An Interview With Henry A. Kissinger

We Were Never Close to Nuclear War

The former secretary of state talks to Stephen S. Rosenfeld of the editorial page staff.

Q: Here it is 40 years after the bomb. What is it that statesmen, practicing politicians who have actual responsibility for power, must know about the bomb? A: They of course become very conscious of the consequences of a nuclear war. One of the first things you get briefed on when you are appointed to one of the top spots is the general consequences of a nuclear war.

Q: Does it scare you? A: We are always trying to show you that you have a responsibility that no previous statesman has faced, in the sense that nobody has ever had the power to destroy mankind. In the past you could always say that the consequences of defeat were worse than the consequences of war. You cannot say that with assurance in the nuclear age.

Q: Can we become paralyzed? A: It's your duty to prevent paralysis, and yet it is also your duty to recognize that nuclear power is not the same as traditional military power. This is the dilemma. If you permit it to go to paralysis, then you're turning the world over to the most ruthless, to the one who can plausibly threaten.

Q: What gives you that faith that a crisis won't go nuclear? A: Well, partly because when you're an American, you know that you have the ultimate decision over the actions leading to nuclear war, and you know that your nuclear threshold is very high, and you assume that that is equally true on the other side. But it is a curious phenomenon that in the period at least in which I was in office, I did not believe that we were close to nuclear war. And I suspect this has been true throughout the nuclear age, except perhaps the Cuban missile crisis.

Q: In the early years of the Soviet-Kuban crisis it appeared at a certain point that the Soviets were encouraging the Indians to go on, having mastered East Pakistan to take West Pakistan also and to disintegrate Pakistan basically, to take the United States "would not stand idly by," would render "significant assistance, the precise nature to be worked out within government circles," and you described this as "a new and ominous dimension" the Soviet encouragement of India.

Q: In terms of the operation of the government, none of these crises reached a point where there was any planning to use nuclear weapons. There was never any decision— even any contingent decision—to use nuclear weapons if such a contingency should arise. And there was never any discussion of how far we would be prepared to go in these circumstances—

A: It is the duty to prevent paralysis, and yet it is also your duty to recognize that nuclear power is not the same as traditional military power. This is the dilemma. If you permit it to go to paralysis, then you're turning the world over to the most ruthless, to the one who can plausibly threaten.

Q: But you would not call this a nuclear alert? A: It was a general alert that also alerted some nuclear weapons. The best proof of that is that we did exactly the same thing in 1970 when Syria invaded Jordan and at that point the Soviet Union was not even directly involved. We wanted to generate enough readable, enough alarming of forces to indicate we would do something. But we were far from a decision to go to nuclear war.

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questions? Regardless of whether there's any planning or any documents or anything like that?

A: It is of course true when you confront the Soviet Union, or when you even consider confronting the Soviet Union, you have to recognize that the nuclear threat increases. And, in fact, you cannot act as if you exclude the nuclear threat or, paradoxically, you encourage it.

Q: Well, every crisis in which a great power is involved is at least implicitly nuclear and couldn't fail to be so unless a great power unilaterally disarmed.

A: Absolutely. Diplomacy in the modern age is conducted against the backdrop of nuclear weapons. Even day-to-day diplomacy. As tension increases as specific circumstances arise that is, of course, more so. Go back to your first question. Did one consider the use of nuclear weapons? It just depends how you define "considering." If you mean in an operational sense the answer is no. If you mean in a general strategic sense, conscious of an increased danger, the answer is more ambiguous, but even in that sense we were never, in my view, close to nuclear war.

Q: Is there a sense in which any geopolitical view of the world, by which I mean that small things done here may affect large decisions taken later in the mind or in the mind of one's adversary, is there a sense in which just a geopolitical view of the world itself adds to the nuclear element in political thinking?

A: Well, I would argue that if you think of the world geopolitically you are, of course, more conscious of nuclear war in a crisis, and you must include it in your calculations. On the other hand, including it in your calculations in a precise way is more likely to make you act responsibly than if you approach the issue strictly morally or strictly legally because then, not being aware of your options, you may suddenly slide into a crisis in which you react convulsively. And to my mind the greatest danger of nuclear war is a crisis that develops among leaders that have not thought about these issues with precision.

Q: But each crisis has its own pattern. Lessons from one can be very misleading. A message of resolve in one instance can be in another situation a message of intransigence.

A: First of all, any message of resolve or conciliation will always be embedded in the general expectations about the other side that have been raised over a long period of time. And will be evaluated in that context. For example, in 1973, all the messages that went back and forth between the Soviet Union and us were in the context of a previous extensive period of détente, so that the Soviets knew we were not spoiling for a confrontation. Now had exactly the same measures been taken after a prolonged period of noncommunication or tension, it is possible that the Soviet reaction would have been different. In 1973, they pulled back less than 12 hours after the alert. Would they do the same thing in different circumstances? I don't know. There is no cookbook recipe you can apply to every situation.

Q: Would you say of the 1973 situation that they pulled back not because of a nuclear threat but because the United States and the U.S. ally Israel had plainly demonstrated a conventional advantage on the ground?

A: I never thought in 1973 that the nuclear threat was the principal element of the equation. The nuclear forces were raised to the same level of alert as the other forces, but since they were closer to it to begin with I'm not even so sure that the nuclear part was as noticeable—nuclear forces being more ready than other forces by their nature. I believe that the decisive element in 1973 was that the Israelis were conventionally superior and that our capacity to reinforce with conventional forces into Egypt was also superior to that of the Soviets.

Q: Khrushchev said about the '62 crisis of course that there had been the smell of burning in the air. You never felt that was the case while you were in the government.

A: Absolutely not. Certainly not vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. We felt it obviously with Vietnam.

Q: I think Khrushchev meant a sense of burning to be the nuclear sense.

A: Never even close to it.

Q: Not in Vietnam? Not with China? Not India-Pakistan? Not Middle East?

A: With respect to China, it was my view and it was also surely President Nixon's view, that we did not wish the Soviets to destroy China. We believed that destroying China might have the same impact on the global equilibrium as destroying Europe. We would truly have sought to resist a Soviet attack on China. But we never carried it to the point of nuclear planning.

Q: Over all, have nuclear weapons been a help or a hindrance in the conduct of world affairs for great powers?

A: If it were not for nuclear weapons it is likely that there would have been a war between us and the Soviets. So it is almost certainly true that nuclear weapons have preserved the peace. It is also true that if we continue the strategy that has got us in 40 years of peace, that some catastrophe somewhere along the line is going to happen and that therefore the big problem of our period is to build on this long period of peace we have a structure that is different from the preceding one.

Q: Aren't you saying something paradoxical? You say the bomb has been an element to keep the peace over 40 years and yet if we go on as we are we risk a catastrophe. What do you mean by that?

A: In the first 40 years, first of all there were 20 years in which we had a huge nuclear superiority, maybe even 30 years. Secondly, most of the crises were in areas where the United States and the Soviet Union controlled most of the decision-making. Finally, the weapons of the two sides only recently became very sophisticated. In the next 40 years many new centers of decision-making will emerge, and weapons will become increasingly complex. Therefore, the crises may not take such a neat evolution.

Q: You mean ... places, other countries which acquire nuclear weapons. Is that what you mean?

A: Other countries which acquire nuclear weapons or other countries that can involve the nuclear powers through their alliances or their perceptions of the national interest. And if that happens then I could conceive some crisis, somewhere, that slowly evolves. . . . The danger we face is more a configuration on the model of World War I than of World War II. Nuclear weapons make it unlikely that a superpower will deliberately aim for world conquest in one throw of the dice, but this does not exclude a gradual escalation or a creeping expansionism.
Stephen Cohen ranks as one of America’s foremost commentators on Soviet affairs. Unlike too many other “experts,” he both speaks Russian and has a first-hand knowledge of the country. His columns in The Nation under the title “Sovieticus,” which are reproduced in this book, often open up small windows on the Soviet world, let in light, expose corners before kept in darkness by ignorance or prejudice.

His reading of Russian society offers cold comfort to those who argue that the Soviet system will collapse under the weight of its own inefficiency. The Communist Party has been legitimized in the eyes of the Russian people by World War II, when it discarded revolutionary and international values in favor of traditional nationalist ones. To a society traumatized by the Nazi invasion, a party which places the defense of the country at the top of its list of priorities is bound to gain the support of the Russian people, no matter what the sacrifices required to support a bloated defense establishment. Nor must one hope for a revolution of frustrated consumers, while discontent with official corruption is widespread, millions of Soviet citizens have a vested interest in a system which favors job security over one which stresses efficiency and personal responsibility. Nor must one look for a change of official attitudes as a result of pressure from the movement of liberal dissenters. People like Andrei Sakharov are certainly courageous, worthy of sympathy and admiration. But they have no following in Russia and, in fact, are looked on as hopeless people, having themselves regarded both the solutions of revolution from below and reform from above. On the contrary, in a country where nostalgia for Stalin remains strong, where one constantly hears calls for a return to traditional Russian values and “thorough discipline” (a synonym for a Terror pour encourager les autres), where the office of the general secretary of the Communist Party has forfeited much of its former power to an increasingly fractious party, the prospect of a barely whimpered military dictatorship, the specter of “Bonapartism” so long dreaded by the Fathers of the Revolution, appears far more likely than liberal reform.

In America, debate over policy toward the Soviet Union too often seems to split the country between conservatives who see every agreement with Soviet leaders as a surrender, and liberals who insist that most of our dangers are self-inflicted, to be remedied by unimpressing pressure on our own government. “Sovieticus” slips into the second category, if for no other reason than Cohen seeks to educate American opinion rather than berate the Russians. For this reason, many of his remarks seem, if anything perhaps, to lack balance, to offer replies to the more extreme perceptions, or misperceptions, of the right. He sometimes appears to confuse the rhetoric of the Reagan administration, admittedly Khomenian in its first four years, with the substance of its policies, which have, in fact, demonstrated restraint almost to the point of inactivity.

But Cohen is a realist. His final article “A Program for Detente,” recognizes that unilateral concessions to show American good will do not stand the test of history—presidents like Franklin Roosevelt who have based their policies toward the Soviet Union on sentiment or personal diplomacy have been the least successful. The cynical men of the Kreml in are far more likely to interpret unilateral gestures by the United States as a trick or a confession of weakness than as a willingness seriously to negotiate. In any case, they are presented by the very institutions they represent from responding in kind. Concrete proposals based on reciprocity have the best chance of acceptance in Moscow.

If, as Cohen suggests, the Soviet Union needs “detente, lots and lots of detente,” before it can progress and reform, then Soviet leaders must recognize that the responsibility for the hardening of American attitudes toward their country is largely their own.
times at least doubled in number those of Hitler's camps, are hardly in a position to deliver the Sunday sermon to the sinful.

Not surprisingly: Gunter Grass adopts none of these arguments. He admits to enjoying the luxury of claiming an age exemption and to having committed no crime against humanity more serious than that of attending the weekly meetings of the Hitler Youth. Nevertheless, he is puzzled by memories of pastors and priests in his native Danzig who prayed for the victory of the German armies and for the health of the Fuehrer, but who never once wished God's mercy on the persecuted Jews, whose gaunt, burned-out synagogue stood only a few hundred yards away.

Grass finds the explanation, not in human bestiality, but in the fragmentation of responsibilities, the subdivision of the human conscience into narrow networks, the bureaucratization of moral values so that loyalty to superiors and the implementation of orders are elevated into the imperium of human virtue. His vision of Hell is that of Kafka and Orwell—a world directed by bureaucratic machines whose manylayered structure of responsibilities means no responsibility at all. In Grass' view, those who stood aside and did nothing are as guilty as Eichmann himself.

None of this is especially original. But Gunter Grass' arguments are offered from fresh perspectives and in a language which, so far as I can tell, is splendidly translated. His humanity saves him from pessimism. The writer must be engage for it is he who struggles against the "transparent society" of data banks, listening devices, an unlimited faith in technological progress, and ideological powers who claim exclusive possession of the truth but who, in the end, leave behind "only the truck of a new bureaucracy"—the class that Marx forgot. Traditionally, the writer has left to future generations the assessment of his work. However, for the first time in the history of our species, the writer can no longer assume the existence of posterity. All the more reason, therefore, to cry out, to protest, to bring men to their senses. We are in trouble, he tells us, but we are not dead yet.

It is quite possible that Henry Kissinger will come to occupy a place in the history of American diplomacy far larger than his brief tenure as secretary of state might merit in itself. For he may well be credited with the evolution of American foreign policy from an amateurish pastime whose principal characteristics have been a naive belief in permanent solutions and the possibility of achieving world harmony, into a profession whose practitioners realize that conflict is permanent and maneuver according to a rational calculation of American national interests. For the moment, however, the verdict on Kissinger's influence must stand in abeyance while America decides just how far she cares to adjust to her relative decline as a world power.

Kissinger's Observations tell you just about everything you ever wanted to know about the nuclear arms race, the time bomb of Third World debt, and the potential consequences of muddled Western responses to Soviet challenges. Once you have read his book, you will realize why you were always afraid to ask. His message is clear—we live in an unstable and dangerous world. The days when the United States, backed by 52 percent of world GNP, its nuclear monopoly and collection of docile allies dependent on New World largess for their survival, could everywhere impose a Pax Americana are well and truly over. Foreign competition has reduced our economic power, the Soviets stand ready to occupy any vacuum created by oversight or miscalculation, and our allies too often adopt positions in East-West relations more suitable for neutrals than friends.

However, Kissinger is a historian and, as such, takes the long view. With characteristic lucidity, he argues that there is no need to succumb to the hysteria of the anti-nuclear activists, nor to send your tax-deductible donations to the "theological school" of diplomacy which contends that the walls of the Kremlin will come tumblin' down once the right notes have sounded on the ideological trumpet. The Soviet Union is not on the verge of collapse, but its situation is far from enviable. Led by a brittle bureaucracy dedicated to nothing more elevated than its own perpetuation in power, the Soviet Union is, as the popular joke goes, the only nation in the world which is almost

**OBSERVATIONS**

**Selected Speeches and Essays, 1982-84**

By Henry Kissinger

Little, Brown. 246 pp. $17.95

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**August Nonfiction**

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completely surrounded by unfriendly communist countries. Allied unity based on common perceptions of economic, political and defense interests of the West will allow America to navigate in the treacherous waters of a nuclear world. What is required of America is a bipartisan foreign policy which combines traditional American moral idealism with geopolitical insight. Let us pray that Kissinger's message is heeded.

TODAY, we think of Ethiopia, when we think of it, as yet another Third World country with a jumped-up Marxist military dictatorship and a population that exists somewhere between mere poverty and utter starvation. However, this was not always so. Fifty years ago Ethiopia seemed impossibly exotic, a mountainous bastion which had heroically resisted the tidal wave of European imperialism that had engulfed the rest of Africa. In 1930, generals and journalists flocked to Addis Ababa to attend the coronation of the young Emperor Halle Selassie in a decor which appeared almost medieval—scores of nobles in their black cloaks and oversized hats, palace lions, an imperial guard that saluted smartly but which were shoeless, and enamelled spitoons ordered specially for the occasion. Five years later, some of the same generals and journalists were back, this time to witness the Italian invasion of the country.

The following six years when Ethiopia was absorbed into Africa Orientale Italiana were tragic but exhilarating ones, which did nothing to lessen its fascination for the outside world. Quite the contrary, one immediately sees how Ethiopia became a fertile source for Evelyn Waugh's satire—in this bleak, archaic land, ordinary Englishmen by the very normalcy of their lives appeared absurd, while the bizarre, the theatrical, the ma-

**HAILE SELASSIE'S WAR**

*The Italian-Ethiopian Campaign, 1935-1941*

By Anthony Mockler

Random House. 454 pp. $24.95

Emporer Halle Selassie

ellistically barbaric became the common currency of everyday life.

The outbreak of war in 1940 found the British position in East Africa serious but not disastrous, while that of the Italians was disastrous but not serious. The subsequent British invasion of Ethiopia, which seemed to enlist every eccentric in the British Empire, combined improvisation and farce in almost equal measure. The British were saved in this campaign, which was very much a close run thing, by bluff, Italian timidity, and men like the nervous, brilliant Orde Wingate for whom Ethiopia's Biblical associations seemed almost to push beyond the brink of dementia. He was convinced that he and his motley "Gideon Force" were the long-awaited Davids come to slay the Italian Goliath. Anthony Mockler recounts the fascinating story of these years with thoroughness, sensitivity and just the right touch of irony. *Haile Selassie's War* is both a tour de force and a terrific read.
Q: Here it is 40 years after the bomb. What is it that statesmen, practicing politicians who have actual responsibility for power, must know about the bomb?

A: They of course become very conscious of the consequences of a nuclear war. One of the first things you get briefed on when you are appointed to one of the top spots is the general consequences of a nuclear war.

Q: Does it scare you?

A: It awes you. And it shows you that you have a responsibility that no previous statesmen has faced, in the sense that nobody has ever had the power to destroy mankind. In the past you could always say that the consequences of defeat were worse than the consequences of war. You cannot say that with assurance in the nuclear age.

Q: Can awe become paralysis?

A: It's your duty to prevent paralysis and yet it is also your duty to recognize that nuclear power is not the same as traditional military power. This is the dilemma. If you permit it to go to paralysis, then you're turning
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So this is in the back of your mind.

But it has also a contradictory result

that in most concrete crises that arise

you do not believe that they will turn

into general war.

Q: What gives you that hope, that

faith that a crisis won't go nuclear?

A: Well partly because when you're

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I did not believe at any time that we

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pect this has been true throughout the

nuclear age, except perhaps the Cuban

missile crisis.

Q: Well now we have an interview

of President Nixon in Time magazine

July 29) where he suggests that on at

least four occasions he "considered"

using nuclear weapons. He's referring

to the Vietnam war, to the Soviets

threatening to take out China's nu-
clear facilities, to the India-Pakistan
clear facilities, to the India–Pakistan war and to the Middle East crisis of 1973. "Considered," of course, can mean many different things, but what are we talking about here?

A: I read that interview and frankly I was sufficiently concerned to talk to some of the other key decision makers of that period—Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Thomas Moorer, the two security advisers, Gen. Haig and Gen. Scowcroft—to see whether their recollection coincided with mine. And so I can safely say that there was never a concrete occasion or crisis in which the use of nuclear weapons was considered by the government.

One has to look at the problem of decision making at various levels. One, a president obviously has to ask himself how far he's prepared to go if absolutely the worst were to happen. In this case if the Soviets attack China or if the Soviets pressure China as a result of the India–Pakistan war or in the Middle East crisis. And I cannot speak for what president Nixon, in the privacy of his office or of his living quarters, might have considered he was prepared to do.

In terms of the operation of the government, none of these crises reached a point where there was any planning...
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Never any decision— even any contingent decision— to use nuclear weapons if such a contingency should arise. And there was never any discussion of how far we would be prepared to go in these contingencies.

So we are talking about something the president must have had in the back of his mind as to his outer limit, but not something that in a crisis the government, either with the key advisors individually or as a group, ever considered.

Q: In the Middle East war of 1973 there was a so-called nuclear alert on the American side. Is that not an aspect of nuclear diplomacy?

A: Technically it is not 100 percent correct to call it a nuclear alert. What happened was we received a message from Brezhnev inviting joint American-Soviet military action in Egypt in effect against the Israelis who had just trapped the 3rd Egyptian army.

Brezhnev added that if we did not agree to joint action, he would undertake unilateral action. We were determined not to undertake a joint action or to permit a unilateral Soviet action. Those of us who were meeting—and at
Those of us who were meeting—and at that point President Nixon chose not to participate—were attempting to convey to the Soviets that we would oppose their move into Egypt. And we wanted to take certain actions that they would pick up through their intelligence before we sent our reply.

There are five stages of readiness for our military; forces, most are in defense condition 4. In 1973, the Pacific theater, because of the legacy of the Vietnam war, was in defense condition 3. During the Middle East alert, we wound from defense condition 4 to defense condition 3 for the rest of the world. Some of the consequences are that some people on leave get called back to their bases and some more bombers are put on alert and similar measures.

My guess is the high probability would have been that had the Soviets sent troops to Egypt, we would have responded with the 82nd Airborne Division in Egypt. Our ally was militarily stronger than their ally. And our judgment was that we could get more conventional forces into the area than they could.

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Q: In the earlier India—Pakistan
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Indians to go on, having mastered East
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You write in your memoirs that the
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And you described this as "a new and
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couragement of India.

Now this is one of the incidents
where President Nixon said he "con=
sidered" nuclear weapons.

A: We believed we had intelligence
information that, after having defeated
East Pakistan, the Indians would at=
tack West Pakistan. Now, we had a
special concern with Pakistan at the
time because Pakistan had opened
China for us and President Nixon was
going to China about two months after
this crisis developed. Moreover, previous presidents had made certain com-
mitments about the territorial integ-
rity of Pakistan.

A: But the specific events to which
you referred occurred one Sunday
morning early in December. President
Nixon, General Haig and I were meet-
ing in his office. We received word
about 10 o'clock from the Chinese--I
could be off, but this is generally cor-
rect--that they had an urgent message
to deliver to us at 2. We thought that
the message might be that they would
come to the assistance of Pakistan.

We asked General Haig to receive
the message and we instructed him to
tell the Chinese that, if their decision
was to assist Pakistan, we would not
be indifferent to a Soviet attack on
China. The reaction would have to be
worked out in the circumstances that
arose. In the event, the Chinese de-
cided not to act. The circumstance
about which we had spoken never
arose.
arose.

We never inquired from the chair=
man of the Chiefs of Staff or from the
Defense Secretary or from the Secre=
tary of State what they recommended
we do should those circumstances
arise. And so there was no planning
for nuclear war.

Had there been a Soviet attack on
China, it is highly probable that we
would have given assistance to China.
What assistance would have had to de=
pend on staff planning that never took
place. It's possible that president
Nixon in his own mind was prepared to
use nuclear weapons, but I think it's

Important to understand that, as a
government, there was never any dis=
cussion of the use of nuclear weapons.
Even at that meeting there was no dis=
cussion of the use of nuclear weapons.

Q: Isn't there a sense that it's al=
most impossible, once you start get=
ting into one of these very messy vola=
tile crises, not to let come into your
mind some of these what if questions?
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gardless of whether there's any plan=
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A: It is of course true when you con=
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A: Well I would argue that if you think of the world geopolitically you are, of course, more conscious of nuclear war in a crisis, and you must include it in your calculations. On the other hand, including it in your calculations in a precise way is more likely to make you act responsibly than if you approach the issue strictly moralistically or strictly legalistically because then, not being aware of your options, you may suddenly slide into a crisis in which you react convulsively. And to my mind the greatest danger of nuclear war is a crisis that develops among leaders that have not thought about these issues with precision.

Q: But each crisis has its own pattern. Lessons from one can be very misleading. A message of resolve in one instance can be in another situation a message of intransigence.

A: First of all, any message of resolve or conciliation will always be embedded in the general expectations about the other side that have been raised over a long period of time. And
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Now had exactly the same measures
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 Q: Would you say of the 1973 that
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Q: Khrushchev said about the '62
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A: Absolutely not. Certainly not vis-
a vis the Soviet Union. We felt it obvi-
ously with Vietnam.

Q: I think Khrushchev meant a
sense of burning to be the nuclear
sense.
A: Never even close to it.

Q: Not in Vietnam? Not with China?
Not India-Pak? Not Middle East?
A: With respect to China, it was my
view and it was also surely president
Nixon's view, that we did not wish the
Soviets to destroy China. We believed
that destroying China might have the
same impact on the global equilibrium
as destroying Europe. We would truly
have sought to resist a Soviet attack

TAKE 236831 PAGE 00009 TIME 18:23 DATE 08-06-85
Q: Over all, have nuclear weapons been a help or a hindrance in the conduct of world affairs for great powers?

A: If it were not for nuclear weapons it is likely that there would have been a war between us and the Soviet Union. So it is almost certainly true that nuclear weapons have preserved the peace. It is also true that if we continue the strategy that has got us these 40 years of peace, that some catastrophe somewhere along the line is going to happen and that therefore the big problem of our period is to build on this long period of peace we have a structure that is different from the preceding one.

Q: Aren't you saying something paradoxical? You say the bomb has been an element to keep the peace over 40 years and yet if we go on as we are we risk a catastrophe. What do you mean by that?

A: In the first 40 years, first of all there were 20 years in which we had a huge nuclear superiority, maybe even 30 years. Secondly, most of the crises were in areas where the United States and the Soviet Union controlled most of the decision making. Finally, the weapons of the two sides only recently became very sophisticated. In the next
became very sophisticated. In the next 40 years many new centers of decision making will emerge, and weapons will become increasingly complex. Therefore, the crises may not take such a neat evolution.

Q: You mean . . . places, other countries which acquire nuclear weapons. Is that what you mean?

A: Other countries which acquire nuclear weapons or other countries that can involve the nuclear powers through their alliances or their perceptions of the national interest. And if that happens then I could conceive some crisis, somewhere, that slowly evolves. . . . The danger we face is more a conflagration on the model of World War I than of World War II. Nuclear weapons make it unlikely that a superpower will deliberately aim for world conquest in one throw of the dice, but this does not exclude a gradual escalation or a creeping expansionism.
August 5, 1985

Attn: Constance

From: Jody

Following is the Rosenfeld interview -- 15 pages follow. Remember to check top and bottom lines to make sure everything went through okay, and call me with any questions.
Q: Here it is 40 years after the bomb. What is it that statesmen, practicing politicians who have actual responsibility for power, must know about the bomb?

A: They of course become very conscious of the consequences of a nuclear war. One of the first things you get briefed on when you are in one of the top spots is the general consequences and plans for a nuclear war.

Q: Does it scare you?

A: It awes you. And it shows you that you have a responsibility that no previous statesmen has faced, in the sense that nobody has ever had that much power. In the past you could always say that the consequences of defeat were worse than the consequences of war. You cannot say that in the nuclear age.

Q: Can awe become paralysis?

A: It's your duty to prevent paralysis and yet it is also your duty to recognize that nuclear power is not the same as traditional military power.
This is the dilemma. If you permit it to
go to paralysis, then you're turning
the world over to the most ruthless, to
the one who can plausibly threaten.

So this is in the back of your mind.
But it has also a contradictory result
that in most concrete crises that arise
you do not believe that they will turn
into general war.

Q: What gives you that hope, that
faith that a crisis won't go nuclear?

A: Well partly because when you're
an American, as opposed to a Soviet,
you know that you have the ultimate
decision over your actions and you
know that your nuclear threshold is
very high, and you assume that that is
equally true on the other side. But it is
a curious phenomenon that in the

period at least in which I was in office,
I did not believe at any time that we
were close to nuclear war. And I sus=
pect this has been true throughout the
nuclear age, except perhaps the Cuban
missile crisis.

Q: Well now we have an interview
of President Nixon in Time magazine
July 29) where he suggests that on at
least four occasions he "considered"
using nuclear weapons. He's referring
to the Vietnam war, to the Soviets
threatening to take out China's nuclear facilities, to the India-Pakistan war and to the Middle East crisis of 1973. "Considered," of course, can mean many different things, but what are we talking about here?

A: I read that interview and frankly I was sufficiently concerned to call the other key decision makers of that period, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Thomas Moorer, Undersecretary of State Joseph Sisco, to see whether their recollection coincided with mine. And so I can safely say that I speak for all of the people who were involved in decision making at the time.

One has to look at the problem of decision making at various levels. One, a president obviously has to ask himself how far he's prepared to go if absolutely the worst were to happen. In this case if the Soviets attack China or if the Soviets pressure China as a result of the India-Pakistan war or in the Middle East crisis. And I cannot speak for what president Nixon, in the privacy of his office or of his living quarters, might have considered he was prepared to do.

In terms of the operation of the government, there was never any plan...
ning for any of these contingencies.
There was never any decision--even--

any contingent decision--to use nu-
clear weapons if such a contingency
should arise. And there was never any
discussion of how far we would be pre-
pared to go in these contingencies.

So we are talking about something
the president must have had in the
back of his mind as to his outer limit,
but not something that the govern-
ment, either with the key advisers or
as a group, ever considered.

Q: In the Middle East war of 1973
there was a so-called nuclear alert on
the American side. Is that not an
aspect of nuclear diplomacy?
A: Technically it is not 100 percent
correct to call it a nuclear alert. What
happened was we received a message
from Brezhnev inviting joint Amer-
ican-Soviet military action in Egypt in
effect against the Israelis who had just
trapped the 3rd Egyptian army. We im-
tended to send a reply rejecting joint
action and Brezhnev had added that if
we did not agree to joint action, he
would undertake unilateral action. We
were determined not to permit this.
Those of us who were meeting--and at
that point Nixon was not part of that group were attempting to convey to the Soviets that we would oppose their move into Egypt. And we wanted to take certain actions that they would pick up through their intelligence before we sent our reply. And therefore we went from defense condition four to defense condition three. Some of the consequences of it are that people on leave get called back to their bases of conventional units and some more bombers are put on alert and similar measures.

My guess is the high probability would have been that had they put a force in, we would have put the 82nd Airborne Division in in Egypt. After all, we had a conventional superiority. Our ally was militarily stronger than their ally. And our judgment was that we could get more conventional forces into the area than they could.

Q: But you would not call this a nuclear alert?
A: So I don’t think it’s correct to call it a nuclear alert, it was an alert that also alerted nuclear forces. But the forces we wanted them to pick up were the conventional forces. The best proof of that is that we did ex-
best proof of that is that we did exactly the same thing in 1970 when Syria invaded Jordan and at that point the Soviet Union was not even directly involved. What we wanted to generate is enough cable traffic that they would pick up and enough alerting of forces to indicate we would do something.

Q: In the earlier Indian-Pakistan crisis it appeared at a certain point that the Soviets were encouraging the Indians to go on, having mastered East Pakistan to take West Pakistan also and to disintegrate Pakistan basically. You write in your memoirs that the United States "would not stand idly by," would render "significant assistance, the precise nature to be worked out when the circumstances arose." And you described this as "a new and ominous dimension" the Soviet encouragement of India.

Now this is one of the incidents where President Nixon said he "considered" nuclear weapons.

A: We believed we had intelligence information that, after having defeated East Pakistan, the Indians would attack West Pakistan. Now, we had a special concern with Pakistan at the time because Pakistan had opened China for us and president Nixon was

[Page cut off before the end of the sentence]
going to China about two months after this crisis developed.

Q: A In late November, early December 1971.

A: But the specific events to which you referred occurred one Sunday morning. President Nixon, General Haig and I were meeting in his office. We received a message about ten o'clock from the Chinese—-I could be off, but this is generally correct—about ten o'clock from the Chinese that they had an urgent message to deliver to us at two. We thought that the message might be that they would come to the assistance of Pakistan.

We asked General Haig to receive the message and we instructed him to tell the Chinese that after they had told him their decision, if their decision was to assist Pakistan that we would not be indifferent to a Soviet attack on China as a result, the reaction to be worked out in the circumstances that arose. In the event, the Chinese never told us what we expected. The circumstance about which we had spoken never arose.

In the event we never inquired from the chairman of the Chiefs of Staff or from the Defense Secretary or from...
from the Defense Secretary or from the Secretary of State what they recommended we do should those circumstances arise. And so there was no planning.

Had there been a Soviet attack on China, it is highly probable that we would have given some assistance to China. What assistance would have had to depend on staff planning that never took place. It’s possible that president Nixon in his own mind was prepared to use nuclear weapons, but I think it’s important to understand that, as a government, there was never any discussion of the use of nuclear weapons. Even at that meeting there was no discussion of the use of nuclear weapons.

Q: Isn’t there a sense that it’s almost impossible, once you start getting into one of these very messy volatile crises, not to let come into your mind some of these what if questions? These ultimate nuclear questions? Regardless of whether there’s any planning or any documents or anything like that?

A: It is of course true when you confront the Soviet Union, or when you
even consider confronting the Soviet Union, you have to recognize that the nuclear threat increases. And, in fact, you cannot act as if you exclude the nuclear threat.

Q: Well, every crisis in which a great power is involved, is at least implicitly nuclear and couldn't fail to be so unless a great power unilaterally disarmed.

A: Absolutely. Diplomacy in the modern age is conducted against the backdrop of nuclear weapons. Even day to day diplomacy. As tension increases as specific circumstances arise that is, of course, more so. Go back to your first question. Did one consider the use of nuclear weapons? It just depends how you define considers. If you mean in an operational sense the answer is no. If you mean in a general strategic sense, conscious of an increased danger, I would have to say yes.

Q: Is there a sense in which any geopolitical view of the world, by which I mean that small things done here may affect large decisions taken later in the mind or in the mind of one's adversary, is there a sense in which just a geopolitical view of the world itself adds to the, heavies up,
the nuclear element in political thinking?

A: Well I would argue that if you think of the world geopolitically you are, of course, more conscious of nuclear war in a crisis, and you must include it in your calculations. On the other hand, including it in your calculations in a precise way is more likely to make you act responsibly than if you approach the issue strictly morally or strictly legalistically because then, not being aware of your options, you may suddenly slide into a crisis in which you react convulsively. And to my mind the greatest danger of nuclear war is a crisis that develops among leaders that have not thought about these issues with precision.

Q: But each crisis has its own pattern. Lessons from one can be very misleading. A message of resolve in one instance can be in another situation a message of intransigence.

A: Well a message of resolve, first of all, any message of resolve, intransigence or conciliation, will always be embedded in the general expectations about the other side that have been raised over a long period of time. And
will be evaluated in that context. For example, in 1973, all the messages that went back and forth between the Soviet Union and us were in the context of a previous extensive period of detente, so that the Soviets knew we were not spoiling for a confrontation. And if you read the press conference I held the day after the alert, I went out of my way to make clear that we were not seeking a confrontation and that we were not asking the Soviets to back off from something they had already done. I was saying don't do something new.

Now had exactly the same measures been taken after a prolonged period of non-communication, and of a perception of one side seeking to humiliate the other, it is possible that the Soviet reaction would have been quite different. In 1973 they pulled back less than 12 hours after the alert.

Would they do the same thing in different circumstances? I don't know. There is no cookbook recipe you can apply to these situations.

Q: Would you say of the 1973 that they pulled back not because of a nuclear threat but because the U.S. and
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A: With respect to China, it was my view and it was also surely President Nixon’s view, that we did not wish the Soviets to destroy China. We believed that destroying China might have the same impact on the global equilibrium as destroying Europe. But we never carried it to any point of military planning or military threats.

Q: Overall, have nuclear weapons been a help or a hindrance in the conduct of world affairs for great powers?

A: You know, I think that if it were not for nuclear weapons it is more likely than not that there would have been a war between us and the Soviets, if not during the eight years I was in office then during some other period. So I think it is almost certainly true that nuclear weapons have preserved the peace. I think it is also true that if we continue the strategy that has got us these 40 years of peace, that some catastrophe somewhere along the line is going to happen and that therefore the big problem of our period is to build on this long period of peace we have a structure that is dif
ferent from the preceding one.

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