

## FORUM: When Empathy Failed

Using Critical Oral History to Reassess the  
Collapse of U.S.-Soviet Détente in the Carter-  
Brezhnev Years

❖ James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang

When something goes wrong, accuse yourself first.  
Even the wisdom of Plato or Solomon  
can wobble and go blind.  
Listen when your crown reminds you  
of what makes you cold toward others

*Jelaluddin Rumi, "Solomon's Crooked Crown"*<sup>1</sup>

No period in the history of the Cold War exceeded the late 1970s in the figurative distance between the stated objectives of the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union and the actual outcome of their efforts. On 18 January 1977, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev said in a speech at Tula that "detente means willingness to resolve differences and disputes not by force . . . but by peaceful means at a conference table . . . We are prepared, jointly with the new administration in the United States, to accomplish a major advance in relations between our two countries."<sup>2</sup>

Two days later, U.S. President Jimmy Carter said in his inaugural address: "[W]e will move this year a step toward the ultimate goal—the elimination of all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth."<sup>3</sup> He then added, in a message

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1. Jelaluddin Rumi, "Solomon's Crooked Crown," in Coleman Barks and John Moyne, trans. and ed., *The Essential Rumi* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 191.

2. Leonid Brezhnev, "On the International Situation" speech given at Tula, 18 January 1977, reprinted in *Pravda*, 19 January 1977, pp. 1–2, and available in translation on the National Security Archive website. See also Christopher Wren, "Brezhnev Appeals to Carter on Arms." *The New York Times*, 19 January 1977, p. 1.

3. Jimmy Carter, "Presidential Inaugural Address," in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Jimmy Carter*, Vol. 1: 1977, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 3.

issued the same day, “The United States alone cannot lift from the world the terrifying specter of nuclear destruction. We can and will work with others to do so.”<sup>4</sup> Statements like these, and the optimistic political atmosphere in which they occurred, caused a reporter for *The Washington Post* to make a prediction shortly thereafter: “We are,” wrote Victor Zorza, “approaching one of those rare moments in history when a lucky combination of circumstances on both sides opens the way to a breakthrough in international relations.”<sup>5</sup>

A little more than four years later, after the Carter administration left office, Thomas J. Watson, Jr., the former chairman of the IBM Corporation who had served as Carter’s ambassador to Moscow in 1979–1980, gave the commencement address at Harvard University. Watson, who had a well-deserved reputation as an incorrigible optimist, on this occasion gave a dour message to the Harvard class of 1981: “An anthropologist writing the history of the past forty years since the first atomic explosion might well conclude that we human beings have been preparing for our own demise. . . . The hour is late. The imperative of realism and reason is urgent. And we confront many illusions.”<sup>6</sup>

What happened? How did such unprecedented optimism regarding U.S.-Soviet relations at the outset of the Carter-Brezhnev years lead instead to the widespread feeling that the two nuclear superpowers and the world as a whole were teetering on the edge of an abyss in which even the possibility of a shooting war between the United States and the USSR could not be excluded? What drove the downward spiral of U.S.-Soviet relations from the heady optimism of January 1977 to events like the television interview in late December 1979 with news anchor Frank Reynolds in which Carter said that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which had begun just days before, had taught him more about Soviet intentions than he had learned during his first three years in office combined. Even more impressive than what Carter said was his demeanor: clenched jaw, steely eyes, devoid of his characteristic wide grin and optimism.<sup>7</sup> Statements by Brezhnev and his colleagues at the time fully reciprocated Carter’s bitter statements.

The Cold War was back in earnest. How did it come to this between Moscow and Washington? Might it have turned out differently? If so, what

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4. Jimmy Carter, “United States Foreign Policy,” *ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

5. Victor Zorza, “The Coming Breakthrough on Arms?” *The Washington Post*, 9 February 1977, p. A21.

6. Thomas J. Watson, Jr., “Commencement Speech at Harvard University, 4 June 1981,” *The Harvard Crimson*, 5 June 1981, p. 1.

7. Jimmy Carter, interview by Frank Reynolds, ABC News, 31 December 1979. See also Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 223–224.

would have had to change? What lessons can we draw from the collapse of détente in the late 1970s?

## **The Carter-Brezhnev Project: Charting the Growth of U.S.-Soviet Mistrust**

The Carter-Brezhnev Project began in the early 1990s at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies. The Cold War as we knew it was over. Mikhail Gorbachev was gone, and so was the Soviet Union. Russia was in turmoil. Thanks to the efforts of many people and organizations in the West who worked closely with Russian counterparts, declassified documents were beginning to emerge from various Russian archives and the archives of Eastern Europe, especially the former East Germany.<sup>8</sup> We had moved from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in 1990 to the Watson Institute. The Kennedy School had proved to be a good venue in which to study the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962—interest in the crisis among the faculty was high, and access to former Kennedy administration officials was exceptional—and we now found ourselves in an institution that was eager to support scrutiny of the Carter-Brezhnev years in order to chart the growth of U.S.-Soviet mistrust that had led, by the end of 1979, to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, a punitive response by the Carter administration, and the collapse of U.S.-Soviet détente.

The institute's benefactor was Thomas J. Watson Jr., the same man who had been Carter's envoy to Moscow and had delivered the apocalyptic commencement address at Harvard in 1981. The most influential board member was Cyrus Vance, who had been Carter's secretary of state. The director was Mark Garrison, who had been deputy chief of mission in Moscow under Watson and whose involvement in U.S.-Soviet relations included two tours in Moscow and a stint as head of Soviet affairs in the U.S. State Department. Each of these men could not fully explain, even after the passage of a decade-and-a-half, why and how the optimism regarding U.S.-Soviet relations with which Carter and his team had come to office could have turned first to suspicion, then to pessimism, and finally to outright hostility in 1980, Carter's last year as president.

Together with Watson, Vance, and Garrison, we thought about how, with the Cold War over, we might organize a project on the collapse of U.S.-

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8. Chief among the organizations for the Carter-Brezhnev Project have been the National Security Archive at George Washington University, Washington, DC; the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC; and the Norwegian Nobel Institute, Oslo, Norway.

Soviet détente—a project similar to the one we had assembled at the Kennedy School to investigate the Cuban missile crisis. We wondered whether sufficient documentation would be available from the U.S. and Soviet sides and whether the senior people from both sides would consent to participate. Might a way be found to explore the collapse of détente—involving declassified documents, former policymakers from Washington and Moscow, and senior scholars of the events that culminated in the bitter period that followed in the early 1980s, what some call “the second Cold War?”<sup>9</sup>

From the beginning, many of the former officials—Americans, but also Russians—who became involved showed enthusiasm for a full-scale investigation of a bilateral relationship that had gone badly awry. In our experience, it is often difficult to locate former senior officials who will agree to involve themselves in a research project that seeks to discover the causes of the failure of their policies. Only rarely do former officials acknowledge that they made significant mistakes.

The first feature of the project, one that was championed by Cyrus Vance in particular, was to examine *errors* made by one or both sides in the process that led to the collapse of relations between Moscow and Washington. Vance, like Robert McNamara, his former boss at the Defense Department in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, also urged us to look carefully for a second factor—*missed opportunities*—by means of which the United States and Soviet Union might have, could have, or perhaps should have grasped opportunities along the way that could have prevented the steady deterioration or at least have ameliorated the mutual alienation and enmity the two governments felt toward each other by 1980. A third and final feature of the project reflected a priority of Vance, Watson, and Garrison: to try to identify lessons that might be derived from the investigation and applied to the emerging geopolitical environment of the post-Cold War period. Other American officials from the Carter administration, as well as former Soviet officials who had been close to Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders of the late 1970s, were also enthusiastic about the possibility of retrospectively “redeeming” a U.S.-Soviet failure by attempting to learn the lessons from that episode and pass them on to others.

These three objectives—to identify mistakes, to look for missed opportunities by both sides, and to draw lessons—seemed natural and obvious to the former officials. They are, however, quite foreign to many scholars who investigate historical problems of the Cold War (or any other historical period, for that matter). As we had discovered in our investigation of the Cuban missile crisis, many historians reject out of hand any attempt to address, let alone an-

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9. See, for example, Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983).

swer, the kinds of questions—concerning mistakes, missed opportunities, and lessons—posed by the former officials who had urged us to take up what became the Carter-Brezhnev Project. As the project began to evolve, a kind of intra-project “détente” between the former officials and the scholars—chiefly historians—began to emerge. The scholars began to understand and appreciate why former officials who had presided over a failed policy would be driven by “what-if” questions of what should have been done differently to have made the policy succeed. In addition, the former officials began to see why historians might be skeptical about “the history that did *not* happen”: the decisions not made. The outcomes that did not occur are infinite in number, and it is difficult (some say impossible) to determine their relative probability.

Especially impressive was the degree to which the former officials were willing to revisit the collapse of détente and to do so in an atmosphere of rigorous cross-questioning by their former adversaries. They often found the discussions difficult, as they revisited, sometimes to an uncanny degree, precisely the misunderstandings and misperceptions they recalled from the events under scrutiny. This was occasionally unpleasant, as almost all of the discussions during five international conferences were centrally concerned with a fiasco for which most people at the conference table had some degree of responsibility.<sup>10</sup> We were fortunate that most of the former officials, most of the time, allowed their curiosity about what went wrong to overwhelm their concern about what they might discover to be their true proportion of responsibility for the debacle. This seems to be a basic requirement of an undertaking like the Carter-Brezhnev Project and was also true of the other two large multi-center, multinational investigations of Cold War history for which we have been primarily responsible: the Cuban missile crisis project and the Vietnam War project.<sup>11</sup>

10. For a summary of some of the project’s findings, a selection of relevant documents, several essays by noted scholars, and a useful introduction by the editor, see Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations in the Carter-Brezhnev Years* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997). The conferences sponsored by the project were as follows: “The Collapse of Detente: The Launch of the Carter-Brezhnev Project,” Pocantico Hills, NY, 22–24 October 1992; “SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust,” Musgrove Conference Center, St. Simons Island, GA, 6–9 May 1994; “U.S.-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s,” Oslo, 1–3 October, 1994; “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1977–1980,” Ft. Lauderdale, FL, 23–26 March 1995; and “The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Detente,” Oslo, 17–20 September 1995.

11. See, for example, James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse*, expanded ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); James G. Blight and Philip Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba’s Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); and Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, with Thomas J. Biersteker and Col. Herbert Y. Schandler, *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999). This research is excerpted and summarized in James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Fog of War: Lessons*

## The Method: Critical Oral History

The conferences of the Carter-Brezhnev Project made use of the method of critical oral history. The method evolved as a way to address the dilemma described long ago by Søren Kierkegaard: We live life forward, groping in the dark, unaware of its ultimate outcome; yet we are forced to understand events in reverse, working our way retrospectively backward to their supposed causes.<sup>12</sup> This situation creates a disconnect between lived experience and our understanding of that experience. Caught in the moment, decision-makers often feel confused and unsure, and sometimes even afraid. But the scholarly (after-the-fact) study of decision-making usually removes the confusion and fear, focusing simply on explanations of outcomes.

We developed critical oral history to build a bridge between the confusion of experience and the relatively cut-and-dried rendering of that experience. Critical oral history does so by combining, in structured conferences, decision-makers, scholars, and declassified documents (which provide added accuracy and authenticity to the conversation). Critical oral history often yields rich and surprising insights into what it was really like for decision-makers, then and there, thus yielding more accurate analyses and applicable lessons for decision-making, here and now.<sup>13</sup>

The method of critical oral history has been shaped to address an overriding concern: How can those of us who use this method be certain that statements made by decision-makers are actually true? Why should we trust them to tell us the truth? To put the matter less charitably (as it has occasionally

*from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), companion book to the 2004 Academy Award-winning film by Errol Morris, *The Fog of War*.

12. The passage is from a journal entry by Søren Kierkegaard for 1843. See James G. Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1989), p. 55. The book is about the missile crisis, but it is framed by Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844).

13. On the method of critical oral history as we have applied it to the Cuban missile crisis, see Len Scott and Steve Smith, "Lessons of October: Historians, Political Scientists, Policy-Makers and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Affairs* (London), Vol. 70, No. 4 (October 1994), pp. 659–684. On the January 1992 Havana conference, see J. Anthony Lukas, "Fidel Castro's Theater of Now," *The New York Times*, 20 January 1992, p. E17; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Four Days with Fidel: A Havana Diary," *The New York Review of Books*, 26 March 1992, pp. 22–29. On the October 2002 Havana conference, see Norman Boucher, "October, 1962: What Really Happened," *Brown Alumni Magazine*, January/February 2003, pp. 28–35. On the application of the method to the study of the war in Vietnam, see especially David K. Shieler, "Robert McNamara and the Ghosts of Vietnam," *The New York Times Magazine*, 10 August 1997, pp. 30–35, 42, 50, 56–57; and Norman Boucher, "Thinking Like the Enemy," *Brown Alumni Magazine*, November/December 1997, pp. 36–45. In addition, two documentary films have been made based on the June 1997 Hanoi conference: *Dialogue of Enemies in Vietnam*, produced by Daisaku Higashi for NHK-Japan, which aired on 6 August 1998; and *Fighting Blind: The Vietnam War*, produced by Pamela Benson for CNN and narrated by Ralph Begleiter, which aired 23 December 1997.

been put to us by skeptics): Are we worried that we are being bamboozled by people who may have a long history of playing fast and loose with the truth? The short, truthful answer is, yes, indeed, we worry about this all the time.

A somewhat longer and (we hope) more informative answer is that certainty in most cases is an unattainable historical objective, whether one uses critical oral history or any other method of inquiry. What we are looking for is not certainty but credible additions or corrections to the historical record.

### **Memory**

*Question:* How can we be certain that participants recall events accurately, assuming they desire to do so?

*Answer:* The memories of all participants must be compared with the memories of former colleagues and adversaries, with the documentary record, and with the best guesses of participating scholars who are familiar with the record of the events. In some instances, certainty is an elusive goal.

### **Agendas**

*Question:* How can we be certain that participants do not harbor hidden agendas; for instance, to enhance the importance of their roles or to denigrate the roles of others?

*Answer:* Although we cannot be certain that this will not happen, all participants are screened before the conferences, and their responses to our questions are compared to other sources of information on the same issues. Almost invariably, arriving at a “final” answer to interesting questions is an unrealistic objective. All answers, no matter how well documented, are (or should be) regarded as tentative, and the act of arriving at even tentative conclusions from critical oral history is more a matter of art than science.

### **Hindsight**

*Question:* How can we be certain that we are able to disentangle retrospective hindsight from foresight during the actual events in question?

*Answer:* In principle the two can be confused, but in practice they are rarely confused, primarily because recollections are tightly constrained by both the documentary record and the recollections of others present. In fact, we have noticed over the years a significant difference between oral testimony given in private interviews, which tends to mimic each interviewee’s previous interviews on the subject, and testimony given in a crit-

ical oral history setting. The latter tends to be less defensive, more carefully documented, and more generous to those one might have mistrusted or with whom one may have disagreed during the events under investigation.

### **Politics**

*Question:* How can we be certain we have taken adequate account of the current political context in which the dialogues about history occur?

*Answer:* The most important fact for the U.S. participants to keep in mind is that Americans almost invariably participate as individuals, whereas the others—whether Russians, Cubans, or Vietnamese, in the cases we know best—often do not. Many participants may be “retired,” in the sense that they are receiving pensions, no longer hold any official position, and so on. But in these other societies, the participants often constitute a “team,” with fixed instructions from their government about what can and cannot be said. A deep and detailed awareness of the particulars of the individual political situation must be obtained during the preparatory phase of a conference. The organizers’ mantra must be “*everything* is political”—the conference agenda, the list of participants, the documentation, even the fact that the conference is occurring at all.

### **Documents**

*Question:* How can we be as certain about the “other” side’s statements as we are about those made by U.S. participants, given the usually huge discrepancy in available documentation on the side of the United States?

*Answer:* Usually, we cannot. Yet we can often begin to approximate information contained in the U.S. database by combining previously published foreign sources and in-depth interviews with participants who are especially keen to get their country’s side of the story on the record in the West. We have found that such individuals exist in greater numbers than one might suppose. One must be resourceful, but the problem is usually not insurmountable.

### **Participants**

*Question:* How can we be sure that we have invited the “right” people, from among those who are available, to participate?

*Answer:* We can never claim, after the fact, that a better group of conference participants was *not* possible to assemble. Nevertheless, we try to put the teams together methodically, filling in gaps in both civilian and military

positions (for example), and trying to ensure that each person at the table is willing to do the extensive preparation necessary for full participation and is also comfortable with the highly informal format in which cross-questioning is to be expected. This process is made much more challenging, but also potentially much more important, in the case of meetings between former enemies. Often the members of the non-U.S. team are designated by their government, which means that we need to have developed a working relationship with government officials, at many levels, in order to understand the possibilities and limitations posed by the identity of the participants.

### **Absentees**

*Question:* How can we be certain that we have not been totally (though inadvertently) misled because many central figures have died and therefore cannot take part? For example, how would our outlook have been altered if Carter and Brezhnev had participated in the conferences on the collapse of détente? Or, what if John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev had been available to participate in the critical oral history of the Cuban missile crisis? Or what if Ho Chi Minh and Lyndon Johnson had been available for the Vietnam War conferences?

*Answer:* Here again, certainty is out of the question. Yet our experience leads us to believe that the *absence* of the chief executives is often more important than their presence at the table. The boss is apt to be still regarded as the boss, and his or her presence can have an inhibiting effect on former subordinates.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it is usually possible to invite participants from the inner circle of those who are necessarily absent, though one should not expect them to agree in all, or even most, analyses of the decisions and actions of their former bosses.<sup>15</sup>

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14. We had to decide whether to invite former President Carter to participate, face-to-face, with the other members of his administration and with their former Soviet counterparts. It became clear that both sides—but particularly the U.S. side—would have been constrained by Carter's presence. In the end, we did not invite Carter to participate "at the table" but instead briefed him after each major conference and got his feedback in return. We have also been told by many former members of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that they would have felt similarly constrained if either John Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson had been at the table during our critical oral history conferences on the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam War. The limiting case of this problem occurred during the three conferences we have been involved in organizing in Havana—two on the Cuban missile crisis and one on the Bay of Pigs invasion—in which Cuban President Fidel Castro participated fully "at the table." The other Cubans present clearly awaited cues from their president, who is famously expansive. Despite this, we feel the trade-off was more than worth it. Castro's memory is prodigious, and he knows things no other Cuban knows. Moreover, a surprise: in the critical oral history setting, he is remarkably amenable to interruptions—for example, by people seeking clarification—or even by instructions from the chair that it is time to let others speak. Cuban colleagues have told us that this has never happened in Cuba except in the critical oral history conferences.

15. This section is based on Blight and Lang, *The Fog of War*, pp. 6–13. We are grateful to Steve

## Empathy and Critical Oral History

Participants in a critical oral history exercise are present for a variety of reasons. Scholars, armed with declassified documents and possessing a scholarly understanding of the events under investigation, are eager to ask questions of former officials. The former officials are present for several reasons, not least the chance to be reunited with former colleagues. Perhaps the strongest motive for the former officials, however, is the chance to ask the kinds of questions of former adversaries they probably believed they would never be given the opportunity to ask. Everyone around the table has at least one motive in common: *they believe something went wrong*. For participants in the Carter-Brezhnev Project, the common bond was a chance to discover why U.S.-Soviet détente collapsed.

The process works—that is, participants feel they have really learned something new and important from the discussions—when a degree of *empathy*, missing in the actual events, is present in the retrospective discussions. Our purpose in this presentation of our work with critical oral history is not primarily epistemological but to give Cold War historians a vicarious “insider’s” view of the way the Carter-Brezhnev Project actually worked. We therefore leave for another occasion discussion of such issues as how, or whether, one is able to “inhabit” the cognitive and emotional “space” of others, particularly adversaries, as well as other theoretical issues posed by making empathy a central concept.

We find the concept of empathy to be useful in explaining what went wrong in historical events and what can go right when critical oral history really works.<sup>16</sup> Empathy has nothing to do with sympathy, with which it is often confused. Ralph K. White, a former U.S. Information Agency official, later a political scientist and psychologist at George Washington University, was for an entire generation of political psychologists the foremost advocate of what he called “realistic empathy” in foreign affairs. We quote him at length because he makes exactly the distinction that must be made between empathy and sympathy. According to White:

Smith, vice chancellor of the University of Exeter, UK, for raising a number of these issues at a July 1998 conference in Bellagio, Italy. See also Danny Postel, “Revisiting the Brink: The Architect of ‘Critical Oral History’ Sheds New Light on the Cold War,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 49, No. 8 (18 October 2002), p. A16.

16. See Blight and Lang, *Fog of War*, pp. 26–57, which contrasts the outcomes of the Cuban missile crisis and the escalation of the war in Vietnam, based on the degree of presence (or absence) of empathy between the adversaries. See also Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight, *Wilson’s Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21st Century*, expanded ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), pp. 65–73, 230–276. The latter presents an “empathy imperative” for the 21st century as the surest way to raise the odds that violent conflict in the 21st century will be less lethal than in the 20th.

Empathy is the *great* corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception. . . . It [means] simply understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. It is distinguished from sympathy, which is defined as feeling with others—as being in agreement with them. Empathy with opponents is therefore psychologically possible even when a conflict is so intense that sympathy is out of the question. . . . We are not talking about warmth or approval, and certainly not about agreeing with, or siding with, but only about realistic understanding.<sup>17</sup>

White goes on to explain the implementation of empathy in the cause of reducing the risk of conflict:

How can empathy be achieved? It means jumping in imagination into another person's skin, imagining what it might be like to look out at his world through his eyes, and imagining how you might feel about what you saw. It means *being* the other person, at least for a while, and postponing skeptical analysis until later. . . . Most of all it means trying to look at one's own group's behavior honestly, as it might appear when seen through the other's eyes, recognizing that his eyes are almost certainly jaundiced, but recognizing also that he has the advantage of not seeing our group's behavior through the rose-colored glasses that we ourselves normally wear. He may have grounds for distrust, fear and anger that we have not permitted ourselves to see. That is the point where honesty comes in. An honest look at the other implies an honest look at oneself.<sup>18</sup>

White identified three critical mistakes in foreign policymaking that prevent empathy from occurring: (1) not seeing an opponent's longing for peace; (2) not seeing an opponent's fear of being attacked; and (3) not seeing an opponent's understandable anger.<sup>19</sup> In the absence of empathy, one cannot accurately tell the story adversaries are telling themselves about you, about themselves, or about the situation they believe they face.

Whether empathy is present or not—and thus whether one perceives accurately or misperceives—is often centrally an *ethical* issue. The critical question is whether an individual has the courage and can sufficiently transcend the bounds of his or her prejudices and preconceptions to really grasp the view of an adversary. The great philosopher of empathy, Sir Isaiah Berlin, wrote that in addition to knowing the mind of an adversary, empathy requires one to grasp “the particular vision of the universe which lies at the heart of [an adversary's] thought.” This capacity, he said, permits one “to some degree to re-enact the states of mind of men” who are fundamentally at odds with one-

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17. Ralph K. White, *Fearful Warriors: A Psychological Profile of U.S.-Soviet Relations* (New York: Free Press, 1984), p. 160; emphasis in original.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 161; emphasis in the original.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163.

self.<sup>20</sup> This is sometimes call the “deployment” of empathy, the grasping of a mindset whose assumptions are fundamentally alien to one’s own.

The Canadian scholar, journalist, and politician Michael Ignatieff has written that to refrain from the deployment of empathy in situations such as those described above is fundamentally unethical or immoral, a point with which we agree. To act uninformed by empathy, to refuse to enter, as fully as possible, the mindset of an actual or potential adversary, is to submit to what he calls “autism,” the behavior of those who are “so locked into their own myths . . . that they can’t listen, can’t hear, can’t learn from anybody outside themselves.” In these instances, according to Ignatieff:

What is denied is the possibility of empathy: that human understanding is capable of penetrating the bell jars of separate identities. But social peace anywhere depends for its survival on just this epistemological act of faith: when it comes to political understanding, difference is always minor, comprehension is always possible.<sup>21</sup>

Possible, yes, in principle. But in practice, the governments of Carter and Brezhnev proved singularly unable to penetrate the “bell jars” of their separate identities. Their inability to prevent the collapse of détente derives in large part from their refusal to make the effort to empathize with one another.

The collapse of détente during the Carter-Brezhnev era reveals what can happen when leaders refuse to empathize, often excusing themselves because of the *other* side’s refusal to see things their way. The result: relations between the two most powerful countries on earth can collapse, each entrapped in its own variant of self-righteousness.

But empathy, which is so often absent between adversaries, is often surprisingly present with *former* adversaries in a critical oral history exercise. When this happens, participants on each side begin to develop the capacity to see pivotal events more or less the way their former adversaries saw them at the time. Participants discover their faulty understandings of the reality their adversaries believed they confronted. Participants learn they were wrong. The full impact comes, however, only if they discover the ways in which their faulty understandings became embedded in a spiral of escalating misunderstanding; that is, if they learn how their decisions were in part responsible for the failure.

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20. Michael Ignatieff, “The Ends of Empathy,” *The New Republic*, 29 April 1991, pp. 33–34. See also Isaiah Berlin’s classic essay on the significance of empathy, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, eds., *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays by Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), pp. 359–435, esp. 389–405.

21. Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997), p. 60.

A caveat is worth mentioning. These sorts of insights are available only to those who come to the table with open minds, with the willingness to consider the possibility that they might have been wrong in important respects—that they might have misjudged their adversary. Especially in the early going at a critical oral history conference, one encounters participants whose interests are primarily in learning the details about how the *other* side could possibly have been so mistaken. Usually, however, as the discussion deepens, and as others around the table begin to grapple with what they are being told, such initial “hardliners” become just as dedicated as the others to identifying mistakes—not only the mistakes of their former adversaries but their own as well. In the excerpt that is the centerpiece of this article, Carter’s former national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, seems at first to follow this trajectory.<sup>22</sup> Yet by the end of the excerpt, he is willing to admit mistakes by the U.S. side.

The significance of empathy—when it is present and when it is not—has been underestimated in the study of war, peace, and conflict. Although empathy is a central concept in such fields as anthropology (especially ethnography), clinical psychology, and conflict resolution, among others, it is (so far as we know) relatively unknown in the field of Cold War history.

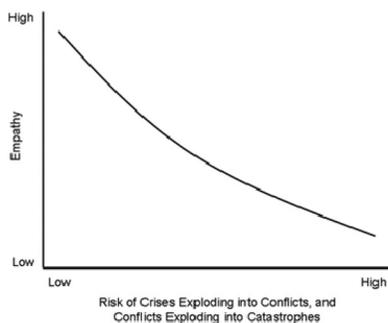
Below are two figures that illustrate the connected points we are endeavoring to make about empathy in international relations: first, that the absence of empathy between adversaries increases the risk of the breakdown of their relationship, leading to increased risk of crises and war; and second, that for a variety of reasons we often find empathy present between former adversaries in a critical oral history setting, with its empirically grounded feeling of revisiting history, and the encouragement of a joint search for mistakes, missed opportunities, and lessons.

The absence of empathy between adversaries increases the risk of the breakdown of the relationship, leading to increased risk of conflict. However, for a variety of reasons, we often find empathy present between *former* adversaries in a critical oral history setting, with its empirically grounded feeling of the revisiting of history and its encouragement of a joint search for mistakes, missed opportunities, and lessons.

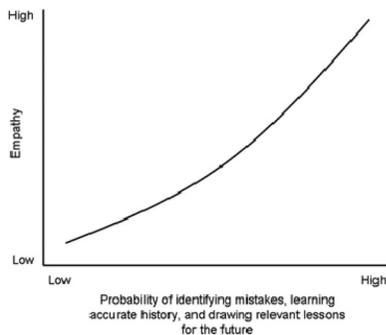
The presence of empathy is more or less why critical oral history works,

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22. Many others—Americans, Russians, Cubans, and Vietnamese—have been similarly helpful, usually without intending it, by successfully and more or less completely assuming their former identities. They interrogate their former adversaries rather than inquire; they make the same accusations they made in the events under study; and they are apt to be highly selective in their references to documentary materials. Sometimes an aggressive demeanor serves the same purpose—of figuratively placing all present into a “time machine.”



**Figure 1.** History



**Figure 2.** Critical Oral History

why we are able to learn something significant in the investigation of events in which empathy was largely absent (and in which the lack of empathy led to the failure under scrutiny). Is this a demonstrable fact? A simple conjecture? A testable theory? These are large questions, many of them epistemological, none of them trivial. We have begun to address such questions elsewhere, though much more theoretical work needs to be done.<sup>23</sup> Here our purpose is to suggest rather than convince readers, whose primary interest is in Cold War history, of a connection between a research method and its subject matter.

### **Critical Oral History in Action: The Vance Mission, March 1977**

We offer a relatively brief and necessarily incomplete taste of what a critical oral history conference is like. We have chosen excerpts from the “SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust” conference held in May 1994 at the Musgrove Conference Center, St. Simons Island, Georgia. The excerpts focus on Cyrus Vance’s ill-fated mission to Moscow at the end of March 1977, shortly after Carter became president. What was undertaken with the best of intentions—to make a start at ridding the world of nuclear weapons—actually began the downward spiral that culminated in the collapse of U.S.-Soviet détente, a new nuclear arms race, and increased risk of U.S.-Soviet confrontation. In addi-

23. See, for example, James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, “Burden of Responsibility: Reflections on the Critical Oral History of the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Peace and Conflict: The Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (September 1995), pp. 225–264; James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, “Lesson Number One: Empathize with Your Enemy,” *Peace and Conflict: The Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (February 2004), pp. 349–368; McNamara and Blight, Afterword, in *Wilson’s Ghost*; and Blight and Lang, *The Fog of War*, esp. ch. 1.

tion to the excerpt, we present some background; brief identifications of the speakers in the excerpt; and a postscript by Georgii Kornienko, who was at the time of the conference the most senior living Soviet Foreign Ministry official from the Carter-Brezhnev period. Readily identifiable interstitial material approximates, to the degree possible, what it was like for the participants and is intended to help give readers a vicarious “seat at the table.”

### **Background**

We called the conference “SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust.” We felt we should start with nuclear arms control negotiations (the second phase of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, or SALT II) because that was where the United States and Soviet Union started with each other. As former Soviet Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh said at a preliminary meeting of our project, “the nuclear arms control talks constituted 95 percent of the total relationship, more or less.” The SALT II treaty was eventually signed and observed, even though President Carter withdrew it from consideration for Senate consent to ratification in January 1980, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The question thus arose: When did the mistrust begin to develop between Soviet leaders and the Carter administration?

Both sides at the Musgrove conference agreed that the March 1977 Moscow discussion on arms control was the key event. The vehement Soviet reaction to the visit was nearly unprecedented. Vance came to Moscow with two proposals: one to make deep cuts in the arsenals of both superpowers, in keeping with Carter’s promise in his inaugural address to begin in 1977 to move toward a nuclear-free world; and a second, more modest proposal, based more or less on the November 1974 Vladivostok accord between Brezhnev and President Gerald Ford. Soviet leaders rejected the proposal for comprehensive, deep cuts; they rejected the back-up proposal; they brought forth no proposal of their own; and they concluded the affair with a press conference called by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who was uncharacteristically emotional and vindictive. In response, the U.S. national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski (who had not accompanied the Vance delegation to Moscow), held his own press briefing in which he, in effect, repudiated Gromyko’s repudiation.

U.S. news accounts of these events were, by the end of March, barely two months into the Carter administration, already asking whether *détente* was dead. In the excerpt below, Vance says that when he thinks about that trip he likens the Soviet response to getting a “cold, wet rag across the face.” March 1977, as the participants on both sides at Musgrove recalled, was when they began to doubt the intentions and seriousness of the other side. This was the

point of origin of each side's mistrust of the motives of the other and was the beginning of the end of any chance for Carter to move quickly and decisively in the direction he had laid out in his inaugural address—that is, toward a non-nuclear world and a fundamental transformation of the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Why? Why this extreme and, to the U.S. delegation accompanying Vance, plainly irrational Soviet reaction to his mission, just weeks after Brezhnev's conciliatory speech at Tula, on 18 January? Did the Soviet leaders not want détente with the Americans? Did they not want a SALT II treaty? These were some of the issues that had perplexed the U.S. participants ever since the fateful Vance visit in March 1977.

### **Excerpt from “SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust”**

*Were Soviet leaders serious?* Zbigniew Brzezinski raises, from the U.S. perspective, the issue of the March 1977 fiasco in Moscow. He remains perplexed about what he regards as the seemingly counterproductive Soviet behavior. His main point is that nothing in the proposals was a surprise: Cyrus Vance brought to Moscow one radical proposal for deep cuts in both arsenals and one based on the formula agreed to at Vladivostok in November 1974 by Brezhnev and Ford. Brzezinski's underlying question seems to be whether the Soviet leaders perhaps were not serious in their stated desire for an arms control agreement with the United States. Brzezinski was seated directly across the long, narrow table from Anatolii Dobrynin, whom he called “Toly,” and it was principally to Dobrynin that he directed the following query.

**ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI:** I would like to use this occasion to raise the question with the Soviet side of the Soviet response to the initial [March 1977] U.S. proposals regarding arms control. The president came to office deeply convinced that there was no fundamental contradiction between the pursuit of human rights and the pursuit of deeper and more comprehensive arms control. He thought human rights was the general historical tendency in our time and that the Soviet Union could not be immune to that process. And indeed, I think, historically, he was in fact correct.

But beyond that, he thought we could do better on arms control because the dynamic of the arms competition was creating a more precarious situation for both sides. Please bear in mind that we came to office at a time in which the détente relationship had somewhat stagnated and there had been no breakthrough in arms control for some time prior to the election of President Carter. When he assumed office, therefore, he seriously contemplated the possibility of using that initial phase of innovation which comes with a new administration to achieve a more comprehensive arms control regime with the Soviet Union. And that is what drove him in that direction. . . . He stressed very strongly that the purpose of any such initiative would not be to gain any advantage for the United States. . . . He stressed

Speakers in the Excerpt

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**Harold Brown**, former U.S. secretary of defense.

**Zbigniew Brzezinski**, former U.S. national security adviser.

**Nikolai Detinov**, former Soviet first deputy defense minister.

**Anatolii F. Dobrynin**, former Soviet ambassador to the United States

**Mark Garrison**, former director of Soviet affairs, State Department.

**Leslie H. Gelb**, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs.

**Robert Legvold**, professor, Columbia University (Conference Chair).

**Robert Pastor**, former director of Latin American affairs, U.S. National Security Council.

**Viktor Sukhodrev**, former interpreter and aide to Leonid Brezhnev and Andrei Gromyko.

**Sergei Tarasenko**, former U.S. specialist in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**Cyrus Vance**, former U.S. secretary of state.

**Odd Arne Westad**, Norwegian Nobel Institute (in 1994, now London School of Economics).

**Vladislav Zubok**, National Security Archive (in 1994, now Temple University).

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that the proposals we make must be equitable to both sides. And that is what motivated the initial American effort to propose deeper cuts. . . .

Nonetheless, when we did make the proposal to you, we made a proposal which had two aspects to it: one did indeed propose deeper cuts, and we advertised that quite a bit—so it couldn't have been that much of a surprise to you; but secondly, we also had a proposal at the same time which was based on the Vladivostok formula, and we specifically said that if the deeper cuts were not immediately acceptable, the other proposal, based on the Vladivostok formula—though deferring on two issues on which no agreement had been reached, and on which there had obviously been a different interpretation of what Vladivostok involved—would be an acceptable basis for negotiation. These two issues were the [Soviet bomber] *Backfire* and the [U.S.] cruise missile. So I am a little surprised to hear that it was such a surprise for you that we were proposing deep cuts, because you knew that it was coming; and second, it was not the only proposal. We also had a fallback proposal based on the Vladivostok formula, setting aside issues on which we disagreed for further resolution. I wonder why the second proposal was not considered more seriously if, for this or that reason, you could not entertain the more ambitious proposal initially.

**ROBERT LEGVOLD:** Zbig, thank you very much. That's very helpful. . . . Let me ask a couple of questions. . . .

First, I would like to ask about President Carter's own inclinations, preferences, and drives on the question of nuclear weapons. In his inaugural address, he spoke of a nuclear-free world. To what degree was Carter actually influenced by the desire for eliminating nuclear weapons?

Second, early in the administration, as I look at the documents, he did ask you, Harold, in the Department of Defense, to assess the implications of going down to 250 launchers, as I recall—a *very* low level—and it got a very unsympathetic reception from both the civilians and from the regular line military, as I understand it. What was that all about, and how did that figure in things? Did the Soviet side have some sense of what Carter's commitments either to a nuclear-free world, or a world at very low levels, meant in this context?

***Carter was serious.** Harold Brown now points out that when Carter came to office he was in fact absolutely serious about moving toward a non-nuclear world. Thus, Brown implies, if Soviet officials felt that Carter's deep cuts proposal was just propaganda put on the table to embarrass the Soviet Union, they were wrong. Carter was serious.*

**HAROLD BROWN:** . . . It has always been the case that every president has come to office and announced that he was going to abolish nuclear weapons—or, at least, that it was his strong intention to do so. President Carter, I think, was the first to put it into his inaugural—

**LEGVOLD:** Harold, is that true?

**BROWN:** Yes.

**LEGVOLD:** A nuclear-free world? Have other presidents argued for that?

**BROWN:** They've all said that we really ought to try to get rid of nuclear weapons. Reagan, for example.

**ODD ARNE WESTAD:** But I think he was the one who *did* believe—

**BROWN:** I think they all believed it when they came into office. And then they started to think about the problems. . . . The lower the number gets the bigger these problems get. And therefore most of them have settled for reducing the numbers rather than eliminating nuclear weapons. . . .

*A “wet rag in the face.” Stimulated by a question from Vladislav Zubok, Brzezinski and Dobrynin engage in an extended, civilized, but still quite heated discussion. Brzezinski repeatedly returns to the question of why the Soviet Union had not simply embraced the fallback proposal Vance had brought to Moscow, especially in light of its similarity to the Vladivostok formula. Dobrynin returns fire with a withering rebuke of the whole U.S. approach to the USSR during the early Carter administration. Why, Dobrynin demands to know, did the administration think it could bully Brezhnev and his colleagues? Why did the United States feel it had a right to set a new agenda, by itself, without consultation with Brezhnev, Gromyko, and the other leaders in Moscow? Vance concludes this part of the discussion by explaining how he felt treated in Moscow: as if he had been hit “by a wet rag in the face and told to go home.” The mild-mannered Vance is visibly upset as he makes this intervention.*

**VLADISLAV ZUBOK:** Well, I believe that the issues of perceptions related to the nuclear balance were important but not crucial. They were not crucial for the beginning of the Cold War, the end of the Cold War, or for the continuation of the Cold War. The basic question was trust and mistrust. And

every new administration that came to the White House the Soviets looked upon with a mixture of apprehension, suspicion, and hope. Much depended upon the first steps and the first signals. . . . A general question to both American and Russian participants: Why did the efforts to create the backchannel fail? Thank you.

**LEGVOLD:** Zbig.

**BRZEZINSKI:** I think you have to understand the political situation that prevailed in the United States in 1976. The administration came to office quite explicitly rejecting the idea of backchannels, secret negotiations, and so forth. It was made very clear from the beginning that the negotiations would be conducted by the secretary of state either directly with his counterpart in the Soviet Union, or with Toly [Anatolii Dobrynin]. And I remember that, in fact, when Toly and I talked about the possibility of maintaining the kind of relationship that Toly had with Kissinger, I told Toly that this was not the way the president wanted to operate now; that Cy would be the principal channel, and that that would be the way we would conduct our business.

But beyond that there is the question of the seriousness of the relationship. The issues between us were centrally important, and they were being posed very directly through the official channels. I don't think it is an adequate answer to say that somehow or other the absence of a backchannel explains the difficulty of dealing seriously with the proposals that were being advanced by the U.S. side. And, I repeat, these proposals had two dimensions to them: one was a more ambitious effort to go forward in keeping with the president's faith as well as conviction that we ought to move eventually toward a non-nuclear world; and the second set of proposals, based on Vladivostok—quite deliberately—and if you look at our documents, we prepared them on the basis of Vladivostok, but left aside two issues on which we could not have immediate agreement because we viewed them as unresolved.

**LEGVOLD:** Anatolii:

**ANATOLII DOBRYNIN:** . . . About whether we were surprised or not about your proposal. No, we were not surprised, because from the very beginning you were talking about deep cuts. . . . President Carter did not feel specifically obliged to follow everything that was in Vladivostok. This was the first time when people in Moscow said, how come? Why is he not obliged? But he was very clear. . . . The president was going to seek deep cuts. . . . How many? Two or maybe three hundred missiles. It was a big revelation to Moscow.

About the second proposal: the second proposal was taken in the context of the overall relationship with you. We did not see this as a first proposal and a second proposal. What actually happened before Cy went to Moscow was that we had a big discussion in our government about what kind of relationship we were going to have with the new administration. Would it be

like it was with Nixon, or before Nixon? And we were under the impression that the new administration was coming with the intention—maybe we were wrong—of taking a new course toward us on a whole set of issues. I don't say it was a good course or a bad course, but a change of course. It was a change in arms negotiations, the proposal of drastic reductions. It was the new position on human rights. It looked as though at the very beginning of the new administration you were setting a new agenda, an agenda proposed by you—a completely new one, which we didn't have before. How were we to deal with this?

A decision was taken not to begin with the specifics of Vladivostok—because, after all, while they were important, it was more important to know what kind of course our relationship would take with the new administration. We had to decide whether we were going to fight these two issues, drastic reductions and human rights, and if so, how.

**BRZEZINSKI:** Do you mean linkage?

**DOBRYNIN:** In a way, yes. In a way. Not directly, but in a way. It always happens; sometimes you make it a public linkage, and sometimes you do not say it. So this was the decision. And when Vance came, from the very beginning, when we first saw you [gesturing toward Cyrus Vance], we felt the proposal for drastic reductions was not a serious approach. I don't say that we were right or wrong, but that was the overall impression . . .

I should say, after an elaborate discussion they had in the government, Brezhnev was a little bit angry. He was not in the mood for this. In the first meeting with Nixon, he said, "Let's sit down and discuss what we and you are going to do, because I am for peace, and you are for peace too." There was no such opportunity with the Carter administration. Maybe it sounds funny, but psychologically it's important, because during the previous fifteen years, that had been the pattern with any administration. . . .

What we were really concerned about was having the agenda prepared by your administration from the very beginning. You prepared it, and then brought it to us. Why did we have to accept it? If we want to have the fight we had for years with your administration, we have to look at your agenda. Rightly or wrongly, that is how we saw things. That's why we were so angry and didn't even want to discuss your proposals.

**LEGVOLD:** Cy, you're next.

**CYRUS VANCE:** I simply want to clarify some things that Anatolii stated. He was absolutely correct in stating that we laid out our proposals in really considerable detail. In the briefing book there is a report of the March 21 [1977] meeting between Anatolii and myself in which we laid out immediately prior to going exactly what it was that we were going to put forward in terms of the basic deep cuts proposal, and in addition to that a fallback proposal. The problem that really arose, it seems to me, was that when we put our proposals on the table, nobody would listen to them, and contrary to usual practice, nobody said, "Well, let's sit down and talk about that and

see if we can find a way to get around this thing.” We got a wet rag in the face, and were told to go home. That was, in my judgment, a very important tactical mistake on your part, and indeed in subsequent years that was confirmed to me by Gromyko. Gromyko said to me, “One of the big mistakes we made was not coming back before you left and saying, ‘Let’s see what we can do about it.’”

***It was an emotional issue.** Viktor Sukhodrev, the English-Russian interpreter for all Soviet leaders from Khrushchev to Gorbachev, then explains that the emotion Vance felt was fully reciprocated on the Soviet side. He tells Vance that Brezhnev and Gromyko were genuinely offended and that they never got over it. Sukhodrev then adds that this feeling was exacerbated by Carter’s pressure on the Soviet Union about human rights. Brzezinski and Dobrynin then resume their argument by disagreeing about which side, the United States or the Soviet Union, was guilty of holding up progress in arms control via linkage to human rights. Dobrynin concludes by telling Brzezinski, in essence, that if the Carter administration had simply begun its March 1977 approach to the Soviet Union in a more modest manner, in a consultative manner, Soviet leaders would have been willing both to accommodate much deeper cuts in the nuclear arsenals than the Americans might have imagined and even to listen to criticism of their human-rights record. The transcript does not adequately convey the intensity of their exchange—again, civilized but accompanied by forceful gesturing and unceasing eye contact.*

**VIKTOR SUKHODREV:** Just a few points relating to the linkage between disarmament and human rights, and what Anatolii was saying about the desire of the Soviet side—of Gromyko and Brezhnev—to talk about the overall relationship, the conceptual side of the Soviet-American relationship. Cy Vance knows that Gromyko always used to start his meetings with secretaries of state or presidents with that conceptual approach, from which he would then go into the various items on the agenda—from disarmament, to Africa, to Cuba, or to whatever was on the agenda. Now, with respect to SALT, you have to take into account the attitude of the Soviets. And here again, because this was so personalized, it was Brezhnev and Gromyko—those two—who conducted these negotiations, after all. You also have to take into account their attitude towards the questions of human rights.

There was no surprise in the new proposals that were brought by Cy. I am not a policymaker, but I familiarized myself with the briefs for those talks, as I had to in order to be competent as an interpreter. I saw in those briefs a rough description of what Cy eventually brought to Moscow. So, they were not a surprise, as Anatoly just said. But they were a disappointment for Brezhnev, who felt he had done so much hard work, personally, in Vladivostok. Suddenly this new administration was toppling the whole structure he had worked so hard to build.

Added to that was the attitude toward human rights. Gromyko always detested having anything to do with . . . [it]. . . . But he had been condi-

tioned—and this I think is an important factor—he had been conditioned by Henry Kissinger to treat the whole thing as of no practical importance. [Laughter.] . . . In Geneva, during one of their meetings . . . Henry Kissinger said directly, “Mr. Minister, why are we quibbling over these forms of words? No matter what . . . I don’t believe the Soviet Union will ever do anything it doesn’t want to do.” So that, in a nutshell, was what Gromyko—and therefore, Brezhnev—had been conditioned to believe. . . . And suddenly, human rights—out of nothing, in the minds of Soviet leaders, Gromyko and Brezhnev—becomes a first-priority issue in the eyes of the new administration.

So, those two things were regarded by both Brezhnev and Gromyko as a kind of *personal affront*. And that attitude—that emotional attitude—colored the whole relationship, as it were, and the negotiations on all other issues. They could never obliterate them.

**LEGVOLD:** Zbig, did you want to speak to this?

**BRZEZINSKI:** Yes. I think we’ve gotten a very important clarification from the Soviet side of what happened in early 1977. It was in fact unilateral linkage that prevented progress on arms control, because we were not linking progress in arms control to other issues. After all, we are also entitled to have a view on human-rights policy, which you thought offensive or a personal affront. But *we* were not linking other issues to progress on arms control. It is quite evident from your responses that you were—that you felt concerned about our views on other issues, and *that*, in turn, led you to reject not only the more ambitious proposal—which was not designed to throw Vladivostok into a wastebasket but was designed to go beyond it—but also the other proposal, which was based on Vladivostok. You’ve made it very clear, both of you now. That was because of other issues.

Well, of course, if there is to be linkage, then linkage can be reciprocal: we can link other issues to progress in arms control too. But we didn’t, because we wanted to have progress in arms control. Your position may be justified in terms of your reading of your own interest; but you were clearly linking other issues to progress in arms control. We were not.

Now, I have to confess that I became someone who favored linkage, especially later on when other issues surfaced. But I was aware of the fact that once other issues were linked to arms control, it would certainly slow down arms control.

**LEGVOLD:** Anatolii, very quickly on this.

**DOBRYNIN:** Thank you. We couldn’t leave it as it is—as if there was a linkage as Zbig understood it. What we are trying to say, myself and my colleagues, is that, for the sake of arms control, we were really prepared to consider some concessions, on our own. That’s why even [KGB Chairman Yuri] Andropov was giving instructions to make concessions on the most unwelcome issue—the issue of human rights. So this was really linkage in a way, but this was not a tight linkage in bargaining terms. We were pre-

pared, if things went well on arms control, to swallow some unwelcome discussion of human rights, since we hoped that the climate would be better between us. This is more or less what happened with Nixon. This was a connection in a way—a positive connection. But it was not a bargaining linkage.

**BRZEZINSKI:** So why didn't you accept our more modest proposal?

**DOBRYNIN:** Because we looked at the whole set of positions your administration brought into office, and they were unacceptable to us.

**BRZEZINSKI:** But the fallback—

**DOBRYNIN:** The fallback position had nothing to do really with Vladivostok. If you really wanted to discuss this issue, I was prepared to discuss it. The second proposal was not really to follow up Vladivostok. You said categorically on all levels, beginning with you, Cy [gestures toward Cyrus Vance], and the president himself, who made it clear when I spoke with him: there would be no restrictions on cruise missiles.

**BRZEZINSKI:** We said there were *two* issues which were not resolved—

**DOBRYNIN:** Yes. *Backfire* [Soviet bomber] and this one. And the [U.S.] air-launched cruise missiles. This was an important question. And you just said, "No, let's leave it aside."

**BRZEZINSKI:** We said, "Let's defer that until we reach an agreement on that issue."

**DOBRYNIN:** Well, we had already been deferring for six years, through three administrations. Why defer each issue? We had experience enough in negotiating. I think we had enough.

**LEGVOLD:** I think we will revisit this issue. . . . Les Gelb is next.

*The Soviet Union blew it.* Leslie Gelb, Vance's principal adviser on arms control, joins the debate. Gelb, who is always witty and ironical, is also very protective of his former boss, whom Gelb accompanied on the ill-fated mission in March 1977. He tells Dobrynin and the other former Soviet officials that they, too, could have had much more than they probably can imagine, if only they had not hit Vance and his colleagues (including Gelb) with that "wet rag in the face" in March 1977. Gelb tells Dobrynin that if the Soviet leaders had been even minimally polite to Vance, President Carter would likely have been willing to go as far as the Soviet Union, maybe even further, toward the objectives of the comprehensive proposal for radical reductions in the nuclear arsenals of both superpowers.

**LESLIE GELB:** I think I might be able to clarify some of these questions, but there are so many scorpions on the table now, it's hard to tell which one to pick up. [Laughter.] Even though the Carter administration did not in any formal way link human rights to arms control, I think we all understood that the strong position being taken on human rights was driving you crazy. It was not a mystery to us.

**DOBRYNIN:** I don't want to say *crazy*, but it was close. [Laughter.]

**GELB:** I meant *crazy*, Anatolii, in the same positive sense you were talking about linkage. [Laughter.] Secondly, I was a strong advocate for the

Vladivostok agreement—let’s just finish there. So, everything else I say should be understood in that context. I was in favor of settling for Vladivostok, as was my boss [points at Vance]. We wanted to do that and move on from there. But when we were discussing what your reaction would be to going beyond Vladivostok, toward a comprehensive agreement, you should know that even proponents of Vladivostok thought you would not react as negatively as you did. . . .

Next point. . . . You can walk away from here thinking that the comprehensive proposal and the “Vladivostok-minus” proposal were not serious, but there actually is evidence that President Carter was prepared to go much further, including in the direction of meeting your other concerns about strategic arms. . . . Had you responded with any counterproposal to what Cy brought to Moscow in March 1977, you would have been greeted with a very interesting, far more interesting proposal on the American side, just to show, to prove that this wasn’t a game. . . . You ought to know that.

Finally, when we left Moscow, I think we left with real grievances as well because, as Cy said, and as the record shows, you were fully forewarned about the alternatives—not just in the week before we left, but in the run-up to that. Your [Vance’s] letter to Brezhnev shows that he knew fully what we were going to put on the table. And yet when we left, we left to the chorus of public statements by your government, and background statements by your government, that you had no forewarning, that this was a very amateurish attempt to force something down the throat of the Soviet leadership after careful negotiations. So, from our standpoint, we did *not* surprise you. We did *not* come with a bolt out of the blue. And yet when we left, as Cy said, we got a wet rag across the face. . . .

***Déjà vu, March 1977?** As the first conference session is adjourning, conference chair Robert Legvold expresses his amazement that the conversation he is hearing in the mid-1990s is the same conversation, more or less, that took place in the 1970s. In a cryptic response, Vance disagrees, telling Legvold in effect (as one participant informally put it to the group during the break that followed this session) that they had “missed the mother of all opportunities” in March 1977. This time, says Vance, they are trying to grasp what happened—why they missed the opportunity to move ahead, rather than enter a downward spiral toward the collapse of their relationship. One has the feeling that Vance is far from the only one at the table who still, after nearly two decades, cannot really understand how everyone involved, from both sides, let it happen. This feeling only intensifies as the conference proceeds, as each side becomes increasingly convinced of the lack of seriousness on the other side both in March 1977 and in this reassessment 17 years later.*

**LEGVOLD:** . . . As I listened to the exchanges this morning, the issues that each side is raising with the other, and the arguments with which each is responding, they appear to me almost a direct duplication of what you did at the time. There is no indication that there are further second thoughts about this at this stage. Now, maybe that’s the important reality; maybe

there aren't second thoughts to be had about it. But this conversation is essentially the conversation you had at the time. Cy, you disagree?

**VANCE:** Yes, I disagree with you.

**LEGVOLD:** Okay, put your mike on.

**VANCE:** What we have been talking about is the question of missed opportunities, and therefore, I think it's really quite different from what you're saying.

**LEGVOLD:** You don't think there was a recognition of missed opportunities at the time?

**VANCE:** At the time, we had different views with respect to whether there was a missed opportunity. But clearly, when you are looking back in a retrospective fashion, you are talking about what the missed opportunities were at the time.

***Mutual Recriminations.** Vance then goes on to say that in March 1977 he was prepared to negotiate on a wide variety of positions on nuclear arms control. He tells his former Soviet counterparts that what prevented his mission to Moscow from ushering in a new and better era in U.S.-Soviet relations was the "wet rag in the face" he received when he and his team arrived. All that was needed, says Vance, was a viable counterproposal. Dobrynin disagrees. The chief problem, he asserts, was the lack of respect shown by the new U.S. administration for what had already been accomplished; namely, the Vladivostok accords of 1974. Harold Brown objects, telling Dobrynin that Vladivostok was already dead in the water in the Ford administration because of congressional opposition. Dobrynin responds that this is irrelevant. The agreement had been consummated by Gromyko and Kissinger, and by seeming to renege on the agreement the United States showed that it was not really serious about dealing with the Soviet Union as an equal on arms control. Characteristically, as Dobrynin speaks, he weaves in and out of Russian and English, as his speech intensifies in each language.*

**VANCE:** In terms of missed opportunities, it's very clear that if we had any response other than a wet rag in the face, we would have come forward with proposals dealing with new systems that were very important to you [gestures toward Dobrynin]: namely, the MX [intercontinental ballistic missile] and the Trident [submarine-launched ballistic missile]. We were prepared to sit down and talk about limits on those. But you cut it off completely by refusing to listen, to pay any attention to what we were saying and what we had attempted to do. That had a further impact in that it led to delay—not an exorbitantly long one, but to a delay nonetheless—that meant we presented the agreement for ratification later than we had hoped. If we had gotten there earlier, I think we might have had a better chance on ratification.

**LEGVOLD:** Anatolii, why didn't you warn Cy in your conversation that this would likely be the outcome? You were an even greater expert on the Soviet Union than our professionals were. Were you surprised by how absolute the response was when it came?

**DOBRYNIN:** I told Cy, when I met with him, that it was absolutely unacceptable, and that it would be rejected.

**LEGVOLD:** And did you say that there would be no further negotiations?

**DOBRYNIN:** Well, I couldn't explain the whole position.

**VANCE:** The issue was a counterproposal.

**DOBRYNIN:** The issue was really—

**GELB:** The issue was *counterproposal*, not acceptance. You did say to Cy, "This is unacceptable." But what about a counterproposal? What about putting something else on the table?

**LEGVOLD:** I am talking about the "wet rag in the face."

**DOBRYNIN:** This was a decision made in Moscow. All I knew was that the proposals were unacceptable. . . . The question that we faced, when Cy Vance arrived in Moscow, was whether we were going to continue détente by pursuing Vladivostok, or whether we were facing an agenda that we thought at the time represented a major departure: a revision of the Vladivostok agreement, human rights, and many other issues which were until now unacceptable. That was really the problem as we saw it at that time. And we wanted from the very beginning to know where the administration stood on our relationship.

Gromyko did later on accept that we made a mistake by not answering Cy Vance. That's another story; and I agree with him. But we are speaking about history as it was.

**LEGVOLD:** Very quickly, Harold.

**BROWN:** Vladivostok had been more than two years before, and no movement had occurred toward completing it or toward ratifying it. In retrospect, wasn't it a little naive on the part of the Soviet side to think that the new administration would come in and just accept and move on an agreement which the previous administration had not been able to do anything with for two years?

**DOBRYNIN:** It was in '74, and in '76—

**BROWN:** But Vladivostok—

**DOBRYNIN:** Yes, but '76 was a continuation of Vladivostok.

**BROWN:** But there had not really been any attempts to ratify—

**DOBRYNIN:** The question isn't ratification. You're wrong! The question was whether there was continuity in our discussions. And indeed, until the very moment of the last administration—

**BROWN:** Yes, but Kissinger had tried to get the administration to complete the endgame, and it had failed because the Joint Chiefs and Don Rumsfeld had essentially vetoed it.

**DOBRYNIN:** Harold, we had to deal with the administration which was in power.

**BROWN:** I understand, but—

**DOBRYNIN:** But we continued to discuss Vladivostok with Kissinger. We continued to discuss it.

**BROWN:** But wanting a continuation of discussions on something that had stalled is really quite different from asking a new group simply to sign what you say you had completed.

**DOBRYNIN:** But what had already been completed, you rejected. This is the point. It's not a question of continuation or no continuation, because there was no continuity. This is exactly the point. The trouble we had with you at the time was that there was no continuity in the process. You may agree or disagree, but as we felt it, for many years, although there had been much back and forth, still we moved in one direction. Then suddenly—suddenly, it all changed.

**BROWN:** My point is that Vladivostok was not as complete on the U.S. side in the previous administration as you thought at the time.

**DOBRYNIN:** But there was a continuation of the discussion. There was no disruption.

**BROWN:** But then what Cy went forward with *was* a continuation of the discussion.

**DOBRYNIN:** Discussion, yes, but not a promise, as we saw it in the previous administration.

*If I knew then what I know now.* At the urging of conference chair Legvold, the tone shifts from accusatory to an emphasis on what, concretely, should have been done differently to have avoided the debacle in March 1977. Mark Garrison, who also accompanied Vance on the mission, begins by saying that maybe the proposals Vance took to Moscow could have been the basis for productive talks, if only they had contained more references to “Vladivostok, Vladivostok, Vladivostok.” Sergei Tarasenko, who worked on U.S. affairs for Gromyko and Georgii Kornienko, agrees: better “packaging” might have made a big difference. Brzezinski then tells the participants that he wishes he had tried harder to find a way to discourage Carter from ceaselessly publicizing what he wanted to accomplish on arms control and in U.S.-Soviet relations generally. He says that Carter’s aversion to secret negotiations often had the unintended result of setting unrealistic expectations about the outcome and timing. Nikolai Detinov agrees with Brzezinski. He says the excessive publicity by Carter led the Soviet side to suspect that the publicized proposals were basically propaganda rather than serious attempts to move the discussion forward on nuclear arms limitations. Following his intervention, Detinov is heard telling his Russian colleagues that he is surprised, almost shocked, to find himself in agreement with Brzezinski—a comment that draws smiles from the Russians, as well as from Brzezinski, who is a fluent Russian speaker.

**LEGVOLD:** This afternoon session is to wind up the discussion of the Moscow meeting in March of 1977, then go beyond it and to discuss the aftermath and the next steps. Mark?

**MARK GARRISON:** I’d like to take just one more swing at the question of American perceptions of the psychological and emotional situation in Moscow—particularly with respect to Brezhnev—and raise the question as

to whether, in retrospect, it might have been useful and desirable to take steps to cope with that.

The Carter-Brezhnev letters, I think, give us a case in point, because at the beginning of that correspondence they exchanged their “Sermons on the Mount,” as Viktor Sukhodrev calls them. Presumably, this caused a certain satisfaction in the Kremlin. But then, as Georgii Kornienko points out, the February 14th Carter letter was something of a turning point in the Soviet understanding of what the American side was up to. Now, if you look at the text of that letter, at first you wonder what the fuss is about, because it doesn’t seem all that new or exceptional, at least if you take a look at just the paragraph on arms control. . . . The point I want to make is that although that paragraph on arms control sets forth the American position as it had come to be known, it doesn’t even contain the word “Vladivostok.” Now, just taking into account the purely psychological, emotional aspects of the situation, might it not have been a good idea to present that position in response to Brezhnev’s letter? Brezhnev’s letter, of course, emphasized Vladivostok, Vladivostok, Vladivostok. The answer came back—no Vladivostok. Wouldn’t it have been useful, just as a matter of atmospherics to avoid the misunderstanding and to say, “Yes, of course, there is Vladivostok, but we think that in order to move on rapidly we need to think about deferring the most difficult questions in Vladivostok?”

**LEGVOLD:** Yes, Sergei?

**SERGEI TARASENKO:** I would like to tell you what Kornienko told me with regard to the March meeting. . . . The leaders were in a certain mood, and set in a certain position, and the formal side of things did not matter. The emotions had already overwhelmed them—the emotional side. And I think now, when we are trying to deliberate on this topic—when we are talking about missed opportunities—maybe we should say that the tactics and the “packaging” mattered. Had those same American proposals been differently packaged, as Mark says with frequent mentioning of the word “Vladivostok,” and certain pledges like “we, the American side, are committed to the Vladivostok agreements,” and if they had developed some additional ideas about the necessity to change something in that agreement, then negotiations would have been possible. Then it would have been possible to develop some dialogue.

**LEGVOLD:** Zbig, could I pick on you for a moment and ask you to respond to Mark’s question to the American side? Knowing what you know now, or even what you knew after the fact in March 1977? What kinds of things would you do differently—if any—in order to reach the objective that you had as of mid-March? What would you change in the decisions on the comprehensive proposal or the deferral? What would you do differently, if anything?

**BRZEZINSKI:** I’m sure there were more than the ones now mentioned, but the following ones come to my mind. First, probably it would have been

better not to publicize our attraction to the comprehensive approach so much at the highest level. This applies to the president as well as to those of us around him. That made the comprehensive cuts idea very much of an American idea, rather than something that might have come out of the joint process of the negotiations. Although one has to take into account the dynamics of the American political campaigns and the pressures they generated on the principal candidates, nonetheless I think the president perhaps oversold it, and over-talked it

Secondly, with respect to the negotiating strategy rather than to the substance of the proposals, I would not have repeated so often—and I repeatedly urged the president not to repeat it so often—his expectation that a SALT agreement would be concluded, first in 1977 (which he publicly stated several times) and then in 1978. I thought this was actually weakening our negotiating position and placing us under pressure to have an agreement, because if we did not it would have looked like a political failure not to have one. My attitude was that the proposals we advanced were reasonable; that in the long run it was in the Soviet interest to accept them; and if there was to be a competition without arms control, we would not lose it. Therefore, we had to have a reason to stick to our position without building up public expectations that the SALT agreement would be concluded within a given time frame.

**LEGVOLD:** Are there any other comments on this [U.S.] side?

**VANCE:** I agree with what Zbig has said on that. But I would also suggest that if we had extended the time so we could have further discussion on some of these questions—not only among ourselves, but also with the most senior people in the Soviet Union—it might have been useful.

**LEGVOLD:** Harold, did you want to say something on this, quickly?

**BROWN:** I don't think I have a great deal to add. I would agree strongly with Zbig. . . . I think we should have taken a little bit more time with things and not hyped it up all so much publicly.

**LEGVOLD:** Nikolai?

**NIKOLAI DETINOV:** The negotiations were presented in such a way that it aggravated *all* negotiation problems for the future. First, the substance of the negotiations had become publicly known even before the proposals had been officially presented. Therefore, we—the Soviet Union—believed that to a large extent these proposals were of a propagandistic or purely political, rather than substantive, character.

Second, it is apparent that the initial reactions of each side to the proposals of the other were very unhelpful. Here is what happened, from my perspective, in Moscow. By encouraging so much press coverage *after* the March 1977 talks failed, the position of the American side was repeatedly emphasized, as was the American view of more or less exactly what was necessary for the resumption of negotiations. This had the effect of making the Soviet position much more rigid, which became, in response:

Vladivostok and absolutely nothing else. This played a big role in slowing down the whole process of the negotiations.

**DOBRYNIN:** Just to add to what Nikolai said: Your position, which was brought by Cy to Moscow, was used against the Carter administration by its domestic political opposition. It became a yardstick for the opponents, and they turned it against the administration. To everything else they later charged, “It’s a retreat! A retreat!” And this made it very difficult for you to formulate, and to defend, your later positions.

***Damage limitation).** Legvold then asks the participants to discuss what happened after the March 1977 fiasco: How did each side move to limit the damage and get a more productive discussion of the issues back on track? Vance introduces the subject before turning it over to Gelb, but not before he tells his former deputy to put out his cigar and come back to the conference table. (Gelb had been banished to a distant doorway, lit cigar in his mouth, by the other participants. The vote for banishment had been unanimous.) Gelb returns and describes the “three-tier” solution that he and Ford administration Soviet specialist William Hyland had worked out, a solution that became the basis for starting over in the SALT talks. Dobrynin adds that if the Vance team had brought something like this in March 1977, it would have been acceptable to the Soviet side as the basis—a serious basis—for beginning discussions. But he implies more: that both sides would have begun to trust rather than be suspicious of each other.*

**LEGVOLD:** What kind of thinking took place in Washington, and what kind of thinking took place in Moscow, immediately after the Vance mission? Cy?

**VANCE:** Let me say a few words, and then, Les, would you join us at the table? Les was very much involved in the aftermath. And leave your cigar there, will you please? [Long laughter, loud applause.]

Let me say that I think, in hindsight, that I was too frank, too open with the press. But certainly, by a similar token, I think that my good friend Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko also really compounded our problems—with that really heavy-handed press conference. I acknowledge mistakes on my part; but I think there were also mistakes on his part. And therefore we were left with a very tough situation.

On the other hand, obviously we had to address the issue immediately as to how we could handle this, how we could try to bring it under control. Fortunately, I had very able, very clever colleagues, one of whom was Les, another of whom was Marshall [Shulman], and others. So we got together and began to work on getting out of this fix we were in. We wanted to move as quickly as possible to get ourselves back on track in time for the meeting in Geneva, which we had announced we would have.

I’m going to turn it over to Les, who was one of the architects of the piece of “construction” that got us back on track.

**GELB:** After we came back from our Moscow trip, Bill Hyland and I went out to lunch. We made a lot of fun of our friends, a lot of fun of our adver-

saries, and then we said there must be some way to reconstruct what was done and what could be done. And we came up with the three-part proposal that you see in the documents. The first part embodied the essence of Vladivostok. The second part took the harder questions that couldn't be resolved there and put them in a protocol where we felt both sides could live with solutions of a very limited duration and go back at the issues. The third part was intended to get us where President Carter wanted to go in the first place; namely, toward the principles that would create a more stable strategic balance.

We looked at this inside the administration, and we were happy to find that it provided a way out. When Cy presented this to you informally thereafter, it gave all of us a way out of the box we found ourselves in after the Moscow events we've been discussing.

**LEGVOLD:** How shortly thereafter, Les?

**GELB:** Quickly. April.

**LEGVOLD:** What was going on in Moscow in those days immediately after the March confrontation?

**DOBRYNIN:** Well, in Moscow immediately after, of course, there was a recognition that we went too far, from both points of view. We knew that we had to find a way out—not immediately, necessarily, but little by little. I don't recall who was the first to reestablish communication, but somebody spoke rather quickly. And we established contact with the State Department—with Cy Vance—and we began the exchange. . . . This three-level proposal Les spoke about ultimately ended in the agreement of 1979. It was the basis for 1979.

**VANCE:** Basically, it was a very good—

**DOBRYNIN:** Basically, it was a very good ground from which to begin. I think that if we had begun with this kind of proposal when you first came to Moscow in March 1977, everything would have been fine. But I am saying "if"—history was different.

*Brzezinski's unexpected mea culpa.* Just before Brzezinski departs from the conference (a day earlier than most of the others), he makes two points in closing, both of which surprise the Soviet participants. First, he says he regrets that he will not be present on the following day for discussion of the "brigade in Cuba" affair in the summer and fall of 1979, which he calls the "worst handled" episode in U.S.-Soviet relations during the Carter administration. (Brzezinski's own deputies in the National Security Council mistakenly concluded that the Soviet Union had, in 1979, introduced a combat brigade into Cuba, when in fact such a brigade had been present in Cuba since the missile crisis of October 1962.) Vance agrees that the brigade episode was a mess. Then Brzezinski says he also regrets the absence during the Carter-Brezhnev years of regular meetings—without an agenda or the necessity to sign any agreement—between the two leaders. He says that had such meetings occurred, greater trust and transparency might have resulted. Garrison agrees because, he says, Soviet leaders obviously felt they were being "pushed around," and that

*impression should have been dealt with forthrightly, face to face, at the highest level. By not developing more trust and transparency, the Soviet Union, despite pursuing SALT to its conclusion, says Garrison, also decided to deny Carter his principal dream: radical movement toward a non-nuclear world and a transformation of the competitive, adversarial U.S.-Soviet relationship.*

**LEGVOLD:** Zbig, I know you have to leave soon. Would you like to make a final comment before leaving?

**BRZEZINSKI:** I'm going to be brief, in part because I have no choice—I have to leave.

**LEGVOLD:** But Zbig, I've just been told that you have a little bit of a cushion. You have another fifteen minutes before you have to leave.

**DOBRYNIN:** Oh, dear! [Laughter.]

**BRZEZINSKI:** I will not use it all up.

First, on the Vienna Summit in 1979. Let the record show that the meeting began with us sitting across the table from each other, and Mr. Brezhnev pointed his finger across the table, like this, and said: "Here is the man responsible for the collapse of détente"—pointing straight at Cyrus Vance. [Long laughter.]

**DOBRYNIN:** Brezhnev was well known for his sense of humor. [Laughter.]

**BRZEZINSKI:** At the Vienna Summit, we were essentially confined to the agreement on SALT. Had the Cuban brigade issue not intervened, perhaps it would have been ratified prior to the Afghan events. But I'm not quite sure that the Afghan events would not have had an impact on the ratification process, because of the reaction of the United States.

I regret that I will not be here for the discussion of the Cuban brigade. But I do think that, from our point of view, it was the worst handled episode in this very complex relationship.

**VANCE:** It was not our shining moment.

**BRZEZINSKI:** That's right, exactly. And that certainly had an impact in terms of loss of time.

This brings me to my final point, which is that rather early on in the administration, I proposed to the president—and he proposed to the Soviet side—annual summit meetings, detached and divorced from negotiating agendas. Perhaps this was premature at the time, given the depth of the disagreement between us. But I was of the view—and our last two days here have reinforced it—that some generalized, quasi-strategic discussions between us were needed. They would have introduced some greater degree of transparency in our mutual perceptions and perhaps a greater degree of understanding. . . . Those around the top leaders usually feel uneasy about their leaders negotiating on their own. But still, I think had we moved to something of the sort that has now developed in the American-Russian relationship—regular meetings, divorced from negotiating agenda, not tied

to grand agreements—it would have been a useful step forward. It's a pity we couldn't do it.

**LEGVOLD:** Zbig, thank you very much. Mark Garrison.

**GARRISON:** I just want to point generally to Zbig's view that, at the beginning of the administration, Jimmy Carter saw SALT as the way to achieve a general breakthrough in the relationship—to move to a completely new relationship. Finally, in the summer of '79, he got the SALT agreement. My impression is that he still nursed the hope that the agreement would lead to a general breakthrough and improvement in relations. That perception—my perception, at least—was that the Soviet Union was absolutely determined that that would not be the case—that this was going to be a signing of the SALT treaty, and that was all. Nothing else.

Now, the question is, was that simply Gromyko's nastiness? Brezhnev's incapacity? Or was the Soviet attitude conditioned by having been pushed around on a number of issues which, they thought, affected their vital interests? Perhaps I'm wrong, but . . . maybe somehow there are some lessons that can be learned by both sides in that kind of relationship.

***Misperception, or the wrong side of history?** Gelb then makes one of the most controversial interventions of the conference. He says, "I didn't learn any lessons." He says he disagrees completely with what seems to be the majority view at the conference, which is that misperception and misunderstanding—produced in part by a mutual lack of transparency—were responsible for the failure of the Vance mission and for the decline that followed it. Oh sure, Gelb says, there may have been misperceptions, but they were not very important, and, in any case, the times were not ripe for the kind of radical change sought by Carter. Vance is sympathetic to Gelb's contention that history was running against them, but he believes the loss of time, caused by the failure of the March 1977 mission, was the key to their failures. Because the March 1977 mission failed and because SALT was not signed until the June 1979 Vienna summit, the right wing in the United States had time to mobilize in opposition to any arms control treaty with the Soviet Union. Robert Pastor strenuously disagrees with Gelb, saying that misperception is the key to understanding everything that went wrong. Legvold, in an effort to determine whether Gelb is serious about his claim that what happened more or less had to happen, asks him whether his framework includes any place for "human intervention." Gelb replies that it does, but the reality, as he looks back on it, was that Carter was in over his head in trying to deal with the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union was cursed with a "gerontocracy" that would have frustrated the initiatives of even a highly savvy politician, which (as Gelb sees it) Carter was not. Soviet leaders, says Gelb, were just not going to move any faster than they did move—at least, not until the Gorbachev era, several years later. Dobrynin tells Gelb that he is wrong about the Soviet authorities, who, he says, were prepared to move much faster on SALT than the Americans.*

**LEGVOLD:** Les, would you like to comment on the lessons you have learned over the past two days?

**GELB:** I didn't learn any lessons from the last two days—

**DOBRYNIN:** He already knew it all. [Laughter.]

**GELB:** —because I don't think anything that's come up is anything we didn't already know. I enjoyed it—[Laughter.]—because it was good conversation, and in some cases it cleared up some of the little mysteries that we all wondered about—who was talking at the other end of the string, what they might have been thinking, and so forth. In some cases the mysteries have deepened, because there were complications that we did not know about. I think the conversation was terrific from that point of view.

The lessons, however, are all the lessons we all understood pretty clearly before we stepped in here. The choices in our circumstances were highly limited. You have described the leadership of an advanced gerontocracy unable to see a good deal of what was put before their eyes. You have described a political system that made decisions in a terribly rigid fashion. And you had even less coordination, less trust, less cooperation in your bureaucracy than we did in ours.

I don't think there was a problem of misperception. We opined here around this table that, if we only had perceived each other in a different way, things would have been different. I don't think that times allowed for different presumptions. There were people in the Carter administration who perceived you more or less the way you have described yourselves. There *were!* Your explanations sounded a lot like a lot of the explanations for your behavior that we heard in the State Department. Yes, there were people who perceived you that way. There were others who didn't perceive you that way at all—who really thought there was some sinister plotting—and who, even if they talked to you, would have believed there was sinister plotting. Nothing you could have said would have changed their minds.

**LEGVOLD:** But Les, in terms of the relationship, had there been any way to overcome the misperceptions—had there been any circumstance in which those misperceptions had not existed—then there would have been quite different possibilities. Now, maybe it's unthinkable that it could have been any other way—

**GELB:** Yes, I think that's what I would say.

**LEGVOLD:** Cy Vance.

**VANCE:** I agree with the proposition that the currents of history were running against us, without any doubt. But I also think that time was running against us. And the extrinsic factors that came into play in this thing took time away from us. Every minute that was taken away from us made it more difficult to get ratification. And I therefore think we paid a very heavy price for these distractions.

**LEGVOLD:** Bob Pastor.

**ROBERT PASTOR:** I would disagree with Les as well. I think that there *are* lessons to be drawn both—

**GELB:** What do you mean: you disagree “as well?” Who else disagreed?  
[Laughter.]

**PASTOR:** Shall we have a show of hands? [Laughter.] I think there are lessons to be drawn. I think in this particular case there were sizable misunderstandings and misperceptions on both sides, and they had enormous implications. I think the failure of the Soviet side to understand that they needed to come back to Secretary Vance in March of '77 with some kind of counterproposal was a very significant missed opportunity. I think all of the issues we are wrestling with today are, in part, issues in which one side did not take fully into account the perceptions and concerns of the other side. And that failure to take them into account—to grasp what the other side was all about—affected both the pace of change and, ultimately, the outcome. I mean, after all: at the end of the Carter administration, the relationship was in tatters. And senior people on both sides of this table have agreed that it all started with the misperceptions and misunderstandings in March 1977. Moreover, these misperceptions would have serious consequences for both countries, and for their respective allies in various parts of the world, in the 1980s.

**LEGVOLD:** Les, did you want to respond to Bob?

**GELB:** You say that if only we hadn't misperceived each other, things would have happened differently, say in March 1977. But we *told* the Soviet side we loved them before March of '77. [Laughter.] They heard it all over the place. In public statements too. They had reasons not to accept what we were saying. They had other things they could point to. And that's almost always going to be the case, particularly on a difficult issue. And I don't know how many times these two gentlemen [indicating Vance and Dobrynin] talked to each other before March. I don't think anyone could have done more to dispel fears of American motives than Cy did. But the question is how the Soviet side perceived what we were doing, no matter how we described it to them—because there wasn't sufficient trust for them to accept the explanations.

By the same token, whatever Anatolii would say—maybe some of us would find it terribly persuasive. But at least as many thought it was Soviet propaganda. I assure you that you could have perceived it from here to kingdom come and it wouldn't have changed a thing, given what was happening at the time.

Transparency wouldn't have solved these things, either. We were transparent. All of the debate was public. The Soviets could have looked at us—and they did, inside and out—and whatever they didn't see, we told them about. And it still didn't change their notion of what we were up to. Some of you [Pointing at Soviets.] probably *still* believe that we were trying to corner you. These views are built up in a period of history in which major powers have major conflicts of interests.

**PASTOR:** But the question is whether transparency in Russia would have affected their policies, would have affected their perceptions, would have affected what was—

**GELB:** But it didn't happen.

**LEGVOLD:** What role, Les, do you leave for human intervention.

**GELB:** There is a role for human intervention, and an important role. But you need incredibly gifted and disciplined leadership to run against historical tides. And I think that's what we didn't have on either side at that point. In the case of Jimmy Carter, he was trying to do great things without the preparation for them. In the case of the Soviet side, I don't think they were ready for a turn in the relationship yet. There were big changes brewing deep underneath the ground in that country that emerged many years later. But at the time we are discussing, I don't think they were prepared to go much faster than they did. Correct me if I am wrong in that perception.

**DOBRYNIN:** You're wrong. On SALT we were prepared to move much faster than you—on SALT.

### **Postscript by Georgii Kornienko**

A key participant in the May 1994 Musgrove conference was to have been Georgii M. Kornienko, the Soviet first deputy foreign minister during the Carter-Brezhnev period and an acknowledged master of the details of U.S.-Soviet arms control over several decades. Kornienko was unable to take part because of an illness in his family. He was subsequently sent a draft transcript of the Musgrove discussions. At a workshop in Oslo, Norway, in October 1994 sponsored by the Norwegian Nobel Institute, Kornienko responded orally to the Musgrove discussions from notes he had made while reading the transcript. We participated in that Oslo workshop, and the following passages are taken from our notes of Kornienko's comments.

Kornienko said he had long believed that Vance's trip to Moscow in March 1977 was very important in the formation of impressions of one another on both the U.S. and Soviet sides. Moreover, he said he now believes, after looking back at those events, that they were even more important than he believed at the time. He agreed with Vance's remark at Musgrove that *time* was lost as a result of the disagreement over the comprehensive, "deep cuts" proposal in Moscow. But, said Kornienko, even more than time was lost. To a certain extent, he said, *trust* was also lost, to such a degree that it could never be recovered.

Less than a month into the Carter administration, the Soviet Union (in Kornienko's words) could find "no trace, no smell, no implication" that the United States intended to stick to the Vladivostok framework. In fact, Soviet leaders soon concluded that Carter meant simply to ignore it. According to

Kornienko, by then the metaphorical “wet towels, or rags, or handkerchiefs” had already been thrown—but *by* the Americans *at* Soviet leaders. Kornienko went further. He said that the feeling in Moscow was not merely that something “wet” had been “thrown” but that the “object” was also dirty and “smelled bad” too. (He said he did not wish to carry the metaphor any further but assumed we would know what he meant.) In other words, by the middle of February, when Soviet officials were told, more or less, what the United States was about to propose, they had their first clue that the Carter administration would not take them seriously, would not deal with them in a serious manner. This, said Kornienko, was infuriating. In an aside, he asserted, “we were not some banana republic, you know; we couldn’t allow the Americans to treat us as if we were.”

The Soviet position, according to Kornienko, was crystal clear, with no shred of ambiguity or ambivalence. In fact, Kornienko confided that he now feels it was “bizarre” that Vance even went to Moscow with the “deep cuts” proposal and the “pseudo-Vladivostok” (Kornienko’s term) fallback proposal. Kornienko said that somehow, at some level, Vance must have known that both proposals were completely unacceptable. If he did, said Kornienko, then Vance must to some degree have expected that “wet rag in the face.”<sup>24</sup>

Kornienko concluded his reactions to the conference with a comment on the Cuban brigade affair in the summer of 1979. He said he understood that in the United States the episode is sometimes regarded as a “comedy of errors.” But he said he wanted to assure everyone that in Moscow the brigade affair was not regarded as a comedy. As with the Vance mission to Moscow in March 1977, this was yet another example, according to Kornienko, of the Carter administration’s failure to deal with Moscow in a serious manner—a failure to take the Soviet Union seriously. By the fall of 1979, Kornienko said, the reemergence of this feeling in Moscow “was very counterproductive, given the pace of events that would soon overtake all U.S. and Soviet efforts to control them.”

## **The “Empathy Gap” of March 1977**

What went wrong in Moscow in March 1977 in connection with the Vance mission? How should we understand the deep U.S.-Soviet mistrust that de-

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24. The late Marshall Shulman, formerly Vance’s special assistant for Soviet affairs, confirmed that as he was packing his suitcase for the trip to Moscow with the Vance group in March 1977 he was deeply worried about what might happen. Shulman said that the best he could hope for was a “no, but . . .” to both the comprehensive and fallback proposals, but his worry was that the response would be exactly what it turned out to be: “no, period.”

rived from that unfortunate event? As a thought experiment, one might frame the issue this way: What does the empathetic discussion of the Vance mission that took place within a critical oral history conference in May 1994 tell us about what was missing in March 1977?

We need to start with a basic question: What *is* empathy? We have been at pains to point out that empathy is not equivalent to sympathy, to agreement. But can anything intelligible and helpful to historians be said about a term that means “putting yourself in the skin” of another or “putting yourself in the shoes of the other?” Trying to identify misperceptions, missed opportunities, and lessons sounds rather mystical, even magical, and thus of questionable value to those of us who investigate the history of the Cold War. For clues about empathy as a concept, we turn to a well-established social science discipline for which intercultural empathy is central: the branch of anthropology known as ethnography—the interpretation of alien cultures and the effort to compare features of those cultures with one another and with one’s own. The pioneers of this field include Bronisław Malinowski and Margaret Mead.

A leading figure in the field was Clifford Geertz. Although his empirical work in the 1950s was in Bali and North Africa, he is known to non-anthropologists primarily for his ability to explain his craft to non-anthropologists. Geertz was an irreverent, witty debunker of myths, and one of his favorite myths concerns the theory and practice of empathy in his own branch of anthropology; that is, “the myth of the chameleon fieldworker, perfectly tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy.” Wrong, says Geertz. “You don’t have to be one to know one,” which is fortunate because, as he points out, you cannot “be one” anyway.<sup>25</sup> Occult, empathy is not.

What is it, then? The successful application of empathy in anthropology has many prerequisites: familiarity with another culture; the opportunity to live and work within that culture (if one is a field anthropologist); and a working knowledge of as many of the nuances of the language of the “natives” (and the reality the language has evolved to represent) as one can master. (“Native” is used in the sense of originating in, or native to, a given locale.) Yet empathy, Geertz believes, does not begin principally with the acquisition of any of these skills, though proficiency in them can deepen one’s acquaintance with an alien culture.

According to Geertz, what is called empathy begins with curiosity—a highly specific curiosity, according to which one is driven “to figure out what

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25. Clifford Geertz, “From the Native’s Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” in Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 56–57.

the devil *they* think *they* are up to.”<sup>26</sup> To an extent, empathy is a skill that can be learned and applied, but only if one is genuinely curious about the sense others make of their own experience. “Understanding the form and pressure of . . . inner lives,” Geertz explains, “is more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke—or . . . reading a poem—than it is like achieving communion.”<sup>27</sup> Empathy is no spookier (but no less spooky, as Geertz was at pains to emphasize) than that. The achievement of empathy, thus defined, is due to equal parts insatiable curiosity, cultural exposure, and the joy of discovering what people think makes them tick. Empathy is not mystical or, at least, no more mystical than, say (in one of Geertz’s telling metaphors), teaching the novels of Jane Austen to contemporary college students at an American university. Teaching Austen’s novels is challenging because the world in which her characters lived is so different from our own; but it is rewarding because no matter how different from us those characters seem to be we can still, with effort, appreciate them, even feel as if we “know” them, thus establishing the common ground of basic humanity on which we all can stand, across the centuries and between Georgian England and the 21st-century United States.<sup>28</sup>

Anthropologists emphasize that their craft is *transactional*. This means that when “anthropologists” are trying to figure out “what *they* think *they* are up to,” the “natives” are trying to figure out “what *we* think *we* are up to.” As if to emphasize the point that things could hardly be otherwise, Geertz says we may as well look at the issue this way: “we are all natives now.”<sup>29</sup> Empathy works both ways. In fact, to work at all, it probably has to work both ways.

This framework helps us to understand the excerpt from the Musgrove conference transcript by revealing what the participants on each side meant when they said, or implied, that the outcome of the Vance mission proved that the other side was not serious about the U.S.-Soviet relationship or about nuclear arms control—which was by far the top priority on their mutual agenda. Brzezinski says this explicitly, on behalf of the Carter administration, as does Kornienko, for the Soviet side. Others say or strongly imply the same. To Vance and his colleagues, being hit with a figurative “wet rag in the face” in Moscow—having both U.S. proposals summarily rejected without a hint of a

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26. *Ibid.*, p. 58; emphasis added.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

28. Clifford Geertz, “Found in Translation: On the Social History of the Moral Imagination,” in Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, pp. 36–54. Geertz remarks that Lionel Trilling, the eminent critic, wrote his last published piece on Jane Austen as an “exotic” author (“exotic,” that is, to students at Columbia in the 1970s), a comparison Geertz liked because it provided evidence for one of his favorite theses: that “we are all natives now,” all “exotic” to someone.

29. Clifford Geertz, “The Way We Think Now: Toward an Ethnography of Modern Thought,” in Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, p. 151.

counterproposal—indicated that Soviet leaders were more interested in scoring public relations points than in serious discussions about the substantive issues. To Dobrynin, Kornienko, and their colleagues, U.S. obliviousness to the central significance of beginning discussions with the Vladivostok agreement cannot have been accidental or based on a misunderstanding but must have been a calculated effort to corner the Soviet leaders, to manipulate them, to embarrass them, to impose the U.S. agenda on them without even a hint of consultation. Kornienko pointedly expresses this view when he declares that the United States was treating the world's other superpower as a “banana republic” and that the Soviet Union was not going to stand for it. The fiasco of March 1977 might be summarized by these two images: the Americans asking why the leaders in Moscow would hit the U.S. secretary of state with a “wet rag in the face”; and Soviet officials asking why the Americans would treat the USSR as a “banana republic.”

This is the kind of data one gets from critical oral history when former adversaries, brimming with a curiosity they mostly lacked at the time of the events being discussed, challenge one another's motives in the historical events. Typically an exchange begins with comments that take the following form:

*You were not listening to us. You were instead seeking whatever unilateral advantage you could achieve. We never believed you really believed what you were saying. You were clearly not interested in working with us. You were interested only in gaining the advantage over us. Your game was zero-sum from the start. You were out to get us. The relationship meant nothing to you beyond that. In short, you were not serious. After that, we were suspicious, deeply suspicious, in all our interactions with you.*

The Musgrove conference transcript is replete with these sorts of accusations, especially in the early going. But it is also replete with denials of the accusations, as in the following:

*No, you are wrong. We were absolutely serious. You were wrong not to believe what we told you—and to conclude that we were out to get you. Our objective was to work with you, to reach a mutually acceptable agreement as soon as possible, and to proceed from that point to build a better relationship. It was you people who weren't really listening—who weren't really serious. That is why from that unfortunate beginning onward we believed we could not accept what you said at face value. We couldn't trust you.*

What these conversations reveal is that neither side succeeded in figuring out “what the devil *they* think *they* are up to.” The opening exchanges between Brzezinski and Dobrynin are especially vivid in this regard.

Then, often unexpectedly, the participants begin to empathize with one another—to appreciate the positions put forth by their former adversaries.

When this happens, as it clearly did in the Musgrove conference, the identification of misperceptions, missed opportunities, and lessons seems to follow as a matter of course. This process can take place outside the formal conference setting, as well as at the table. For example, many on the Soviet side mentioned that Brezhnev was “emotional” about the Vladivostok agreement of November 1974—that is, he was so attached to it in part because he had to struggle to forge a consensus within the Soviet Politburo on the accord. This was interesting, but not necessarily convincing to many of the U.S. participants. But they later found out that Brezhnev had suffered a stroke more or less simultaneously with the Vladivostok events. Somehow, in Brezhnev’s own understanding of the events, he apparently felt he had paid a dear price—his health—in order to reach the agreement with Ford and Kissinger. Thus he believed that any U.S. administration, even a new one, ought to have respected this sacrifice. During one of the breaks at Musgrove, while strolling outdoors with some of the former Soviet officials, Brzezinski commented to them that he had not known the especially personal circumstances surrounding Brezhnev’s commitment to the *exact* terms of the Vladivostok agreement. He said he wished he had known, that it would have made a difference.

Leslie Gelb, however, took the iconoclastic position that no lessons were to be learned from revisiting the events surrounding the Vance mission, that even if he had known in 1977 what he learned at the conference, the knowledge would not have made any difference because back then, according to Gelb, the conditions simply would not have allowed each side to empathize sufficiently, to regard one another as sufficiently serious to move ahead with arms control, and to begin to transform the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Gelb readily admits *now* that many misperceptions befogged U.S.-Soviet relations in the late 1970s, but he does not believe the conditions *then* would have allowed for the kind of curiosity necessary to (in Geertz’s formulation) understand “the form and pressure of . . . inner lives”—the real motives, fears, and aspirations of adversaries in Washington and Moscow. According to Gelb, an exercise in critical oral history can be interesting, enjoyable, and even informative, and it might even reveal important misperceptions, rooted in a lack of empathy, as one of the causes of what happened. Nonetheless, the exercise will not yield useful lessons because, according to Gelb, the mutual misperception of the other side’s lack of seriousness was itself determined by outside forces, by history, by the personalities involved.

Who is correct? A critical oral history pessimist like Les Gelb, or a critical oral history optimist like Robert Pastor? Is critical oral history fun and interesting—because of the presence of empathy that was previously lacking—but basically useless in any practical sense? Might events really have been different—better, less dangerous, more productive—if certain things

had been known or at least suspected? Might things be similarly different—also better—in the future if adversaries can find a way to empathize with one another more fully? Can the critical oral history exercise lead to clues about how to close the “empathy gap”—not just in conferences in which the past is revisited but when it really matters in the present and future? Does the kind of history that emerges from critical oral history merely fill in some psychological texture in a game of historical Trivial Pursuit; for example, that so and so actually believed what he was saying? Can we actually learn from critical oral history?

These questions deserve the full attention of anyone who approaches history primarily, or at least in part, for its lessons; that is, because of the belief that history might be useful. Because of the potential costs of misperceptions, we believe we must try to answer this question. At least in principle we are critical oral history optimists, like Pastor. But what do optimists say to the pessimists like Gelb? We have no real choice in the matter. The alternative to empathy, as Ignatieff suggests, is a form of “autism” in which “what is denied is the possibility of empathy: that human understanding is capable of penetrating the bell jars of separate identities.”<sup>30</sup> The alternative is a lack of interest in, as Geertz puts it, “what the devil *they* think *they* are up to.” The alternative is to believe that, if Carter and Brezhnev had actually known what each thought he was doing, the U.S. officials would still end up believing they got a “wet rag in the face” in March 1977 and leaders in Moscow would still end up believing they had been treated like a “banana republic.” This is unlikely, in our view. Empathy matters. It is not the only thing that matters, but it is possible that few things make more of a difference in matters of war and peace.

## **Empathy Matters: The Virtual History of Détente after March 1977**

How much might empathy matter? Consider this possibility: Both Carter and Brezhnev have close advisers who make accurate assessments of what went wrong in Moscow in late March 1977. Carter is told point-blank that his approach to the Soviet Union—deep cuts and fallback proposals—will be regarded in Moscow as offensive, arrogant, and unacceptable. Unexpectedly, Carter listens carefully to this criticism. Brezhnev, for his part, is made to understand that chasing the secretary of state out of town on his first official trip to Moscow inflamed right-wing forces in the United States who would do

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30. Ignatieff, *Warrior's Honor*, p. 60.

their utmost to see that the Senate did not ratify the SALT II treaty. Carter writes to Brezhnev and apologizes for offending the Soviet Union. Brezhnev reciprocates by admitting that his response, and Gromyko's, were too hasty and emotional. Several weeks later, they meet in Norway, without an agenda, to begin to see what might be possible between their two countries. The discussion is frank but civilized and useful. Carter learns a good deal about the Soviet leaders' feeling of inferiority and thus the need for the United States to avoid setting an agenda on anything other than a consultative basis. Brezhnev comes to understand Carter's genuine feelings about the imperative of human rights over the long term and how those feelings are rooted in Carter's variant of evangelical Christianity. Each party agrees privately that they can do business with each other, and they issue no press releases or release any official statements.

Thus, despite the negative start in March 1977, the superpowers adjust their mutual course and accomplish a great deal during Carter's two terms in office, 1977–1985, the first term with Brezhnev as his interlocutor, the second with Yuriy Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko. The SALT II treaty is approved by the Democrat-dominated Senate with little controversy. The “hot spots” in the Third World, especially in Africa and the Middle East, cause surprisingly little friction between Washington and Moscow, primarily because the two superpowers remain focused on their core relationship, nuclear arms control, and the situation in Europe, and do not let themselves get distracted from their objectives: reducing tension, reducing the level of nuclear armaments, and, as Carter often put it, making the world a safer place for their grandchildren. The Soviet Union intervenes briefly in Afghanistan in late 1979 but quickly withdraws, drawing little in the way of public criticism from Washington, though privately Moscow and Washington are in touch throughout the crisis. With Soviet troops gone from Afghanistan, the nascent Islamic fundamentalists who had been organizing to fight the Soviet Union are thrown into disarray, along predictable ethnic and religious lines. Improved superpower relations also allow for the United States and Cuba to normalize relations, something Carter had come to office intending to do. With normalized relations, the potential for an outbreak of Cuban-inspired, anti-American uprisings in Latin America and Africa, where Fidel Castro has long been regarded by some as a hero, is greatly reduced. Carter and Castro sign an accord in Mexico City, and each pledges to visit the other's country in the near future. Finally, the United States, with the Soviet Union's backing, normalizes relations with both China and Vietnam (also high priorities for Carter in the run-up to his first inauguration in January 1977). The festering “war after the war,” as some were calling it in southeast Asia, is nipped in the bud, preventing the escalation of tensions between Vietnam and China.

Not everyone is happy with the way events transpire. Especially unhappy are Cold War hardliners in both the United States and Soviet Union whose popularity depends to a significant degree on their ability to demonize the enemy. But this is made difficult (though not impossible) throughout Carter's two terms in office simply because U.S. and Soviet officials are able to empathize so well with one another. Carter, along with Brezhnev and his successors, deserves much credit for grasping the opportunity to reverse course following the March 1977 fiasco. In accounts of the Carter-Brezhnev period, historians are soon comparing the March 1977 Vance mission to Moscow with the Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961. After the brigade of CIA-backed Cuban exiles was defeated, President Kennedy immediately called a press conference and took responsibility for the debacle. But he privately made many moves to ensure that never again would he naively trust advisers eager for confrontation or conflict. In the spring of 1977, the informal Carter-Brezhnev meeting in Norway is bitterly opposed by hardliners in both camps. But in a rare instance of leaders actually leading, both Carter and Brezhnev move ahead anyway. Following the Bay of Pigs disaster, top officials in the CIA resigned or were fired, and right-wing hardliners (led by Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater) led a campaign to discredit Kennedy. A similar campaign against Carter is led by the former California governor, Ronald Reagan. Like the earlier campaign against Kennedy, Reagan's campaign is relatively ineffective because of Carter's substantive and public relations successes.

The previous three paragraphs summarize "the virtual history of détente" after the events of March 1977. "Virtual history," Niall Ferguson's term, is simply history that "explores what might have been if events had turned out differently."<sup>31</sup> We prefer the term "virtual history" to the more traditional "counterfactual history" because the latter was created in part as an epithet, a term of accusation, by historians who claim that their craft has nothing to do with alternative histories, missed opportunities, or lessons. The virtuality of an exercise in critical oral history is unavoidable. Anyone who doubts this should re-read the conference excerpt on the Vance mission. Nearly every statement makes at least an implicit reference to a "what-if"; to how it might have been; to what you in Moscow, might have had, if only . . . ; or to what you, the Americans, might have been able to accomplish if you . . . In this sense, critical oral history is something like an operational definition of rigorous virtual history; it begins with history as it happened, then moves, in cross-questioning, to virtual history, followed by the drawing of lessons relevant to the discrepancy between actual history and virtual history.

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31. Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

## Lessons from the Actual History of Détente in March 1977

For those who are critical oral history optimists, much could be said about which lessons should be drawn from this exercise. But consider an unfortunate, possibly decisive, symmetry between Vance and Gromyko. Kornienko wondered in his postscript to the Musgrove conference transcript whether Vance knew that he would get that “wet rag across the face” in Moscow. He did. After we received Kornienko’s comments, Vance confirmed to us that he was more or less certain the Soviet Union would utterly reject what he had to offer. Yet, with all that was at stake, he went ahead and delivered the proposals anyway. The usually stolid Gromyko, we were told by several people at the Musgrove conference, gave his putatively indignant, completely out-of-character press conference at the conclusion of the Vance visit on specific orders from Brezhnev. In other words, Vance pretended that the Soviet Union would find the proposals he was carrying sufficient to begin serious talks. Similarly, Gromyko pretended to be shocked and angry when Vance arrived with exactly those proposals. Both knew more or less what would follow: more tension, more difficulty focusing on the core relationship, less progress on SALT II, and more ammunition for the hardliners in both Washington and Moscow. Each gave advice, based on long experience, but their advice was rejected—on the one side by a new U.S. president who had no experience with the Soviet Union; on the other by an ailing, elderly Soviet leader scarcely in touch with the realities of his office. Vance and Gromyko, as well as those around them, were being “good soldiers” carrying out orders. The result was a debacle.

Carter and Brezhnev, the men who gave the orders in March 1977, were insufficiently curious. They did not listen to their most experienced and able advisers—those who were best at empathizing with the adversary—on the issues at hand. The chief executives, Carter and Brezhnev, thought they knew better, but they did not. The advisers who did know better did not go to the mat for what they knew should be done. Up through the March 1977 events, the comparison with Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs is instructive, in our view. But not afterward. Neither Carter nor Brezhnev fundamentally changed course. The virtual history of détente after March 1977 is just that: virtual, not actual.

This lesson leaps out at us: whoever is leading makes a difference in matters of war and peace. Leaders must have the humility to *empathize* with their advisers—to listen to them, to recognize good advice, and to act on it. But advisers, if they *know* they are being ordered, inadvertently, to act against their country’s best interest, must find a way to be heard by those at the top. If

Vance and Gromyko had succeeded in this regard, it is *possible*—how *probable* is a suitable subject for debate—that a considerable portion of the virtual history imagined above might have been actual history instead. In the metaphor of the thirteenth-century Persian poet Jelaluddin Rumi:

When something goes wrong, accuse yourself first.  
Even the wisdom of Plato or Solomon  
can wobble and go blind.  
Listen when your crown reminds you  
of what makes you cold toward others.

No one could induce Carter and Brezhnev to listen in time to prevent the collapse of *détente*.

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