soviets did engage in some acts of "aggression" in 1978-1979 that increased U.S. perceptions of a Soviet threat. Auten notes several significant actions, including concerns about the increased Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean, Soviet-backed South Yemen's invasion of pro-U.S.

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<sup>152</sup> *The SALT II Treaty: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Part 6*, 387. See also Letter, pro-SALT Senators to President, 3/2/79, Congressional Liaison Office, "SALT II Congressional Correspondence 10/17/78-10/19/78," Box 229, JCL; Report on Anne Wexler's Meeting with Pro-SALT Group on MX, Madeleine Albright to the File, 6/12/79, NSA 22—Press and Congressional Relations Files, "6-7/79," Box 4, JCL.

North Yemen, and later the presence of Soviet troops in Cuba.<sup>153</sup> Critics often tried to link other Soviet actions to consideration of the SALT treaty. In particular, SALT critics pointed to the Soviet troops in Cuba as a reason to distrust the Soviet Union and retreat from cooperation through SALT. At the same time, Carter still had the agency to placate concerns and convince skeptics to vote for SALT, so this theory cannot explain why domestic actors successfully mounted their opposition to the treaty.

Until summer 1979, Carter did not tie other tensions in the U.S.-Soviet relationship to his faith in arms control, as he insisted on considering the SALT II treaty on its own terms. One exception occurred in March 1978, after weeks of Soviet advisors aiding Ethiopian and Cuban troops against Somalia. Carter delivered an unusually stern speech, threatening that a lack of Soviet restraint in local conflicts could threaten SALT II.<sup>154</sup> Although these actions could have spurred Carter to advance strategic weapons programs to gain leverage and curb Soviet interventions, the speech seems to be an anomaly. Critics grew frustrated that Carter made this speech only to back off from its tough rhetoric almost immediately.<sup>155</sup> After summer 1979, some might use the fact that Carter explicitly pulled the treaty after the invasion of Afghanistan as evidence that Carter abandoned arms control after finally realizing the Soviets' belligerence. Carter knew this action doomed the treaty, but he did not lose faith in SALT even after this act of Soviet aggression. In his letter to Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, Carter wrote, "I continue to share your view that the SALT II Treaty is in the national security interest of the United States and the entire world."<sup>156</sup> Based on Carter's previous commitment to arms control, there is reason to believe he was sincere in his hope for the future of SALT. The administration also continued

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<sup>153</sup> Auten, *Carter's Conversion*, 272-275.

<sup>154</sup> Edward Walsh, "U.S. Will Match Soviet Military, Carter Warns," *The Washington Post*: March 18, 1978; Martin Tolchin, "CARTER WARNS SOVIET ITS MILITARY POLICIES IMPERIL COOPERATION: A STRONG SPEECH ON DEFENSE," *New York Times*: March 17, 1978.

<sup>155</sup> George F. Will, "Is Carter Sleepwalking On Foreign Policy?" *The Washington Post*: March 30, 1978.

<sup>156</sup> Letter, President to Robert Byrd, 1/3/80, NSA 22 – Press and Congressional Relations Files, "1/80," Box 4, JCL.

its plans for SALT III;<sup>157</sup> Soviet aggression did not seem to upset the plans for the next round of arms reductions or Carter's aspirations for arms control. While perceptions of the Soviet Union influenced the SALT II debate, Soviet actions alone cannot account for Carter's failure to sell his arms control goals.

Similarly, Soviet weapons developments partly explain the MX decision, but Carter's reticence and timing of the MX approval suggest his decision stemmed from an interest in influencing domestic opinions about his nuclear policy. The U.S.-Soviet military balance initially provided the impetus for the development of the MX; the Air Force worried about matching Soviet MIRVed missile capability in the early 1970s, and between 1975 and 1979, the Soviets added more heavy SS-18 ICBMs as they phased out older models.<sup>158</sup> This fear of the U.S.'s "ICBM vulnerability problem" persisted through the Carter administration, and proponents saw the mobile MX as the best way to counter Soviet weapons developments.<sup>159</sup> The 1978 and 1979 National Intelligence Estimates also expressed mild alarm at Soviet capabilities, saying Soviet ICBMs were more accurate than expected and increasingly capable of hitting the majority of U.S. Minuteman silos.<sup>160</sup> This perception may have generated more urgency to develop the MX, as the Pentagon began studying MX basing modes. At the same time, however,

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<sup>157</sup> See, for example, Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to President, 8/1/80, Brzezinski Donated Material, "Meetings—SCC 331, 7/31/80," Box 33, JCL.

<sup>158</sup> John M. Collins, *U.S.-Soviet Military Balance: Concepts and Capabilities, 1960-1980* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 443. Heavy ICBMs have a greater throw-weight (weight of missile payload); the SS-18 had a throw-weight of about 5-9 metric tons, versus the "light" MX with a throw-weight of 4.35 tons. See "The Peacekeeper ICBM," Nuclear Weapons Archive, <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Usa/Weapons/Mx.html>.

<sup>159</sup> In the documents I surveyed, the fear of U.S. ICBM vulnerability was by far the most common justification of the MX. For some of many examples, see Richard Burt, "Issue and Debate MX Missile Could Mark Big Switch in U.S. Nuclear Policy," *New York Times*: June 15, 1979; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Unheeded Warnings About the ICBMs," *The Washington Post*: January 12, 1979; Bernard Weinraub, "U.S. Military Strength Dwindling, Republicans Say: Conservatives Complained Charge Weapons' Delays," *New York Times*: March 1, 1979; Drew Middleton, "Defense Specialists Worried By Trend of Russian Efforts," *New York Times*: July 17, 1978; Memo, Harold Brown to President, 10/28/78, Brzezinski Donated Material, "Serial Xs (9/78-12/78), Box 36, JCL.

<sup>160</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict Through; the Late 1980s [Volume I--The Estimate; Memorandum Attached]* (1979), 1, <https://0-search.proquest.com.luna.wellesley.edu/docview/1679156130/abstract/8198C562082D4B42PQ/1>.



the intelligence estimates also reported that Soviet modernization was continuing as expected, so there was not necessarily a major uptick in Soviet weapons development during this period. The administration still moved forward with basing mode studies based on some individuals' belief in Minuteman vulnerability, but they lacked consensus on the urgency of this vulnerability problem.<sup>161</sup> Carter did not appear so alarmed at Soviet weapons developments, as he still felt his advisors were forcing him to make a decision. In the end, Carter approved the MX days before signing SALT II; instead of delaying the decision further, he approved the missile before choosing a basing mode, the main focus of the Pentagon studies. Moreover, if Carter had made the MX decision purely based on concerns about vulnerability, he would have chosen the smaller missile that could fit on submarines to achieve optimal survivability.<sup>162</sup> The particular MX decision, as well as its timing, suggests Carter aimed to convey a specific message to both Soviet and domestic audiences about his commitment to deterrence in an age of parity.

While it is ultimately difficult to delineate the precise reasons for the approval of the MX and the failure of SALT II, international politics seem to have had a moderate effect on Carter's policy choices. This explanation alone, however, does not elucidate why Carter announced his MX decision when he did, nor why he could not stem the rising tide of SALT opposition.

### **Domestic Politics, SALT II, and the MX**

Others might argue that Carter faced a public and Congress skeptical of arms control and pushing for measures like the MX to regain superiority; Carter capitulated to their demands in his MX and SALT decisions. Rather than public opinion directly influencing Carter's nuclear

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<sup>161</sup> An analysis of the decision-making process about the MX basing mode is beyond the scope of this thesis—although the debate narrowed around a few basing options, the administration considered as many as 40 basing modes. For one account, see Holland and Hoover, *The MX Decision*, 154-170.

<sup>162</sup> Herbert Scoville Jr., *MX: Prescription For Disaster* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 108-109 makes this point.

policy choices, however, domestic elites tried to influence public opinion as they legitimated their desired strategies. This does not mean that the administration completely disregarded public sentiment about the treaty. For instance, one memo from the White House Communications team expressed concern about declining public support for SALT, “Especially if [these trends] reflect what Senators are hearing during the recess.”<sup>163</sup> Congressmen listened to their constituents, so the administration worried the portion of the public with strong opinions on SALT could influence their Senators. Additionally, domestic hostility toward the SALT II treaty and Carter himself made it difficult for Carter to win public support for SALT II. Domestic support for Carter as a President had peaked in spring 1977 at a 75 percent approval rating, but by the time Carter signed SALT II and brought it to the Senate, he had reached some of his all-time lowest approval ratings of around 29 percent.<sup>164</sup> Concurrently, Carter faced an increasing disapproval of his policies in Congress, making some Senators reluctant to cooperate on SALT. The Carter administration had used some of its political capital lobbying moderate Republicans to vote for the Panama Canal treaties in 1978, and some of those cooperative Senators feared their reelection prospects if they also voted for SALT II.<sup>165</sup> Thus, this hostile domestic environment made securing approval of any foreign policy decision a challenge for Carter.

Ultimately, this hostile domestic environment may not have brought about SALT II’s demise; rather, the declining SALT II public approval suggests its failure came from Carter’s inability to influence public opinion. An early SALT poll taken in November 1978 found 42

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<sup>163</sup> Memo, Alan Raymond to Jerry Rafshoon, Landon Butler, and Bob Beckel, 8/20/79, Congressional Liaison Office, “SALT II Public Outreach, 2/15/79 – 10/29/79,” Box 230, JCL.

<sup>164</sup> John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, “Presidential Job Approval,” *The American Presidency Project*, last modified 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php?pres=39>. SALT itself did not seem to affect overall approval ratings; this decline largely resulted from other issues like the energy crisis. See “Gallup Poll Index no. 182 (October/November 1980),” Caldwell Donated Material, “Public Opinion Polls,” Box 7, JCL.

<sup>165</sup> Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control*, 46. This sentiment appears in various assessments of Senator positions on SALT; see “Baker,” “Cochran,” “Dole,” Caldwell Donated Material, “Evaluations of Senators Positions [1] and [2],” Box 10, JCL.

percent in favor and 20 percent opposed. By the time Carter signed the treaty, these numbers had fallen to about 33 percent in favor and 24 percent opposed. Public support continued to plummet; by October 1979, the numbers dropped to 24 percent favoring and 26 percent opposed. Common concerns among the public included a lack of trust in the Soviets to reciprocate arms reductions, and the fear that the treaty would give the Soviets a strategic advantage over the U.S.<sup>166</sup> This suggests Carter's opponents were more successful at mobilizing public opposition against SALT. More notable, however, is the amount of people who did *not* have a strong opinion about SALT. Of those polled in March 1979, 69 percent did not know enough about SALT to pass judgment. Although the Carter administration planned a massive publicity campaign to sell SALT, by July 1979, 58 percent of the public was still uninformed about SALT.<sup>167</sup> This public indifference could have hindered Carter's ability to silence his very vocal critics before and during the ratification debate, and it also demonstrates Carter's inability to mobilize a coalition in favor of SALT II.

As support for SALT declined, the influence of anti-SALT interest groups grew; while their rhetoric likely helped fuel the mobilization against Carter, it is less clear that they directly influenced his policy decisions. The ASC and CPD, the largest of these groups, believed the U.S. should regain nuclear superiority. They distributed pamphlets and created anti-SALT film, and one survey of Congressional aides found these groups lobbied over half the Senate to sway votes against SALT.<sup>168</sup> The CPD had been lobbying the Carter administration for some time,<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Memo, William J. Dyess to Mr. Nimetz, 8/8/79, Caldwell Donated Material, "State Polls," Box 8; "Gallup Opinion Index no. 171 (Oct 1979)," Caldwell Donated Material, "Public Opinion Polls," Box 7, JCL.

<sup>167</sup> Memo, William J. Dyess to Mr. Nimetz, 8/8/79.

<sup>168</sup> The ASC produced three films discussing U.S. military weakness; of these, "The SALT Syndrome" had the greatest influence, as it was shown 600 times in 1979 and the administration published a formal rebuttal of the film. Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control*, 105. For a discussion of anti-SALT propaganda, see Jerry W. Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Boston: South End Press, 1999), 265. For Congressional aides, see David C. Kurkowski, "Impact of Interest

so Carter undoubtedly felt pressure to approve the MX and many Senators felt their pressure to reject SALT II. It is difficult, however, to assess the actual influence of these groups on either public or Senatorial opinion; the same study of Congressional aides found aides universally denied that interest groups had any sway on Senators' votes.<sup>170</sup> Further, Carter's actual decisions do not correspond with these groups' precise demands; the CPD wanted Carter to renegotiate a better SALT agreement and to deploy Minuteman missiles in mobile basing systems in the interim during MX development.<sup>171</sup> Specific pressures from these groups did not seem to factor into the decision to proceed with the MX just before the SALT debate. Rather, Carter considered the broader domestic debates about these programs when he attempted to justify SALT and his MX approval. Carter may not have shifted his policy choices in direct response to the demands of public opinion, but Carter's failure to influence this public opinion through his legitimation hindered his ability to silence his critics and successfully build a coalition in support of SALT II.

## Conclusion

The public SALT II debate opened up space in U.S. domestic politics to debate the meaning of parity, the role of nuclear weapons in foreign policy, and the future of U.S. nuclear acquisitions. Carter initially hoped to halt the MX program and sell the SALT II treaty to the public and domestic elites on its own terms, taking advantage of parity's stability to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in overall defense planning. The public nature of the debate, however, allowed his critics to gain increased visibility as they argued the treaty would enshrine Soviet strategic superiority and therefore erode deterrence. Carter approved the MX and shifted his

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Groups on the Senate's Consideration of SALT II," 11/18/82, in Caldwell Donated Material, "SALT II Ratification," Box 8, JCL.

<sup>169</sup> Letter from E.R. Zumwalt to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 8/13/77, NSA 15 – Office Files, "Chron 8/1-12/77," Box 67, JCL.

<sup>170</sup> Kurkowski, "Impact of Interest Groups on the Senate's Consideration of SALT II."

<sup>171</sup> Auten, *Carter's Conversion*, 281.

legitimation, instead justifying SALT and a crucial component of overall national security and assuring critics he would maintain essential equivalence. This rhetoric only reinforced critics' conception of U.S. defense policy in an age of parity, granting them additional legitimacy and allowing them to continue their mobilization while shifting public debate further away from the treaty itself. By the time Carter pulled SALT II from Senate consideration, he had lost control of his original narrative and set the U.S. down a different path of nuclear policy, one based around weapons like the MX and designed to deny any Soviet advantages in a nuclear war.

## Chapter 4: PD-59 and the Making of Nuclear Superiority

*Senator Glenn: I get lost in what is credible and not credible. This whole thing gets so incredible when you consider wiping out whole nations, it is difficult to establish credibility.*

*Secretary Brown: That is why we sound a little crazy when we talk about it.*<sup>172</sup>

When Carter entered office, he believed parity reinforced the balance of terror such that both the U.S. and the Soviet Union could accept the stability of a MAD deterrent posture. He denounced the idea of limited nuclear options against military targets, doubting such an exchange could remain limited. By the end of his term, however, Carter signed PD-59, a nuclear employment policy designed to ensure the Soviet Union had no chance of victory in a nuclear exchange. PD-59 stated that in the event of nuclear war, the U.S. “must be capable of fighting successfully so that the adversary would not achieve his war aims and would suffer costs that are unacceptable.”<sup>173</sup> While some insist that this doctrine did not mean the U.S. planned to fight a nuclear war, others highlight the war-fighting aspects of PD-59, such as the implication that the U.S. could control escalation during a nuclear war to achieve a favorable post-war balance.<sup>174</sup> Carter denied the apparent turn in his nuclear policy, claiming there was “no change in my goals, or my concept or my philosophy.”<sup>175</sup> Regardless of the extent of the change, PD-59 required significant weapons buildups and even superiority in order for the U.S. to inflict devastating nuclear attacks with reserve forces after an initial nuclear exchange. Why did Carter adopt such a policy?

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<sup>172</sup> *Nuclear War Strategy: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 96<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, on Presidential Directive 59, September 16, 1980* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980), 22.

<sup>173</sup> Presidential Directive 59, “Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy,” July 25, 1980, National Security Archive.

<sup>174</sup> For one such exchange, see William Burr, “How to Fight a Nuclear War,” *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2012; Harold Brown, “A Countervailing View,” *Foreign Policy*, September 24, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> “War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Missile Experimental; Interview with Jimmy Carter, 1987,” 01/27/1987, *WGBH Media Library & Archives*, [http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_332175FFE7084DEDA75E815B914A6192](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_332175FFE7084DEDA75E815B914A6192).

In this chapter, I first outline the evolution of the Carter administration's nuclear strategy, beginning with the development of the countervailing strategy and culminating in its codification in PD-59. Next, I test the theory of legitimation and coalition building; in contrast to the previous chapter, this debate took place largely in private and prevented the mobilization of coalitions to undermine the countervailing strategy. Then I show that while perceptions of an increasing Soviet threat motivated some architects of the strategy, they cannot explain why this particular strategy came to dominate the administration's nuclear policy. The domestic political context placed some pressure on Carter to choose a strategy bolstering U.S. military strength, but the countervailing strategy's success partially depended on legitimating it to this domestic audience. I argue the countervailing strategy persisted because its advocates carefully controlled private debate to decrease the need to legitimate the strategy in contrast to other alternatives. In private, they had the freedom to develop a strategy maintaining essential equivalence that focused on denying any Soviet advantages. The countervailing strategy's success also stemmed from its public legitimation; the administration used rhetoric demonstrating it adhered to MAD while preventing Soviet superiority to appeal to both parity narratives and block accusations of undermining deterrence. The private debate narrowing, plus this successful public appeal to domestic audiences, prevented a coalition favoring MAD from mobilizing against the countervailing strategy; this forced Carter to shift his narrative about parity closer to that of his critics and reassert the role of nuclear weapons as an essential part of national security.

### **Flexible, Enduring Equivalence: The Development of PD-59**

When Carter entered office, he inherited Richard Nixon's nuclear doctrine, which still affirmed MAD in its declaratory policy while beginning to explore limited nuclear options in its employment policy. When presented with the SIOP containing nuclear war plans relying on

massive counterforce attacks, Nixon complained about its rigidity and worried the threat of such devastating attacks lacked credibility. In January 1974, he signed National Security Decision Memorandum 242 (NSDM-242), asking the Department of Defense for guidance on possible alternatives for nuclear weapons employment policy. A few months later, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger signed the Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP). As the first substantive change to the SIOP in roughly a decade, the NUWEP retained the major counterforce attack options while also developing Limited Nuclear Options (LNOs) and Regional Nuclear Options (RNOs).<sup>176</sup> The LNOs and RNOs created plans for low-level nuclear exchanges, such as a response to Soviet nuclear use against U.S. allies. The Nixon administration hoped these modifications to U.S. strategic posture could deter nuclear war at any level of escalation.

Carter criticized Nixon's policies during the Presidential campaign, asserting his faith in MAD and denouncing policies that he believed indicated the U.S.'s pursuit of a first-strike capability. In a press briefing on defense issues, Carter claimed the U.S. and Soviet Union both realized the balance of terror remained a key basis of stability and denounced the idea of limited nuclear options: "Even if we could ensure the war would be 'limited' in nature, it would still face the possibility of ten million Americans being killed."<sup>177</sup> In addition to this skepticism about LNOs' viability in an actual nuclear exchange, members of the NSC worried the NUWEP did not actually provide a diverse array of nuclear options. Zbigniew Brzezinski described the LNOs as "massive in both direct and collateral damage," and argued the Nixon administration never ascertained a clear purpose for LNOs or plans for their use.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> NSDM 242, "Policy for Planning the Employment of Nuclear Weapons," January 17, 1974, National Security Archive; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Policy Guidance for the Employment of Nuclear Weapons," April 3, 1974, National Security Archive. For an overview, see Desmond Ball, "The Development of the SIOP, 1960-1983," 57-83.

<sup>177</sup> *The Presidential Campaign, 1976*, 355-358.

<sup>178</sup> Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to President Carter, "Our Nuclear War Doctrine: Limited Options and Regional Nuclear War Options," March 31, 1977, National Security Archive.



In light of these doubts about existing nuclear strategy, Carter signed Presidential Review Memorandum 10 (PRM-10) on February 18, 1977, calling for a re-examination of “overall U.S. national strategy and capabilities.”<sup>179</sup> Lynn Davis, a former political science professor and now the Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs in the Department of Defense, led the subsequent study considering five possible conflict scenarios. For each, the team offered seven Alternative Integrated Military Strategies (AIMS). For the potential U.S.-U.S.S.R. conflict, the AIMS ranged from MAD to damage limitation requiring clear nuclear superiority. The JCS critiqued the ambitious, lengthy study, claiming it lacked a clear statement of national interest and a precise definition of enemy capabilities.<sup>180</sup> The intelligence community and the ACDA articulated additional complaints; the intelligence community worried the limited scope of AIMS would produce the same limited range of alternative strategies as previous studies, and the ACDA decried the absence of arms control considerations in the study.<sup>181</sup>

After PRM-10’s floundering, the Presidential Review Committee, a committee of NSC, held a series of meetings in June and July 1977 to interpret the findings from PRM-10 and define clearer goals for strategy and force posture. While the group agreed the U.S. should maintain strategic equivalence with the Soviet Union, they disagreed on whether the Soviets believed they could fight and win a nuclear war, and on issues such as the amount of HTK needed to deter the Soviet Union.<sup>182</sup> On August 30, 1977, Carter signed Presidential Directive 18 (PD-18), his first attempt at guiding the nuclear force posture. This document, however, still rendered the nuclear posture a blank canvas, providing varied ideas with no guidance on how to implement them.

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<sup>179</sup> PRM 10, “Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review,” February 18, 1977, Federation of American Scientists, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/prm/prm10.pdf>.

<sup>180</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 120-126.

<sup>181</sup> For Intelligence Community critique, see Memo, Stansfield Turner to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 3/4/77, NSC Institutional Files, “PRM-10 [1],” box 27, JCL; for ACDA critique, see Memo, Director of the ACDA to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 3/4/77, NSC Institutional Files, “PRM-10 [1],” box 27, JCL.

<sup>182</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 131-132.

PD-18 said essential equivalence required that “advantages in strategic force characteristics enjoyed by the Soviet Union must be offset by United States advantages in strategic forces,” while also citing many U.S. military advantages and seeing opportunities for cooperation on arms control to enhance stability.<sup>183</sup> One observer called the document “a mishmash of everyone’s pet concepts,” and another saw PD-18 as evidence of “the struggle for Carter’s soul between the hawks and doves.”<sup>184</sup>

PD-18 called for an additional nuclear targeting study to examine and revise Nixon’s policy laid out in NSDM-242. Brown selected Leon Sloss, former deputy director of the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs at the Department of State and an ACDA assistant director under Nixon and Ford, to direct the study. The group worked under the still controversial assumption that the Soviet Union had a concept of victory in nuclear war, so the final results of the study emphasized denying Soviet victory in any nuclear war.<sup>185</sup> The Nuclear Targeting Policy Review (NTPR), finished in November 1978, considered four potential nuclear strategy alternatives:

1. Preserve the SIOP, maintaining deterrence through major counterforce attacks
2. Add limited nuclear options targeting Soviet leadership and urban-industrial assets
3. Add limited nuclear options targeting conventional and nuclear forces, augmenting flexibility and endurance
4. Return to MAD, a strictly retaliatory posture against urban-industrial targets

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<sup>183</sup> Walter Slocombe, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense, to Director of Defense Research and Engineering et al., “U.S. National Strategy (Presidential Directive/NSC-18) (PD/NSC-18),” August 30, 1977, National Security Archive.

<sup>184</sup> “Mishmash” quoted in Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 135; Victor Zorza, “Behind Carter’s Tough Talk on U.S. Resolve,” *The Washington Post*, March 23, 1978.

<sup>185</sup> For example, the study claims, “The Soviets seriously plan to face the problems of fighting and surviving a nuclear war should it occur, and of winning.” *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review*, Phase I Report, Executive Summary, November 1978, ii, National Security Archive. Some at the time did dispute claims of Soviet warfighting plans, see Marshall Shulman to Secretary of State Muskie, “PD-59,” September 2, 1980, National Security Archive; Henry A. Trofimenko, “Counterforce: Illusion of a Panacea,” *International Security* 5, no. 4 (1981): 28–48. Long and Green’s analysis of Soviet nuclear policy seems to confirm this point, as the Soviets expressed alarm that the U.S. planned to fight a nuclear war after unveiling PD-59, and they chose to build their ICBM force because they recognized the U.S. had the more effective SLBM force; see Green and Long, “The MAD Who Wasn’t There,” 618.

In order to prevent and “unfavorable post-war nuclear force balance,” the study called for increased emphasis on flexibility—developing a “look-shoot-look” capability to locate assets and quickly retarget U.S. forces—and endurance, or building forces which could survive an initial nuclear strike and continue the exchange over a long period of time.<sup>186</sup> The NTPR conclusions favored the third option, and the NSC and Pentagon began to advocate for this strategy. They tentatively called it the “countervailing strategy,” but internal debates continued concerning its implementation, specifically on issues like developing the HTK-capability of the MX.<sup>187</sup>

Before the NSC reached a complete consensus on the countervailing strategy, however, Brown described it in the *Fiscal Year 1980 Defense Annual Report* in January 1979. For the first time, Brown publicly denounced MAD, calling it no longer “wholly credible” in light of the Soviet military buildups of the last fifteen years. He defined the countervailing strategy as the capability to respond to any attack such that the enemy “could have no expectation of achieving any rational objective,” calling for a policy covering a large list of targets and adding weapons like the MX and Trident to maintain essential equivalence.<sup>188</sup> Claims that Carter had approved this strategy as official policy leaked to the press and generated controversy, as critics worried the U.S. had shifted away from MAD.<sup>189</sup> The administration moved quickly to quiet the backlash, denying that Carter had formally endorsed this policy.

The White House did not officially begin to review the countervailing strategy until April 1979, when the Special Coordination Committee (SCC) on the NSC held three meetings to discuss the NTPR and overall strategy. Only the minutes from the first meeting on April 4 are declassified; in this meeting, the SCC discussed nuclear targeting and how to create the most

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<sup>186</sup> *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review*, vii-xi.

<sup>187</sup> Auten, *Carter's Conversion*, 288.

<sup>188</sup> Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1980* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1979), 93-95.

<sup>189</sup> Walter Pincus, “Decision-Making Is Narrowing on A-Force Strategy,” *The Washington Post*, February 11, 1979, A1; Richard Burt, “Carter Shifts U.S. Strategy for Deterring Nuclear War,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1979.

effective deterrent. Spurgeon Keeny, the deputy director and ACDA representative on the SCC, voiced concerns that the countervailing strategy signaled a major policy change, as it shifted a significant number of urban-industrial targets to military targets and therefore moved the U.S. toward damage limitation. While some aspects of the strategy, like targeting Soviet conventional forces on the move, were indeed new additions to targeting policy, Brown denied any major changes. Although Brown favored MAD early in his term, he now argued targeting Soviet military and leadership targets would best deter the Soviets, even as Vance and Brzezinski thought the Soviets most valued urban-industrial targets.<sup>190</sup> As the NSC refined the countervailing strategy, they faced pushback from several groups. The ACDA and State Department still favored strategies closer to MAD, while Strategic Air Command and the Navy remained loyal to their SIOP. Brzezinski and William E. Odom, Military Advisor to the National Security Advisor, realized they would need to retain the SIOP while adding options for flexibility and endurance to gain Pentagon approval.<sup>191</sup>

Brown described the countervailing strategy again in the SALT II hearings, tying it closely to the notion of essential equivalence. He defined essential equivalence as the ability to deny the Soviets any of their goals for a strategic strike and to wage a general war of any plausible scope and duration.<sup>192</sup> The administration still had not released a formal document outlining the strategy; Brzezinski later claimed that once Carter approved the MX, he personally pressed the President to issue a directive outlining the new strategy even though Brown did not

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<sup>190</sup> Detailed Minutes, Special Coordination Committee Meeting, "Strategic Forces Employment Policy," April 4, 1979, National Security Archive.

<sup>191</sup> Victor Utgoff, William Odom, and Fritz Ermath to David Aaron and Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Targeting Study SCC," April 24, 1979, National Security Archive.

<sup>192</sup> Brown struggled to distinguish the countervailing strategy from essential equivalence, but said essential equivalence takes care of the "perceptions problem," while the countervailing strategy took care of the "military problem." *Military Implications of the SALT II Treaty: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services*, 64.

believe this step was necessary.<sup>193</sup> At the same time, however, Carter still expressed skepticism about these policies, accusing the NSC of amplifying the actual Soviet threat.<sup>194</sup> Nevertheless, the NSC and the Office of the Secretary of Defense began drafting a directive in early 1980. This group included only the top officials in each department, without much input from other NSC members. The group also never sent drafts of what would become PD-59 to Edward Muskie, the new Secretary of State—Muskie did not find out about PD-59 until it leaked to the press in August.<sup>195</sup> At the time, Odom justified the decision to restrict interagency coordination because it was “so closely related to military contingency planning, an activity that remains a closely held prerogative...of the Department of Defense and the Joint Staff.”<sup>196</sup> The NSC intended for the new targeting policy to be a strictly military issue, so they relegated interagency coordination to a lower priority level.

In March and April 1980, several people, including Odom and Brown, produced drafts of PD-59 and debated their points of contention. Brown wanted to include clauses emphasizing the primacy of pre-planned urban-industrial attacks over flexible response, and he hesitated to add sentences calling for the increased reserve forces needed for endurance. Odom insisted on the inclusion of this point, arguing Brown’s own countervailing strategy would require “a larger and coercive reserve.”<sup>197</sup> As the group worked through their disagreements, the 1980 Presidential campaign intensified as Reagan argued Carter had permitted the dangerous degradation of U.S.

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<sup>193</sup> Richard Burt, “The New Strategy for Nuclear War: How it Evolved,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1980.

<sup>194</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1983), 336.

<sup>195</sup> Brzezinski had to explain the Muskie controversy to the President. See Brzezinski to the President, “Flap with Muskie over PD-59,” National Security Archive. Brzezinski would claim that the media’s depiction of this was overblown, but even his own chronology demonstrates how the administration excluded Muskie from meetings. See Zbigniew Brzezinski to Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State, “PD-59 Chronology,” August 22, 1980, National Security Archive.

<sup>196</sup> William E. Odom and Jasper Welch to Brzezinski, “Targeting Policy,” March 26, 1980, National Security Archive.

<sup>197</sup> William E. Odom and Jasper Welch to Brzezinski, “Draft PD on Nuclear Employment Policy,” April 17, 1980, National Security Archive.

defense, promising his own nuclear policy taking a harder line against the Soviet Union.<sup>198</sup>

Ultimately, the PD-59 group reached a compromise and briefed Carter on July 24, 1980. The next day, Carter signed PD-59. The final document reiterated the countervailing strategy:

“To continue to deter in an era of strategic nuclear equivalence, it is necessary to have nuclear (as well as conventional) forces such that in considering aggression against our interests, any adversary would recognize that no plausible outcome would represent a victory or any plausible definition of victory.”

PD-59’s guidance on nuclear weapons employment included pre-planned options from the SIOP, allowing the President to select attacks from a full range of military, industrial, and political control targets. An initial nuclear response would target primarily military targets, including enemy strategic and theater nuclear forces, military command, control, communications, and intelligence capabilities, and industrial facilities supporting military production. These options would also require growing the reserve force to have survivable forces able to respond after the initial nuclear exchange. Finally, PD-59 called for flexibility, developing limited targeting plans on short notice during an exchange—especially for achieving objectives in a theater nuclear campaign.<sup>199</sup>

News of PD-59 soon leaked to the press, with journalists noting it placed less emphasis on retaliation against cities and greater emphasis on military targets. The notion of flexibility and its associated limited nuclear strikes generated some apprehension; one official admitted flexibility was “more an aspiration than a reality now,” and the Director of the Federation of American Scientists questioned the flexible targeting options: “Who would be there to turn off

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<sup>198</sup> Hendrick Smith, “Reagan Advisers Hold Somber View of Soviet Intentions,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1980; Richard Burt, “CARTER SAID TO BACK A PLAN FOR LIMITING ANY NUCLEAR WAR,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1980; Stephen F. Cohen, “Hard-Line Fallacies,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1980.

<sup>199</sup> William E. Odom to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “M-B-B Luncheon Item: Targeting,” August 5, 1980, with Presidential Directive 59, “Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy,” July 25, 1980, National Security Archive.

the war if we nuked Soviet command centers?”<sup>200</sup> Both the public and Congress expressed concern about Muskie’s exclusion from PD-59 planning, prompting the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to call a hearing on the new nuclear war strategy.<sup>201</sup> Brown and Muskie testified at the hearing on September 16, 1980, both denying that PD-59 represented a major shift in strategy. Muskie claimed the countervailing strategy merely augmented the traditional MAD doctrine, and Brown called it “a natural evolution of the conceptual foundation built over a generation by men like Robert McNamara and James Schlesinger.”<sup>202</sup> While some Senators maintained concerns about the new nuclear strategy, the hearing seemed to placate the rest; Albright wrote to Brzezinski after the hearing that she did not expect further discussion on the topic.<sup>203</sup> The Pentagon began to draft more detailed military planning for PD-59 in the fall, but plans stalled once Reagan was elected President in November 1980.

### **MAD in the Streets, Counterforce in the Sheets: Legitimation and PD-59**

What role, if any, did coalition building and legitimation play in the formulation and persistence of the countervailing strategy in Carter’s nuclear doctrine? Although the strategic concerns described in the next section motivated the initial review and revision of the nuclear posture, they cannot explain why the administration chose the countervailing strategy among a range of options and why it persisted until PD-59. There were ample opportunities for debate and revision, but the strategy remained almost entirely consistent throughout the whole period. I

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<sup>200</sup> Richard Burt, “Carter Said to Back a Plan for Limiting Any Nuclear War,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1980; Michael Getler, “Carter Directive Modifies Strategy for a Nuclear War,” *The Washington Post*, August 6, 1980; George C. Wilson, “U.S. Shift in Nuclear War Strategy Evokes Some Shudders,” *The Washington Post*, August 13, 1980.

<sup>201</sup> The Department of Defense denied the exclusion of Muskie at the time; see Don Oberdorfer, “Pentagon Says State Was Informed of Shift in A-War Strategy,” *The Washington Post*, August 11, 1980; Richard Burt, “The New Strategy for Nuclear War: How it Evolved,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1980. For Congressional concerns, see Memo, Madeleine Albright to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 9/13/80, NSA 22 – Press and Congressional Relations File, “Weekly Reports 6-10/80,” Box 2, JCL.

<sup>202</sup> *Nuclear War Strategy: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 4, 7.

<sup>203</sup> Memo, Madeleine Albright to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 9/20/80, NSA 22 – Press and Congressional Relations File, “Weekly Reports 6-10/80,” Box 2, JCL.

argue that mechanisms of limiting the scope of the debate, such as excluding people and restricting it to the private sphere, helped advocates of the countervailing strategy dominate strategic planning. In this private sphere, advocates decreased the need to legitimate their strategy with respect to norms of deterrence, creating space for the denial aspects of the countervailing strategy. When the strategy emerged in public several times, however, those advocates scrambled to legitimate it, couching it in the language of MAD and parity to prevent critics from mobilizing against the administration. Moreover, this public rhetoric appealed to multiple coalitions by respecting MAD logic while denying Soviet superiority, all in the name of preserving parity. The private decision-making dynamics streamlined the nuclear planning process, but they allowed the countervailing strategy to persist without revision through the end of Carter's term.

It was not immediately clear or inevitable that the countervailing strategy's tough stance of denying Soviet victory would come to dominate Carter's nuclear strategy. PD-18's mix of optimism about the potential for U.S.-Soviet cooperation, plus a hard line toward Soviet military developments, reflected the mix of hawks and doves in the White House involved with its creation. The countervailing strategy indicated the eventual dominance of the hawks in this private sphere of decision-making, and the apparent abandonment of Carter's optimism and faith in MAD and parity. Several mechanisms of the private nuclear planning process narrowed the scope of debate and prevented the mobilization of groups favoring alternative strategies.

First, some actors became deliberately excluded from debates about nuclear strategy. For instance, the actors who completed the NTPR all held the belief that the Soviet Union had a concept of victory. The document explicitly states, "The Soviets seriously plan to face the



problems of fighting and surviving a nuclear war should it occur, and of winning.”<sup>204</sup> The NTPR claimed the intelligence community had reached a consensus on this point, but later accounts express doubts about the prevalence and certainty of this assumption. Nevertheless, the group’s belief narrowed the range of options considered—while the NTPR kept MAD as a major policy option, major recommendations like flexibility aimed to deny Soviet war objectives and strike military assets. Further, even when the study considered MAD as an option of future strategy, it still insisted, “A continued capability to execute a wide range of limited attacks would be possible.”<sup>205</sup> The rhetoric around the objectives of a nuclear strategy began to shift alongside this narrowing. While earlier documents like PD-18 emphasized the importance of essential equivalence to prevent the Soviet Union from exerting political leverage, rhetoric in the NTPR and onward stressed essential equivalence to deny any Soviet victory.<sup>206</sup> The recommendations from this group with shared perceptions of the Soviet Union soon took the shape of the countervailing strategy.

Similar dynamics of exclusion also occurred later during the drafting of PD-59, decreasing the need to legitimate the countervailing strategy against opposing voices. In addition to excluding the State Department, the process excluded all but the principals in the NSC and Pentagon, restricting the debate to a limited sphere. Although the smaller group may have made decision-making more efficient, Marshall Schulman, a Columbia University professor, described PD-59 as “a case study in how not to make security policy.”<sup>207</sup> While many naturally viewed

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<sup>204</sup> *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review*, i.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.* x.

<sup>206</sup> I claim this is a significant shift in rhetoric. Preventing political leverage means maintaining a roughly equal military balance to assuage allies’ fears that the U.S. would not be able to defend them against Soviet provocations in an era of Soviet superiority. Preventing victory, on the other hand, shifts the meaning of deterrence from one based on the balance of terror to one of denying war aims. While the U.S. can still claim to reject a war-fighting strategy, preventing Soviet victory requires significant force buildups and preparation for every contingency to guarantee the U.S. emerges from nuclear war more powerful than the Soviet Union.

<sup>207</sup> Marshall Shulman to Secretary of State Muskie, “PD-59,” September 2, 1980, National Security Archive.

nuclear targeting as a strictly military matter, initial conversations about targeting in the SCC meetings did include representatives from the State Department and the ACDA. As the process evolved, however, these groups became excluded from the debate. Actors like Muskie might have voiced opposition to components of the countervailing strategy, but by excluding them, the makers of PD-59—those who favored doctrines emphasizing counterforce targeting and limited nuclear options—could dominate conversations about strategy and ultimately dominate policy. Removing actors from this debate meant people like Brzezinski and Odom did not have to justify the countervailing strategy to critics, which might have opened up space others to propose alternative strategies. Without this debate and opposition, the administration constructed a consensus around the countervailing strategy.

Second, proponents of the countervailing strategy prevented opportunities for revision and precluded consideration of alternative strategies by taking issues off the table for debate. While much of the debate about the countervailing strategy still remains classified, the minutes from the first April 1979 SCC meeting provide insights about the nature of these strategy debates. At the end of this meeting, Gen. David Jones, Chairman of the JCS, noted they had discussed neither flexibility nor endurance—two key features of the countervailing strategy that distanced it from MAD. Brzezinski, however, foreclosed debate on these issues by saying he assumed they “were understood by all.”<sup>208</sup> Brzezinski presumed consensus on these issues so no one could debate them; this pivoted future conversations to focus on the specifics of forces required for flexibility and endurance, rather than focus on whether these concepts should be included at all. This meeting may not be representative of all strategic planning meetings, but the overall *lack* of nuclear strategy meetings suggests the countervailing strategy gained momentum and support by avoiding scrutiny. This lack of review and revision streamlined the

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<sup>208</sup> Special Coordination Committee Meeting, “Strategic Forces Employment Policy,” 9.

pipeline from countervailing strategy to PD-59 by preventing other actors from offering alternatives that could challenge the countervailing strategy's dominance in nuclear planning.

All of these acts of narrowing the debate about the countervailing strategy restricted the audience for its legitimation, preventing alternative strategies from gaining support and challenging the countervailing strategy. While strategic planning necessarily takes place in private, the countervailing strategy's architects even excluded people and ideas from this sphere of private debate. In theories of agenda setting, the "expansion of conflict," or the broadening of debate to a wider group, allows for more intense contestation to weaken the dominant position. In this case, I argue that by restricting the scope of debate about nuclear strategy, Brzezinski and Brown limited potential challenges to the countervailing strategy. They formulated the strategy from early NTPR recommendations and eliminated much of the work of legitimation by debating it in only a few, increasingly exclusive, meetings. Advocates of the countervailing strategy did not need to legitimate it to compete with other groups, giving them the freedom to craft a strategy focused on denial without accusations of undermining deterrence. Had the debate taken place in public, there would have been a wider audience to critique this policy. People favoring alternative strategies like MAD could have used this audience to mobilize support and challenge the countervailing strategy.

While the countervailing strategy derived much of its strength from its limited visibility in the private sphere, it eventually entered the public sphere and the administration needed to legitimate it. After Brown's unsuccessful legitimation during the FY1980 Annual Report, the authors of PD-59 took care to use rhetoric demonstrating its consistency with norms of deterrence. The backlash from Brown's hearing centered on his quote that MAD was "no longer wholly credible," as critics worried this strategy "could create pressures for making a preemptive

first strike in times of crisis—a step most Americans reject as immoral.”<sup>209</sup> This criticism forced the administration to clarify that the statement was not yet official policy. By explicitly dismissing MAD, Brown suggested the administration eschewed norms of deterrence and planned to fight a nuclear war. The larger public audience included critics skeptical of the need to deny Soviet superiority; the administration needed to successfully legitimate the countervailing strategy to prevent their mobilization. After this instance of failed legitimation, later iterations of the countervailing strategy avoided the rhetoric refuting MAD, and Brown balked at any language that might associate the strategy with warfighting. In Brzezinski's March 1980 draft of PD-59, Brown excised a section describing the targeting of U.S. flexible forces as a means to “fight a nuclear war, if need be,” labeling it “war fighting.”<sup>210</sup> He insisted PD-59 demonstrate that “our objective remains deterrence and that we have no illusions about either side being able to count on fighting and winning a nuclear war.”<sup>211</sup> It is certainly true that U.S. nuclear war plans had always included military targeting, and Brzezinski and Odom believed MAD gave the U.S. a “1914 War Plan.”<sup>212</sup> But the architects of the countervailing strategy understood they could not adopt a strategy with a purely counterforce declaratory policy. They needed to demonstrate the countervailing strategy’s adherence to norms of deterrence to resonate with audiences and prevent critics from mobilizing against them.

The administration also moved to legitimate the countervailing strategy in public after Carter signed PD-59 and someone leaked it to the press. At a time when Republicans were

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<sup>209</sup> *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1980*, 93; Pincus, “Decision-Making Is Narrowing on A-Force Strategy”; Robert Kaylor, “Brown Would Widen Range Of Russian Military Targets,” *The Washington Post*, January 14, 1979; Richard Burt, “Carter Shifts U.S. Strategy for Deterring Nuclear War,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1979.

<sup>210</sup> Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Harold Brown, 3/22/80, Brzezinski Donated Material, “Presidential Directive 59 3/80 – 4/80,” Box 35, JCL.

<sup>211</sup> Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 142.

<sup>212</sup> They compared MAD to Germany’s Schlieffen Plan in World War I due to its perceived rigidity. Victor Utgoff, William Odom, and Fritz Ermarth to David Aaron and Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Targeting Study SCC,” April 24, 1979, National Security Archive.

increasingly deriding Carter's nuclear policy, the leak may have been a strategic rhetorical maneuver by the administration. They could bring PD-59 out in public and confront these criticisms directly, controlling the debate on their own terms by legitimating their actual strategy. The administration's legitimation emphasized the strategy's "evolutionary" nature, insisting it was not a departure from previous nuclear strategies. While they wanted to present a muscular nuclear strategy, they still needed this evolutionary rhetoric to avoid accusations of creating a war-fighting strategy. Some aspects of PD-59—like the pre-planned options—were consistent with earlier strategies, but other concepts like flexibility and endurance were new additions. In fact, Brzezinski called PD-59 "the third major revision of the strategic doctrine since World War II," but joined other officials in assuring the public that it was not a major change.<sup>213</sup> Even if they did not believe in its evolutionary character, both Brown and Muskie used this rhetoric in the Nuclear War Strategy Hearings: Muskie called the countervailing strategy "not a radical departure from existing policy," and Brown called it "a natural evolution" from older strategy.<sup>214</sup> If they had admitted PD-59 was a radical departure from the previous doctrine, they would have indicated the administration rejected existing conventions of MAD and planned to fight a nuclear war. Brown's rhetoric attempted to show the U.S. would not fight a nuclear war while also showing the U.S. would counter all Soviet war-fighting aims:

"PD-59 does not assume that we can win a limited nuclear war, nor does it intend or pretend to enable us to do so. It does seek both to prevent the Soviets from being able to win such a war and to convince them they could not win such a war. I do not believe either side could win a limited nuclear war; and I want to ensure as best we can that the Soviets do not believe so either."<sup>215</sup>

Although the administration needed to reassure the Soviet Union it did not plan to fight a nuclear war to avoid dangerous arms racing, their legitimation also suggests sensitivity to domestic

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<sup>213</sup> Memo, Reg Bartholomew to Secretary of State Muskie, September 5, 1980, National Security Archive.

<sup>214</sup> *Nuclear War Strategy: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 4, 7.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.* 8

perceptions. Critics, especially those in Congress, would reject any strategy not clearly rooted in historical notions of deterrence. Even though the countervailing strategy gained support as a result of the private debate, its architects recognized its legitimation mattered in the public moments that would decide strategy's fate.

Brzezinski, Brown, Odom, and others exerted strong control over the development of the countervailing strategy in the private sphere, where they could regulate the debate to block opposition. When they unveiled it in public, the countervailing strategy's actual content was deliberately vague, allowing a multivocal legitimation to win support from domestic elites like Congress—even if parts of the strategy seemed contradictory.<sup>216</sup> While the strategy needed to comply with existing notions of MAD and deterrence, it also needed to assuage public fears of future Soviet superiority. As Representative Jack Kemp (R, NY) observed, “The biggest scandal to ever hit this Nation would be if the American people ever wake up and find themselves in a position of military inferiority with the Soviet Union.”<sup>217</sup> The countervailing strategy had to deny Soviet victory in a nuclear war and maintain a favorable post-war strategic balance, while also demonstrating the U.S. did not believe it could fight and win a nuclear war. This legitimation blocked the mobilization of an opposing coalition: since the strategy claimed to deny Soviet victory, it delegitimized more restrained alternatives by suggesting anything less than the countervailing strategy would allow Soviet superiority. Congress's acceptance of PD-59 after only one hearing demonstrates this legitimation's effectiveness. By including existing targeting plans and new flexible options to maintain essential equivalence, PD-59 appealed to pessimists about parity and affirmed the administration's commitment to deterrence.

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<sup>216</sup> Warner Schilling raised this point in the subtitle of his article, “The Search for Sufficiently Equivalent Countervailing Parity.” He meant to illustrate how all of this rhetoric of essential equivalence and the countervailing strategy was ultimately meaningless, as no one really knew how parity would translate into political outcomes. I argue this rhetoric was deliberately indeterminate and even nonsensical in order to meet the demands of the coalitions with various narratives of parity.

<sup>217</sup> *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1980*, 594.

In sum, the privacy of the debate about nuclear strategy removed alternatives to the countervailing strategy, which in turn decreased the need for proponents to legitimate this strategy. Proponents of the countervailing strategy like Brown and Brzezinski faced fewer rhetorical constraints and could advocate a strategy effectively requiring nuclear superiority, as they had prevented an opposing coalition from mobilizing against them. This is not to say, however, that public legitimation did not also ensure the countervailing strategy's survival. Had the public declaratory policy not conformed to the language of MAD, it would have violated norms of deterrence and become vulnerable to attacks from an opposing coalition accusing the administration of proposing a nuclear war-fighting strategy. By carefully legitimating the strategy as an evolution of existing doctrine, the administration placated skeptics who feared Carter would allow Soviet superiority and erode deterrence while also blocking opposition worried about abandoning MAD. Ultimately, the countervailing strategy persisted because of this narrow private debate and effective public legitimation; it is not surprising that Carter signed a document on which his advisors had reached a perceived consensus, and which appealed to notions of deterrence and essential equivalence.

### **The International Politics of the Countervailing Strategy**

Some might dispute the above argument, instead claiming international politics—specifically, heightened perceptions of the Soviet threat—necessitated Carter's adoption of PD-59. It is true that the nuclear targeting review began in response to general trends in Soviet doctrine; Soviet geopolitical moves, weapons buildups, and strategic modernization fed into perceptions that the Soviet Union planned to fight a nuclear war. These developments, however, did not specifically dictate the countervailing strategy. The administration lacked consensus about the countervailing strategy as the optimal means to counter the Soviet threat and Carter

considered several other strategy options, so this explanation cannot completely explain the countervailing strategy's persistence in the Carter White House.

The countervailing strategy developed based on a few administration officials' assumptions about Soviet nuclear warfighting capabilities, which stemmed from general trends of increasing Soviet nuclear forces and the arrival of strategic parity. As Schilling observed, U.S. policymakers' anxiety about Soviet superiority and intentions revealed their tendency to assess the strategic balance by counting missiles rather than relating capabilities to different war outcomes.<sup>218</sup> In 1978, the Soviet Union increased its numbers of SS-17, SS-18, and SS-19 missiles—all with MIRVed capability—and deployed four additional Delta 3 submarines carrying up to 16 MIRVed missiles each.<sup>219</sup> U.S. intelligence reports noted that although the Soviets were continuing their modernization on the expected trajectory, their ICBMs had higher accuracy than expected.<sup>220</sup> As seen in Chapter 3, these capabilities generated fears that the Soviet Union planned to fight a nuclear war. The increased HTK-capability and accuracy of Soviet missiles gave them incentives to take advantage of these capabilities by striking first, and their increased theater nuclear capability suggested plans for lower-level nuclear exchanges. The authors of the NTPR argued these developments eroded U.S. counterforce capability, and Brown cited the Soviet Union's "impressive military strides" as evidence the Soviets planned to fight a nuclear war.<sup>221</sup> The state of parity compounded these fears, as the same policymakers worried impending Soviet numerical superiority would give the Soviet Union additional political leverage. They drew links between trends in Soviet military capabilities and the assumption that

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<sup>218</sup> Schilling, "U.S. Strategic Nuclear Concepts in the 1970s," 70-71. It is worth noting, however, that the intelligence community did not base their assessment of Soviet warfighting doctrine solely on capabilities; they also studied military documents and rhetoric from Soviet military officials.

<sup>219</sup> Collins, *U.S.-Soviet Military Balance*, 458; Auten, *Carter's Conversion*, 233.

<sup>220</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict Through the Late 1980s [Volume I--Summary Estimate; Memorandum Attached; Includes Graphs, Maps, and Figures]* (1978), 2, <https://o-search.proquest.com.luna.wellesley.edu/docview/1679148714/abstract/65D6B0AF79F94A41PQ/1>.

<sup>221</sup> Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1980*, 7.



the Soviets planned to fight and win a nuclear war, prompting the idea of a strategy to deny Soviet victory.

In this international politics explanation, the turn to the countervailing strategy would also stem from concerns about U.S. extended deterrence in an age of parity. While the Carter administration expressed concerns about Soviet actions toward NATO in its move to review nuclear targeting policy, they did not unanimously agree the countervailing strategy would best bolster extended deterrence. There were some concerns about Soviet military buildups in intermediate-range and medium-range ballistic missiles in Eastern Europe during this period. In particular, 1978 saw increases in Soviet deployments of the Backfire bomber and the SS-20 missile—both theater nuclear forces—while the U.S. did not possess any medium-range ballistic missile capability. This development may have increased Allies' fears about extended deterrence, which could have prompted increased U.S. interest in LNOs to defend them against lower levels of Soviet aggression. In fact, discussions of NATO in U.S. nuclear policy documents center on Allied concerns about U.S. ability to deter aggression towards them.<sup>222</sup> It is not clear, however, that the countervailing strategy best served this purpose. Rather than decrying Soviet aggression, NATO reaffirmed its decision to make détente its official policy during this period.<sup>223</sup> Further, the administration debated whether the Allies even wanted the countervailing strategy. The State Department released a report in August 1980 doubting PD-59's utility for extended deterrence, saying, "PD-59's attention to increased targeting flexibility and the capacity to launch limited attacks over an extended period will be in tension with

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<sup>222</sup> The NTPR states, "Allied concerns about our ability to deter aggression against NATO have grown as Soviet capabilities have grown, and calls for more effective plans to target "the Warsaw Pact threat;" *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review*, vii. In the PD-59 hearings, Muskie said, "The countervailing strategy reflects and supports the NATO strategy of flexible response by underscoring the availability of a full spectrum of nuclear responses;" *Nuclear War Strategy: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 5.

<sup>223</sup> NATO made this statement in the October 1979 document *Détente and Perceptions*. See *U.S.-Soviet Relations During the Carter Administration*, 88.

[NATO's] deeply held aversion to nuclear warfighting.”<sup>224</sup> The administration could have developed an alternative nuclear strategy focused on extended deterrence without enhanced flexibility and endurance, but they chose the countervailing strategy despite Allies' concerns.

The bulk of U.S. nuclear strategic planning occurred from late 1978 to spring 1980; if this explanation of the countervailing strategy is correct, this period should have seen specific events indicating increasing Soviet geopolitical influence beyond these concerns about extended deterrence. Much of the last chapter overlaps with this period, and as stated earlier, the Soviet Union's growing influence in countries like Yemen, Cuba, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua increased tensions in the U.S.-Soviet relationship. While the U.S. denounced these actions, they did not seem to create a major increase in Soviet geopolitical influence that had direct implications for U.S. nuclear planning.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was arguably the most significant act of Soviet aggression during Carter's term, but it did not cause Carter to pivot towards the countervailing strategy. The invasion alarmed the U.S. for a number of reasons: the Soviet Union expanding its sphere of influence by establishing another socialist government on its border, the increased presence of Soviet troops and weapons in the Persian Gulf, and the potential for the Soviet Union to gain control of Middle East oil.<sup>225</sup> Some authors argue this moment triggered Carter's harder line toward the Soviet Union and the adoption of PD-59. Afghanistan did cause some change in Carter's attitude; he admitted his “opinion of [Russia] has

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<sup>224</sup> David Gombert to Eugene Martin, “Evolution and Foreign Policy Consequences of New Nuclear Targeting Policy (PD-59),” August 15, 1980, National Security Archive.

<sup>225</sup> John M. Goshko, “U.S. Assails Soviets on Afghanistan: State Department Cites Continuing Military Buildup,” *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1979; “The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1979-1980,” United States Department of State, Office of the Historian, accessed 3 March 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>.

changed more drastically in the last week than the previous two and a half years.”<sup>226</sup> In January 1980, he unveiled the “Carter Doctrine,” aiming to protect the Persian Gulf from further Soviet influence and calling the Soviet Union “the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War.”<sup>227</sup> By December 1979, however, most of the decision-making about nuclear strategy had already occurred—at best, the invasion of Afghanistan might have sped up the process of drafting PD-59. Even during the countervailing strategy revision process, Carter still had not become totally convinced of Soviet plans to fight a nuclear war. Brzezinski recounted meetings as late as summer 1979 where Carter grew frustrated with NSC members who he perceived to be inflating the Soviet threat.<sup>228</sup> Overall, Afghanistan played a minor role in Carter’s turn to the countervailing strategy, and Soviet geopolitical moves did not appear to significantly influence U.S. nuclear planning.

An account of the countervailing strategy as a reaction to Soviet actions on the international stage cannot explain why the Carter administration selected this particular strategy, and why it remained unchanged for two years. First, the administration did not all agree that the countervailing strategy would best counter Soviet nuclear strategy. In the April 4 SCC meeting, Brown expressed doubts that nuclear war could be fought over a long time even if the U.S. adopted the countervailing strategy, predicting any nuclear war would soon become all-out war. In the same meeting, David Aaron, Deputy National Security Advisor, worried that trying to gain an edge over the Soviets would only encourage the Soviets to improve or expand their forces.<sup>229</sup> As seen in the NTPR, the administration contemplated several different targeting options in

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<sup>226</sup> “War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Missile Experimental; Interview with Jimmy Carter, 1987,” 01/27/1987, *WGBH Media Library & Archives*, [http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_332175FFE7084DEDA75E815B914A6192](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_332175FFE7084DEDA75E815B914A6192).

<sup>227</sup> Jimmy Carter, “The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” January 23, 1980, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079>.

<sup>228</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 336.

<sup>229</sup> Special Coordination Committee Meeting, “Strategic Forces Employment Policy,” 5-6.

response to an increasing Soviet threat—the countervailing strategy was not an inevitable or unanimous choice. Even major proponents of the countervailing strategy, like Odom, considered other options. Odom always expressed frustration with the credibility of the massive SIOP attack options, but he began to favor flexibility only after innovation in U.S. information-gathering abilities. The shift to electro-optical satellite imaging allowed the development of “look-see-look” capabilities, where the U.S. could locate targets and transmit the information to SAC within a few hours, allowing them to retarget ICBMs to those locations. U.S. technological developments helped imagine a strategy beyond “a huge mechanical war plan aimed at creating maximum damage without regard to the political context.”<sup>230</sup> Odom’s choice of the countervailing strategy came from improvements to U.S. capabilities rather than solely from his perceptions of the Soviet threat.

Second, if concerns about increased Soviet capabilities played a primary causal role in PD-59’s development, the strategic planning should have devoted significant attention to matching Soviet capabilities. While policymakers tried to match Soviet capabilities with the MX, the architects of the countervailing strategy repeatedly downplayed the importance of U.S. capabilities in the operational aspects of this strategy. When the JCS argued the U.S. did not have adequate capability to execute the countervailing strategy, Brzezinski said, “While declaring this strategy before we have the capability to carry it out may seem unrealistic, the strategy is essential to maintaining Alliance cohesion.”<sup>231</sup> Brown remained reticent about bolstering U.S. capabilities to uphold his own strategy’s principles; he did not want to increase reserve forces, but Odom observed, “[Brown’s] own concept of a countervailing strategy seems

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<sup>230</sup> Odom compares this technological shift to “the one Copernicus caused by shifting from Ptolemy’s geocentric view of the solar system to a heliocentric one;” William E. Odom, “The Origins and Design of PD-59: A Memoir,” in *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice*, ed. Henry D. Sokolski, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute Publishing Office, 2004), 183.

<sup>231</sup> Minutes, Policy Review Committee Meeting, 5/14/79, 2, Brzezinski Donated Material, “Meetings—NSC Staff (1/78-6/80),” Box 24, JCL.

to require a larger and coercive reserve.”<sup>232</sup> Brown might have been willing to approve these capabilities if he had been purely concerned about the rising Soviet threat, but both Brzezinski and Brown placed greater stock in the inherent value of the declaratory policy. Ultimately, the administration considered myriad strategies to counter the perceived Soviet military doctrine and they did not all consider the countervailing strategy the best option. Soviet strategy and capabilities cannot fully account for the selection of the countervailing strategy; only through the internal process of narrowing the strategic debate could the countervailing strategy come to dominate the alternatives.

### **Domestic Politics and PD-59**

Some might also argue the countervailing strategy stemmed from Carter’s response to domestic political attitudes; he capitulated to pressure from interest groups, domestic elites, and the rest of the public to take a harder line against the Soviet Union. Despite these domestic attitudes, Carter did not select the countervailing strategy in response to specific constituent demands. The strategy persisted because it was largely shielded from this public audience; when the administration revealed it in public, they won support from this audience in their legitimization of the countervailing strategy as a means to maintain essential equivalence.

The domestic political context necessitated the countervailing strategy’s legitimization as a means to deny Soviet superiority, but public opinion did not directly influence this policy formulation. The year the administration began reviewing its nuclear posture, 1978, marked the first time since 1957 that more Americans perceived the Soviet Union ahead of the U.S.

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<sup>232</sup> William E. Odom and Jasper Welch to Brzezinski, “Draft PD on Nuclear Employment Policy,” April 17, 1980, National Security Archive.

militarily than perceived the U.S. ahead of the Soviet Union.<sup>233</sup> This public skepticism about U.S. military capability persisted; by August 1979, one-third of Americans believed the U.S. held a military advantage, one third believed the Soviet Union held a military advantage, and one third believed the countries were evenly matched.<sup>234</sup> Other 1979 polls reported that a majority of Americans believed the U.S. military capability was “weaker than it ought to be,” and that 73 percent perceived U.S. military capability as equal to or weaker than that of the Soviet Union. These polls reflect a general trend of public desire to spend more on defense—this figure jumped from 30 percent of Americans to 60 percent of Americans from 1978 to 1979.<sup>235</sup> While the public opinion did not articulate a particular optimal nuclear strategy, it did increase the need to demonstrate the U.S. would remain strong on defense in an age of parity. Carter often reiterated this point in his speeches, especially those related to the nuclear balance.<sup>236</sup> The countervailing strategy’s public legitimization, emphasizing essential equivalence and deterrence, spoke directly to these domestic anxieties and insisted the U.S. would prevent Soviet superiority even after a nuclear war. This legitimization demonstrates an attempt to influence public opinion, but it is less clear that this public opinion influenced the initial strategic planning.

Some contemporary observers also hypothesized that PD-59 served as a response to Republican attacks on Carter’s defense and foreign policies, as Carter signed it just before the

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<sup>233</sup> “Chart 2: Nuclear and Missile Balance,” Caldwell Donated Material, “Public Opinion Polls,” Box 7, JCL. For Carter approval ratings, see “Gallup Poll Index no. 182 (October/November 1980),” Caldwell Donated Material, “Public Opinion Polls,” Box 7, JCL.

<sup>234</sup> “Gallup Opinion Index Report, no. 171 (Oct. 1979),” Caldwell Donated Material, “Public Opinion Polls,” Box 7, JCL.

<sup>235</sup> Memo, Harold Brown to the President, 2/27/79, Caldwell Donated Material, “State Polls,” Box 8, JCL; Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control*, 81.

<sup>236</sup> See, for example, Jimmy Carter, “NATO Ministerial Meeting Text of Remarks at the First Session of the Meeting,” May 10, 1977, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7492>; Carter, “Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Vienna Summit Meeting,” June 18, 1979, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=32498>; Carter, “Memphis, Tennessee Remarks at the Opening Session of the 1978 National Democratic Party Conference,” December 8, 1978, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30285>; Carter, “Address at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina,” March 17, 1978, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30516>.

Democratic National Convention in 1980.<sup>237</sup> Certainly, during the 1980 Presidential campaign, Reagan often cited Carter's foreign policy failures as evidence of Carter's weakness against the Soviet Union. He derided Carter's inadequate defense spending and proposed a nuclear strategy similar to the countervailing strategy, meant to deny any potential Soviet victory in a nuclear war.<sup>238</sup> The Carter administration recognized PD-59's utility in countering these accusations; Odom noted in a July 1980 memo to Brzezinski, "The Republican platform includes a lot of nuclear war-fighting doctrine. The issue may or may not come up in the campaign, but...the PD is needed to clarify our policy and leave no room for confusion."<sup>239</sup> PD-59 could showcase Carter's commitment to a strong defense and to preventing Soviet superiority, refuting some of the Republican obloquies against him. While this pressure likely influenced the timing of PD-59's signing and leaking to the press, the administration had been developing the countervailing strategy long before the campaign. This Republican pressure alone was insufficient to bring about Carter's embrace of the countervailing strategy.

Unlike the SALT and MX debate, domestic elites and interest groups played a smaller role in debates about nuclear strategy during mid-1978 to 1980 by virtue of their privacy. Based on the Congressional attitudes discussed in Chapter 3, many members of Congress would have supported a strategy that required an increase in nuclear forces—as long as the doctrine did not suggest the U.S. would fight a nuclear war. While PD-59 faced some skepticism and scrutiny in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing, the Committee seemed satisfied after only one session. Similarly, hawkish interest groups like the CPD pressed for nuclear modernization

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<sup>237</sup> Michael Getler, "Carter Directive Modifies Strategy for a Nuclear War," *The Washington Post* August 6, 1980; George C. Wilson, "Carter: Shifting, Shoring Up Position on Defense: Carter Shifts Policies, Shores Up Arms Stance," *The Washington Post*, August 19, 1980.

<sup>238</sup> See, for example, "A Debate: Are U.S. Defenses Ready, Rusty Or Adequate?" *New York Times*, October 12, 1980; "Nation's Military Anxiety Grows as Russians Gain: Defense: Is the U.S. Prepared?" *New York Times*, September 20, 1980; Meg Greenfield, "The Real Military Issue" *The Washington Post*, October 1, 1980.

<sup>239</sup> Memo, William E. Odom to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Targeting PD Brief for the President," July 24, 1980, National Security Archive.

and even superiority throughout Carter's term, but they focused their energy on pressing for the MX and railing against SALT II.<sup>240</sup> The CPD did not explicitly argue for specific nuclear strategies. These groups contributed to the growing public support for a harder line against the Soviet Union, but there does not appear to be a direct causal link between any particular demands and Carter's nuclear strategy. Because the administration kept the review and revision of nuclear strategy so private, these groups barely knew it was happening; this privacy likely insulated the strategy from specific instances of domestic pressure or mobilization that could have influenced Carter to pursue a certain strategy.

These domestic pressures may not have had a primary role in the development and survival of the countervailing strategy, but the Carter administration still tried to influence these domestic opinions when the time came to legitimate the countervailing strategy. PD-59 may not represent a response to demands from specific domestic constituencies, but it shows some awareness of domestic attitudes toward deterrence and the Soviet threat. The administration anticipated and responded to domestic concerns when presenting the strategy to the public—they formulated the declaratory policy with an eye toward both international and domestic perceptions to demonstrate the U.S. would prevent Soviet superiority and thus maintain a strong deterrent.

## **Conclusion**

The architects of the countervailing strategy initially chose this targeting policy based on assumptions that the Soviet Union believed it could win a nuclear war. By supplementing the SIOP with additional counterforce targeting options, they hoped to demonstrate to both the

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<sup>240</sup> Nitze's views certainly would have implied a nuclear strategy requiring superiority, as he believed U.S. nuclear restraint would be dangerous in the face of Soviet warfighting capability; see, for example, Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," 231. The CPD rhetoric may have pushed the domestic debate about strategy further toward a harder line toward the Soviet Union, but their publicity campaign focused on SALT; see Committee on the Present Danger, "Looking for Eggs in a Cuckoo Clock: Observations on SALT II," January 22, 1979, reprinted in Charles Tyroler, *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books Inc., 1984), 96. See also Auten, *Carter's Conversion*, 280.



Soviets and the U.S. population that the Soviet Union could have no chance of victory.

Although this strategy contradicted Carter's initial goals, the private policymaking process decreased the need for legitimation of the countervailing strategy, preventing the consideration of alternatives and preventing coalitional mobilization against it. In the absence of public rhetorical battles, the countervailing strategy remained unscathed as its advocates constructed a consensus around it by narrowing private debates. In public, however, the administration needed to sell this strategy to its domestic audience, so its legitimation used deliberately vague and contradictory rhetoric to appeal to multiple coalitions. PD-59 utilized the language of MAD to demonstrate its consistency with norms of deterrence, while also emphasizing the development of flexibility and endurance to prevent Soviet superiority. Without this legitimation, critics could have delegitimized the countervailing strategy by accusing the administration of pursuing a warfighting strategy. This combination of private debate and the demands of public legitimation led Carter to sign PD-59 as a means to maintain deterrence in an age of parity and use nuclear weapons to enhance national security, even as this strategy pushed the U.S. toward nuclear superiority and embraced an altogether different narrative about the role of nuclear weapons from the one Carter initially proposed.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions**

This study characterized Carter's nuclear policy as a site of domestic contestation within broader debates about the meaning of strategic parity; Carter's policy shifted partially because coalitions mobilized against Carter's initial vision as they successfully legitimated alternative policies. Critics argued Carter's plans for arms control and a MAD nuclear strategy violated norms of deterrence, so the administration needed to shift its policy to avoid further public backlash and win support from domestic elites. Parity's unsettled nature allowed multiple interpretations of this moment to compete in nuclear policy debates. Beginning with the Warnke controversy and continuing in the SALT II debate, those worried about parity delegitimized Carter's policy of restraint by arguing it would permit Soviet superiority and undermine deterrence. They masked calls for U.S. superiority in calls for maintaining parity to prevent the loss of U.S. political leverage; the public nature of this debate provided the audience allowing this coalition to mobilize. Carter shifted his rhetoric closer to that of his critics, but only lent legitimacy to their claims framing Carter's policies as inadequate for deterrence and empowered critics to call for additional nuclear programs. By failing to control the public debate, Carter enabled this coalition to push nuclear policy away from his optimistic narrative about parity and away from his desire for nuclear weapons' reduced role in foreign policy.

In private strategic planning, supporters of the countervailing strategy narrowed the scope of strategic debate by restricting the consideration of alternative strategies, preventing coalitions favoring other strategies like MAD from mobilizing against them. With fewer constraints on legitimation, they constructed a consensus around this strategy designed to deny Soviet victory. Carter moved this strategy to the public sphere in the wake of additional pressure from opponents condemning his weakness on defense. PD-59's legitimation combined respect for

MAD with measures denying Soviet victory in nuclear war, blocking mobilization against it from all sides. By legitimating this strategy to prevent Soviet superiority, however, Carter's policy further embraced the pessimistic narrative of parity. In all these cases, the international environment provided some impetus to meet the Soviet threat, but these perceptions did not dictate Carter's specific nuclear policy choices. Carter could not sell his narrative of parity and nuclear weapons; his policies are the result of his failure to prevent the mobilization of a hawkish coalition who saw nuclear weapons as essential to national security, as he needed to combat their legitimation to demonstrate his nuclear policy would not violate existing norms of deterrence.

### **Implications for Other Cases**

This work focused on a single case, but can the theory here help explain other Presidents' policies? The trajectory of Obama's nuclear policy most closely mirrors Carter's story, as Obama approved major arms control in New START while approving a massive nuclear modernization program. A preliminary analysis of Obama's case suggests some similar dynamics of legitimation. When Obama needed to gain Senate approval of New START, he met a small group of fierce opponents led by Jon Kyl (R, AZ), who feared the treaty would weaken the U.S. strategic position and erode U.S. extended deterrence. While the opposition in this case split more clearly along partisan lines, the Obama administration still scrambled to legitimate New START to its critics. To reinforce his claims that New START would not weaken the U.S.'s deterrent, Obama made concessions to Kyl in the form of investment in nuclear laboratories and other nuclear infrastructure.<sup>241</sup> This investment helped launch the major

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<sup>241</sup> Peter Baker, "White House Presses Senator Kyl on New Start Treaty," *New York Times*, November 25, 2010; Baker, "New Start Treaty Gets Push From Obama," *New York Times*, December 1, 2010; "Special Report: In Modernizing Nuclear Arsenal, U.S. Stokes New Arms Race" *Reuters*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nuclear-modernize-specialreport/special-report-in-modernizing-nuclear-arsenal-u-s-stokes-new-arms-race-idUSKBN1DL1AH>.

modernization program, which gained further momentum after Russia invaded Ukraine and significantly soured U.S.-Russia relations. The modernization program, totaling about \$350 billion over the next decade, included the B61-12 warhead with “dial-a-yield” capability, a replacement for the Ohio-class submarine, the long-range strike bomber to replace the B-52 and B-1, the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent to replace Minuteman III ICBMs, and the Long Range Stand Off Weapon to replace the air-launched cruise missile.<sup>242</sup> Pressure from the Pentagon likely also influenced the decision to proceed with all of these projects; Sam Nunn, now a major arms control advocate, lamented, “The process has preserved the status quo,” meaning bureaucratic momentum prevented Obama from halting a modernization program already set in motion.<sup>243</sup>

At the same time, however, Obama still had the agency to sell New START to skeptics, and he chose the rhetoric of improving nuclear weapons in order to make future cuts while still maintaining a strong deterrent. Cooperation on future arms control, however, became impossible as distrust grew between Obama and Vladimir Putin. Additionally, public legitimization of the modernization programs seemed to respect similar norms of deterrence, as it avoided describing a war-fighting capability while promising a U.S. advantage. Although critics derided the B61 as a “war-fighting weapon,” the administration insisted it would create “more strategic stability” while also preventing others like Russia or China from gaining superiority. Even programs that seemed like entirely new weapons were evolutionary and did not provide any new military capabilities, again inserting these weapons programs into the language of MAD.<sup>244</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide more than speculation about the processes by which

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<sup>242</sup> Aaron Mehta, “Is the Pentagon’s Budget About To Be Nuked?” *Defense News*, August 8, 2017, <http://www.defensenews.com/2016/02/05/is-the-pentagon-s-budget-about-to-be-nuked/>.

<sup>243</sup> William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, “U.S. Ramping Up Major Renewal in Nuclear Arms,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2014.

<sup>244</sup> Mehta, “Is the Pentagon’s Budget About to Be Nuked?,” Broad and Sanger, “As U.S. Modernizes Nuclear Weapons, ‘Smaller’ Leaves Some Uneasy,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2016.

Obama came to accept these nuclear programs, this suggests that Obama considered both international and domestic politics when formulating his strategy, as he needed to appease coalitions of domestic elites like Congressmen who could unseat his vision. Obama initially tried to tell a story of nuclear weapons being used solely for deterrence, while his critics saw them as an essential part of national security writ large. If Obama had proceeded with arms control without the modernization, these critics would have argued the U.S. was giving up its strategic superiority and therefore the leverage afforded by nuclear weapons, thus undermining deterrence. At the very least, the debate here demonstrates a similar repertoire of rhetoric used to legitimate U.S. nuclear policy; the domestic requirements of legitimation that respects deterrence while preserving U.S. dominance may constrain Presidents' ability to sell their desired programs at home.

### **Implications for Theory**

Carter's case demonstrated some of the dynamics of coalition building and legitimation described in Chapter 1, as hawks built opposition against Carter by justifying alternative nuclear strategies. The application of agenda setting theory to foreign policy merits future inquiry, as it is relevant in this case; when an issue gains increased public visibility, it allows for more widespread debate and a greater chance for those opposing the President to build a coalition. In public debate, groups use resonant rhetoric to undermine their opponents—this case witnessed groups using or citing opposition language to point out weaknesses and strengthen their own case. It is unclear, however, if successful legitimation and coalition building matter in all public nuclear policy debates, and future work might broaden this study to examine how and when debates about defense and foreign policy might influence policy outcomes. These dynamics of agenda setting functioned in the opposite manner in the private sphere, as privacy decreased the

need for legitimation and narrowed the scope of conflict, making it harder for opposing views to undermine the dominant one. Some might object to this interpretation of private debate, arguing these policy outcomes stem more from trade-offs among different bureaucracies. I was unable to adequately test a bureaucratic politics theory of nuclear decision-making, but future work might evaluate the extent to which bureaucratic interests motivated those involved in policy planning and how the President might have balanced these trade-offs alongside the demands of legitimation. Additionally, agenda setting literature often highlights the role of the media in elevating certain issues to public attention, but I did not interrogate the media's culpability in shaping domestic perceptions of Carter's nuclear policy choices. Throughout Carter's term, however, the media—specifically newspapers—amplified those voices most critical of Carter, so this coverage may have helped build the coalition against Carter. Thus, future analysis might conceptualize the media as having an active role in shaping the national security narrative in addition to merely capturing this narrative.

This work used Krebs's theory of narratives and settled or unsettled moments as a stepping-stone to study the dynamics of nuclear policy debate, and it suggests some future directions for Krebs' line of inquiry. While it is difficult to distinguish settled and unsettled moments in the national narrative, it appears that the existence of an unsettled moment mattered in this case, as it afforded legitimacy to multiple interpretations of parity and permitted the rise of the hawkish coalition arguing for increased nuclear capabilities. They strengthened their narrative's legitimacy by showing Carter's narrative would permit U.S. inferiority, making it harder for Carter to guide the country toward one dominant narrative about parity. Future work could conduct more rigorous text analysis to establish parity as an unsettled moment and determine the point at which the U.S. had settled on the narrative of parity as a potential threat.

This may include tracing rhetoric throughout other Presidential administrations, likely beginning with Nixon and continuing through Reagan. Future work could also examine the processes by which domestic actors may challenge Presidential nuclear policy in settled periods, and whether similar legitimation patterns occur in other unsettled periods. This study suggests additional actors can help determine the national security narrative in the U.S.; the President has the bully pulpit, but the audience for his rhetoric has the agency to challenge him—other mechanisms beyond Presidential rhetoric can build or destroy security narratives.

Carter's opponents often accused the administration of permitting U.S. strategic inferiority and undermining deterrence, forcing the administration to shift its rhetoric and policy to demonstrate its commitment to a strong defense. At the same time, although hardliners claimed U.S. superiority would afford some political or military leverage, they almost never precisely defined this leverage. This murkiness, however, did not seem to shake or weaken hardliner arguments, which stayed consistent throughout Carter's term. The idea that superiority ensures national security, even in the nuclear age, pervades U.S. strategic thinking. One document called this the U.S.'s "Number One Syndrome"—as a consequence of U.S. superpower status, leaders might have trouble arguing for superiority's irrelevance without facing charges of permitting U.S. decline.<sup>245</sup> Further, the preoccupation with superiority encourages policies like PD-59 that prioritize matching capabilities one for one without necessarily focusing on the political objectives or post-war consequences of such capabilities.<sup>246</sup>

This constrains the range of policies that can be legitimated to the public, allowing policies

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<sup>245</sup> "Soviet and American Approaches to International Competition," n.d., NSC Institutional Files, "PRM 10 [8]," Box 29, JCL. It is also hard to ignore the gendered subtext of this rhetoric of dominance, as policymakers aggressively tried to demonstrate their nuclear arsenal was bigger and stronger than that of the Soviet Union. Carol Cohn began a discussion about the consequences of such masculine rhetoric in nuclear war planning, but additional work could further interrogate the role of this pervasive gendered language in legitimation and selection of policies. Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–718.

<sup>246</sup> In fact, Schilling observed, "[PD-59] has a fine Old Testament ring to it: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and, if need be, city for city." Schilling, "U.S. Strategic Nuclear Concepts in the 1970s," 73.

pushing for nuclear superiority to masquerade as deterrence. Additionally, it is difficult to legitimate a pure MAD strategy because it rejects the idea of nuclear weapons affording some political leverage beyond deterrence. Opponents fear plans to reduce the arsenal and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in foreign policy will undercut U.S. nuclear superiority, but they frame their objections as concerns about undercutting deterrence. Policymakers might need to couple MAD strategies with strategic modernization programs to avoid accusations of weakness. Additionally, these framings have clearly resonated with audiences despite their incoherence. Future work must explore not only when effective legitimation matters in nuclear policy, but why this legitimation succeeds—what other factors lend credibility to these framings to make them resonate and allow for mobilization?

Finally, this thesis began by questioning a growing body of literature that assumes U.S. policymakers have always tried to escape MAD due to their fears about Soviet objectives in a nuclear war. It is true that some policymakers turned away from MAD because they chose to couple nuclear weapons to broader national security goals beyond deterrence, but not all policymakers shared this view. Further, perceptions of the Soviet Union did not immediately dictate Carter's turn away from MAD-type policies. Only through a process of coalition building could the MAD skeptics turn U.S. employment and acquisition policy toward damage limitation and nuclear superiority. While these groups could argue for policies designed to deny Soviet superiority, they could not recommend the U.S. pursue superiority. Any language of U.S. superiority, first-strike capability, or warfighting generated public backlash for violating MAD and flouting existing norms of deterrence. While some levels of nuclear policy seemed like evidence of an attempt to escape MAD, policymakers were still constrained by MAD in their rhetoric. Domestic perceptions created significant political incentives to adhere to this language



of MAD in declaratory policy, and at times the policy only existed in this declaratory realm without the required capabilities to reinforce it.<sup>247</sup> The evolution of U.S. nuclear policy was not an inexorable march away from MAD; the coalition trying to escape MAD came to dominate strategic planning through a process of contestation, and even then their policy still needed to fall within the bounds of MAD to maintain legitimacy.

This study has begun to draw attention to the need for scholars to devote more attention to the rhetoric and domestic politics fueling the formation of nuclear strategy. While the international environment might create incentives to modify nuclear strategy, the strategy outcomes are closely tied to domestic politics as the precise choice of strategy may stem more from the competition between internal coalitions. Moreover, talk matters, even in the often-secret realm of nuclear policy; since effective deterrence ensures the U.S. never has to actually use its weapons and strategies, scholars should pay attention to public debate and declaratory policy as important to the formulation of nuclear strategy. These policies may not just come from a desire to match or surpass enemy capabilities, but rather from the political necessity of crafting policy maintaining both deterrence and dominance in the national security realm. To better understand the frequent contradictions between nuclear modernization, strategy, and arms control, future scholars should investigate how leaders balance the demands from a variety of coalitions to show their commitment to deterrence and craft a narrative about foreign policy.

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<sup>247</sup> See Chapter 4 and the discussion of how the countervailing strategy existed primarily on a declaratory level, and how policymakers did not worry about building capabilities before unveiling the strategy.

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