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THE US VS. THE WORLD

Where Are We, How Did We Get Into This, and What Will We Do After Henry Is Gone?

By Tad Szulc

The state of American foreign policy in this Bicentennial and election year is, to put it mildly, not satisfactory.

In fact, for reasons ranging from the avoidable to the inevitable, our foreign policy in 1976 seems to be in more disarray than at any time since the immediate postwar period when, because of our wealth and short-lived nuclear monopoly, we undertook world leadership.

Today one finds here a sense of helplessness that is as startling as it is blown all out of proportion. Still, the reality is that policies that looked relatively clear—if not always entirely wise—even three years ago have now lost cohesion and direction. Or so it appears to many of those observing the torturous conduct of our foreign affairs. Thus the United States is confused about *détente* with the Soviet Union, nervous about Western Europe, uncertain over the new turmoil in China, upset over Angola and Southern Africa, and divided over Israel.

In this pessimistic and moody city, we are again concerned about our adversaries, unsure of our allies, and perplexed by the emergence of the new and powerful alliance that we call the Third World. Most of the time we are on the defensive, often in petulant ways unbecoming a great republic. We oscillate between threats of intervention and unnecessary isolationism. We improvise rather than lead.

Such debate on foreign policy as exists is characterized by personality conflicts, irrelevance, politicking, and misinformation (the latter being compounded by the Administration's devotion to secrecy and its penchant to mislead). The Congress, frequently at odds with the White House over much of the policy, rarely adds to the quality of the debate. Great foreign policy debates seem to be a thing of the past.

The paralysis in foreign policy has reached the point where the Ford Administration does little beyond responding to criticisms. A whole implausible argument has developed among President Ford, Ronald Reagan, and Senator Henry Jackson over whether the United States retains military superiority over the Soviet Union. Reagan and Jackson improbably accuse the President of weakening our defense posture; Ford responds that under his Administration the United States is and will remain "Number One." This is a non-issue inasmuch as Ford obviously does not favor an American inferiority and there is little that Reagan or Jackson could

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th... return to the Cold War, something that the President clearly doesn't propose. Thus semantics become a substitute for policy.

On the Democratic side, the picture is just as uninspiring. The apparent liquidation of the party's liberal wing in the spring primaries has left only the centrist contingent: Jimmy Carter, Jackson, and, very possibly, Hubert Humphrey. Front-running Carter's foreign policy ideas, to the extent that they are clear to anyone, are conventional: He is for a strong defense establishment, against US interventionist adventures (although he defended Ford's Indochina policy almost up to the day Saigon fell a year ago), and in favor generally of improving relations with one and all in the world. Jackson emphasizes a strong stand toward the Soviet Union and a clearly pro-Israeli policy. Humphrey's views have not markedly changed since 1968: He takes all the right liberal positions, but brings no noticeable leadership at this time. On foreign policy alone, then, one would be hard put to choose among the Presidential candidates.

President Ford, never strong in foreign policy, leans on Secretary of State Kissinger, but the latter has contrived to make his own controversial personality into an election issue, thus increasingly becoming a liability to the President. Once sacrosanct, Kissinger has managed to antagonize both the conservatives and the liberals—for reasons ranging from *détente* to his stance on Angola and Cuba—and is no longer a major force in policy-making.

Rather than pulling together his disintegrating foreign policy establishment, Kissinger has been barnstorming the country with speeches that range from expressions of deep pessimism about the fate of the West to mysterious threats as to what the United States might do about the uppity Cubans—only to take his words back when challenged by the Senate. An example of the Washington feelings about Kissinger was a recent dinner-speech remark by Senator Stuart Symington: "We spent the morning listening to Kissinger explaining his explanations. . . ."

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