

“If measured by instant history, the Nixon administration’s world balance sheet shows far more credits than debits.”

The Diplomatic Legacy: Accomplishments to Be Assessed

for Decades

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"I've always thought this country could run itself domestically without a President, all you need is a competent Cabinet to run the country at home. You need a President for foreign policy . . ."

—Richard M. Nixon, quoted by Theodore H. White in "The Making of the President—1968"

By Murrey Marder

IN WORLD POLITICS, which he chose as his highest challenge, President Nixon set out to reverse the national course of total confrontation with communism, recognizing that it carried extreme risk of mutual disaster in a nuclear age of equally armed superpowers.

In doing so, he successfully transformed a strategy he had championed in earlier years. In international terms, he enhanced national security by shifting East-West competition away from a perpetual collision course. The tragedy of his presidency is that his global accomplishments were diminished, if not offset, by the domestic damage his administration inflicted on the nation in the guise of protecting national security at home.

The conduct of foreign policy is not an end in itself; the object is to enhance national well being. Democratic societies can only project externally the strength, cohesion and purposefulness that they possess internally.

President Nixon, in one sense, ended up not unlike one of his original models, Woodrow Wilson, who could have scored triumphs for peace abroad if only he had not lost the battle at home. President Wilson, however, left office with a frustrated but idealistic glow. President Nixon, on entering office, had identified "a crisis of the spirit" as America's worst affliction. During his presidency, he compounded that crisis, leaving the nation far emptier morally and spiritually than when he arrived.

He set as his "first priority" an "honorable end to the war in Vietnam." Historians are likely to debate for years to come the costs and the consequences of the stratagems used by the Nixon administration in prolonged pursuit of that goal. President Nixon did surmount the Vietnamese war, which drove his predecessor from office, although the nation was severely shaken in the process and the seeds were sown for his ultimate departure from office.

He did not end the war, he de-Americanized it; the struggle for control of South Vietnam goes on. President Nixon extricated a half-million American troops from the battle after four additional years of bitterly divisive involvement, with, he insisted, U.S. honor intact. As recorded by the 1972 election returns, and the shift of public attention away from the continuing war, Americans counted that a major

gain for surcease from national anguish.

President Nixon, in his first inaugural address, committed the United States to a new "era of negotiation" after "a period of confrontation," inviting America's world adversaries to "peaceful competition." This was his fundamental innovation.

HE FULLY FULFILLED that commitment. As evidenced by summit meetings held, agreements signed, international tension abated, American relations with the Soviet Union were eased considerably. For the first time in a generation, the United States could converse with the population in the People's Republic of China.

"Detente," the imprecise catch-all word for limitation of tension, already has once survived what it was intended to preclude—the threat of East-West confrontation, in the 1973 Middle East war.

The Nixon administration, through the Nixon Doctrine (actually more anti-doctrine than doctrine), acknowledged in 1969 that America could not indefinitely sustain the United States' self-assigned, post-World War II mandate of world policeman.

President Nixon later explained to Congress, in defining the doctrine:

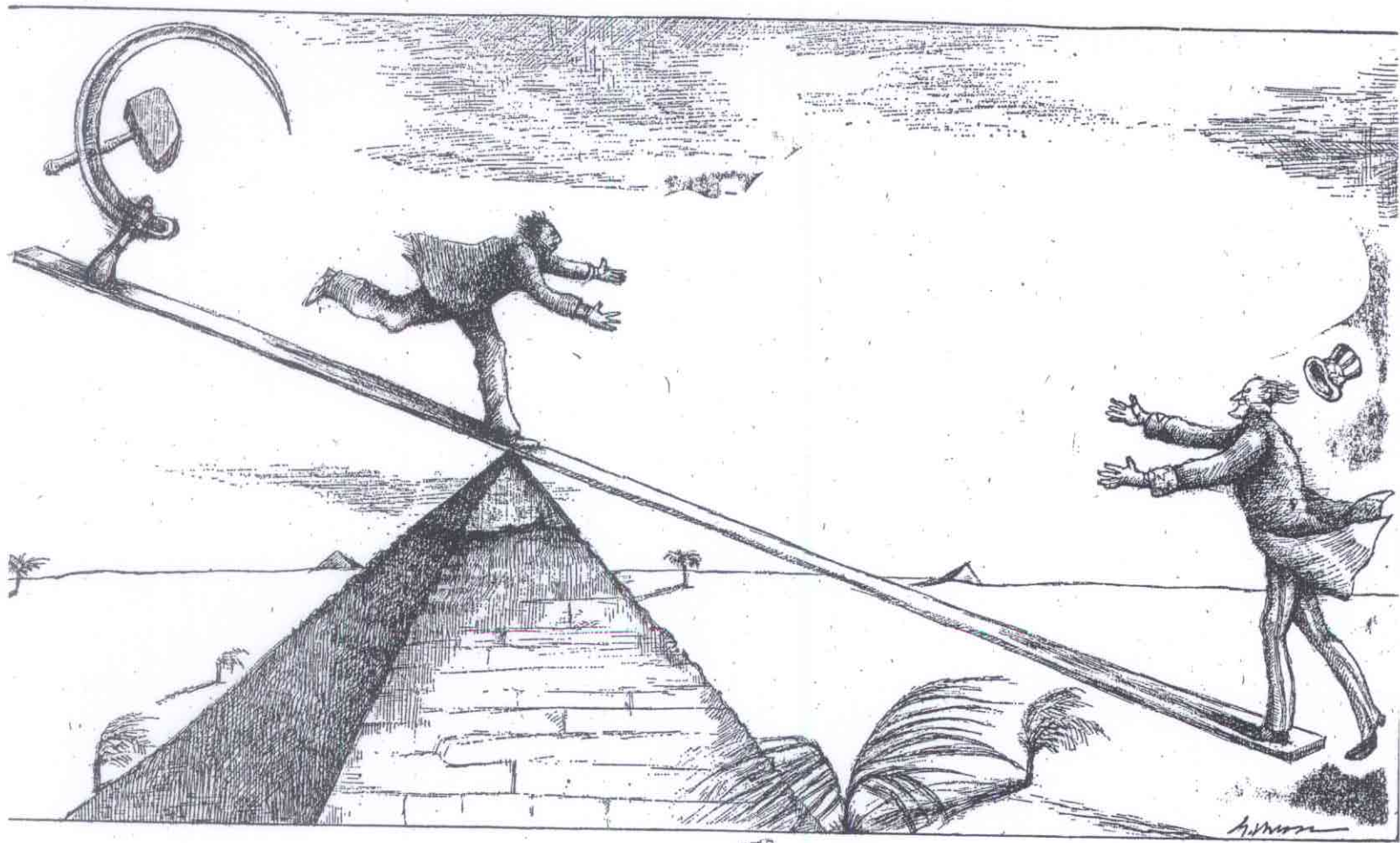
"Its central thesis is that the United States will participate in the defense and development of allies and friends, but that America cannot—and will not—conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world. We will help where it makes a real difference and is considered in our interest."

The message was clear: American resources were not limitless, and the generation-long drive to exorcise communism would bow before that reality, in effect, by redefining American ideology.

"The slogans formed in the past century," President Nixon told Congress in 1970, "were the ideological accessories of the intellectual debate. Today, the 'isms' have lost their vitality . . ."

To help reconcile resources and objectives, the President committed himself to reduction of the world "burden of arms." Pursuit of that objective, and of an end to East-West confrontation, brought breakthrough U.S.-Soviet accords on strategic arms limitation (SALT), opening up an entirely new dimension of relationships between adversary nations. The actual reduction of arms spending, however, continued to be an elusive goal.

A world-wide groundswell of rising



inflation, intensified in part by the accumulated costs of the Vietnamese war since 1965, demonstrated, by the early 1970s, that economic power, even more than military power, was the determinant of strength in a new world of nuclear parity between the superpowers. The long-heralded "crisis of capitalism," Marxist theorists hopefully proclaimed, was in sight. Western economists scoffed at the claim, but were deeply troubled by the escalating economic instabilities.

The Nixon administration, pledged to maintain "the stability of the dollar" as the essential rock of the world monetary system, was forced to "close the gold window" in 1971, ending convertibility of the dollar into gold, and twice it was compelled to devalue the dollar.

Allied relationships reeled under the multiple shocks of surprise American rapprochement with China, trade rivalry between the United States and Western Europe, the surge of U.S.-Soviet accords, divided policies in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and especially the accelerated world energy crisis, speeded by Arab manipulation of oil supplies and prices as a political weapon in the Middle East conflict. Despite the disclaimers of the Nixon Doctrine, American foreign policy was massively engaged globally.

FROM THE BEGINNING of the Nixon administration, the Middle East, not Southeast Asia, was recognized as the greatest hazard for East-West confrontation.

While the Arab-Israeli war reverberated in October, 1973, Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger plunged into the conflict, first to engineer, with the Soviet Union, a cease-fire, and then to launch the most ambitious American search for peace in the region of the world most resistant to peace.

Overall, the Nixon administration pursued a supremely activist, although not a uniformly balanced, foreign policy, selectively concentrated, with blind spots (such as Africa, and, until 1974, Latin America), and not exempt from strategic disasters (notably the India-Pakistan war of 1971, in which the Nixon administration "tilted" toward Pakistan, the loser).

If measured by instant history, the Nixon administration's world balance sheet shows far more credits than debits, even though the reality cannot match the rhetoric of the President's promised "generation of peace," the shimmering goal he sought to inscribe in the history of his two terms in office.

It is inaccurate, as well as a hazardous illusion for the future conduct of American foreign policy, to credit Kissinger, rather than the President, with initiating the Nixon administration's fundamental shift in U.S. global strategy. "No Secretary of State is really important," Mr. Nixon said in the continuation of the quotation at the head of this review, because "the President makes foreign policy."

The President's pre-inaugural derogation of the importance of Secretaries of State became obviously wrong in the case of Kissinger, as it was in the case of John Foster Dulles and Dean Acheson in earlier administrations.

No Secretary of State has received the global attention that surrounds Kissinger. But it is the authority of the presidency that makes foreign policy; without it, any Secretary of State is powerless.

President Nixon prided himself on coming to office more experienced with the world than any recent predecessor. Over a 20-year period, he said in his first inauguration, "I have visited most of the nations of the world. I have come to know the leaders of the world, and the great forces, the hatreds, the fears that divide the world."

Mr. Nixon also entered the White House with something else that few Americans knew at the time: a private, compelling drive for greatness, a determination to stand in world history as one of the boldest, most imaginative, most successful Presidents, who overcame the odds of lower middle-class origin, lack of family wealth or social status, and the sneers of liberals and the "Eastern Establishment," to score a dramatic global record.

The obsession showed through repeatedly on the presidential record. There were references, as offhanded as his withdrawn personality would permit, to Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Disraeli, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, Charles de Gaulle. In time of challenge, when he needed psychic reinforcement for audacious decisions of high risk, he replayed "Patton," the biographical film of the headstrong World War II forces.

AFTER THE DISASTER in the covert Cuban invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Mr. Nixon, out of office, criticized President John F. Kennedy for "a Hamlet-like psychosis" of indecision. However, when the United States faced down the Soviet Union in the 1962 Cuban nuclear missile crisis, Mr. Nixon hailed that as President Kennedy's "finest hour."

The living leader whose style President Nixon envied the most was de Gaulle. The French President's mystique, grandeur, his personification of the nation he ruled, his techniques for springing international surprises, indeed, for outfoxing the ultra-rightists who helped restore him to the presidency in 1958, intrigued Mr. Nixon.

President Nixon, at least until he faced the threat of impeachment, apparently never overcame the awe of being President.

A British writer, granted a lengthy interview in February, 1971, wrote:

"... For a man who has got to the top in politics, he seems strangely unable to realize that he is at the top. Listening to him talking about the role of President Nixon it was rather as if he was talking about a function and a person that still lay in the future rather than in the present, more as if he was describing how he would fill the role when he eventually reached the White House than how he was actually filling it here and now."

President Nixon often spoke solemnly of the solitude of his decision-making process: alone, pen and yellow legal memo pad in hand; methodically calculating, then unhesitatingly selecting the close, but right, choice.

The most momentous decisions, he indicated, were taken in near-isolation.

"The loneliest decision of all," he told an interviewer in mid-May, 1974, was his order for massive B-52 bombing of North Vietnam in December, 1972, which, he said, "brought the war to an end"—meaning the cease-fire accord of January, 1973. His 1970 decision to send U.S. troops into Cambodia, the President said, "had very little support from my advisers."

An inner sense of loneliness, secretiveness, apartness in conducting great affairs of state is also a characteristic of Kissinger.

Kissinger once admitted to an interviewer, and rued it afterward, that his fascination for the public was like that of the "lone cowboy" in American Western dramas, single-handedly circling the globe for multiple "High Noon" showdowns, winning out repeatedly against overwhelming odds.

This helped to explain the Nixon-Kissinger affinity—each was inherently a loner.

And yet, when the White House made public the large volume of presidential Watergate tape transcripts, one disclosure that surprised some of the highest ranking officials in the administration was the inner relationship of the President and his two closest White House aides, H. R. (Bob) Halde- man and John D. Ehrlichman, ousted in the Watergate crossfire.

Their readiness to correct, or disagree with the President and his frequent deference to their judgment aroused speculation about what role Haldeman and Ehrlichman actually played in global decisions. White House loyalists insisted that the Watergate discussions were atypical; that the President, on world issues, made his own decisions without equivocation or responsiveness to his staff subordinates.

Tension between the Haldeman-Ehrlichman grouping in the White House, who resented Kissinger's "superstar" publicity, and Kissinger reached a peak between Kissinger's Oct. 26, 1972, announcement that "peace is at hand" in Vietnam, and the actual cease-fire accord in January, 1973. Kissinger told several close friends in that interval that he was seriously considering resigning as the President's national security adviser.

A year and a half later, with Haldeman and Ehrlichman jettisoned, Kissinger as Secretary of State was to make an open threat to resign, to reinforce himself against the storms of the Watergate scandals.

THROUGHOUT his administration President Nixon, in addition to negotiating with China, with the Soviet Union, North Vietnam and other adversaries, was constantly engaged in maneuvering around political forces on the American scene.

These internal political maneuverings constitute the least-told portion of the history of the Nixon administration's foreign policy.

Every President engages in negotiating with, or circumventing, domestic forces in pursuit of his objectives.

In President Nixon's case, however, the domestic strategy was extraordinary. He and Kissinger both were determined to shut out from their secrets the federal bureaucracy, which they

distrusted. Moreover, the President was intent on a profound shift of American policy toward the Soviet Union and China. This meant that the President was embarked on overturning basic ideology of Republican rightists, the original core of his political support. The challenge for the President was how to set the stage for the policy shift without arousing a furious political outcry that could block it.

As perceived from the White House, therefore, almost everyone outside it was a potential blocking force: the federal bureaucracy inherited from previous Democratic administrations; the liberal "Eastern Establishment" which would agree with his Sino-Soviet policy but would oppose continuation of the Vietnamese war; allies who would "leak" to protect their own interests, and political rightists in the Republican and Democratic parties and in the American military establishment who would raise outcries over his turnabout with China and the Soviet Union.

Before he became President, Mr. Nixon had moved considerably ahead of the right wing of his party in examining the power realities of the nuclear age, but relatively few Americans were aware of that.

ALTHOUGH HE WAS an early disciple of John Foster Dulles, by 1967 Mr. Nixon had made a major departure from Dulles' anti-Communist dogmas.

Writing in Foreign Affairs, the organ of the "Eastern Establishment," Mr. Nixon added up the military, economic, social, political and intellectual damage inflicted on the United States by the Vietnamese war, and concluded:

"Other nations must recognize that the role of the United States as world policeman is likely to be limited in the future."

Looking beyond Vietnam, Mr. Nixon was most troubled by the realization that "the Soviets may reach nuclear parity with the United States" in the coming decade, and that China, "within three to five years, will have a significant nuclear capability . . ."

This realignment of world military power, Mr. Nixon said, requires that "every step possible must be taken to avert direct confrontations between the nuclear powers. To achieve this, it is essential to minimize the number of occasions on which the great powers have to decide whether or not to commit their forces."

The dual themes, retrenchment of American military involvement abroad, and the diminution of East-West confrontation, were the genesis of what came to be called the Nixon Doctrine. The parallel views of Kissinger, read by the President, brought Kissinger into the White House.

INITIALY, BY propounding the concept of "linkage"—that all East-West problems were linked, including Vietnam, nuclear arms control, the continuing crisis in the Middle East resulting from the 1967 Arab-Israeli war—the Nixon-Kissinger policy attempted to induce the Soviet Union to bring enough pressure on North

Vietnam to end the war in South Vietnam.

That effort failed. North Vietnam was carefully positioned between China and the Soviet Union, arch rivals for Marxist-Leninist paramountcy. The Kremlin could not put adequate pressure on Hanoi to make it shift course in the war, even if it wished to do so, without exposing the Soviet Union to charges of betraying Communist interests. In addition, if either China or the Soviet Union balked at supplying arms and other war supplies, North Vietnam could sustain the war with supplies from either one of them. Only if the United States engaged the self-interest of both China and the Soviet Union could it obtain any leverage against North Vietnam.

The Nixon administration therefore devised a web-like scenario of intertwined secret diplomatic strategies, with Hanoi, with Moscow, with Peking. Simultaneously, while threading a path through this diplomatic maze by subterranean channels, the Nixon administration had to fend off escalating domestic demands for fulfillment of its priority commitment to end the war.

Time was the imperative to allow the Nixon administration's strategic threads to be drawn together. "Buying time" from the American public became the driving dilemma inside the administration.

Phased American troop withdrawals from South Vietnam were the prime device chosen to buy time. Beginning with an initial withdrawal increment of 25,000 men, dramatically announced by President Nixon and South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu at Midway Island on June 8, 1969, the administration spaced out troop pullbacks over a four-year period, with careful calibration of American public and congressional pressures.

The technique was comparable to turning a valve to permit steam to escape from a boiler to avoid an explosion. As the pressure mounted, more steam—troops—were let out. Each batch of withdrawals was proclaimed new evidence of the success of "Vietnamization," turning the war over to the South Vietnamese.

While this process stretched out, the administration periodically circulated hints that secret diplomacy was on the verge of producing the hoped-for peace accord. Critics were repeatedly disarmed by administration charges that their demands for more flexible conditions for ending the war, or setting deadlines for unilateral U.S. withdrawal, jeopardized administration strategy when diplomatic success was within tantalizing range.

Once the national boiler almost did explode, when President Nixon sent American troops, joined by South Vietnamese forces, into a new theater for U.S. military action, across the Cambodian border in April, 1970. Violent dissent spilled out across many college campuses, and the United States had political war casualties on its home front.

ESSENTIALLY, however, the administration's strategy of containing American public opinion succeeded—but at a price. The price was rising disaffection among the public and in Congress, a feeling of being out-manipu-

lated, with a mounting curve of attempts to limit the President's war-making powers.

The strategists in the White House had a much different perspective. The multiple, hidden diplomacy which preoccupied them, they were convinced, ultimately would produce enough spectacular dividends to thrust the Vietnam turmoil into the shadows.

It was in the midst of the Nixon administration's completely hidden secret three-tiered diplomacy with Peking, with Moscow, with Hanoi, that the storm of alarm over security leaks broke on June 13, 1971, with the first published installment of the Pentagon Papers on the Vietnam war.

"There was every reason to believe," President Nixon said afterward in defense of the extraordinary countermeasures he instituted, that "this was a security leak of unprecedented proportions."

At first glance, Kissinger told friends afterward, he assumed that the leaker was Laird, happy to see blame poured on the Kennedy and Johnson administrations for leading the United States into the morass of Vietnam. On second thought, Kissinger, as well as the President, was stunned by the thought that a leak hemorrhage across the government could spill into public print all the tightly guarded secrets on their China-Soviet-Vietnam diplomacy. They dared not tell even the nation's highest courts the specifics of these fears because the secrecy in large part was to conceal their plans from the federal bureaucracy.

Not until a month later did the White House disclose that for 2½ years, starting "within two weeks" of the President's inauguration, the Nixon administration was engaged in secret explorations with the People's Republic of China.

Only marginal, public-conditioning steps were disclosed during that time, salami slices of relaxations on trade and travel between the United States and China. These were to reinforce U.S. intentions in the secret diplomacy with China, and progressively to prepare American public opinion for the reversal of American policy.

The dramatic "Ping-Pong diplomacy" — the first official visit of an American group to Communist China, a table tennis team with accompanying newsmen, in April, 1971, became part of the mutual public scene-setting.

Leakage of the Pentagon Papers in fact did nothing to impair, or diminish, the surprise of the disclosure on July 15, 1971, that Kissinger had secretly traveled to Peking the previous week, conferred with Premier Chou En-lai, and arranged for a spectacular visit to China by President Nixon, which took place the following February after a subsequent Kissinger preparatory visit.

The shock was great to the absolut-

ist anti-Communist political allies of President Nixon; but attrition and the conditioning of public opinion had reduced their ranks and their impact. By the time the President traveled to Peking his mission was hailed by most Americans, and the world, as enlightened statesmanship, although in Japan the initial disclosure of Kissinger's secret diplomacy was labeled the first of the "Nixon shocks."

A REVERSE USE of the disclosure of secret diplomacy was made by the Nixon administration on Jan. 25, 1972, to out-manuever critics, predominantly on the political left, who challenged the administration's claims that it was exhausting all diplomatic possibilities for ending the war in Vietnam.

For 30 months, President Nixon dramatically revealed on national television, Kissinger and North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho periodically met secretly in Paris, behind the back of the formal negotiations conducted by publicly assigned diplomats. This was unknown as well to almost all senior officials of the State Department, including those who thought they were supervising all the diplomacy on Vietnam.

"There was never a leak," President Nixon said proudly.

The President actually was disclosing failure of 12 rounds of Kissinger-Tho diplomacy; nevertheless, that publicly strengthened the administration's hand.

Similarly, super-secret "back channel" negotiations were conducted between the United States and the Soviet Union, over the heads of American-Soviet negotiators in the nuclear SALT negotiations, and in the planning of President Nixon's first summit trip to Moscow.

An October, 1971, announcement of the President's plan to visit the Soviet Union for summit talks, eight months before the event, was a prime example of how the Nixon administration used its secret and its public strategy for mutually reinforcing purposes.

By announcing the Moscow visit before he made the Peking trip, but with the actual Soviet trip set for the following May, the President served notice to both Communist nations that he was pursuing a triangular strategy, which left the United States free to tilt in either direction. Also, by displaying this surge of interwoven high-stakes diplomacy, the Nixon administration gained time; and advantage, over its Vietnam critics, who had accused it of pursuing only sterile diplomacy.

These "closely inter-related" and "highly sensitive foreign policy initiatives" were inseparable, and "leaks of secret information about any one could endanger all," President Nixon insisted in 1973 when the Watergate tide was cresting around the White House. Alarm that the Pentagon Papers disclosure represented "a security

leak of unprecedented proportions," he said, precipitated the creation of the White House anti-leak "plumbers" unit, and the launching of other extraordinary precautions, including the wiretapping of members of Kissinger's National Security Council staff with

Kissinger's cooperation.

Not until early 1974 did the outside world learn that the "plumbers" discovered, in late 1971, that Navy personnel inside the White House were spying on Kissinger's operations and passing information to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The bureaucracy, too, was trying to pierce the secrecy wall.

The secrecy web, however, remained essentially intact and effective.

President Nixon, in February, 1972, achieved his dramatic meeting with China's Mao Tse-tung and Premier Chou En-lai after "almost three years of the most painstaking, meticulous and necessarily discreet preparation." A generation of hostile confrontation was over.

THE FOLLOWING May, in Moscow, President Nixon completed his double-summit triumph. After signing the world's first nuclear arms limitation accord and an array of other agreements, President Nixon and Soviet Communist Party chief Leonid I. Brezhnev, cocktails in hand and with Brezhnev's left hand around the President's shoulder, celebrated "peaceful coexistence" before 1,500 guests in the Kremlin's resplendent St. George's Hall.

Among the onlooking Politburo members was dour Mikhail Suslov, chief ideologist of the Communist Party and for a generation the archetypal champion of struggle with the West. Suslov managed a slight smile as he shook hands with the President.

President Nixon had boldly gambled and won. Despite a gross affront he delivered to Soviet prestige earlier in May, by ordering the mining of North Vietnam's harbors to cut off Soviet seaborne arms deliveries, the Soviet Union's self-interests in East-West detente had induced it, after a brief period of soul-searching, to proceed with the summit meeting.

The Nixon administration had diplomatically encircled North Vietnam by forging new ties with its two major allies, China and the Soviet Union. It required nearly a year more of diplomatic bargaining between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, however, with active intervention by the Soviet Union, plus the punishing B-52 bombing of North

Vietnam in December, 1972, to produce the Vietnam cease-fire accord of January, 1973.

Most of what followed in the diplomatic history of the Nixon administration lacked equivalent drama, except for the outbreak of the Middle East war in October, 1973, with its threat of

a confrontation despite detente.

Soviet leader Brezhnev's return summit trip to the United States in June, 1973, was anti-climactic compared with the first summit. Its most novel result was an agreement on the prevention of nuclear war, which caused disquiet among some allies, notably France, about U.S.-Soviet "hegemony."

The realities of bargaining out specific measures for development of East-West detente were compounded by a morning-after reaction in Congress to the inflated expectations aroused by the hyperbole of detente rhetoric.

In 1973 and 1974, the Nixon administration was confronted by powerful demands in Congress for freer Soviet emigration treatment of Jews and other minorities as the bargaining price for easing restrictions on Soviet trade, and hardened demands for greater protection of American security interests in the continuing nuclear strategic arms negotiations with the Kremlin. Weakened by the Watergate

furor, the President's ability to deliver on his detente commitments was impaired.

An attempt to dramatize the President's personal prowess in global diplomacy as an antidote to the Watergate-impairment cancer by a triumphal tour of the Middle East, on the coattails of Kissinger's diplomatic successes, gained fleeting headlines in June, 1974, but no slowing of the malignancy.

Summit III, in Moscow, immediately afterward, brought the President once more to the Kremlin, only to leave almost empty-handed. There was more pathos than triumph this time, with the President almost embarrassingly pleading for Soviet and world recognition that his continuing "personal relationship" with the Soviet leadership was the real touchstone for pursuing detente between the two superpowers. In addition, the goal of a permanent limit on offensive strategic nuclear weapons was now more remote than ever.

This was the end of the road in global dimensions: an unrequited President checkmated by a Soviet leadership hunkering down to avoid getting bruised when he fell.

Detente, as the nation's policy, has been hailed here and abroad as the Nixon administration's most striking accomplishment. And yet, as history closed on the Nixon administration, the nation was caught up in escalating debate about the meaning, the depth, and the value of detente as the momentum of the policy, and the administration's life, flagged.

In the final accounting, President Nixon was not toppled from office over international ends, but domestic means. The extreme practices that his administration employed on the domestic scene in the name of protecting the secrecy of his foreign policy

proved his undoing. The excesses of security control, paradoxically, might have been regarded as less unbearable in the era of confrontation than in the era of negotiation he fostered. His 1968 projection was wrong; the country cannot run itself domestically without a President, keenly attuned to American values.

Marder, diplomatic correspondent for The Washington Post, closely followed the Nixon foreign policy ventures in this country and overseas.