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Detente and the Future

By Claiborne Pell

WASHINGTON—Given a choice between détente with the Soviet Union or a return to the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations of the frigid cold-war period, most Americans, I suspect, would choose a realistic easing of tensions between the supporters.

And, as a matter of fact, the progress toward détente initiated by Richard M. Nixon and vigorously executed by Secretary of State Kissinger has had until recently very broad support among the American people. Now, however, détente is in trouble.

The efforts to reach mutually beneficial agreements with the Russians on arms control and trade are under attack from all sides within the United States.

Conservatives criticize détente because of their profound disapproval of Communism and their equally profound distrust of the long-range intentions of the Soviet Union.

Liberals, while not opposing détente, insist on a coupling of agreements on arms controls or trade with liberalization of Soviet society.

Our military leadership and their supporters in industry and the Congress oppose détente because they believe that only overwhelming military

superiority—and damn the cost—can provide security for our country.

The national leadership of much of organized labor is cool to détente, reflecting a traditional anti-Communist stance in foreign affairs as well as a union membership with heavy stakes in defense-oriented industry.

And the American Jewish leadership's view of détente is strongly shaded by its concern over the persecution of Soviet Jews and the role of the Soviet Union in the Middle East.

Each of these segments of our society has some measure of legitimacy for its concern. However, in combination, these segments form a very formidable alliance encompassing a major part of the most articulate and influential opinion-forming groups in the nation. And there is a very real possibility that, in combination, this alliance could turn our country from the path of détente.

I consider myself a liberal with moderate fiscal views, a supporter of labor, an admirer of Israel and the contribution to our national wealth of our American Jewish community, and one who values basic human rights.

But I also have a long view of history, and I believe it would be disastrous if we were turned from the present opportunities for détente.

History does not stand still, but moves in currents and directions. And

if the movement toward détente is halted, history will take a new direction, probably toward confrontation and conflict.

The tragedy is that most of the segments now joining in the alliance against détente do not want to see such a change in the direction of history. Each wants only to attach a condition to détente, apparently without realizing that the cumulative weight of the conditions could sink the ship.

The result would be what very few of the critics of détente want: an escalation of the arms race, a tightening of repression within the Soviet Union, a resurgence of the basic Soviet anti-Semitism, and an end to all voluntary emigration from the Soviet Union.

I am under no illusions as to the sun and light behind the Iron Curtain.

But at least people there are alive and leading reasonably normal lives. It is not the bleak scorched area it could be in a World War III.

It is so easy to forget the improvements of the last ten years. Prominent opponents of Soviet policies are now exiled instead of being killed or jailed.

It is understandable that the American Jewish community is concerned about the ill-treatment of many Jews who wish to emigrate, particularly in light of the Soviet history of pogroms

and anti-Semitism. But the Russians have in fact responded to world pressure and some 30,000 Jews are being permitted to leave Russia each year. The extent to which the Russians have responded can be seen in the fact that Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union represents 85 per cent of all persons permitted to emigrate, while Jews constitute less than one per cent of the population.

Finally, I think we should remember that Nikita S. Khrushchev was removed from power primarily because his advocacy of détente with the West was opposed by Soviet conservatives and the Soviet military. Now Leonid I. Brezhnev has staked his political life on détente. If he, too, falls because of his advocacy, it will be many a decade before another Soviet leader will risk his reputation, his prestige and his power in pursuit of better relations with the West.

In seeking détente, the United States should use whatever bargaining levers it has to assure our military security and to press for recognition of the human values and liberties we treasure. But we must be careful that we do not overload the circuits and instead of bringing light to the world, plunge it toward darkness.

Claiborne Pell, Democrat, is junior Senator from Rhode Island.