



Summits: Substitutes for Strength? Yalta to Geneva — the 40-year record

by Jeffrey St. John

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The first American President who plunged into personal foreign diplomacy was Theodore Roosevelt. His role as peacemaker at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on September 25, 1905 concluded with an agreement between Imperial Japan and Czarist Russia to end the Russo-Japanese War.

Historian Samuel Eliot Morison later maintained that the Treaty of Portsmouth — sired by President Roosevelt 80 years ago — set the stage for World War II in the Pacific. “The treaty established Japan as overlord in Manchuria and enabled her to become the dominant naval power in the Pacific. Between 1941 and 1945, the United States paid heavily for the long-term results of Roosevelt’s meddling. For which, ironically enough, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize,” observed Professor Morison.

In the weeks prior to the Geneva summit between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, an unsubstantiated rumor was making the rounds in Washington. It held that First Lady Nancy Reagan had suggested to the President that his second-term efforts to bring about peace with the Soviets could make him a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In addition to Theodore Roosevelt, only one other U.S. President has received the Nobel Prize for Peace: Woodrow Wilson in 1919. He won it for his ill-fated World War I League of Nations peace effort that actually set the stage for World War II. Nine other Americans over the last 80 years have been awarded the peace prize. The last individual recipient (groups were named later) was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1973. He shared the prize with North Vietnam’s Le Duc Tho for the 1972 Paris peace agreement between North and South Vietnam.

In 1976 — one year after the North Vietnamese Communists completed their military conquest of all of Vietnam in violation of the Kissinger-Tho peace agreement — Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt wrote his *OnWatch — A Memoir*. In it, he related details of a conversation that revealed Henry Kissinger’s worldview. According to Admiral Zumwalt, during a Washington-to-Philadelphia train ride to the 1975 Army-Navy football game, Kissinger expressed the belief that the U.S. was on a downhill course which could not be arrested.

“He states,” Admiral Zumwalt recalled, “that his job is to persuade the Russians to give us the best deal we can get, recognizing that the historical forces favor them. He says he realizes that in the light of history he will be recognized as one of those who negotiated terms favorable to the Soviets, but the American people have only themselves to blame because they lack the stamina to stay the course against the Russians who are ‘Sparta to our Athens.’ I took him on strongly on this, saying that I couldn’t accept that the decision to grant the Soviets superior capability in either



strategic or conventional fields should be done without putting the issue to the people. K. said, 'You don't get reelected to the presidency on the platform that admits you got behind. You talk instead about the great partnership for peace you achieved in your term.'

Henry Kissinger is the acknowledged architect of both détente and summit diplomacy during the White House years of Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Kissinger, Nixon and Ford have prevailed on President Reagan in the last five years — both privately and in public — to continue the policies of détente and summit diplomacy despite their demonstrated failures during the last four decades.

Geneva Summit — 1955

In the last three decades, there have been eight post-World War II summit meetings. By the time of the first of these — held in Geneva in 1955 — it had been a decade since the 1945 Yalta and Potsdam conferences. During that period, the Soviets had consolidated their hold on Eastern Europe; aided the Chinese Communists in their military seizure of power on the China mainland; launched the Korean conflict through their proxy, North Korea; and supplied and directed the conflict in Indochina between the French and the Communist Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh.

The 1955 Geneva summit, attended by the United States, Great Britain and France, came 12 months after the West had agreed to the partition of Indochina into North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. President Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, warned that the meeting was a Kremlin propaganda effort to draw attention away from the formation of the Warsaw Pact — composed of Eastern European satellite nations and the Soviet Union — six months before the Geneva summit.

"Eisenhower, however, did not think the agreement constituted any substantial danger to NATO," wrote historian Elmo Richardson in *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. "Although members of his own party were brandishing copies of the newly published record of the Yalta Conference of 1945, the President refused to permit a chance at peace to be jeopardized by past mistakes Any dangers or disappointments involved in the summit meeting, he reasoned, were preferable to an aimless drift toward conflict."

In his memoirs, *Mandate for Change*, President Eisenhower would later admit that his "Open Skies" disarmament proposal presented at the Geneva summit was rejected by the Soviets, and that at the October 1955 foreign ministers conference "the Soviets had repudiated every measure to which they had agreed in July."

Camp David Summit — 1959

The Geneva summit brought to an end joint allied efforts to negotiate with the Soviets, attempts which had characterized the Yalta, Potsdam and Geneva meetings. Beginning with the September 1959 Camp David summit between President Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, face-to-face diplomacy became the preference of each succeeding President.

"I decided to make an effort that no President ever was called on to make," Eisenhower told



reporters after his Camp David meeting with Nikita Khrushchev. "I want to prove that we are not aggressive, that we seek nobody's territories or possessions; we do not seek to violate anybody else's rights. We are simply trying to be a good partner in this business of searching for peace."

Yet, in the five years between the 1955 Geneva summit and the scheduled Paris summit of 1960, the Soviets had brutally crushed the Hungarian revolt in October 1956, and had watched as their proxy, Egypt's President Nasser, was saved from certain overthrow when President Eisenhower pressured the English, French and Israelis to withdraw their military forces from Suez. Both the Hungarian and Suez crises came on the eve of Eisenhower's 1956 landslide reelection. Later, in 1958, he would be forced to send U.S. troops to Lebanon to block Nasser's effort to annex that country.

summit *n* 2. The utmost height; the culmination; the highest degree; acme; as, the *summit* of human fame.

summit *v.t.* To submit. *Obsolete.*

Webster's New International Dictionary Second Edition Unabridged

He did not demonstrate the same determination, however, when Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba in January 1959. The American and Soviet leaders at the 1959 Camp David summit never discussed the growing body of evidence that Fidel Castro was intent on making Cuba the first Soviet proxy in the Western Hemisphere.

The Cancelled Summit — 1960

The Paris summit of May 1960 was scheduled to convene as the presidential contest between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts was shaping up. However, on May 1, 1960, the Soviets shot down an American high-altitude U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. Although Nikita Khrushchev had known of the U-2 flights when he met with President Eisenhower at Camp David nine months before, he never raised the issue. In May 1960, he used the incident to cancel the Paris summit and to withdraw his invitation for the American President to visit Moscow.

"Khrushchev apparently felt," observed Soviet scholar Dr. Frederick Barghoorn, "he had a golden opportunity to blacken the image of the United States as a 'warmongering' nation. Soviet propaganda regarding the U-2 affair was utilized to build up the Soviet image of the United States as a predatory United States and, at the same time, to terrorize small and weak nations."

The U-2 incident, the never-held Paris summit, and U.S.-Soviet relations became primary foreign policy issues in the presidential race between Nixon and Kennedy. Nikita Khrushchev later admitted to President Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, that the Soviets had favored the election of Senator Kennedy.

President Kennedy's first major foreign policy decision was to proceed with the plan conceived by the Eisenhower Administration to overthrow Fidel Castro with an invasion led by Cuban exiles. The Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 failed mainly because of its premature disclosure in the press, thus forewarning Castro, and because President Kennedy refused to provide the promised military



support for success.

Vienna Summit — 1961

Fresh from his failure to overthrow the Communist regime of Fidel Castro, President Kennedy agreed to meet Soviet Premier Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961.

In *The Soviet Superpower — The Soviet Union 1945-80*, Peter J. Mooney observes that Khrushchev believed he could turn Kennedy's inexperience to advantage, and that the Bay of Pigs failure had placed the American President in a position of weakness. "Khrushchev behaved toward Kennedy," Mooney notes, "with a directness that had been lacking in his dealings with other statesmen. Since Kennedy's inauguration, the Soviet propaganda machine had been relatively conciliatory toward him and restrictions on travel to and from West Berlin had been eased, but after his Vienna 'ultimatum' things changed."

In rapid-fire succession following the Vienna summit, the Soviets moved to deny the West access to West Berlin and started construction of the Berlin Wall, moves which the Kennedy Administration refused to challenge. Within one year, the Soviets had placed missiles in Cuba, leading to the famous Cuban missile crisis of October 1961. That crisis ended with a pledge by President Kennedy not to invade Cuba in exchange for withdrawal of the Soviet missiles.

Despite the Berlin and Cuban crises, the Kennedy Administration then agreed in October 1962 to sell substantial amounts of wheat to the Soviet Union, and concluded a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Kremlin in July 1963.

Just three weeks prior to his assassination, President Kennedy approved the November 1, 1963 overthrow of South Vietnam's President Diem. "Our complicity in his overthrow heightened our responsibility and commitment [in Vietnam]," concluded a secret government study of the war, which later became known as the famous *Pentagon Papers*.

Glassboro Summit — 1967

Four years elapsed between the Kennedy assassination and the June 1967 Glassboro, New Jersey summit between President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin. During that period, the Soviet and Chinese Communists supplied massive amounts of military hardware to the North Vietnamese. That equipment led to the wounding and killing of thousands of American servicemen in a war in which an American military victory was subordinated to international and domestic political considerations.

In his memoirs entitled, *The Vantage Point*, President Johnson disclosed that he decided to meet Kosygin in the small New Jersey college town in order to prevent protestors — for or against the Vietnam War — from besieging the gathering. At it, the President sought to convince the Soviet premier of his sincerity in wanting to begin immediate talks about limiting nuclear weapons and about negotiating a settlement of the Vietnam war. Kosygin wished to talk only about the Middle East and the Israeli destruction of the Soviet-trained and -supplied Egyptian army in the Six Day War that occurred three weeks before the summit. "Each time I mentioned missiles, Kosygin



talked about the Arabs and Israelis,” President Johnson later recalled.

At the start of the session, Kosygin contended that Hanoi was willing to begin talks for a negotiated peace if the U.S. called a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam. President Johnson agreed to stop the bombing but he noted that no response ever came from Moscow or Hanoi. “Despite many subsequent exchanges with the Soviets on Vietnam, they never gave us an answer. Nor did anything ever come from Hanoi,” Johnson maintained.

President Johnson chose not to seek reelection in 1968. His decision followed North Korea’s seizure in January 1968 of the USS Pueblo and North Vietnam’s launching during the same month of the “Tet” military offensive in South Vietnam. Then, while the Democratic Convention in Chicago was turned into a riot — which helped elect Richard Nixon — the Soviets under Leonid Brezhnev invaded Czechoslovakia.

Summits in Moscow — 1972 and Washington — 1973

Henry Kissinger later revealed that, when he became President Nixon’s national security advisor in 1969, he secretly began planning for a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam, an opening to Communist China, and Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) with the Soviets.

In *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, the first President to resign from his office admitted that his summit meetings with Brezhnev in Moscow and Washington were in part an outgrowth of the Soviet Union’s rapidly developing superiority in strategic nuclear weapons. “I knew the Soviets,” Nixon wrote, “were moving much faster than we were in this area. Unless we got some agreement soon, we might face a situation in which we would be weaker than the Soviets in the eyes of our allies, our friends and neutral countries. Therefore, in addition to pinning Brezhnev down to a new agreement by the end of 1974, I specified that we should be talking about reductions and not just limitation of nuclear weapons.”

Vladivostok Summit — 1974

Although President Nixon resigned in August 1974, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger convinced his successor, Gerald R. Ford, to meet with Soviet leader Brezhnev in Vladivostok in November 1974 to conclude a proposed SALT II arms agreement.

Ford later wrote in *A Time to Heal*: “Vladivostok had been an appropriate ending to a journey designed to strengthen ties with old friends and expand areas of agreement with potential adversaries. The results of the trip had exceeded my expectations. There was, of course, no way for me to know at the time that this would be the high-water mark and that the next five and a half months would be the most difficult of my presidency — if not my life.”

The following year, 1975, began with the Soviet abrogation of a trade treaty with the U.S. that had been concluded at the 1972 Moscow summit. The Kremlin objected to a congressional stipulation that the amount of credit the Kremlin would receive was to be based on the number of Soviet Jews allowed to emigrate.

In late April 1975, North Vietnam captured Saigon, abrogating the 1972 Paris peace treaty for



which Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had shared the Nobel Peace Prize. Kissinger and both Presidents Nixon and Ford blamed Congress for the ignominious end to the Vietnam conflict. However, in their book *Kissinger*, authors Marvin and Bernard Kalb implied that when Kissinger signed the 1972 agreement, he privately concluded that it would last only three to four years at the most. Kissinger had a bleaker vision of Saigon's future than Nixon," the authors contended. "He believed that the most that could be salvaged from the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a 'decent interval' between an American pull-out and the possibility of a Communist take-over."

Despite the Vietnam disaster and the important role the Soviets played in that U.S. defeat, Kissinger continued to prevail on President Ford to pursue détente with the Kremlin. When Nobel Prize-winning Soviet author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in a June 30, 1975 speech, characterized détente as a continuation of the Munich appeasement policies of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s, President Ford acted on the recommendation of Secretary Kissinger and refused to invite the Russian novelist to the White House.

Efforts by President Ford to conclude a SALT II agreement with the Soviets did not restrain them from moving into Angola with Cuban proxies. In a Detroit speech given on November 24, 1975, Kissinger openly protested Soviet and Cuban involvement in Angola. In his book, then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Zumwalt recalled that the Secretary of State had admitted to him privately that "in the light of history he [Kissinger] will be recognized as the one who negotiated terms favorable to the Soviets."

Vienna Summit — 1979

From 1976 until President Ford's defeat by Jimmy Carter, Henry Kissinger continued to push for approval of the SALT II agreement. The arms accord was officially signed by President Carter and Soviet leader Brezhnev at the June 1979 summit in Vienna.

Then, in July 1979, the Soviet- and Cuban-backed Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua. In September 1979, the Soviets reinforced their troop strength in Cuba. These two developments — combined with Soviet-Cuban advances in Africa and Asia during the détente era of the 1970s — made it doubtful that the U.S. Senate would ratify SALT II. The December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan effectively killed chances for Senate approval of SALT II.

In Keeping Faith — Memoirs of a President, former President Carter admitted that, while the "brutal" Soviet invasion forced him to change his view about the Soviets, he would continue to abide by SALT II despite the refusal of the Senate to ratify it. "During the 1980 campaign," Carter recalled, "Ronald Reagan called for a massive buildup in our nuclear arsenal, condemning the SALT II treaty and the negotiating techniques and principles followed by me and my Democratic and Republican predecessors in achieving this and earlier nuclear arms limitation agreements. He pledged to cast aside the SALT II treaty, calling it 'fatally flawed.'"

In the almost five years since he was sworn in as President, Ronald Reagan has abided by the SALT II agreement. In addition, he has sought a wide range of new arms control agreements with the Soviets. During that same period, the Soviets have continued their military aggression despite



the deaths of three consecutive leaders, by providing conventional military aid to Nicaragua, Libya, Ethiopia, Angola and Vietnam. Their repressive actions in Poland, their destruction of the civilian Korean Airlines Flight 007, and their responsibility in the cold-blooded murder of U.S. Army Major Arthur Nicholson by East German border guards did not cool the Reagan Administration's ardor for another arms control agreement and a face-to-face summit.

The record of summit diplomacy since the 1945 Yalta and Potsdam conferences affirms the wisdom of what Sir Winston Churchill concluded when British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned from his 1938 summit with Adolph Hitler in Munich. "They should know," Churchill told the British House of Commons on October 5, 1938, "that we have suffered a great defeat without the benefit of war, the consequences which will travel far with us. They should know that we have passed an awful milestone in our history. The terrible words have for the time being been pronounced against the Western democracies — 'Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting.' Do not think that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning."