



Ch. 44 — Decline of Cold War
CERTAINITIES, 1972-89

Learning Intentions

In this section, you should understand:

- Reasons for US withdrawal from Vietnam.
- Détente, SALT and Star Wars.

US *Withdrawal* FROM VIETNAM

How and why did the US Withdraw from Vietnam?

When Richard Nixon became President in 1969, he wanted to end US involvement in Vietnam because:

- Opposition at home was growing.
- The costs of the war were increasing.
- Huge numbers of American soldiers were killed.
- The US did not seem to be able to win the war.
- Nixon wanted to get **re-elected** in 1972 so he had to end an unpopular war.
- **Congress** was reluctant to commit any more money to the war in Vietnam.
- Nixon also had other foreign policy aims. He wanted to improve relations with Communist China and to do this he needed peace in Vietnam. Nixon used China and the Soviet Union to pressurise North Vietnam to make peace.

Vietnamisation

But Nixon knew he could not pull out of Vietnam because this would look like a defeat for America. Nixon did not want peace at any price. He wanted to leave Vietnam with honour because *'We simply cannot tell the mothers of our casualties and the soldiers who have spent part of their lives in Vietnam that it was all to no purpose.'* For Nixon **peace with honour** meant separate governments for South and North Vietnam. He began a policy of **Vietnamisation** - the gradual withdrawal of US troops and the strengthening of the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) to take a greater part in the war. By 1971, Nixon had withdrawn almost half of the 550,000 US soldiers based in Vietnam. By September 1972, only 40,000 were left. He also announced the **Nixon Doctrine** - the US would give help to countries fighting internal attack, but he would not send in US troops.

Since the talks in Paris were dragging on, Nixon also increased **aerial bombing**, particularly of North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This was part of his **Madman strategy** where he wanted to give the impression that he was prepared to even use atomic bombs to end the war. He hoped this would put further pressure on North Vietnam to make peace.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Nixon want to withdraw from Vietnam?
2. What was Vietnamisation?
3. What was the
 - a. Nixon Doctrine
 - b. the Madman Strategy?

Invasion of Cambodia

He also secretly ordered the **invasion of Cambodia** to destroy Vietcong dumps and to destroy their supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The invasion of Cambodia had serious consequences for Nixon when it was made public:

- It increased **anti-war demonstrations** at home and led to the deaths of four students at **Kent State University** in Ohio.
- It widened the **credibility gap** as more people doubted what the government was telling them.
- It led to a **rebellion in Congress**, where it was felt that Nixon was overstepping his power. Congress repealed the Tonkin Resolution and cut off all military aid to Cambodia. It also passed the **War Powers Act 1973**, which controlled the President's use of troops.

Peace Treaty

Negotiations were still going slowly in Paris, but eventually a combination of heavy bombing, pressure from China and the Soviet Union and the continued fighting brought peace. The US and North Vietnam signed a **peace treaty** in Paris in January 1973. They agreed that:

- The US would withdraw from South Vietnam.
- All prisoners-of-war would be released.
- There would be further negotiations to decide the future of North and South Vietnam.

Vietnam Became Communist

The US continued to give aid to South Vietnam after it withdrew in 1973. They hoped to maintain a non-Communist government in South Vietnam. But the North Vietnamese launched an attack in 1975 which led to the capture of **Saigon**, the capital. North and South Vietnam were united under a Communist leadership. In explaining the Vietnamese victory, Nixon's National Security Adviser, **Henry Kissinger**, later said, *'Because there were always more Vietnamese prepared to die for their country than foreigners, their nationalism became the scourge of invaders and neighbours alike.'*

What was the Impact of the Vietnam War on the US?

- The US lost **58,000 soldiers killed** and **150,000 wounded**. Many of the 2.7 million soldiers ('veterans') who served in the war suffered **psychological damage**. They were more likely to **suffer panic attacks, depression, drug addiction and suicide** than the rest of the population. They were often blacklisted at home and the veteran was sometimes portrayed as crazy or mad in Hollywood movies, such as Taxi Driver (1976). In general, other movies such as Platoon (1986) and Full Metal Jacket (1987) portrayed the **futility and cruelty of the war** so that there was little pride in being a veteran of the Vietnam War, in contrast to the role of veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War.
- Families of soldiers **missing in action** (MIA) continued to campaign after the war for information on their fate. They kept the issue alive for politicians and forced the government to negotiate for their return from North Vietnam where some were held as **prisoners-of-war** (PoWs). However, the US government had little success because the North Vietnamese gave very little accurate information. They drip-fed the return of some of the MIA but many were unaccounted for, presumably dead.
- The war gave a **boost to the military-industrial complex** - companies involved in the production of arms, ammunition, planes and helicopters benefitted hugely from the war. This provided further growth in the American economy in the middle of the 1960s. However, in the longer term it weakened the economy. The war cost \$150 billion (though some estimates put it at \$300 billion). The war was paid for without raising taxes so that increased the **budget deficit** (shortfall). The extra money in the economy caused **inflation**, and this combined with rising **unemployment** caused **stagflation**. The cost of the war impacted on Johnson's **Great Society**, and it forced him to negotiate the **Outer Space Treaty** (1967) with the Soviet Union to cut spending on space exploration.

What was the Impact of the Vietnam War on the US?

- The war impacted on the **Presidential elections**. In 1964, Johnson defeated Goldwater by appearing as the 'dove' to Goldwater's 'hawk'. Then Johnson did not seek the Democratic nomination for re-election in 1968 because of the war's unpopularity, and Nixon won on a commitment to organise US withdrawal from Vietnam, 'to end the war and win the peace'. Over the years, participation in the war was a factor in the election of some politicians. **John McCain**, for example, once a Vietnam PoW, was elected to the US Senate. However, **Bill Clinton** and **George Bush Junior** still got elected as Presidents even though both had **avoided service** in Vietnam.
- The US **policy of containment** in the Cold War had **failed**. Not only had the US been defeated in **South Vietnam**, but **Laos** and **Cambodia** were also weakened. They soon had **Communist governments**. However, Vietnam was the only example of the failure of containment. The feared domino effect was limited to the neighbouring countries of Vietnam. Indeed, by the early 21st century, American influence in Vietnam was stronger than ever, with **multinational companies** such as Coca-Cola, Nike, McDonalds and Disney using the cheaper labour of Vietnam to produce some of their products. Capitalism was winning by peaceful means.
- American **propaganda** in the Cold War had painted themselves as the good guys against the cruel Communists. But American conduct of the war (e.g. **My Lai Massacre**, the use of **chemical weapons** and napalm) undermined America's image at home and abroad. **Anti-Americanism** became a feature of protests around the world. Americans' confidence in their political and technological superiority was also lessened. Henceforth, the American people were very reluctant to get involved in wars in faraway places; they did not want 'another Vietnam'.

What was the Impact of the Vietnam War on the US?

- **Respect** for the US government system and politicians was **undermined** as they were shown to have lied about US involvement and about the progress of the war. This was clearly shown in the Pentagon Papers, which were leaked to the press.
- The Vietnam War contributed to the **great divisions** in American society which caused so much violence and conflict at the end of the 1960s.
- Congress reduced the **power of the President**, whom they felt had increased commitments to Vietnam without Congress's permission.
- The US government used the **CIA** to break many laws during the conflict. The CIA was forbidden by law to conduct secret operations inside the US, but in Operation Chaos, it kept files on thousands of Americans, infiltrated college groups and opened private letters. These revelations also undermined the American public's confidence in their government and in the democratic process.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the effects on the US of the invasion of Cambodia?
2. What agreements were reached in Paris between the US and North Vietnam?
3. How did Vietnam become Communist?
4. What were the main effects of the Vietnam War on the US?

Détente, **SALT** and *Star Wars*

Nixon and Détente

Nixon's other main foreign policy concern was Cold War relations with the Soviet Union and China. He developed his foreign policy with **Henry Kissinger**, his National Security Adviser and later his Secretary of State. They believed that the US must look after its own interests. They were both **suspicious people** so they often negotiated in **secrecy** and set up secret channels of communication which bypassed the State Department (which was also responsible for foreign policy) and Congress. This was called **shuttle diplomacy**. This was another aspect of the **imperial presidency**, which reached its peak during Nixon's term of office.

Nixon still believed in the **policy of containment** but he approached it in a different way. He developed a policy of **détente** - that is trying to improve relations with the Soviet Union and China. This was linked to the **Nixon Doctrine** (getting countries which faced internal Communist aggression to take on more responsibility of fighting for themselves). He was hoping that détente would ease tensions so that he could cut military spending.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was Nixon's shuttle diplomacy?
2. What was the policy of détente and why did Nixon favour it?

Nixon's Visits to China and Russia

Nixon and Kissinger used **back channels** to organise Nixon's visit to China in 1972. His visit caught many people in the US and outside by surprise because Nixon had a reputation as a **Cold War warrior** and the US had tried to **isolate Communist China** since 1949.

However, Nixon hoped to improve relations with China, increase US-China trade, put pressure on North Vietnam in the peace negotiations and to play off China and the USSR against each other. It also helped Nixon in the presidential election year of 1972 because television pictures of his visit to the **Great Wall of China** were beamed back to the US. In spite of Nixon's claim that *'This was the week that changed the world'*, his visit was mainly symbolic.

However, Nixon did successfully play off China and the USSR. The Soviets feared that they would be isolated, so two months after his visit, Nixon had a summit meeting in **Moscow** with **Brezhnev**, the Soviet leader. This was the first visit by a serving American President to the Kremlin. The leaders agreed on the **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I)**. This treaty put a limit to the number of ICBMS (intercontinental ballistic missiles) and submarine-based missiles for five years. Even though there was still much scope for developing other types of nuclear weapons, **SALT I** showed that both sides realised the dangers of the arms race. The two countries signed a further agreement to work together for **peaceful co-existence**, *'to do their utmost to avoid military confrontation and to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war'*. This was a significant victory for the policy of détente, which was strengthened by **Brezhnev's visit** to the US in 1973.

Arab-Israeli War, 1973 - Its Impact on Détente

However, détente was put to a **severe test** when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in October 1973 (in the Arab-Israeli - Yom Kippur - War). The USSR had supported Egypt and Syria before the war and the US supported Israel. There was a danger that détente would be destroyed. **Kissinger** was sent to Moscow to work out a truce. The Israelis refused to agree and the Soviets said it should be enforced by the two superpowers. Nixon disagreed and put the US on **nuclear alert**. One year after SALT I, détente seemed to be collapsing, but both sides backed down and a truce was agreed.

Chile and the CIA

In spite of Nixon's visits to China and Russia, it was clear that Cold War tensions were still strong. Some accused Nixon of mainly undertaking his visits for **election purposes** in the election year of 1972. Indeed, Nixon's treatment of **Chile** showed he was still the Cold War warrior. He tried to prevent the election of the socialist **Salvador Allende** as President of Chile. When that failed, he used the CIA to undermine Allende's rule and this led to Allende's overthrow and assassination in 1973. In this way, Nixon was following the traditional **policy of containment**.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did Nixon improve relations with:
 - a. China?
 - b. the Soviet Union?
2. What effect did the Arab-Israeli War have on the policy of détente?
3. What incidents or events show that Nixon was still a Cold War warrior?

Ford and Détente

President Ford, who succeeded Nixon after he resigned over the Watergate scandal, continued the policy of **détente**. He relied on Henry Kissinger as his Secretary of State and this provided continuity of policy. Ford met **Brezhnev** in **Vladivostok** in 1974 and agreed on a second round of SALT talks.

Détente took another major step when Ford and Brezhnev, along with 33 other government leaders, signed the Helsinki Agreement in 1975. They agreed to:

- Respect each others' borders, which applied particularly to Europe.
- Allow freedom of travel, and encourage trade and cultural links.
- Respect human rights.

But Congress was opposed to other aspects of Ford's policies. It refused to send military aid to the **collapsing South Vietnamese government**, which was attacked by North Vietnam in 1975. It also rejected his proposals to send arms and equipment to anti-Communist forces in **Angola**. Congress feared that the US would be dragged into another foreign war.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did Ford continue the policy of détente?
2. How did Congress oppose some of Ford's foreign policy?

Carter's Foreign Policy and SALT II

Carter's foreign policy differed from that of Nixon and Ford. He wanted a foreign policy based on **moral principles** - based on honour and right. But Carter was very **inexperienced** in foreign policy. Because he relied for advice on two different points of view - that of his Secretary of State, **Cyrus Vance**, as well as his Secretary of Defense, **Zbigniew Brzezinski** - his policy was often inconsistent.

He wanted to reduce arms but he was also critical of the Soviet Union for its treatment of **dissidents** (political protestors) in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union itself. This criticism upset the Russians and this put détente under pressure. Further difficulties were caused between the two superpowers when Carter arranged a peace agreement between **Egypt and Israel** in 1978 without involving the Soviet Union (the Camp David Agreement).

SALT II

The SALT talks continued slowly and once again the US played the **China card** when the Chinese leader, **Deng Xiaoping**, visited the US. The Soviet Union feared isolation again and soon an agreement on arms limitation - **SALT II** - was reached with the US in 1979. This put a limit (on missiles and bombers) of 2,400 per country. But this did not stop the USSR installing SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe and the US countering with Pershing missiles. SALT II was also criticised in the US, where the liberals said it did not go far enough while the conservative right wing said it went too far.

However, even the limited agreement was halted when the USSR invaded **Afghanistan** in December 1979 and Congress **refused to ratify** the treaty. In his State of the Union speech, Carter said the Soviet invasion was *'the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War'*. He caused relations with the Soviet Union to deteriorate by suspending grain sales to that country and by boycotting the **Olympic Games** in Moscow in 1980. This was the end of détente.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did Carter's foreign policy differ from Nixon's and Ford's?
2. What was SALT II?
3. What actions did Carter carry out that undermined détente?

Reagan and Star Wars

By the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Cold War tensions between the US and USSR increased:

- The **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan** confirmed to the US that the Soviet Union had not changed since 1945 - it was still aggressive and expansionist.
- Reagan introduced an **aggressive tone** to his foreign policy - he wanted military superiority over the Soviet Union, which he said was the evil empire aiming for world domination.

Reagan began a huge **arms build-up**. Over \$550 billion a year was spent on conventional and nuclear weapons. New weapons such as the **stealth bomber** were developed. At the same time, however, Reagan was prepared to discuss **arms reduction**. But because of mistrust between the two sides, the **Strategic Arms Reduction Talks** (START) which began in 1982 failed.

In 1982, Reagan wrote a **private letter** which explained his approach to the Soviet Union.

'I don't underestimate the imperialist ambitions of the Soviet Union... I want more than anything to bring them into realistic arms-reduction talks. To do this they must be convinced that the alternative is a build-up militarily by us. They have stretched their economy to the limit to maintain their programme. They know they cannot match us in an arms race if we are determined to catch up. Our true ultimate purpose is arms reduction.'

Reagan and Star Wars

To achieve this he was prepared to tolerate huge **budget deficits**.

The following year Reagan announced that the US was developing the **Strategic Defense Initiative** (SDI), popularly called **Star Wars**. This was a plan to develop a **defence shield** in space which would destroy any missiles fired at the US. Some scientists doubted if the US could develop such a shield. Others said they could and that it would make all Soviet missiles obsolete.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Cold War tensions increase between the US and the USSR in the late 1970s and early 1980s?
2. Why did Reagan begin a large arms build-up?

Star Wars and Relations with the Soviet Union

SDI was a barrier to US-Soviet agreement when **Reagan and Gorbachev**, the new Soviet leader, met in **Geneva** and **Reykjavik**. Gorbachev objected to extending the arms race into space, while Reagan said the US would share the Star Wars technology. But Gorbachev did not believe him. However, agreement was eventually reached in 1987 when they signed the **Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty** (INF) in Washington. This led to the dismantling of the Soviet SS-20 missiles and the US Pershing missiles in Europe. But Reagan still refused to abandon the Star Wars project.

Some historians believe that **Reagan's tough policy** and his increase in armaments forced the Soviet Union to see that it could not compete. Others think that the **growing understanding** between Reagan and Gorbachev was more important. At any rate, it was clear that Gorbachev wanted to reform the Soviet Union and reduce arms, and Reagan was prepared to negotiate. A further improvement in relations occurred between the two states when Reagan visited **Moscow** in 1988.

The Policy of Containment - A Successful Policy?

Shortly after, however, **Gorbachev's reform movement** led to a process which caused the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe (1989) and finally the **downfall of Communism** in Russia (1991). The US policy of containment **contributed** to this downfall. It forced the Soviet Union to maintain huge spending on armaments which would have been better used in improving the economy and social conditions in the USSR. Ultimately the USSR could not compete with the spending of the stronger US economy. But reforms to reduce military spending in the USSR undermined Communism and led to its collapse and the **end of the Cold War**. The US became the world's most dominant power.

One of the authors of the policy of containment in the 1940s assessed the **cost of the victory** of that policy:

'We paid with 40 years of enormous and unnecessary military expenditures [spending]. We paid through the cultivation of nuclear weaponry to the point where the vast and useless nuclear arsenals had become a danger to the very environment of the planet.. We paid all this because we were too timid to negotiate.'

But those who supported the policy of containment also argued that it **avoided war with the Soviet Union** and discouraged or **prevented a Soviet invasion of Western Europe**.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was Star Wars?
2. How did Star Wars affect relations between the US and the USSR?
3. When Communism collapsed in the Soviet Union in 1919, did that mean the policy of containment was successful?