To consider the past half-century of national security policy today, in the wake of great military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, invites the thought that the more things change, the more they remain the same. In the shadow of the first years of the Cold War, the dominant theme of the Eisenhower Administration was the simple but powerful “Peace through Strength.” In tandem with “Peace and Prosperity,” it brought to the nation not only a certain sense of security, but also sent an unmistakable message to the Soviet Union and other potential adversaries.

Now, five decades on, the Bush Administration proclaims “Peace through Strength” as its own national security strategy, using the motto as a metaphor to drive home its intention to discharge America’s responsibilities as the only global superpower and sending a message abroad. But unlike the 1950s, now in a world much more fragmented and diverse, many traditional allies have deserted the United States, some bitterly resenting our position of leadership.

**The Eisenhower Years: Peace, Progress, and Prosperity**

In the fall of 1953, as ISI was born, Dwight Eisenhower was in his first year as President, already deep in the process of fulfilling his campaign promise to bring the Korean War to an end. There was a truce, a shaky and uncertain outcome to a military stalemate on the Korean Peninsula that had cost the United States more than 50,000 casualties—but not yet a peace treaty. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was barely four years old. The People’s Republic of China was approaching its fourth year in power, in the early stages of imposing its brutal Maoist brand of communist rule after having driven Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists to the island of Formosa. Just months earlier, in March 1953, Stalin had died, and the Soviet leadership fell to Georgy Malenkov, who would by 1955 be moved aside and replaced by Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin.

Determined to avoid the mistake of rapid U.S. demobilization after World War II, the Eisenhower Administration made important investments in modernizing weapons systems, many of which would still be in use a decade and more later. The last part of the Iron Curtain that had dropped down across Central Europe in 1948 after the communist coup d’etat in Czechoslovakia now sealed the satellite states into the Soviet orbit. Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, had come to office pledging...
ing a new foreign policy, one based not simply on defending the West against Soviet encroachment, but on openly encouraging “liberation” of the captive nations. Thus began the classic debate between advocates of “liberation” and advocates of “containment.”

In late July 1956, Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. The British and French owners of the canal, alarmed at the prospect of losing their dominance in the region, persuaded the Israelis to invade the Sinai. Simultaneously, Hungarian workers were intensifying resistance to Soviet rule in their country, and in October, Hungarian Premier Imre Nagy joined that resistance. Serious clashes broke out. The Hungarians, exhorted by the West and especially the United States, went into full-scale revolt against their Soviet occupiers in the belief that America would come to their aid. But on November 4, the Soviets invaded Hungary, laying waste to Budapest and replacing Nagy with a communist functionary, Janos Kadar. More than 200,000 Hungarians fled their country and thousands more were arrested, killed, or executed—including Premier Nagy—before the Hungarian Revolution was finally quashed. The U.S. appealed to the United Nations for action in Hungary, but the British and French, angered by U.S. actions on Suez, declined to give their support. Thus came to an unhappy end the vaunted policy of “liberation.” National Review, then scarcely a year old, railed at the timidity of the Eisenhower Administration; American conservatives were deeply disturbed.

Meanwhile, Eisenhower, concerned that the Suez crisis would bring direct Soviet intervention in the Middle East, joined with the United Nations to apply pressure to the British, French, and Israelis to withdraw. In late November they did. Many still argue that had Eisenhower supported the Suez invaders and deflected the Soviet threat to intervene, the face of the Middle East would today be vastly different, and that had the Administration not been paralyzed in its response to events in Hungary, the Soviet Union would have been significantly weakened, thus offering hope to the captive nations that would have to endure another three decades of oppression.

Although the Eisenhower years were essentially calm in domestic political terms, the uproar over Senator Joseph McCarthy’s investigation into subversive activities generated a storm of protest. McCarthy was motivated by anti-communism, a theme of American administrations since Truman, but his tactics and public demeanor drew the concentrated fire of liberals and the media. In response, “anti-anti-communism” grew in respectability, receiving substantial assistance from the dominant Liberal Establishment for years to come.

McCarthy also probed the Truman Administration’s China policy, focusing on the victory of the Chinese Communists under Mao Tse-tung on October 1, 1949. He, and others, wanted to know “who lost China.” His investigations, much pilloried by the media and the Left, actually revealed shocking details of the malign and misguided influences operating within the State Department.

In January 1959, Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba, and a major debate about Castro developed. In April, Castro visited New York and Washington, meeting with Vice President Nixon and declaring, “No soy comunista” (“I am not a communist”). Influential New York Times columnists Harrison Salisbury and Herbert Matthews, among others, argued that the U.S. needed to give Castro a chance, but it was not long before Castro moved to establish a classic communist dictatorship in Cuba. Three years later he would declare, “I am and have been a communist all my life, and will al-
ways be one.” It was a major setback for an Administration that had vowed to prevent any new communist governments from being established on its watch.

Ike’s eight years were characterized by traditional cooperation between the Executive and Congress on matters of foreign and defense policy. We had not yet reached the time of the “great divide,” when partisan rancor over national security issues spilled into everyday debate to do violence to bipartisanship in such matters.

**The Kennedy-Johnson Era: New Frontier and Great Society**

The 1960 election, pitting Vice President Richard Nixon against Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy, heralded not only a new form of campaigning, highlighting the growing importance of television (stressing “style”) in politics, but also introduced anew method of injecting national security issues into a campaign. With little traction against the solid accomplishments of Eisenhower’s eight years of accelerated arms buildup and America’s entry into the race with the Soviets for outer space, Kennedy was left with few credentials in the realm of national security.

From 1957 on, the United States had carefully tracked Soviet progress in missile development. The Gaither Committee, specially appointed, produced a secret report on the subject, and National Intelligence Estimates reflected growing concern about possible Soviet superiority in this field. Emboldened by the still-secret Gaither report, by several leaked Air Force reports that suggested a “missile gap” in favor of the Soviets, and by the U-2 incident in May of 1960, Kennedy went public with the charge. Eisenhower and Nixon, unable to reveal top-secret satellite intelligence that demonstrated there was no such “gap,” were suddenly at a disadvantage.

The “missile gap” charge was instrumental in Kennedy’s cliffhanger victory over Nixon in 1960; when combined with his constant theme that “we’ve got to get America moving again” (implying that a robust economy and a rapidly expanding science and technology base were somehow inducing stagnation), it provided the momentum to put Kennedy first across the finish line. A few months later, safely in office, Robert McNamara announced that there was no “missile gap” after all.

The Kennedy team stormed Washington in a highly effective manner. Glamorous, young, articulate, brash, and confident, the new Administration quickly seized the political high ground and, as the lore has it, “captured the imagination of America”—and much of the rest of the world. In his inaugural speech, Kennedy declared his willingness “to pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

But it was not long before the New Frontier buckled under the reality of governance, blundering badly in the Bay of Pigs fiasco. A C.I.A. plan for the invasion of Cuba, originating in the Eisenhower Administration, was approved by Kennedy and implemented. The notion was to provide arms and cover for a brigade of several thousand Cuban exiles to be landed in Cuba to form the nucleus of popular resistance to Castro, and to reinforce their efforts with air strikes by C.I.A. planes. At the critical moment, as the invading Cuban exiles were being pounded by Castro’s forces, the Administration lost its nerve and called off the promised air support. The results were heavy losses to the invaders, capture of the remainder, and the ultimate ransoming of the prisoners—and, not least, an enormous black eye for the Kennedy Administration. In the wake of the disaster, C.I.A. Director Allen Dulles was replaced. Cuba would
become a centerpiece of the Administration’s foreign policy record.

In the summer of 1962 there were increasing signs of Soviet activity in Cuba. By the fall, Republican senators were speaking frequently on the Senate floor, attacking the Administration for doing “nothing” while the Soviets were busy building intermediate-range missile installations in Cuba. The Administration maintained its silence.

By October the evidence was mounting, causing enormous pressure on Kennedy. Finally, on October 22, Kennedy delivered an electrifying address to the nation, revealing the extent of the Soviet buildup and announcing that America would now react. There followed seven tense days in which the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were “eye-ball to eye-ball.” On October 28, Kennedy announced that the Soviets had agreed to withdraw their missiles. Not revealed at the time were the two key concessions Kennedy gave in exchange—a promise not to invade Cuba, and the withdrawal of U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey. The outcome was hailed as a great victory for American resolve, though critics observed that we had, in the end, paid a heavy price for a mere return to the status quo ante by delivering a pledge not to invade Cuba.

The outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis helped exacerbate the growing differences between China and the Soviet Union; Mao Tse-tung declared the Soviets to be “cowards” for having withdrawn. This would prove to be the start of the “Sino-Soviet split,” a factor in world politics that lasted well into the second Reagan Administration, with successive American Presidents seeking to take advantage of the strained relationship.

In a June 1963 speech, Kennedy proposed to open a new chapter in relations with the Soviet Union, calling for a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. It was negotiated and, after considerable debate in the Senate, ratified. Kennedy hailed it as a strategic accomplishment; he and his principal advisors concluded that the Soviets would abide by it, and that, after having come face-to-face with overwhelming American nuclear superiority in the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S.S.R. would never catch up with American military power. But Khrushchev, chagrined and embarrassed that his Cuban gambit was foiled, determined that never again would the Soviet Union be inferior in a confrontation with the U.S.; his goal henceforth would be military superiority, and he put the U.S.S.R. on a course to achieve it.

Vietnam, America’s most unpopular war and one that was lost decisively, traces its origins to the Kennedy Administration. The President, who had as a young congressman traveled to Vietnam, was intrigued with the possibilities of halting what he perceived to be communist aggression in the former French colony. By mid-1963, Kennedy had increased the number of American military “advisers” in South Vietnam to 16,500, but the communists pressed their revolutionary advances. Rebuffed in Cuba, taken to stalemate and compromise in the confrontation with Khrushchev, Kennedy badly wanted to succeed in Vietnam. But an assassin’s bullet brought the New Frontier to a tragic end on November 22, 1963, and the country had a new President: Lyndon Baines Johnson.
Vowing to continue the struggle in Vietnam, Johnson eventually took personal charge of the war, down to the conduct of specific military operations. A relentless taskmaster, the new President vowed to succeed where the French and, apparently, Kennedy had failed. His military buildup in Vietnam eventually brought troop levels to more than half a million, with mounting casualties.

On the European front, Johnson moved to strengthen NATO while at the same time engaging the Soviets. Safely re-elected in a landslide over Barry Goldwater in 1964, Johnson began in earnest to entice the Soviets into a different relationship, essentially overlooking the massive Soviet support flowing to North Vietnam. Meanwhile, Khrushchev, increasingly embattled at home and under mounting pressure from the People’s Republic of China, was unceremoniously dumped and succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev as Communist Party General Secretary and Alexei Kosygin as Soviet Premier. “B and K,” as they were known, began their own “charm offensive” in Europe, India, and among the less developed countries—the latter in part because of a Chinese campaign calling for “people’s war” in those regions. According to Mao’s version of Marxism-Leninism, it would be possible, based on the Chinese example, to bypass the industrial stage of capitalist development and move directly from a peasant society to a “classless” communist society. A global rivalry for influence was under way, with both China and the Soviet Union considering the outcome in Vietnam to be pivotal.

In foreign policy, the Johnson Administration took a problem-solving approach, without any grand strategic vision. The tempo of bad news from Vietnam intensified, especially after the Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964. At home, resistance to the war built up across the country and in the Senate, where William Fulbright, chairman of the influential Foreign Relations Committee, repeatedly denounced U.S. policy. Finally, Fulbright openly broke with Johnson and aligned himself with the opponents of the war.

One significant outcome of the Khrushchev decision in 1962 to build Soviet military power into a position of superiority was increased research and development for a Soviet anti-ballistic missile capability. The Pentagon pressed for an invigorated U.S. program, but McNamara resisted. The deployment of a primitive Soviet system proceeded. In June 1967, Johnson held an summit meeting with Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin in Glassboro, NJ, in an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade the Soviets from further deployment.

Frustrated by the failure, Johnson renewed his efforts to win in Vietnam, but the reverses continued, casualties mounted, and domestic opposition grew exponentially, especially with the massive Tet Offensive launched by the North Vietnamese in late January 1968. As the lame duck Johnson Administration limped toward the November election, candidate Richard Nixon claimed that he had a plan to end the Vietnam War (inaccurately reported and criticized as a “secret” plan), and the battle with Hubert Humphrey was joined.

In the midst of the 1968 presidential campaign, in the early hours of August 21, Soviet troops and tanks entered Prague to quell a growing rebellion against Soviet occupation there. Earlier, hardliner Antonin Novotny had been replaced as Czech leader by Alexander Dubcek, a reformer who allowed rapid liberalization. Brezhnev, alarmed at the possible loss of a key satellite state on the border of Germany and Austria, declared the right of the Soviet Union to defend its sphere of influence. Thus was born the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” which declared communist gains to be irre-
versible. The Soviet invasion became an important factor in the 1968 election, and inspired a poem by W.H. Auden:

August 1968
The Ogre does what ogres can,
Deeds quite impossible for Man,
But one prize is beyond his reach:
The Ogre cannot master speech.

About a subjugated plain,
Among its desperate and slain,
The Ogre stalks with hands on hips,
While drivel gushes from his lips.

Nixon and Ford: Mastery or Drift?

Richard Nixon came to office in 1969 well prepared, with an ambitious agenda, unparalleled experience in the field of foreign affairs, and determined to run foreign relations from the Oval Office. Deliberately shutting out the State Department even while appointing an old and trusted friend as Secretary of State (William D. Rogers), Nixon entrusted policy generation and, in several critical areas, implementation, to the National Security Council under the direction of Harvard professor Henry Kissinger.

Nixon determined that the United States would not “cut and run” from Vietnam, believing that a quick exit would be interpreted as a defeat and make America look like “a pitiful, helpless giant.” A staunch anti-communist who knew the Soviet Union and its leaders well, Nixon understood the global strategic context for restoring America’s stature in the world. A deeply secret initiative in this process was the attempt to open up a dialogue with China, from which the United States had been estranged and without contact since October 1949. Nixon had actually written elliptically of this prospect in an article, “Asia After Vietnam,” in the October 1967 issue of Foreign Affairs, but it was disregarded as campaign rhetoric. It was an elaboration of this article’s themes that Nixon had in mind when he spoke of a “plan to end the Vietnam War.”

Vietnam remained the Administration’s central preoccupation. Nixon sought various ways out, including launching the secret bombing of North Vietnam’s sanctuaries in Cambodia. In June 1969, Nixon ordered the first contingent of troops out of Vietnam, leaving 475,000 in place. By that time, 31,000 Americans had been killed in combat. In July, at Guam, he began the process of “Vietnamizing” the war by declaring that the United States would continue to assist friendly nations under attack, but would look to any nation so threatened to provide the manpower to defend itself. In November, in a major address that restated and codified the Guam principles as the “Nixon Doctrine,” Nixon emphasized that in making the shift, the United States would keep all its treaty commitments. It was a major bid to extricate the United States from Vietnam, under conditions of “an honorable peace.”

While seeking to disengage in Vietnam and to strengthen regional alliances, Nixon worked hard on the European front to bolster NATO. By so doing, he reasoned, he could blunt growing Soviet influence in the east while working to force the Soviets to the negotiating table. In early 1969 he had decided to deploy the “Safeguard” antimissile system at a single site, a demonstration of American capability, but sought to develop greater restraints on the Soviet Union. Ongoing negotiations produced the Antiballistic Missile Treaty of May 1972, which was quickly debated and approved by the Senate in August. The treaty permitted two deployment areas (later reduced by protocol to one) deliberately located in a manner designed to prevent national area defense. The doctrine of Mutual Assured
Destruction (MAD) was thus formally enshrined, as the treaty specifically left in place the capability for constantly improving missile penetration capabilities. Opponents of missile defense, who argued that it was “provocative” and “destabilizing,” hailed the treaty as a major advance in arms control. By holding each other hostage and being assured that a missile strike would inevitably bring massive retaliation, the theory went, neither side would risk a launch and global “stability” would be enhanced. Kissinger insisted that “by setting a limit to ABM defenses, the treaty not only eliminates one area of potentially dangerous defensive competition, but it reduces the incentive for continuing deployment of offensive systems.” This supposition would not be borne out by later events.

Moreover, Nixon argued, the United States would employ “linkage” in its dealings with the Soviet Union, explaining that relations in areas such as trade and technology transfer would be “linked” to Soviet cooperation in the Middle East, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Nixon’s hand was enhanced by evolving secret contacts with China, established and developed by Kissinger under Nixon’s constant watch.

By force of his personality and deep experience, and even with a Congress dominated by Democrats, Nixon was able to steer the ship of state with relatively little opposition on policy or political grounds. It was hard for any congressman to challenge him successfully, and few even tried. To be sure, Nixon had a vision of America’s place in the world, but he accepted the notion of fundamental stalemate in the relationship with the U.S.S.R. In 1972, it was not possible to conceive of a world without the Soviets.

In February 1972, as he prepared for his re-election campaign, Nixon made the dramatic announcement of his impending visit to China; he flew there at the end of the month. It was a stunning achievement, and he had accomplished the groundwork with perfect stealth. Nixon even managed to persuade then-Governor Ronald Reagan to travel to Taiwan to explain the trip to Chiang Kai-shek, and also convinced Senator Barry Goldwater to hold his fire, citing the long-term strategic advantages to the United States. The Soviet reaction was one of utter shock; a key Kremlin advisor said it “hit like a bolt from the blue,” and there was widespread fear that China would, as a result, align with the U.S. against the Soviet Union. That thought was uppermost in Nixon’s mind: the “China Card” came into play for the first time.

The impact on U.S.-Soviet relations would not be lost: Nixon traveled to Moscow in May, and there, after three years of stalled negotiations, signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with Brezhnev. The treaty provided for a “freeze” on both sides at existing levels and the destruction of older missiles. With these significant accomplishments in his pocket, Nixon sailed into the November elections, trouncing Senator George McGovern in a landslide.

But the unraveling of the Nixon Presidency began almost immediately in the new term, as the unfolding of the Watergate drama and the ensuing cover-up slowly crept into the media. In the thick of his struggle with the Congress, Nixon was confronted with a joint Egyptian-Syrian attack...
on Israel on October 6, 1973, the Yom Kippur War. A see-saw battle at first, the Israelis eventually gained the upper hand. But pressured by the United States and the Soviet Union, with Brezhnev threatening unilateral action if they did not withdraw, Israel did not press its advantage—despite having suffered more than 6,000 casualties, heavy equipment loss, and a multi-billion dollar economic blow.

**Transition to Ford and the Policy of Détente**

The Watergate crisis erupted into a full-scale congressional assault on Nixon, who finally decided to resign after being charged by the House Judiciary Committee with “high crimes and misdemeanors.” Gerald R. Ford ascended to the Presidency, and proceeded to pursue the main lines of Nixon’s foreign policy.

As the theory of linkage progressed, it gradually became a doctrine of sorts, accruing the title of “détente.” In classical diplomatic terminology, détente meant merely “relaxation of tensions,” a tactic, but in the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger context, it was elevated to policy status. Critics charged that it was all well and good to employ a carrot-and-stick approach, promising the Soviet Union certain benefits for good behavior, but the obvious difficulty lay in the hard fact that the stick was never employed. Ford, the consummate pragmatist, relied heavily on his staff and cabinet, and in the field of foreign policy, Kissinger had no equal.

As it became increasingly obvious that the policy of détente was failing to pay dividends, and as the Soviet military buildup continued (the extension of Khrushchev’s 1963 decision never again be in an inferior position when confronting the United States), concern grew among conservative Republicans. Ronald Reagan resolved to challenge the sitting Republican President, and after several initial setbacks, energized his campaign when he launched a frontal attack on détente as a flawed and dangerous policy. Carrying the fight to the Republican National Convention in Kansas City, Reagan came within a whisker of seizing the nomination in 1976. Ford went down to a decisive defeat in November, leaving no foreign policy legacy, or even a significant accomplishment.

**The Carter Presidency**

Jimmy Carter’s first major foray into the foreign policy arena came with a commencement speech delivered at Notre Dame in May 1977, when he declared that the United States should no longer have “an inordinate fear of communism.” It was a harbinger of things to come. Carter began his Presidency with a series of assumptions about his personal capacity to change the world and advance human rights, to recapture the “moral high ground.” He was particularly interested in changing the behavior of the Soviet Union, believing that an open and friendly, less “militaristic” approach could bring results, especially in the field of arms control. Thus, he made a SALT II agreement the centerpiece of U.S.-Soviet relations.

Coming to power in the backlash against Watergate, Carter also harbored a deep distrust of the intelligence community, which he believed had stepped beyond the boundaries of legality. He and his C.I.A. Director, Annapolis classmate Stansfield Turner, proceeded to rearrange and dismantle important elements in the human intelligence capacity of the C.I.A. in favor of less risky “national technical means.” The impact on intelligence collection and analysis, much less morale, was profound and would last for decades.

Carter soon ran into the realities of
Washington policy infighting, and SALT II gained no significant traction. Important Democrats in Congress were skeptical, and several very prominent Democrats outside government joined forces with a few Republican experts to form The Committee On The Present Danger, an organization that would figure prominently as a “bridge” to Democrats in the 1980 election.

By 1979, the Carter Administration had but meager achievements in foreign policy, with only the Panama Canal Treaty counted in the success column. In January, the Administration announced its intention to recognize the People’s Republic of China. The Soviet Union was on the march in several areas of the world. Iran was in ferment. In January, the Shah fled Tehran for Switzerland, and the Ayatollah Khomeini was installed in his stead. In February, the American Ambassador in Afghanistan was murdered, with little reaction from Washington. In November, student mobs attacked the American Embassy in Tehran, taking 52 hostages, and on Christmas Eve, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan to enforce the Brezhnev Doctrine that communist revolutions are irreversible. Reeling from a series of policy setbacks, Carter finally admitted that he was “shocked” by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

As the nation prepared for the 1980 elections, Carter suffered yet another setback in April when a hostage rescue attempt in Iran ended in complete disaster. Carter’s Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, resigned in protest of this militaristic venture. To his credit, but too late to be of any help, Carter moved to increase defense spending. Lacking a grand strategy from the outset, beset by internal Administration bickering, and with interest rates, inflation, and unemployment at all-time highs, Carter’s future was bleak.

On the Republican side, Ronald Reagan systematically eliminated half a dozen competitors and was nominated in August 1980 at Detroit. With the challenge Reagan posed on the domestic front (“Are you better off than you were four years ago?”) and in the foreign policy and national security area (“We need to close the window of vulnerability”), Reagan and running mate George H. Bush swept to victory in a landslide.

“Morning in America”:
The Reagan Theme

The strength of Reagan’s appeal resulted in a bonus: a Republican majority in the Senate, which brought a huge advantage in the realm of foreign policy. Reagan’s campaign themes, reflecting his own deeply held beliefs, were devastatingly simple: “Family, Neighborhood, Work, Peace, Freedom” was the title selected for the Republican Platform, and reflected the blueprint of his agenda for the nation. Symbolically, moments after he was sworn in, the 52 hostages, held captive in Iran for 444 days, were released.

Back in January 1977, just after Carter’s Inauguration, Reagan told me: “My idea about the Cold War is that we win and they lose.” In his first press conference, ten days after his own 1981 Inauguration, Reagan was asked how he evaluated the long-range intentions of the Soviet Union, and he replied: “So far détente’s been a one-way street...they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat...” The effect in Moscow was stunning, and commentators everywhere criticized Reagan for being “aggressive” and “provocative.” His message was easily understood: he did not want an arms race, but if there was going to be one, the United States would not lose it.

Reagan’s distrust of the Soviet Union was rooted in his personal experience with communists and their sympathizers in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s.
and he had long been a close student of dealings with the U.S.S.R. Oddly, while Reagan was a staunch supporter of building military strength, he thought of it more as a demonstration of America's intent than as inherent destructive power. As his actions would later demonstrate, he armed in order to disarm, and in reality, he could even have been viewed (especially in light of the later Reykjavik summit with Gorbachev) as an instinctive disarmer.

After surviving a near-fatal assassination attempt scarcely three months after the Inauguration, from his hospital bed Reagan penned a personal letter to Brezhnev, only to have his personal peace appeal rejected in a torrent of bluster. It was a sort of "last best efforts appeal," but it fell on deaf ears.

Reagan aimed to nullify the Brezhnev Doctrine, and immediately ordered that the United States resist Soviet advances wherever they occurred. Aid to the Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua was increased over strong opposition in Congress, and special efforts were made to stave off a Cuban-aided communist takeover in besieged El Salvador. A complex economic warfare program was put in place, using sophisticated techniques to disinform the Soviets and to bar trade in high technology. The objective was to persuade the Soviets that they could never catch up with the United States, in effect voiding the military buildup that had been started by Khrushchev two decades earlier.

The straw that would finally break the Soviets was the March 1983 announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Immediately derided by critics as a "Star Wars" fantasy and openly provocative, the initiative did not at first gain traction. At the same time, Reagan decided to proceed with the two-track decision in Europe, under which the United States would deploy Pershing II intermediate-range missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles to counter the growing threat of Soviet SS-20 mobile missiles. The deployment would be cancelled, provided the Soviets eliminated their missiles. While the decision was strongly supported by key allied governments—Britain, Germany, and Italy—it was roundly attacked in the U.S. press, and massive protest demonstrations were organized throughout Europe, with generous support from the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the deployment proceeded.

Reagan's first major deployment of U.S. forces came in 1983 to counter an attempted Cuban takeover of the tiny island of Grenada. It was a resounding success, and an important signal that the United States was under new management. In September, Reagan also reacted angrily when the Soviets shot down a Korean commercial airliner that had accidentally strayed into Soviet airspace.

In relatively rapid succession, Brezhnev and successors Andropov and Chernenko died, with Mikhail Gorbachev coming to power in March 1985. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, with whom Reagan had a close working relationship, was the first major Western leader to meet with him, and declared him to be "a man we can do business with."

Throughout his Presidency, Reagan kept his goals in mind as he adjusted strategies to ensure the superiority of American military power in the service of the defense of the West. As he launched a worldwide "crusade for democracy," he was reflecting a personal conviction that freedom and the democratic way go hand-in-hand. He would not be deflected from his goals, and thus by 1988 had set the stage for his successor to bring the Cold War to a decisive conclusion. In one of his most powerful speeches of his Presidency, delivered at the Berlin Wall in 1987, he exclaimed, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!"
George Bush’s election has been characterized by some as Ronald Reagan’s third victory. As a sitting Vice President with impressive credentials in foreign affairs, Bush’s victory in November 1988 over Michael Dukakis was all but foreordained. On entering office, however, Bush decided to clean house of the Reagan appointees and install his own team.

The events of 1989, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of communist rule in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, brought a decisive end to the Cold War. While an entire revisionist history has now developed arguing that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse anyway (some revisionists even argue that Reagan impeded an earlier end to the Cold War) and that Reagan’s initiatives did not “win” the Cold War, it is beyond doubt that Reagan’s clear vision, managed in its final stages by the Bush Administration, was indeed decisive.

Bush, a talented and principled man, was also a pragmatist. While he managed successful and important campaigns in unseating Panama’s dictator Manuel Noriega and dislodging Saddam Hussein from his illegal gains in Kuwait, his Administration failed in several important respects. It will be forever argued that Bush should have “finished” Saddam in 1991 by proceeding to Baghdad, but he and others argue that there was no “mandate” from the United Nations to move north against the dictator. Then, too, Bush hesitated as East Germany was crumbling, was troubled by the revolt of the Balkan states against Soviet rule, urged the Ukraine not to leave the Soviet Union, was displeased by the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, and even held back as Slovenia and Croatia struggled for their independence with the support of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

Clinton: Foreign Policy and the Politics of Spin

During the eight years of the Clinton Administration, foreign policy was viewed through the prism of domestic politics. In fact, foreign policy was often viewed as a nuisance to an Administration that quickly learned that holding political power was the ultimate goal. President Clinton came to office with no clearly defined international objectives, and he took nearly eighteen months to put his foreign policy and national security teams in place. His Administration also presided over a major draw-down in American military strength, instituted in the waning days of the Bush Administration as a reflection of the reduced threat assessment since the end of the Cold War.

Unfortunate outcomes in Somalia in 1993 and in Haiti in 1994 appear to have convinced Clinton that the United States risked more than it gained in such involvements. Throughout his two terms, Clinton remained largely reactive. Although the United States ultimately responded to the brutality and warfare in Yugoslavia, where “ethnic cleansing,” or genocide, was rampant, the response typically came late.

In the face of growing terrorist threats worldwide, including the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, the 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 truck bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the 2000 attack on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen, Clinton’s rhetoric was strong but his actions weak and indecisive. This was especially true in
the response to the embassy bombings: Clinton ordered cruise missile attacks in the Sudan and Afghanistan, with no measurable results.

When North Korea began one of its periodic aggressive eruptions in 1993, threatening to establish a nuclear weapons capability, the Clinton Administration reacted promptly, examining both diplomatic and military options. Opting for a negotiated solution, the Administration signed an “Agreed Framework,” short of a treaty, in which North Korea’s nuclear program and Soviet-style graphite reactors would be mothballed and subjected to I.A.E.A. inspections in exchange for two light water reactors and an annual supply of fuel oil, financed by an international consortium of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. Diplomatic engagement with North Korea continued until the end of the Clinton Administration.

George W. Bush: A New Foreign Policy

The Bush Administration, now three years in office, brought remarkable contrast to the Clinton years, fielding from Day One a national security team of the first rank, perhaps the strongest in the half-century under review here. Moreover, the Administration came to office with a clear and detailed plan, reminiscent of the Reagan approach, to consolidate and renew American military and diplomatic capabilities. The United States, the only remaining superpower, would henceforth shape the agenda in a way to serve American and allied interests. With a solid working majority in both houses of Congress, Bush enjoyed a starting advantage rarely granted a new President.

In 2001, immediate requests for increases in defense spending were sent to Capitol Hill, and the President made a strong case for scrapping the ABM Treaty of 1972 as it was about to expire. The prospective demise of the ABM Treaty produced howls of protest in the liberal media, and outright condemnation from critics abroad. Bush used the North Korean threat as a reason to let the treaty lapse, but he also had his eye on other adversaries, real and potential, including China’s future capabilities. Further evidence of Bush’s intentions was embedded in his flat statement, surpassing the commitment of his predecessors, that the United States would do whatever it takes to defend Taiwan against attack from China.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, only reinforced the Administration’s determination to move in front of the power curve. In eloquent speeches to the nation and to Congress, Bush laid out his case for a declaration of war against “terrorism with a global reach.” The initial response was to cede to Bush all authority required to accomplish the job—especially in the short but effective campaign to oust the Taliban in Afghanistan and to crush Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network there. But when addressing the problem of Saddam Hussein and Iraq, domestic and international support for Bush wavered, then buckled.

The Administration fell into protracted disagreements with France and Germany, and both openly attacked Bush for his insistence on moving against Iraq without U.N. sanction. Bush personally made the case to the United Nations, but could not convince the French, Germans, Russians, or Chinese. A pleasant and valuable surprise came in the form of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s full support for the United States, and at considerable personal political risk. A further dividend for Administration policy came from the former communist states of Eastern Europe—and even some of the former states of the Soviet Union, which offered basing facilities for U.S. forces. Bush had led the charge for the admission of the Eastern European nations into NATO; that...
support yielded important assistance in the actions in Iraq.

To date, Bush has been conducting foreign and national security policy in a convincing and determined manner, with clearly stated goals and a willingness to commit the resources, human and material, to accomplish the job. At the time of this writing, Iraq remains the central focus of Administration policy. The war on terror, Bush has stressed, is a long-term undertaking, and he has personally not retreated from seeing it through. What happens next, in domestic political terms, will be a function of the 2004 elections.

Ten Presidents

Mountains of scholarship, commentary, and opinion have been written about the ten men who have held the Presidency in the last half-century. What has been wrought in this era?

Led at times by brilliant and determined men, at others by indecisive and hesitant ones, the United States has, on balance, fared well. From cramped dormitory quarters in South Bend, Indiana, in the mid-1950s, this author could not begin to conceive of a world without the Soviet Union or of true security against a nuclear missile threat; nor even in later years, well into the 1960s, could a contemporary have imagined a “Communist China” opening to western investment, much less enjoying a $200 billion trade surplus with the United States. That there would be free and sovereign states in Eastern Europe would have been an impossible dream. At the same time, few would have been able to predict the emergence of threats after the Cold War, and notably the international terrorist network.

As we have seen, only a few Presidents entered office with a clear plan of action; some dabbled in the heretofore “safe” field of foreign policy while others were passionately immersed in it. American military power waxed and waned in the half-century, not always measured accurately by the threats perceived.

The historical tally in foreign policy and national security matters favors Presidents persuaded that action, sometimes bold action, in defense of American objectives, and based on a realistic assessment of the intentions of potential enemies, best serves the nation’s interests and keeps the American people safe. Risk, always inherent in a dangerous world, is part of the calculus of leadership. But American Presidents are, by definition, required to be leaders.