I. The Contradictions of Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Who?

Jimmy Carter came into the White House with a relatively unimpressive political background and a lackluster record, with little national experience or recognition when he started his quest for the presidency. Political humorists called the governor of Georgia “Jimmy Who?” A couple of months before the election, Gerald Ford still believed he would beat Carter hands down. The diplomatic corps in Washington, very much the same as most American voters, was mystified by Carter's relatively unorthodox style and his original views and judgments. He seemed to have no definite program, and ordinary Americans would find in his speeches just what they were eager to hear. He clearly did not belong to the Washington Establishment, nor did he enjoy solid support within his own party. He was a political phenomenon, and his conduct in public defied all standards. A devout Baptist, he gave a straightforward interview to Playboy magazine admitting that he had moments of “lust in my heart,” all of which acquired broad and controversial publicity. In short, he cut quite a fresh and rather unusual figure on the American political horizon.

When Carter was elected I found it difficult to forecast his future actions, as there were too many unknowns. Deep down I hoped that Carter, with his military and technical background—he had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy and trained for the elite nuclear submarine service—could prove a more reliable and stable partner than his predecessors in the White House, especially in the talks on limiting nuclear weapons. Life proved more complex than that, and Carter and his presidency turned out even more contradictory than they appeared at the start. Many also regarded him as naive. That is clearly wrong. Personally, I respect Carter and his high spiritual and moral convictions. He was ahead of some other presidents in his public stress on such values common to all mankind as genuine disarmament, human rights, famine relief, environmental protection, and the need to preserve and properly use the resources of the whole planet.

American historians describe his presidency as erratic, and in my country it is considered one of the unfortunate pages in Soviet-American relations, an assessment with which I am inclined to agree, although at the start he had had good intentions and wanted to develop stable relations with the Soviet Union. One of the main reasons for his failure was the incompatibility between his ideas, some of which were very good, and his ability to put them into practice. He lacked flexibility. Seeking to achieve the best, he would underestimate tangible assets. The most egregious example was in the field of disarmament. As he pursued the wonderful bird of his dream—a drastic reduction in nuclear weapons—he let go of the bird in his hand, the ratification of the SALT II treaty.

Sometimes Carter behaved as if he were deliberately trying to disprove the truth of the aphorism that politics is the art of the possible. Occasionally he was just unlucky. But more often he failed to find the most important goal by which to chart the policies of his government and then implement them steadfastly. His failure to pick his priorities and stick with them was in no small measure due to great disagreements among his principal aides. Since he had to depend on an unstable and heterogeneous coalition, he picked a cabinet which helped create contradictory foreign and domestic policies. Along with time-tested Cold War soldiers like Zbigniew Brzezinski as national security adviser, James Schlesinger as energy secretary, and Admiral Stansfield Turner as director of central intelligence, more moderate circles were represented in the government by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Chief Arms Negotiator Paul Warnke, Treasury Secretary W. Michael Blumenthal, and Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano.

These contradictions plagued Carter's presidency with crises and mini­crises, particularly in its relations with the Soviet Union. But his own character was also contradictory, composed of interwoven conservative and moderate views on affairs of state and personal matters. Foreign policy was focused on restoring the international position of the United States, which had been seriously undermined by the loss of the nation's gamble in Vietnam. Thus the administration proclaimed the need for more solid relations with its military and political allies in the triangle of North America, Western Europe, and Japan, as well as the strengthening the military force of NATO. Carter built up the U.S. armed forces in keeping with the Pentagon's military and political doctrine, making the Soviet Union its main opponent and rival. Military force was considered one of the crucial tools to influence international affairs. When Carter spoke on foreign affairs, we tended to hear echoes of the anti-Sovietism of Brzezinski.

The policy of human rights, aimed against the Soviet Union and the socialist community, was launched by Carter from his very first days in office to cement the West's foreign policy under the leadership of the United States.
Carter saw it as a continuation of his role in the American civil rights movement and presented it as establishing new moral standards in America's foreign policy, in contrast to what he viewed as the immoral period of Nixon, Kissinger, and Ford. The ideological campaign had the auxiliary role of mobilizing domestic support for the administration's foreign policy and helping to overcome the deep split left by the Vietnam war and Watergate. But it was carried out mainly at the expense of Soviet-American relations.

All this took place while the elders of the Soviet leadership persisted in pursuing their conservative domestic policy and allowed the country to sink gradually into economic and political stagnation. It was a dramatic part of the history of our relations with the United States: two nations and their leaders, each of which seemed in early 1977 to desire better bilateral relations and a reduction of the nuclear danger, had by early 1980 arrived at a situation in which relations were terrible, detente had collapsed, a nuclear arms reduction treaty lay unratified in the United States, and the groundwork was laid for a revival of intense Cold War rhetoric and confrontation after the election of Ronald Reagan. The detailed history of Soviet-American relations during this period, which I will try to set down here with its principal characters, resembles a complicated and tricky game of chess, with only one essential difference: in reality it ended with both rivals losing the game and the policy of detente in ruins.

**Friendly First Soundings**

Even before Carter’s election, I began learning from his supporters and intimates how he planned to govern. Late in July I was invited to dinner by J. Paul Austin, a financial backer and chairman of Coca-Cola, the most powerful company in Carter’s home state of Georgia. He said Carter wanted to appoint Dean Rusk, whom he held in great respect, as his secretary of state, but Rusk refused categorically, preferring to remain a university professor in Georgia. His next potential candidate was Brzezinski, with whom Carter had become close during their meetings as members of the Trilateral Commission, an organization of notables in many fields which concentrates on the relations among the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. But Carter had grown apprehensive about one aspect of Brzezinski’s personality: he took too much pleasure from personal publicity, so Austin said Carter wanted to use Brzezinski in the White House, where his vanity would be more controllable, as assistant to the president for national security affairs.

Shortly afterward I attended a dinner given by David Rockefeller at which Brzezinski was also a guest, probably with the express purpose of displaying him to the Soviets in the most favorable light. We already knew of his position as one of the leading Western experts on communism, of his origins in the old Polish nobility, of his father’s refusal to return to Poland with his family after World War II, and of the son’s marriage to a niece of the pre-war president of Czechoslovakia, Edward Benes. All this to some extent influenced his views, which were notoriously anti-communist, although in recent years he had moved toward the center. When the possibility opened up of joining Carter’s team, he even started talking about progress in some areas of Soviet-American relations.

During the conversation at dinner Brzezinski visibly tried to refrain from extreme statements, and his attitude was quite friendly. After listening to a philosophical monologue about foreign policy, I remarked that it would be nice to hear something more practical, for example, an explanation of the real differences between the foreign policy of the Ford administration and the Democrats, especially on Soviet-American relations. Brzezinski made a special point of arguing that Carter would find it easier to implement his foreign policy because Congress would be dominated by members of his own party. But he failed to outline any essential distinctions, at which point Rockefeller interrupted our conversation and said, pointing to Brzezinski, “I have already told him that I don’t see any particular differences.”

I came away with a strong impression of the Rockefellers: they were running a virtually no-risk political game. Irrespective of which candidate won, they would be able to have their views known to him through the people they supplied. Nelson Rockefeller, the vice president, was well known as Kissinger’s patron, and here was his brother David, the famous banker, sponsoring Brzezinski for a high position in the Carter administration.

Some days later I attended another dinner at the house of Averell Harriman, the Democratic Party elder who had become one of Carter’s advisors. Harriman attached great importance to the fact that Carter, if elected, would be the first American president with an advanced technical education, moreover in the field of nuclear technology. In Harriman’s view, this accounted for Carter’s special interest in “the central issue of the modern times, that is, the prevention of nuclear war.” He stressed that Carter did not consider it essential to pursue American superiority in any type of strategic arms, but was prepared to negotiate an agreement with the Soviet Union limiting them to “approximate equality.”

Harriman wanted to visit Moscow in September, meet with Brezhnev and Gromyko, and report back to Carter. I arranged this visit quickly, and he made his trip on September 16–22. Brezhnev received Harriman as a statesman identified with American goodwill, and they agreed on the need for further strategic arms limitation talks. Brezhnev expressed the hope that summit meetings would continue their useful role.
elaborately on each individual question. Unlike Kissinger, he avoided publicity and preferred to work without much ostentation. His attitude to the Soviet Union and his negotiations with it were unbiased. You could depend on his word, which was of no small importance during that complicated period. Vance coordinated all his moves with the president and carried out his wishes punctiliously. In this sense he had less room for maneuver than Kissinger.

At the same time, Vance had an unshakable confidence in the correctness of his position, which led to his voluntary resignation in 1980 on a point of principle about the disastrous raid on Iran to retrieve the American hostages there. This only-enhanced his authority and respect in the United States and abroad, but it also permitted his opponents within the administration to take advantage of his integrity and conscientiousness. He also commanded the deserved respect of his Soviet counterparts. During our meetings, whether private or official, his behavior was impeccably correct. He never used sharp words, especially in public, for rhetorical effect. As a person, he was optimistic, lively, intelligent, and sociable, and I remember with pleasure my contacts with him, both official and informal. We still meet from time to time.

I also met with Brzezinski on January 24 to get to know the main protagonists of the new administration. It would be a serious mistake to claim that the administration’s uneven course was only due to the different personalities of Vance and Brzezinski, in themselves — they represented and reflected the mood and opinion of some of the main currents in American political life. Brzezinski praised Carter’s political courage for telling the press on the second day of his presidency that he was going to seek an agreement on SALT and take other measures to check the nuclear race in spite of the anti-Soviet campaign mounted by the American military. He then admitted that there was indeed too much noise over the Soviet military threat, which contributed to public support for the arms race.

In this connection he singled out, not without reason, the undue secrecy of the Soviet Union about its armed forces, because it prevented the president from convincing the leaders of Congress, the military, and their supporters that there was no need for exorbitant military expenditures, especially in the field of strategic weapons. But the military proceeded from the argument of “the highest risk,” that is, they would always seek to maintain Soviet military potential at its maximum.

Brzezinski remarked with some amusement that when Carter began examining the background of SALT negotiations, he was amazed to discover that the entire discussion had for years been almost exclusively based on the American data covering both sides’ strategic forces, and the Soviet side had furnished only a few figures on its own initiative because of the Kremlin’s mania for secrecy. It would be a good idea, he suggested, if we made it a practice to exchange military data.

That was how I started out with Brzezinski (we called each other by our first names: Zbig and Tolya): It was less systematic than my relationship with Kissinger, although we met fairly frequently. He impressed me as an interesting, emotional, and highly intelligent interlocutor, although his outlook was markedly ideological. He preferred to discuss concepts and sometimes failed to take account of the concrete realities of international relations. He did not dwell on the details of Soviet-American negotiations and did not as a rule participate directly in them, although he was well informed. He did not go to Moscow, like Kissinger; that was Vance’s job as secretary of state. I got the impression that Brzezinski also decided he would be unsuitable as a negotiator because he was so well known to Moscow as a long-standing critic of the Soviet Union and an anti-communist ideologist. Nevertheless that did not by any means diminish his influence on Soviet-American relations, in which he could have played a more positive role if Carter, rather than employ him as a principal opponent of the Soviet Union, had given him responsibilities for conducting concrete negotiations with the Soviet side on individual issues, as he did with China. Brzezinski and I followed the useful practice of informal conversations at breakfast in his office or our embassy. My wife and I, together with our granddaughter, visited his house several times, and we met his wife, who was an original sculptress, and his children. We also played chess, although our scores must remain a state secret.

Face to Face with Carter

Two days after my meetings with Vance and Brzezinski, on January 26, Vance handed me the president’s first private letter to Brezhnev, which outlined the main lines of his foreign policy toward the Soviet Union. Carter endorsed Brezhnev’s Tula speech on disarmament and proclaimed that “my solid objective is to liquidate nuclear weapons completely.” He named three areas in which progress toward that objective could be achieved: an immediate SALT agreement as the most important first step, another agreement on a duly verifiable and complete nuclear test ban, and a redoubling of efforts for progress on negotiations on the balanced reduction of conventional forces in Central Europe.

Carter also noted the need for the joint prevention of crisis in the troubled regions of the world, making particular mention of the Middle East. But
he warned that he could not be indifferent to the freedoms and rights of man. In conclusion he wrote that he was looking forward to meeting Brezhnev in the spring to discuss both "our divergences and our common interests."

On the whole Carter's message was well received in Moscow because it seemed to open good prospects for negotiations on disarmament. At the same time his statement on human rights indicated that this question could become a constant subject of controversy.

On February 1, President Carter invited me to the White House. As usual, I entered the familiar Oval Office alone. Carter was somewhat surprised that I had not brought anybody to record our conversation, but I assured him that all his statements would be reported to Moscow accurately, just as I had done with other presidents. Joining us for the conversation were Vance, Brzezinski, and Reginald Bartholomew, a State Department official.

Since I was the only one on the Soviet side, I started out by remarking lightly that the American side had clear numerical superiority. I congratulated Carter on his election as president, and he was pleased to point out that he came from the very heart of America, and only in this country could an ordinary man become an "emperor," that is, the president.

In this connection I told him a historical anecdote. One of Napoleon's marshals, Bernadotte, was elected King of Sweden. The court physicians found it strange that he would never take off his shirt when they examined him. The whole court was mystified. It was not until his death that they discovered the reason. On his chest, dating from his days as a revolutionary soldier in France, they found a tattoo saying "Death to kings." Carter and his aides burst out laughing, and the atmosphere of the meeting became more informal.

Carter got down to business by saying he wanted me to tell the general secretary that he was sincere in his wish to ameliorate Soviet-American relations. Moscow probably had learned from previous presidential campaigns that Carter would forget many of his pledges. But the President said, "I want to stress that this will not happen"—especially with SALT. Above all he believed that the main thing we could do to reduce tension drastically, and therefore be able to cut military expenditures, would be to build mutual trust by agreeing to a minimal level of strategic weapons—just enough to be sure that each country had a sufficient number to deter an attack but not big enough to inspire fear that its arsenal could annihilate the opposite side in a first strike.

What would those approximate levels be? I was struck by this because the statement of a new president could mean a radical departure from his predecessor—and that is exactly what this turned out to be.

Carter replied that we could agree on a level of "some hundreds of carr-
was about disarmament. So he asked for our understanding if he, unlike previous presidents, were to receive, say, the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the White House or issue a statement in support of some Soviet individual, which he gave us to understand could be about Andrei Sakharov, the dissident physicist who had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his stand on human rights inside the Soviet Union. He promised not to abuse the right to make such declarations because he realized they might complicate our relations, but still he would do it from time to time according to his convictions.

I reminded him of Brezhnev's promise not “to test the new American president.” I concluded, “You, Mr. President, have reacted to it favorably. Now let us not test Moscow, either. That will certainly benefit Soviet-American relations.”

The president exchanged glances with Vance and Brzezinski and said he did not want to force a confrontation with us on that subject. It was dropped at that point but evidently would remain on the agenda and indeed was likely to become a major sore in our relations—as I reported to Moscow. Carter obviously believed he could harmlessly separate his public statements about human rights from the whole package of the U.S.-Soviet problems.

Throughout the conversation Carter was at ease and friendly. I was for the first time exposed to his famous smile, said to have the broadest grin of all the American presidents after Theodore Roosevelt. His expertise in all questions, his ability to grasp their essence at once, and his evident desire to understand the most crucial issues in detail were superior to those of President Ford. Just as evident was his desire to produce new original ideas of his own, though they were not always properly thought out. That put his interlocutors on their guard because it could affect the continuity of the American position in negotiations that had long been under way.

I reported the conversation to Moscow and recommended that we lose no time in developing good relations with Carter, although I warned of trouble ahead with SALT and human rights. Carter himself proved unable to give solid and consistent direction, reminiscent of the fable by the Russian poet Ivan Krylov about the incongruous team composed of a swan, a pike, and a crayfish.

Hence the constant struggle of Carter's main advisers to gain the president's ear. The Washington diplomatic corps followed closely that continuous tug-of-war with Brzezinski pulling ever more vigorously on his end of the rope. Hence also the zigzags in foreign policy, particularly in relation to the Soviet Union. While there was a consensus inside the administration that détente was a combination of “rivalry and cooperation,” there was practical disagreement over which of the two elements was to be emphasized at any one time. Brzezinski regarded the global strategic struggle as paramount, but Vance thought it should not overshadow important areas of prospective cooperation.

The main handicap of the Carter administration was, if anything, its failure to see the long-term implications of all major problems taken as a whole. Both Carter and his advisers not infrequently sought to solve such problems spontaneously by snatching “hot questions” to be tackled separately and at once. Sometimes they turned to what they hoped would be quick fixes to buffer political and other pressures within the country, or to placate influential groups. Needless to say, this lack of clear priority did not often serve their own or the country’s long-term interests.

At first Moscow was somewhat puzzled about what Carter was driving at in his relations with the Soviet Union. Judging by his vigorous correspondence with Brezhnev at the initial stage, his intentions seemed positive and constructive. But some surprise invariably seemed to interfere, leading to quite unexpected results and puzzling many supporters of normalization. The administration demonstrated that, except for SALT, it did not intend to treat relations with the Soviet Union as a priority, and even with SALT Carter's departure from the Vladivostok accords made matters more difficult.

Washington's relations with Moscow were greatly damaged by Carter's moralizing approach, which seemed ostentatiously calculated to enlist mass support in his country, meanwhile caring little for the damage it inflicted upon our relations. At the initial stage Carter probably did not mean to make human rights one of the most controversial issues of his policy toward Moscow. But his position was propagated through the mass media rather than traditional diplomatic channels. I came to the conclusion that Carter believed, erroneously as it turned out, that a formidable campaign against the Soviet Union would yield major gains in public relations without essentially damaging relations with Moscow because of our overriding aspirations for a SALT agreement.

The Carter Crusade

The coming of every new American administration inevitably implies a certain change in the conduct of American foreign policy, and the Carter administration was no exception. But under Carter there probably was more controversy and heated debate among top officials than under any modern American president. That applied, first and foremost, to his principal lieutenants, Vance and Brzezinski, one a practical and balanced lawyer, the other
But Moscow believed Carter was deliberately interfering in the Soviet Union's internal affairs in order to undermine the existing regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Carter proved incapable of seeing that, and his insensitivity to our concerns was responsible for the disagreements that followed. Whether or not Carter meant it, his policy was based on linking detente to the domestic situation in the Soviet Union. This represented an abrupt departure from the policy followed by preceding administrations, thus inevitably making his relations with Moscow tense. The Soviet leadership tried to reason with Carter through diplomatic channels and high-level exchanges of letters, all in vain. Public criticism of Carter by the Soviet Union did not help, either.

In a show of stubbornness and irritation, Carter rejected appeals from American public figures who became concerned about the aggravation of Soviet-American relations. He told one member of Congress that he saw no need to be concerned every time Brezhnev sneezed. Of course, Carter could also sneeze at Brezhnev whenever he chose. But then how could he expect to build long-term relations with Moscow? The two nations were sliding right past each other.

SALT and Human Rights

SALT remained the centerpiece of Soviet-American relations as it had been under Ford and Kissinger, but the new president and his team were determined to come up with a better treaty than their predecessors. Carter did not like Kissinger's 1976 proposal to trade reductions in American cruise missiles for Russian Backfire bombers and thought the former secretary of state had struck a bad bargain; it provided for too many restrictions on cruise missiles (somehow counting air-to-surface cruise missiles within the totals of strategic arms) and too few on Backfire bombers. He also thought that the agreement set the overall ceilings for strategic arms too high. Hence he thought, as a temporary measure, we might agree to a quick agreement based on Vladivostok but excluding cruise and Backfire while negotiations proceeded on his bold approach. He knew that we categorically opposed excluding cruise missiles—where the United States had a big advantage—but when Vance went to Moscow that was exactly the proposal he brought.

On March 4 Carter sent Brezhnev a message to this effect via the hot line in order to bypass the Soviet Foreign Ministry, which Brzezinski thought was the main opponent of the president's new ideas. Carter meanwhile ordered a new "comprehensive proposal" with substantial reductions which in fact changed the structure of the Vladivostok agreement, including total overhaul of strategic bombers and multiple warhead launchers. The Soviet heavy missile force would also be cut in half from about 300 to 150. The basic line actually was that the United States was seeking substantial reductions in existing Soviet systems in exchange for marginal cuts in future American systems.

The White House brushed aside objections from some experts within the administration that new American proposals would not be negotiable with the Soviets. Negotiability with the Soviet Union was at that moment clearly not the criterion that interested President Carter and his key advisers (Vance probably excepted). They were looking for good publicity and for new negotiations with the Soviet Union on their terms. Moscow bluntly rejected these proposals and indeed their entire underlying concept. It took an additional two years of protracted negotiations to reach the SALT II compromise signed in 1979.

Brzezinski supported Carter's approach. Paul Warnke, the chief American negotiator at the SALT talks, criticized Carter in a private conversation with me; he said the president was too rash and eager to get too much done in too short a time without considering the interests of the other side. Vance and Warnke both favored a step-by-step approach, but they had to follow Carter's instructions. It was this controversy, between the two main parties, as well as within the American administration itself, that doomed a quick agreement on disarmament and damaged our long-term relations with Carter.

The other major irritant in our relations was the question of Soviet dissidents and human rights. After Andrei Sakharov wrote Carter to compliment his human rights policies, he replied with a personal letter and then received individual immigrant dissidents at the White House, causing growing indignation in the Kremlin. I came to the conclusion that while Carter really believed it was morally justified to defend human rights (and he deserves credit for that), he saw the question as a convenient propaganda weapon to keep on wielding in public at the expense of agreements on other major issues in Soviet-American relations, whether by design or not. There are good arguments for and against this policy, both moral and political. In the final analysis I believe it did more harm than good to our relations and even to the course of human rights in our country. These would have been more successfully enhanced through a combination of permanent and strong but essentially private pressure through the confidential channel, along with negotiations on issues of interest to the Soviet leadership.

In the middle of February I delivered a special oral note on the basis of a Politburo text angrily protesting State Department interference in the case of a leading Soviet dissident, Aleksandr Ginzburg, who was later
arrested for currency offenses for receiving funds from abroad to support the Moscow group monitoring human rights under the Helsinki accords. The presentation was made to Arthur Hartman, who was acting as secretary of state during Vance’s absence from Washington. Hartman said to me he had nothing to add to Carter’s official position but remarked privately that, as a professional diplomat, he anticipated major difficulties in our relations on account of the new, activist administration policy supporting Soviet dissidents.

Then Vance privately voiced his growing apprehensions about the effect the official focus on dissidents could have on our relations, even the SALT negotiations. After I reaffirmed our position to Vance, he asked me rather unhappily what could be done to escape from the vicious circle. I replied officially and tersely: “Stop your interference into our internal affairs.” What else could I say? The conversation produced no results.

Two days later I had a conversation with Brzezinski on the same subject. He did his utmost to justify Carter’s posture on Soviet dissidents and human rights. As he wrote later in his memoirs, not without pride, from the very outset he had seen this issue as a splendid “opportunity to put the Soviet Union on the defensive ideologically.”

But Carter himself failed to realize that the Soviet leaders would regard his position as a direct challenge to their internal political authority and even as an attempt to change their regime. Thus what was seen by the Soviet leadership as strictly a domestic issue spilled over to our relations with a new administration.

Moscow Stands Firm

Inside the Kremlin, the reaction was indignation, irritation, and concern. At the end of February, the most influential members of the Politburo—Gromyko, the foreign minister; Ustinov, the defense minister; and Andropov, the head of the KGB—circulated a joint memorandum to their colleagues. With Vance due on a visit in March, the memo assessed Carter’s latest messages and public statements as designed “to try to impose on us his own approach to the basic questions of Soviet-American relations even before we set about negotiating.” It suggested that the Kremlin should signal the new president that pressure would be “unacceptable and futile.” The three ministers were also skeptical about drastic cuts in nuclear missiles and accused Carter of raising the question for “political demagoguery and propaganda” to force Soviet concessions. In short, the memo suggested a tougher stance toward the new administration at the very beginning of its term, something very unusual in our relations with the United States for many years.

After a detailed discussion—and every one at the meeting was highly critical about Carter’s human rights and SALT positions—the Politburo decided to send Carter another personal message from Brezhnev, which I handed to Vance on February 27.

This important letter largely determined the development of our relations with the new American administration, especially about SALT, and was marked by a hard, and sometimes sharp tone. It warned him that progress in arms control would be hampered by abandoning the “balanced, realistic approach to new concrete steps by advancing utterly unacceptable proposals.” It called Carter’s stance “unconstructive” and asked flat out: “What is the meaning of the idea of drastic cuts in nuclear missile forces on both sides? . . . We hope to see a more balanced approach when Secretary of State Vance comes to Moscow.”

On human rights, it was even more dismissive, accusing Carter of corresponding simultaneously with Brezhnev and “an apostate [Sakharov] who has proclaimed himself the enemy of the Soviet state and is against normal, good relations between the Soviet Union and the United States? We do not recommend taxing our patience in any area of international politics, including the sphere of Soviet-American relations. There is no dealing with the Soviet Union that way.”

Vance read the letter twice. After a while he noted that the letter was a tough one but personally he welcomed plain language by a general secretary who “does not beat around the bush.” Indeed, Vance admitted that he had told his president more than once that he treated certain international problems too lightly. He had warned Carter against believing that he could reach a SALT agreement without long negotiations.

“I tell him it can’t happen, but . . .” Vance made a helpless gesture. He regretted this turn of events, especially when policy in public eye was focused on human rights. “I hope that Brezhnev’s straightforward letter will make the president look at things somewhat differently. Needless to say, I am not completely in agreement with the letter, but I think it is important that the president should receive exactly such a letter now.”

Vance and I understood each other; after all, we were professionals.

Brzezinski reacted completely differently. In his memoirs, he calls the letter “brutal, cynical, sneering, and even patronizing” and, according to him, found that Carter agreed with him. The angry debate continued through a high-level exchange of letters. Carter replied to Brezhnev on March 4, showing little change in his agenda in a letter delivered to me not by Vance but Brzezinski, who insisted it was positive.

“Now, what do you think?” he asked me.

I remarked that it did not advance us much toward a solution of the
main question, which we saw as preparing a new SALT agreement on the basis of the Vladivostok meeting. On March 16, I handed Vance another letter from Brezhnev to Carter, which reemphasized our disarmament positions and rejected "the attempts to raise questions going beyond the scope of relations between states" such as human rights. On that question, we had quickly reached an impasse.

These conversations offered no real possibility of compromise before I left for Moscow to prepare for Vance's talks. Brzezinski relayed to me the president's opinion that his first year in office offered the maximum political opportunity to reach a SALT agreement; I certainly agreed—but on what terms?

Vance meanwhile outlined to me in a very private way new approaches to SALT, which he most probably would carry to Moscow. They had two alternatives: either a comprehensive agreement, which the administration of course preferred, or a more limited version. Both these proposals would mean serious reductions, essentially at the expense of Soviet missiles, because all substantive cuts would come from the Soviet side. I warned Vance that they would most certainly be rejected. The very fact of publicizing the basic content of American proposals before Vance presented them to the Soviet leadership was taken in Moscow as an indication that Carter's intentions were not serious, and that he was merely trying to achieve a propaganda victory. It was obvious that his mission to Moscow was doomed even before he left if he were to persist in these huge cuts, and my impression was that he himself was not sure of his own position but had to follow Carter's instructions.

It is exceedingly rare for an ambassador to tell a secretary of state so bluntly that his trip will be a failure if the president is going to insist on his proposals, but I also knew too well what he faced in Moscow. I reported our conversation to Moscow, so the Politburo had time to consider Carter's proposals properly and prepare our reply.

The Price for Trying Too Much

Vance's visit to Moscow took place on March 28–30 and was a predictable failure on SALT.

"If the United States wants to reopen questions that have already been solved," Brezhnev told the secretary of state, "then the Soviet Union will again raise such problems as the American Forward-Based Systems in Europe and the transfer of American strategic weapons to its allies. The principal demand of the American administration is for half of Soviet heavy land-based missiles to be liquidated, and that is utterly unacceptable."

Vance had a third option—essentially splitting the difference between the other two—but when he cabled back to Washington proposing to submit it, Carter approved a message prepared by Brzezinski instructing him not to. Vance was completely discouraged, while Carter was hurt and angry that both his options had been so quickly turned down. Disapproving public statements and press conferences followed on both sides. The failure of Vance's mission drew much public attention and introduced distrust on both sides. What was the explanation for such a diplomatic disaster?

Some historians believe this was a case of a missed opportunity. Maybe so. But the Carter proposals, which suggested in a effect a wrenching departure from the long-established course of the talks, were not properly and patiently explained to Moscow through diplomatic or confidential channels before Vance's visit, although the White House had mounted a publicity campaign for them. The Soviet leadership had already staked its prestige on the Vladivostok accord as the basis for SALT II. Any attempt to change that understanding invited an explosion in Soviet-American relations, especially when Moscow was not yet ready to accept the idea of a practical reduction in its nuclear arsenal rather than an agreed set of limits.

I think the best possible scenario would have been for Vance to have brought to Moscow Carter's consent to conclude SALT II on the basis of the Vladivostok agreements, and for the Soviet side then to declare its readiness to discuss Carter's comprehensive proposal immediately afterward. With such a package we could have had an early summit, reopened the high-level direct dialogue, and cleared the air. That might also have opened the possibility of another and earlier SALT agreement than the one we finally did get at the 1979 summit in Vienna.

But bad strategy sinks good ideas. All these practical possibilities turned into lost opportunities at an early stage of the Carter administration and put Soviet-American relations on a more difficult path of mutual suspicion and mistrust. More than that, the new administration's comprehensive but not very well conceived proposals on SALT became a sort of yardstick that enabled the critics to condemn any reasonable, negotiable compromise as a capitulation to the Soviets. The president's evidently sincere but impulsive and radical proposals created additional difficulties in subsequent disarmament negotiations. Carter himself publicly and unnecessarily staked his personal prestige. His tactic was to reach for too much too soon, and it proved unsuccessful.

Carter's plan disrupted the Kremlin's hopes for continuity in Soviet-American relations, which were based on consolidating the gains of the Nixon and Ford administrations by the earliest possible signing of a SALT II
ter on the basis of the Vladivostok arrangements. Carter's rejection of those accords was a serious psychological shock for Brezhnev, who would have found it politically impossible to reassemble an arms control package even if he had agreed with Carter's ideas. Remember that the Vladivostok agreement had caused a debate within the Soviet leadership which Brezhnev won only by warning Marshal Grechko, the defense minister, that he was prepared to confront him before the Politburo. With this behind him, Brezhnev certainly could not deliver the Soviet military establishment again for Carter's even more radical proposals.

On the day after Vance's departure from Moscow Brezhnev convened a meeting of the Politburo. On the agenda was only one question: How to deal with the Carter administration? The collapse of Vance's mission did not surprise the Soviet leaders. I don't think it completely surprised Carter either. According to his diary, Carter already knew before Vance's departure for Moscow that Brezhnev found his latest SALT proposals "deliberately unacceptable." Why then did he nevertheless send them to Moscow with Vance?

**Trying to Pick-Up the Pieces**

On the day after Vance's departure from Moscow, with angry statements flying around from both sides, Brezhnev convened a meeting of the Politburo. What had happened was in a way the deliberate application of an angry shock treatment to the Carter administration. On the agenda for the meeting was only one question: How were we to deal now with the Carter administration. After the lesson, what next? The main line of our policy remained the restoration of good relations and the atmosphere of detente as best we could—first of all by putting the SALT negotiations back on the right track. But it was very important not to waste much time lest hostile feelings harden in Washington. So it was decided to let Brezhnev write Carter a conciliatory letter with an appeal for joint efforts to solve our complex problems.

On April 4 I called on Vance with a letter from Brezhnev to Carter welcoming his concrete suggestions and stating his "strong conviction that there cannot possibly be any insurmountable obstacles in solving even the most complex problems in relations between our two countries." As we talked, I saw that Vance was still deeply affected by his failure in Moscow. Because of my experience with other administrations in Washington, he asked for my private views on the present state of Soviet-American relations. I told him that, frankly speaking, they were the most unsatisfactory in the last ten years. In less than three months, I remarked that the Carter administration had contrived to impair relations with the leadership of the Soviet Union, which had from the very outset been trying to establish good relations with the new president. I asked Vance if the president really believed that the Soviet leadership would have accepted the SALT proposals he brought to Moscow.

Vance made an attempt to justify Carter's approach by saying that the president had been eager for a dialogue and perhaps a compromise on the two options. But once the Soviet side rejected both of them, the president and Vance himself were utterly surprised, and his delegation was "shocked." All had been expecting a critical examination of their proposals by the Soviet side, rather than a short and quite unexpected rejection by the general secretary with hardly any explanation. Vance noted that Carter had lost his cool under the shock of the rejection and called congressional leaders together to make an emotional statement even before Vance had left Moscow. By the time Vance returned he had calmed down.

At the end of our conversation Vance reaffirmed that he would continue discussing SALT with Gromyko in Geneva in May (as was agreed during his visit to Moscow) and expressed the hope that he would also be able to discuss the Middle East. On the whole, it looked like the administration was looking for a way out of a blind alley into which it had driven—or at least that was the way Vance himself saw it.

More than that, meetings with president and some other officials during the next few days showed that a certain change in the administration's handling of SALT had taken place. I felt a growing interest in a return to confidential diplomacy—to the "back-channel"—regular, informal, unpublicized contacts. It looked as if a tacit recognition had taken place that Carter's public approach to SALT had not worked and it was worthwhile trying it Kissinger's way instead.

The president invited me to the White House on April 12 to discuss SALT. Evidently trying to avoid the subject of Vance's mission, he wanted to discuss ways of reaching a SALT agreement within several months. He wondered if we should resume the negotiations in Geneva. I repeated that as long as there was no mutual understanding in principle on the highest level, delegations of disarmament specialists were unlikely to remedy the situation. Then why had Brezhnev and Gromyko rejected the American proposals without even discussing them? asked the president. I replied that as long as there was no mutual understanding in principle on the highest level, delegations of disarmament specialists were unlikely to remedy the situation. Then why had Brezhnev and Gromyko rejected the American proposals without even discussing them? asked the president. I replied that as long as there was no mutual understanding in principle on the highest level, delegations of disarmament specialists were unlikely to remedy the situation.