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The Nixon Administration and American Foreign Relations

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Summary

Assessments of President Richard Nixon's foreign policy continue to evolve as scholars tap new possibilities for research. Due to the long wait before national security records are declassified by the National Archives and made available to researchers and the public, only in recent decades has the excavation of the Nixon administration's engagement with the world started to become well documented. As more records are released by the National Archives (including potentially 700 hours of Nixon's secret White House tapes that remain closed), scholarly understanding of the Nixon presidency is likely to continue changing. Thus far, historians have pointed to four major legacies of Nixon's foreign policy: tendencies to use American muscle abroad on a more realistic scale, to reorient the focus of American foreign policy to the Pacific, to reduce the chance that the Cold War could turn hot, and, inadvertently, to contribute to the later rise of Ronald Reagan and the Republican right wing—many of whom had been part of Nixon's "silent majority." While earlier works focused primarily on subjects like Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union, the historiography today is much more diverse – now there is at least one work covering most major aspects of Nixon's foreign policy.

Keywords: Nixon, Kissinger, China, détente, Soviet Union, rapprochement, Vietnam, Watergate, India, Pakistan, Nixon tapes

Subjects: 20th Century: Post-1945, Foreign Relations and Foreign Policy, Political History

A New Era

When Richard Nixon became president on January 20, 1969, he assumed the office at a low point in domestic morale and the reputation of the United States around the world. The experiences of the 1960s had been searing for the nation: the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, urban violence, and a breakdown of international order. Nixon's lead speechwriter, Raymond K. Price, said often that if the 1860s was an actual Civil War, then the 1960s had been a virtual civil war. The feeling of siege was an important part of the mentality of the Nixon White House.

The long post-1945 period was ending as Nixon took office. Yet if the shape of a new era remained obviously unknown, it surely would be contentious. Among modern presidents, few had experienced a more linear path to the Oval Office, with Nixon's service in the US House (1947–1951) and Senate (1951–1953) and eight years as Dwight Eisenhower's apprentice while vice president (1953–1961). The world stage he would encounter as president was one he had glimpsed before, whether unveiling the "Pumpkin Papers" that helped to convict Alger Hiss during the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation or squaring off in the 1959 Kitchen

Debate with Nikita Khrushchev over whether the American or the Soviet economic system was superior. Nixon narrowly defeated Vice President Hubert Humphrey by nearly a half million votes on November 5, 1968, to become the thirty-seventh president of the United States.

The Nixon Doctrine

Richard Nixon made it an early priority of his presidency to redress the international situation. The experience of the Vietnam War had sapped much American creative potential during the 1960s, and traditional American allies in Europe wondered if the United States could be a force for good again. Nixon's key collaborator in this effort was National Security Adviser Henry A. Kissinger, a former Harvard professor. Both men were eager to demonstrate that the United States could be a force for peace and constructive activity again and that not all of the nation's creativity and imagination had been sapped by the trauma of Vietnam, where an average of two hundred American soldiers died each week during the second half of 1968. While Nixon is perhaps known best for his overtures to American adversaries, including the Soviet Union and China, he first turned his attention to American allies. Thirty days into his presidency, Nixon made a tour of western European capitals and planned an American foreign policy that would not be based around a war in Southeast Asia. He spoke to the parliaments of Europe before he spoke to the US Congress.

Nixon had created an outline of these foreign policy plans much earlier. He described his vision of a post-Vietnam world in his influential *Foreign Affairs* article "Asia after Vietnam," published in October 1967, more than a year before he reached the White House and even before he was an official candidate for the nation's highest office.¹ He articulated these views further in Guam on July 25, 1969, while he was visiting to meet the astronauts who were returning from the moon.² In an informal session with reporters dealing with questions mainly about Vietnam and China, Nixon made some important revelations about the way he saw the world and how he intended to govern. These remarks, which became known as the Nixon Doctrine, were not limited to simply the way he saw American interests in the Pacific.

The Nixon Doctrine represented the first major revision to the Truman Doctrine in nearly a quarter century: the United States was no longer willing to mobilize forces anywhere to defend against aggression. A harbinger of the détente era, the simplicity in his language suggests that the Nixon Doctrine was indeed meant to have application beyond Vietnam. When Nixon said "We, of course, will keep the treaty commitments that we have," and "We should assist, but we should not dictate," he foreshadowed a new phase in America's engagement with the world in which other nations would be expected to take on more responsibility in the areas of their own defense, monetary and economic affairs, and political development.³ Future American commitments would be undertaken on a more realistic scale commensurate with a new era of reduced Cold War tensions.

Nixon's statement reflected two emerging trends: the unsustainability of the American military commitment in the world in both budgetary and human costs and a growing isolationist movement at home. While the Nixon Doctrine was focused on the war in Southeast Asia in the short term, it also had implications for the rest of the world, such as in Europe, where Europeans would be expected to pay for a greater share of their defense during the Nixon administration.

Nonetheless, some have said that Nixon had no real foreign policy strategy and that the Nixon Doctrine was never intended to be applied universally.⁴ These same critics say that his remarks at Guam were intended mainly as a vehicle to articulate his new policy of Vietnamization, in which American forces would be replaced by Vietnamese forces. These are obvious conclusions if one limits one's view of Nixon foreign policy to Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

But Nixon himself referred to the Nixon Doctrine as having application to many different parts of the world. In addition, the Nixon Doctrine was neither meant to be a one-size-fits-all view of the world nor implemented in a linear fashion. There were times when the American commitment increased in places like Vietnam during the Nixon administration, even while generally it decreased. Nixon explained one such occasion in which the American commitment increased in his nationally televised speech of April 30, 1970. He announced that he had ordered a US incursion into Cambodia, beginning the year before, in 1969, for the purpose of disrupting what were believed to be North Vietnamese sanctuaries. These sanctuaries included portions of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the North Vietnamese supply route to South Vietnam, as well as staging locations from which the North Vietnamese attacked. This announcement led to the greatest wave of antiwar student protests during his entire presidency, which temporarily closed 536 universities, colleges, and high schools, and included the tragic killing of four students by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University on May 4. Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution the same year.

A Rescaling of Foreign Policy

Former Harvard professor Henry Kissinger oversaw the architecture of Nixon's foreign policy, which was rooted in a revitalized National Security Council. Newly appointed as Nixon's national security adviser, Kissinger had become famous because of his book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), which led to a role as a national security consultant during the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations. However, Nixon and Kissinger shared the belief that the process of national security decision making had become too informal in their predecessors' administrations. Working for Nixon, Kissinger centralized foreign policymaking to an unprecedented degree in the White House. Relying on increased secrecy and backchannels, which enabled Nixon and Kissinger to communicate directly with various locations around the world, the Nixon White House substantially reduced the traditional influence of both the Departments of State and Defense over policymaking.

Nixon entered the White House at a time of declining American influence over the wider world. In addition, Nixon and Kissinger were challenged by a series of difficulties they had inherited: the Vietnam War, a resurgent Soviet Union, two decades of no contact with the People's Republic of

China, a volatile Middle East, and a low point in relations with US allies in Europe. Nixon was also constrained by a declining domestic morale that had been sapped during the 1960s by difficult choices of guns versus butter—that is, the Vietnam War versus the Great Society civil rights and other domestic reforms—and a political class that did not seem to have answers to the nation's problems.

In short, Nixon and Kissinger sought to rescale America's commitment with the world in the hopes that reducing the US scope of activity would create creative opportunities inside the areas they believed were in the nation's most strategic interests. Nixon recognized earlier than most experts that the late 1960s was an opportune time to strengthen the position of the United States in the world with respect to its adversaries. Whatever else might be said about Nixon and Kissinger, they did not lack strategic purpose. Nixon had concluded that Communist foes China and the Soviet Union were not a part of a Communist monolith and that they disagreed profoundly with each other. In fact, in recent years, historians have learned that the two Communist nations were at the point of war in March 1969. Nixon used the tension between the countries to shift the balance of power toward the West.

He did this by quietly sending diplomatic signals to China, a nation with which the United States had had no diplomatic relations for two decades. In fact, non-recognition of "Red China" was as bipartisan a foreign policy as there had been during the Cold War up to that point. Since the United States had no direct contact with China, Nixon sent messages to Chinese leaders through third parties who had contact with American diplomats, first through Romania and later through Pakistan. This was an awkward process, and it sometimes took weeks or months to receive a return message from the Chinese. The irony was that during his presidency, Nixon, who was perhaps the ultimate anti-Communist due to his prosecution of Alger Hiss and role on the House Un-American Activities Committee, made breakthroughs not with American allies but with America's Communist adversaries. For this reason, some commentators have claimed that "only Nixon could go to China." That is, he was the only leader who could control the right wing of the Republican Party, critical of closer relations with a Communist nation, while also maintaining the necessary toughness vital to successful negotiations with the Chinese that, in his view, did not exist in the Democratic Party.

The real breakthrough came in 1971 when a Chinese table tennis team invited an American team to China, thus initiating what became known as "ping pong diplomacy." Secretly, the invitation had the approval of Chinese Community Party chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai. Subsequently, as diplomatic contact between China and the United States became more advanced, Nixon sent Kissinger on a secret mission to China in July 1971. His objective was to reach agreement with his Chinese hosts about a future visit by President Nixon. The agreement was reached and announced simultaneously in China and the United States on 15 July 1971.

China and the Soviet Union

A central tenet of Nixon's foreign policy strategy was his reliance on what became known as "triangular diplomacy" with China and the Soviet Union. Nixon hoped to use one as leverage against the other, in an attempt to improve US ties with each. Nixon visited China in February 1972, marking the first visit of an American president to the nation. As he foreshadowed in his 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article, "Asia after Viet Nam," Nixon believed that the end of the Vietnam War was near enough to begin planning a postwar American policy toward Asia. Such a policy could not exclude the world's most populous nation, no matter the past rivalries or differences in Cold War ideology. Nixon's arrival in Beijing was carried live on American television, and after forty hours of briefings en route by Henry Kissinger, Nixon warmly greeted Premier Zhou Enlai at the airport. Thus, Nixon restored relations between the two nations after two decades without formal contact.

Although not guaranteed in advance that they would be able to visit with Mao, Nixon and Kissinger indeed met with the ailing chairman. The visit forced Nixon to clarify American intentions with respect to Taiwan. Nixon articulated his "one China" policy by stating that he believed Taiwan was a part of China. This shift shocked allies in Taiwan and Japan and resulted in Taiwan being expelled from the United Nations in late 1971 and replaced by the People's Republic of China both in the general assembly and the security council. Nixon also took full advantage of the video cameras that covered seemingly every moment of his visit to China, capturing dramatic images for Americans at home of their president visiting the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and other exotic venues. Meanwhile, the media extravaganza continued while Nixon was in meetings as First Lady Pat Nixon visited schools, communes, factories, and pandas at the Beijing Zoo.

As Nixon said, his visit was "the week that changed the world." The launch of rapprochement with China was a stunning capstone for a former anti-Communist who built his national reputation in the shadow of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Hiss-Chambers case. By making peace with China, Nixon put pressure on the Soviet Union. By shifting the focus of US foreign policy to Asia, emphasis on close transatlantic ties with traditional allies in Europe was reduced. Nixon believed the Soviet Union would moderate its policies and seek warmer relations with the United States due to the continued differences between China and the Soviet Union. At times rivals and even enemies, China and the USSR shared a long border but had different types of Communist systems. By exploiting their differences, Nixon believed he could extract concessions from each. Although his original plan was to achieve a summit with the Soviet Union first, China became the more important priority when the possibility of that breakthrough arose. This quick succession of events meant that Nixon achieved three capstone foreign achievements all within a single year, 1972: rapprochement with China, the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty with the Soviet Union, and a tentative peace in Vietnam. For these efforts, he was crowned with a stunning landslide reelection in November over his Democratic rival, Senator George McGovern.

Nixon's visit to China sent shockwaves through the Kremlin, which feared that the Soviet Union would become irrelevant in a world in which it was surrounded on both its western and now its eastern frontiers with enemies. Therefore, the Soviets became eager to host a summit of their own with Nixon, which occurred during May 1972. On that trip, Nixon also became the first

American president to visit Moscow, and he signed the first arms limitation agreement with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, known as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Agreement (SALT I). The agreement, as well as the signing of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, ushered in a new era of détente, was the first agreement of its kind. The agreements froze the number of ballistic missiles and paved the way toward additional talks aimed at reducing overall nuclear stockpiles. The achievement permitted Nixon again to project an image of himself as the world's premier statesman with two crowning foreign policy achievements in the span of three months.

Vietnam and Southeast Asia

During the 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon had pledged that he had a plan to end the Vietnam War. The Nixon tapes—his 3,451 hours of secret White House recordings—demonstrate that there was not so much a plan as a set of preferred outcomes. Certainly, no evidence of a secret plan has ever surfaced. Indeed, it is not clear how could there have been a rigid plan when Nixon spent so much time reacting to events outside of his control, such as casualty reports, politics in North Vietnam, the poor weather conditions that reduced the number of sorties, and the influence of China and the Soviet Union.⁵

In Nixon's thinking, the only people who wanted American GIs out of Southeast Asia more than Americans were the Chinese and the Soviets. Nixon used American withdrawal as a bargaining chip with adversaries. Critics are right to point out that it took another four years for the United States to extract itself from Southeast Asia, at a total cost of approximately fifty-eight thousand American dead, including approximately twenty-three thousand during Nixon's presidency, not to speak of the wounded or of combined Vietnamese military and civilian casualties. But Nixon believed these losses would be mitigated by long-term gains with China and the Soviet Union. In his view, these adversaries, as well as traditional allies in Europe and Japan, would not view future American commitments as credible should the United States prove incapable of reaching an honorable settlement in Southeast Asia. The timing of any settlement in Vietnam would be closely related to achieving breakthroughs in relations with China and the Soviet Union.

Lacking a plan to end the war upon his arrival at the White House, in the opening year of Nixon's presidency he grasped for ideas that he hoped could quickly end the conflict in Southeast Asia and fulfill a campaign promise. During his 1968 campaign, Nixon scribbled some shorthand thoughts on one of his famous yellow legal notepads: "What situation will be in January 1969, no one will predict ... but after four years of failure, it's time for new leadership to end the war on a basis that will win lasting peace in Pacific." While these sound like campaign talking points, Nixon did allude to elements of what became his eventual strategies of Vietnamization, triangular diplomacy, and détente: "We failed to train V. Nam to take over fighting.... We failed to put emphasis on non military aspects.... Failed diplomatically to enlist Soviet[s]."⁶

Nixon, with the help of national security adviser Henry Kissinger, hoped that developing a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union would bring to bear greater pressure on the North Vietnamese. But Nixon would not accept just any peace terms. According to the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, the president emphasized twice that he

would “never ... accept a humiliating defeat on humiliating terms.”⁷ The main problem was that US-Soviet relations were not terribly constructive in Nixon’s first year of office, meaning that Nixon and Kissinger would be forced to take a much longer road to peace.

Another key to understanding Nixon’s strategy to end the Vietnam War, but to do so on the best possible terms for the United States, is the “mad man” and “decent interval” theories. In his post-Watergate memoir *The Ends of Power*, former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman wrote that his boss’s use of the former strategy was deliberate. “I call it the Madman Theory,” Haldeman recalled the president telling him. “I want the North Vietnamese to believe I’ve reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that, ‘for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button,’ and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.”⁸ Unfortunately, it did not play out that effortlessly. A number of costly and destructive military operations would need to be executed, from the mining of Haiphong Harbor in May 1972 to the devastating “Christmas bombing” that December, before the North Vietnam, badly weakened and with the assent of their Soviet masters, returned to the bargaining table.⁹

Meanwhile, the decent interval theory has become an increasingly popular way to understand Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy for ending the Vietnam War. Strict adherents argue that the primary criteria for US withdrawal from South Vietnam was that a “decent interval” during which South Vietnam could stand alone must pass following an American exit before South Vietnam would inevitably be overtaken by the North Vietnamese Communists. A decent interval was necessary for the United States to save face. An immediate Communist takeover would be embarrassing to the Nixon White House and call into question the nearly twenty years of military involvement in Southeast Asia. In other words, American leaders knew that defeat in Vietnam was inevitable and were willing to continue an immoral war for as long as they had to in order for the United States to exit under the best possible terms.

The decent interval theory deserves a more nuanced look, especially now that many more of Nixon’s White House tapes are available for research. Until recently scholars have tended to use the Nixon tapes far too selectively to bolster particular viewpoints while ignoring evidence to the contrary. Too much reliance on any single explanation can result in overly simplistic conclusions. There is evidence on the tapes suggesting that the decent interval theory does not adequately explain Nixon and Kissinger’s frustrated attitude; at times they speak of desiring no interval at all other than the duration necessary to quickly withdraw troops and POWs. In addition, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s thinking evolved over time. For example, following Nixon’s groundbreaking visit to China during late February 1972, the tenor and content of their discussions seems much closer to support for the idea of a decent interval theory. But before then, Nixon and Kissinger’s moods could swing wildly depending on how the war was going. Their feelings about the war revolved around—and responded to—the latest casualty figures, news media coverage, political polls, and reports from the field. Some days they were up and some days they were down.

South Asia

Nixon's overtures to China resulted in unexpected side effects. During the fall of 1971, when war started between India and Pakistan, Nixon broke with traditional American foreign policy by allying the United States with dictatorial Pakistan, ostensibly because Pakistan was an ally of China. In his 1978 memoir, Nixon claimed, "By using diplomatic signals and behind-the-scenes pressures we had been able to save West Pakistan from the imminent threat of Indian aggression and domination. We had also once again avoided a major confrontation with the Soviet Union."¹⁰ Kissinger's far more detailed chapter, in the first volume of his memoirs, *White House Years*, published in 1979 complemented and largely corroborated Nixon's. The August 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation on the heels of Kissinger's groundbreaking trip to China was, in Kissinger's view, a particular cause for alarm because it "was deliberately steering nonaligned India toward a de facto alliance with the Soviet Union" and enabled India to take an uncompromising stance against the instability in Pakistan.¹¹ After several months of conflict, a ceasefire put an end to the conflict on December 16, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh.

Contrary to the president's and national security advisor's memoirs, however, nearly every other account of the US response to the South Asian crisis has faulted the Nixon administration for its handling of the crisis, its "tilt" to the dictatorial and arguably genocidal regime of Yahya Khan, its anti-Indian bias, its distorted reading of intelligence, and its claim that the United States "saved" west Pakistan by challenging India and the Soviet Union.¹² The critics stand on solid ground in arguing that Nixon and Kissinger personalized policy with anti-Indian zeal and sympathy for Yahya, although arguing that these prejudices defined American policy is not entirely accurate.

On the charge of conflating regional issues with the global Cold War game, the critics of the Nixon administration have an even stronger case. Nixon and Kissinger displayed amazing indifference to the fact that the Indians and the Pakistanis were pursuing their own national interests on the subcontinent. However, the critics' charge that the White House risked another world war by its allegedly reckless actions is somewhat mitigated following a review of the fuller documentary record and the substance of US rhetoric and actions via US-Soviet backchannels. The messages to the Soviets primarily revolved around joint action at the UN and encouraging the Soviets to restrain their ally, India. The backchannel exchanges show a steady—not reckless—progression of behavior. Although Nixon and Kissinger contended that their actions had forced the Soviet hand and removed the Indian threat of dismembering west Pakistan, the case is still not closed, and full confirmation is still not entirely possible in the absence of materials relating to Indian cabinet meetings, notes of the Soviet Politburo, and Indo-Soviet exchanges.

Globalization and the Gold Standard

In addition to the July 1971 "Nixon shock" that he would become the first president to visit China, a crisis in the economic realm also permitted Nixon to make a lasting impact on the world. Nixon was forced to make a decision to take the US dollar off the gold standard, which was a problem

that had been brewing ever since 1958. That year, the total number of dollars in circulation surpassed the gold held by the Federal Reserve, which violated a key tenet of the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement. Hoping to circumvent the problem, Nixon had no choice except to act after Secretary of the Treasury John B. Connally informed him in June 1971 that American gold reserves had dipped below \$10 billion for the first time, against approximately \$30 billion in circulation. As with his other policies, when Nixon made a decision he preferred to take bold action. Little did he realize that 1971 would be the beginning of the nation's fifteen-year struggle to control inflation and achieve stable growth rates.

On August 15, 1971, he delivered a nationally televised speech that dealt a mortal wound to the Bretton Woods system and the gold standard, as well as announcing a host of other economic initiatives that Nixon knew would take effect just in time for the 1972 presidential election. These included an import surcharge, wage and price controls, a devaluation of the dollar, and an investment tax credit. Despite his self-proclaimed ignorance of economic and monetary policy, these policies positioned Nixon as an economic leader, and in the short term nearly every economic indicator rose in advance of the 1972 election. (However, many economists have said that these policies contributed to economic stagflation that plagued the national economy for much of the rest of the decade.)

As a result of these decisions, Nixon turned back weak, quixotic opposition to his re-nomination at the Republican national convention. With his foreign policy achievements and American forces largely withdrawn from Vietnam, Nixon's political opponents could gain little traction on the issues. The Nixon White House was also able to successfully contain the Watergate story during the 1972 election, ensuring it would remain an inside-the-Beltway story until the following year. Moreover, because of the 1969 Chappaquiddick incident, during which a female companion of the married Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts mysteriously drowned, Kennedy chose not to run. Kennedy would likely have been a much more formidable foe than the eventual Democratic nominee, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota. Nixon was ahead in the polls the entire year and went on to defeat McGovern in the 1972 presidential election in one of the largest landslides in American history. Nixon lost only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia in the Electoral College and captured over 60 percent of the popular vote.

However, there was another legacy of the 1972 campaign that did not take shape until after Nixon's second inauguration yet would eventually bring his White House tenure to an end. In what started as a botched burglary by officials connected to Nixon's reelection campaign, five men were caught breaking in at the offices of the Democratic National Committee, located in the Watergate building, on June 17, 1972. The burglars and their funding were traced to Nixon's Committee to Reelect the President. After the investigation of the burglars seemed to produce no further leads, one of the burglars, James McCord, confidentially wrote to Judge John J. Sirica that indeed "higher ups" were involved in a cover-up of the Watergate burglary.

Checks on Presidential Power

Following McCord's letter to Sirica, the Senate Select Committee on Campaign Activities, otherwise known as the Ervin Committee (after its chairman Sam Ervin, a senator from South Carolina) was established, and a special prosecutor was appointed. In the spring of 1973, several high-ranking White House aides resigned, and some were later convicted of trying to cover up the investigation into the affair. Nixon denied any personal involvement, but the July 1973 disclosure that Nixon had secretly taped conversations and phone calls since 1971 eventually produced subpoenaed evidence that appeared to indicate that Nixon was more involved in the cover up than he had stated.

The Watergate crisis and its political fallout seriously damaged Nixon's foreign policy. The gradual escalation of the investigation into Watergate-related activities occupied more and more of Nixon's time. The collapse of a tentative peace deal in Vietnam in late 1972 forced Nixon to prematurely spend a great deal of political capital earned in his reelection during the "Christmas Bombing," which eventually forced the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table. The Paris Peace Accords were signed during January 1973. In human terms, the cost of the war was 58,000 dead and 304,000 wounded, counting American forces only. Even after the Paris Peace Accords, the region remained shaky for the following two years, and South Vietnam finally capitulated in a takeover by communist North Vietnam in April 1975.

In late 1973, coinciding with Nixon's declining popularity, a cascade of headlines containing sordid details from Vice President Spiro Agnew's earlier involvement in taking bribes as governor of Maryland that forced his resignation, possible US involvement in a coup in Chile, and growing instability in Southeast Asia, Congress exercised its foreign policy authority to seriously check the Nixon's ability to conduct foreign policy in the form of the War Powers Act.¹³ On November 7, 1973, H.J. Res. 542, a joint resolution concerning the war powers of Congress and the president (sometimes referred to as the "War Powers Resolution") became Public Law 93-148, overriding President Nixon's veto on a House vote of 284 to 135, with eighty-six Republicans in the majority. The Senate had already produced a veto-proof 75 to 18 rollcall, with twenty-five Republican senators opposing the president's position. These votes took place at a time of peak erosion in congressional support for Nixon, in a Congress in which over a quarter of the House members had been elected since 1970, many on antiwar platforms.

Key provisions of the War Powers Act include the stipulation that the president must consult with Congress before deploying military personnel into hostilities and regular consultation must continue for as long as military personnel remain deployed. If a declaration of war was not made, this initial consultation must be made to the leaders of both chambers of Congress within forty-eight hours of deploying military personnel and must include the nature of the hostility, the authority upon which the deployment was made, and the estimate duration of deployment. Finally, after each follow-up consultation, the deployment of military personnel must end within sixty days, unless an extension is granted by Congress. At any time, the Congress may, by affirmative vote of concurrent resolution, direct the president to end the deployment of military personnel

This final clause of the War Powers Act is generally seen as a reaction by Congress against President Nixon's management of the Vietnam conflict. But stressing the partisan political context of 1973 presents too narrow a view. Congress did not claim to be granting itself new constitutional powers; most importantly, it did not dispute the president's authority to wage war as commander in chief once war had been declared. The War Powers Act is better seen as a measure designed to reassert the constitutional authority of Congress to declare war in the first place. As such, it represented the culmination of three decades of bipartisan debate over the prerogatives of the president. Until the late 1960s, and more specifically until the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War, Congress responded to unilateral presidential initiatives by authorizing, approving, or ratifying the president's decisions to deploy military personnel in hostilities without declaring war.¹⁴

Legacy

By late 1973 Nixon had become so engulfed in the Watergate scandal that the War Powers Act and other forms of congressional scrutiny seriously hampered his ability to conduct foreign policy. The House Judiciary Committee began impeachment proceedings on May 9, 1974. After the Supreme Court overruled Nixon's attempt to use executive privilege to block access to tapes of his meetings and phone calls, Nixon knew he had few options. Among the subpoenaed recordings was the "smoking gun" tape, released on 5 August 1974, which demonstrated that Nixon knew of the cover up beginning days following the June 1972 break in at the Watergate, and that Nixon suggested using the CIA to block the FBI's investigation.

As a result, on the evening of August 8, 1974, Nixon announced on live television that he would resign the following day, and Vice President Gerald R. Ford would become president at noon. Nixon departed the White House on August 9, and exactly one month later, President Ford pardoned Nixon for any crimes he may have committed while in office. While Nixon never admitted to any complicity in any crimes, by being pardoned he could not escape the image of guilt. More than forty of Nixon's associates went to jail for Watergate crimes or related scandals, even while some were pardoned or had sentences commuted by presidents Carter or Reagan. Former Governor Reagan made it an early priority of his presidency to issue such pardons and was successful in his 1980 campaign, in part, due to the former Nixon staffers who tried to create an image of the fortieth president as restoring balance after the excessive sentences that some associated with Watergate received.

In the nearly twenty years of his post-presidency, Nixon's standing gradually rose, beginning with the success of the extended interviews he gave to British journalist David Frost, which were broadcast in primetime television in the United States and around the world. Nixon also wrote several best-selling books, primarily on foreign policy topics. He remained active on the international scene and took four additional trips to China, lived to see the end of the Cold War and the Russian transition beyond Communism, and was consulted as an expert by his Oval Office successors. Nixon accepted the judgment he received from scholars during his lifetime, never believing that his contemporaries would recognize his achievements. According to Nixon, it would be historians who would eventually acquit him.

He succumbed to a stroke on April 18, 1994, and died four days later at the age of eighty-one. He was eulogized by a bipartisan cross section of American politicians, including President Clinton, who urged Americans to judge Richard Nixon on his full record and not just his shortcomings. Nixon was the only president to resign from office and the only person to have been elected twice to the presidency and the vice presidency. No other American has held office in the executive branch of the federal government as long. Nixon cast a new die that remains the archetype of the ultimate politician, and he continues to occupy a unique place in the American public consciousness.

While scholarship of the Nixon presidency continues to evolve as more records become available, thus far Nixon's legacy has been to flex American muscle abroad on a more realistic scale, shifting foreign policy to a Pacific-based strategy, which emphasized the growing importance of nations such as China and Japan, reducing the chance that the Cold War could turn hot, and contributing to factors that made the rise of Ronald Reagan and the Republican right wing—many of whom had been part of Nixon's "silent majority"—possible.

Discussion of the Literature

The literature on Richard Nixon, his policies, and his presidency is arguably in its most productive phase in the early 21st century. Books about the life and times of the thirty-seventh president continue to be published every year, including award winners and best sellers. For as long as Nixon occupies a unique place in the American public consciousness, this will probably be so. Moreover, the points of view represented in these works reflect the full political spectrum, even while serious academic studies have been under-represented in the past decade. There is something for everyone in the literature, but there is insufficient space here to cover it exhaustively. Therefore, this discussion focuses on the classic works as well as recent entrants. The classics were authored during a time when most foreign policy records of the Nixon White House had not yet been declassified by the National Archives, whereas the recent entrants represent the surge of new publications of the last few years.

Jonathan Aitken's *Nixon: A Life*¹⁵ is a sympathetic portrait that praises Nixon for his three primary achievements in foreign policy: rapprochement with China, détente with the Soviet Union, and bring an end to American combat with Vietnam. Aitken benefitted from extensive and unusual access to Nixon, and the work includes many insights into his personality and private life. Despite now being dated, the three volumes by Stephen Ambrose¹⁶ have held up reasonably well considering Ambrose wrote at a time when few archival records or almost no tapes were available to researchers. In addition, Ambrose's work on Nixon have held up much better than some of his others works, including, for example, his books on Dwight Eisenhower. Although Ambrose was a critic of the Nixon administration, his trilogy is relatively balanced. His question, at the end of Volume 2, whether or not the country gained more or lost more when Nixon resigned, remains a seminal issue of debate a quarter century later.

Conrad Black's sympathetic portrait, *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*,¹⁷ depicts a president who made some mistakes but got most of the important decisions correct. Black admires Nixon most when he was backed into a corner, such as during the 1952 "Checkers" speech designed to keep

Nixon on the Eisenhower ticket or working with a Democratic Congress during his presidency on a host of domestic policies. On the other side of ideological spectrum David Greenberg's *Nixon's Shadow*¹⁸ identifies Nixon as the prime example of a cynical self-serving politician. In a series of cultural references, Greenberg shows how the enduring myth of Nixon can be more powerful than the man himself. Despite some accomplishments, such as the opening to China, Greenberg argues that Nixon will always be defined by his failures. Finally, another classic work is Richard Reeves's *President Nixon: Alone in the White House*.¹⁹ Based on interviews and newly available declassified documents, Reeves presents a nuanced portrait of a man who was an unlikely president. Reeves's Nixon seems to be grasping for the truth one moment and evading it the next. Ultimately, Reeves argues, Nixon's presidency was doomed from the start due to an overreliance on secrecy and deception.

Meanwhile, an impressive flow of new works adds to an already substantial literature. As more and more Nixon administration documents are publicly released by the National Archives, along with nearly three thousand hours of Nixon's secret White House tapes, the literature is likely to sustain its pace of growth for the foreseeable future. The most comprehensive of these new works, edited by Melvin Small, is *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon*.²⁰ An honorable mention is *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations*, edited by Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston.²¹ Two volumes to feature many of the newly released tapes include Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter's *The Nixon Tapes: 1971–1972* and *The Nixon Tapes: 1973*.²²

Two new biographies that represent differing ideological perspectives are Evan Thomas's sympathetic *Being Nixon: A Man Divided* and the critical *One Man Against the World: The Tragedy of Richard Nixon*, by Tim Weiner.²³ Equally divergent are a growing number of biographies of Henry Kissinger, with Christopher Hitchens's *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* on one extreme, and—not to overlook Kissinger's own three-volume memoirs—the first volume of Niall Ferguson's multi-volume authorized biography simply entitled *Kissinger*.²⁴ Another new work that explains the origins for much of Nixon's philosophy when it came to foreign policy is Irwin Gellman's *The President and the Apprentice*.²⁵

Recent monographs that expand the documentation of Nixon's foreign policy to new geographical regions include Luke A. Nichter's *Richard Nixon and Europe* and Roham Alvandi's *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah*.²⁶ A recent, critical look at Nixon and Kissinger's policies in South Asia is Gary J. Bass's *The Blood Telegram*.²⁷ And these do not even include a wave of other recent works that were published just before or after the fortieth anniversary of Nixon resignation, in August 2014, but which focused more on Watergate and non-foreign policy themes.

Two subjects that have been of high interest for many years, yet have only begun to be explored by scholars, include Chile and the Middle East. The lag between popular interest and scholarly activity has been explained by a lack of primary source materials available for research, especially intelligence records. The situation is slowly changing, and will be helped by recent declassification activity, such as the August 2016 release of the previously classified president's daily briefs by the Central Intelligence Agency. Still, there are monographs on both subjects, though a scholarly consensus has hardly emerged.

Regarding Chile, Lubna Z. Qureshi's *Nixon, Kissinger, and Allende: U.S. Involvement in the 1973 Coup in Chile* focuses on the involvement of the CIA and the Nixon White House in the coup.²⁸ On the other hand, Kristian Gustafson's *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964–1974* denies any direct role in the 1973 coup.²⁹ Finally, another recent work expands the discussion even further: Tanya Harmer's *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* redirects the conversation away from U.S. and Cold War and instead focuses on actions of local and regional actors.³⁰

On the Middle East, some of the most pioneering works have been produced by scholars abroad, such as Tore T. Petersen's *Richard Nixon, Great Britain, and the Anglo-American Alignment in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula: Making Allies Out of Clients*.³¹ Boaz Vanetik and Zaki Shalom's *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process, 1969–1973: From the Rogers Plan to the Outbreak of the Yom Kippur War* was first available in Hebrew.³² A major work just published by a U.S.-based scholar is Salim Yaqub's *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s*.³³ Approximately half of the book covers the Nixon years, as Yaqub shows that the 1970s was a critical turning point in relations between the United States and the Middle East. As more and more records are declassified, the fields of Chile, the Middle East, and many others will remain fruitful areas of research.

Primary Sources

The official repository of the Nixon White House records is the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, located in Yorba Linda, California. A part of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), major collections related to foreign policy subjects include the National Security Council Files, President's Personal File, White House Central Files, White House Special File, various Staff Member Office Files (SMOF), Audiovisual materials, and White House tapes. Also, relevant records can be found in numerous Record Groups at both the Nixon Library and NARA's Archives II, located at College Park, Maryland. Such Record Groups exist for most executive branch agencies (e.g., Record Group 59) is the Department of State.

In addition to official records, collections of personal papers of members of the Nixon administration are scattered across many universities, as well as some of the nation's larger manuscript libraries, including the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the Library of Congress. Some of these personal papers were the grist for a substantial number of biographies and memoirs, though these can be spotty for scholars. Many key figures of the Nixon White House never wrote proper memoirs (e.g., John Mitchell, Pat Nixon) while many written during the 1970s were published when some authors were defendants and the desire to pay ongoing legal fees outweighed writing a durable history. Despite all that has already been written about them, the Nixon tapes remain arguably the most underutilized primary source. It is ironic that a plethora of books were published about the secret tapes of the Kennedy and Johnson administration before anyone similarly tackled the Nixon tapes. Part of the problem is simply size; Nixon recorded more than all other presidents combined, a daunting figure of 3,451 hours. But part of the challenge is convincing scholars and the public that we have more to learn.

Stanley Kutler was an early pioneer, publishing more Nixon tape transcripts than anyone else, but he limited himself to Watergate subjects in his *Abuse of Power*.³⁴ Arguably the first to successfully use the tapes in a major foreign policy publication was Jeffrey Kimball in his two books *Nixon's Vietnam War* and *The Vietnam War Files*.³⁵ At that stage

approximately 5 to 7 percent of the tapes had been transcribed and published in some form. During the decade that followed, the tapes made cameo appearances in various books, but no one sought to tackle them in any systematic way. During this period, the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs Presidential Recordings Program did more than anyone else.

For several years, the most prolific transcribers of the Nixon tapes were not academics, but historians at the Department of State Historian's Office (HO). For a time, the HO had a "tapes team," composed of Richard A. Moss and Anand Toprani, who transcribed tapes that ended up on numerous Nixon/Ford volumes of the series *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Working at the same time, Luke A. Nichter spent approximately a decade transcribing the tapes, bringing the total published to 12 to 15 percent of the total through collaboration with Douglas Brinkley on two books to date. In addition, the public can access digitized versions of the tapes on the websites of the Miller Center, Luke A. Nichter, and the Richard Nixon Presidential Library.

Links to Digital Materials

Digital National Security Archive <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/>.

Nixon Tapes <http://www.nixontapes.org/>.

Public Papers of Richard Nixon (The American Presidency Project) http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/richard_nixon.php.

Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library & Museum <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/>.

University of Virginia, Miller Center of Public Affairs Presidential Recordings Program <http://millercenter.org/presidentialrecordings>.

US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/nixon-ford>.

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Notes

1. See Richard Nixon, "Asia after Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 46.1 (October 1967): 111–125.

2. He repeated and expanded on a number of these points in his “Address to the National on the War in Vietnam” of November 3, 1969. Also known as his “Silent Majority” speech, it is arguably the most significant address Nixon gave during his presidency.
3. Nixon, Richard. “Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2140>.” American Presidency Project, eds. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, July 25, 1969.
4. Following the latest release of Nixon tapes in August 2013, there are now a total of twenty-three conversations that substantively discuss Nixon’s view of the Nixon Doctrine. The quick takeaway from these conversations leaves one with the sense that the Nixon Doctrine was neither solely about Vietnam nor a truly global doctrine—if such a thing is even possible—but somewhere in between. While Nixon and Kissinger cared about some parts of the world more than others, in these recordings Nixon himself provides examples of how the Nixon Doctrine was to have application to foreign policy with Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Europe. A number of these tapes were not available when the authors previously wrote on the subject. For example, see Jeffrey Kimball, “The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36.1 (2006): 59–74. However, new works should be aware of newly released Nixon tapes. Other works that have expanded our understanding of the Nixon Doctrine as the National Archives has declassified more sources include Dan Caldwell, “The Legitimation of the Nixon-Kissinger Grand Design and Grand Strategy,” *Diplomatic History* 33.4 (2009): 633–652; Luke A. Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
5. The best studies, by scholars such as Pierre Asselin and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, emphasize the international aspects of the conflict and the agency of non-American actors. For example, see Asselin’s *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (University of California Press, 2013); and Nguyen’s *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
6. Richard M. Nixon Notes, Box 1, July 7, 1968, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.
7. David C. Geyer and Douglas E. Selva, eds., *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969–1972* (Washington, DC: US Department of State), 90–97.
8. H. R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 83.
9. For a recent overview of the Madman Theory and the Vietnam War, see James Rosen and Luke A. Nichter, “Madman in the White House: Why Looking Crazy Can Be An Asset When You’re Staring Down The Russians,” foreignpolicy.com, March 25, 2014; and William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon’s Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015).
10. Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 530.
11. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 867.
12. The most recent critical account of these events can be found in Gary Jonathan Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).
13. For a discussion related to the War Powers Act and presidential authority during war time, see John Hart Ely, *On Constitutional Ground* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), Louis Fisher, *Presidential War Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Richard F. Grimmett, *War Powers Resolution: Presidential Compliance* (Congressional Research Service, 2007); Edward Keynes, *Undeclared War: Twilight Zone of Constitutional Power* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982); Richard H. Kohn, ed., *Military Laws of the United States*

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14. In addition, the federal courts have sustained and even legitimated such presidential behavior and congressional abdication of decisions to wage undeclared war. See *Campbell v. Clinton*, 52 F. Supp. 2d 34 (D.D.C. 1999), affirmed, 203 F.3d 19 (D.C. Cir. 2000), cert. denied, 531 U.S. 815 (2000).

15. Johnathan Aitken, *Nixon: A Life* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1993).

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