

Generational Learning and Foreign Policy

Until March of 1985, one of the themes most frequently touched upon by the students of the Soviet Union was the advanced age of the Soviet leadership. Prior to Brezhnev's death, the average age of the Politburo was 71. Under Andropov and Chernenko, the Soviet Union continued to be run by a gerontocracy wedded to traditional and demonstrably ineffective programs in almost all important policy areas. With the accession to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, aged 54, a much younger generation of Soviet leaders has come to the fore. The passing of the old guard has prompted widespread expectations of major changes in Soviet Union's domestic and foreign policy.

Westerners would do well to consider their own situation. Superficially, Western political leaderships have displayed considerable turnover; fresh blood, sometimes men and women in their 40s and 50s, has regularly penetrated the inner circles of policymaking elites. Only two of the prime ministers and presidents of the states in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are over 70; the mean age of these fifteen leaders is 60. But while the governing faces have changed, what about the ideas and policies behind them? To a remarkable degree, concepts formulated in the late 1940s and early 1950s continue to dominate

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Western foreign and security policy even when they have been shown to be severely wanting. What accounts for the tenacious endurance of these ideas and policies? What implications does this have for the future course of East–West relations? What, if anything, could be done to break the hold over policymakers of outmoded notions of conflict management?

Probably the best way to explain the evolution and endurance of the dominant Western concepts of conflict management is by reference to some of the principles of cognitive psychology. The cognitive approach emphasizes the ways in which people distort decision making by gross simplifications in problem representation and information processing. Some psychologists have suggested that human beings may be incapable of carrying out the procedures associated with rational decision making.¹ Whether or not this is actually so, there is growing evidence that people process and interpret information according to a set of mental rules that bear little relationship to those of formal logic. Robert Abelson refers to these as yet poorly understood procedures as ‘psycho-logic’.²

One principle of psycho-logic that has received some empirical verification is ‘cognitive consistency’. Many experiments point to the conclusion that people try to keep their beliefs, feelings, actions, and cognitions mutually consistent. Thus, we tend to believe that people we like act in ways we approve of, have values similar to ours, and oppose people and institutions we dislike. We expect people we dislike to behave in ways repugnant to us, to have values totally dissimilar from ours, and to support people and institutions we scorn.³ Psychologists theorize that cognitive consistency is an efficient scheme of the mental organization because it facilitates the interpretation, retention, and recall of information.⁴ Be this as it may, our apparent need for cognitive order also has some adverse implications for decision making because it appears to be responsible for a systematic bias in favor of information consistent with impressions and expectations that we have already formed.

Cognitive psychologists contend that it is impossible to explain policy decisions without reference to policymakers’ beliefs about the world and about the motives of other actors in it. These beliefs, organized as ‘images’, shape the way in which policymakers respond to external stimuli. Robert Jervis, who has applied cognitive concepts to the study of foreign affairs, suggests that the primary source of images about international relations for policymakers is stereotyped interpretations of dramatic historical events, especially wars and revolutions. These upheavals have a particularly strong impact on the thinking of younger people

whose opinions about the world are still highly impressionable. Images formed by adolescents and young adults can still shape their approach to international problems years later when they may occupy important positions of authority. This may explain in the words of Jervis why 'generals are prepared to fight the last war and diplomats prepared to avoid it'.⁵

Lessons learned from history are reinforced or modified by what policymakers learn from the first-hand experience. Jervis finds that events that are personally experienced can be a 'powerful determinant' of images. This too may be a source of perceptual distortion because personal experiences may be unrepresentative or misleading. As with historical lessons, events experienced early in adult life have a disproportional impact on perceptual predispositions.⁶

Jervis makes an important distinction between what he calls 'rational' and 'irrational' consistency. The principle of consistency, he argues, helps us to make sense of new information as it draws upon our accumulated experience, formulated as a set of expectations and beliefs. It also provides continuity in our behavior. But the pursuit of consistency becomes irrational when it closes our minds to new information or different points of view. Even irrational consistency can be useful in the short run because it helps to make a decision when the time comes to act. However, persistent denial of new information diminishes our ability to learn from the environment. Policymakers must strike a balance between persistence and continuity on the one hand and openness and flexibility on the other. Jervis marshals considerable evidence to indicate that they more often err in the direction of being too wedded to established beliefs and of defending images long after they have lost their utility.⁷

Irrational consistency can leave its mark on every stage of the decision-making process. Most importantly, it affects the policymaker's receptivity to information relevant to a decision. Once an expectation or belief has taken hold, new information is assimilated to it. This means that policymakers are more responsive to information that supports their existing beliefs than they are to information that challenges them. When confronted with critical information, they tend to misunderstand it, twist its meaning to make it consistent, explain it away, deny it, or simply ignore it.

To the extent that a policymaker is confident in his expectations, he is also likely to make a decision before sufficient information has been collected or evaluated. Jervis refers to this phenomenon as 'premature

cognitive closure' and sees it as a major cause of institutional inertia. As all but the most unambiguous evidence will be interpreted to confirm the wisdom of established policy and the images of reality upon which it is based, policymakers will proceed a long way down a blind alley before realizing that something is wrong.⁸

THE LESSONS OF THE 'THIRTIES

The concept of irrational consistency seems especially germane to postwar Western security policy. Until quite recently, these policies were formulated almost entirely by men who had reached maturity in the years before World War II. The origins of that monumental upheaval provided them with 'lessons' about the nature of the conflict, lessons they applied to postwar problems. Even though the policies derived from these lessons failed in many instances to achieve the ends they sought, they continue to dominate Western, particularly American, thinking about foreign policy. The most vocal criticism of these policies has come from representatives of the younger, postwar generation whose outlook on world affairs reflects a very different set of historical lessons.

Several caveats are in order before elaborating the lessons of the 1930s and their implications for postwar conflict management. From the outset, we must recognize that any portrayal of these lessons represents something of an idealized overly coherent description of what is in fact a more general, diffuse, and often inarticulate generational orientation toward international relations.⁹ In practice, policymakers rarely spell out the most fundamental assumptions they make about the world, nor are they necessarily fully conscious of them. These assumptions are nevertheless crucial to understanding the evolution of policy. James Joll writes:

When political leaders are faced with the necessity of making decisions the outcome of which they cannot foresee, in crises which they do not wholly understand, they fall back on their own instinctive reaction, traditions, and modes of behaviour. Each of them has certain beliefs, rules or objectives which are taken for granted; and one of the limitations of documentary evidence is that few people bother to write down, especially in moments of crisis, things which they take for granted. But if we are to understand their motives, we must somehow try to find out what, as we say, 'goes without saying'.¹⁰

A second caveat pertains to the extent to which any generational lesson is shared by the members of that particular generation. The lessons about international relations we are about to describe, while they have dominated Western and especially American foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War, are by no means universally held by everyone who reached maturity in the late 1930s and early 1940s. There are representatives of that generation, today aged 50–75, who hold quite different views about the causes of war, the necessity of military preparedness, and the importance of demonstrating resolve. At the same time, there are many people both older and younger who share that generation's outlook on the world. Older individuals are often particularly important in formulating and articulating lessons for a younger generation. John Foster Dulles, born in 1888, and Dean Acheson, born in 1893, both played such a role for the generation under discussion. E.P. Thompson, born in 1924, has performed a similar service for much younger peace movement activists whose viewpoints, which we shall also briefly examine, clash notably with those of their elders.

Five lessons based on the origins of World War II seem particularly germane to understanding postwar approaches to conflict management. The first of these concerned the genesis of aggressive and expansionist regimes; it was attributed to the severe economic malaise which sapped the strength and undermined the legitimacy of democratic governments. This was seen to have happened in Italy, Germany, Spain, and most of Eastern Europe, where economic turbulence and decline paved the way for fascism or authoritarian regimes.

The second lesson pertains to the root causes of economic collapse, one of which was the breakdown of the international economic order. In the absence of mechanisms for regulating trade, currency exchange rates, and international debt, nations dealt with pressing economic problems in terms of their own narrow self-interests. As a result, all suffered.

The third lesson was that the relative isolation of the United States from Europe had been another fundamental cause of both the economic and political collapse of that continent. Although it was the dominant economic power, the United States provided insufficient economic leadership and remained aloof from European security problems. Washington's handling of the war debt question, its most important intervention in European economic affairs during this period, only aggravated. European economic ills after 1930. The obvious lesson was

that the United States should take a more active and responsible role in European affairs in the postwar period.

The fourth lesson was about the nature of foreign policy aggression; it was an expression of a particular domestic political structure. Aggression was the fuel totalitarian dictatorships burned to maintain legitimacy; they could not survive at home without seeking to expand abroad. Their appetites for conquest were insatiable. Totalitarian states could not be appeased; concession only encouraged further demands. Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, and imperial Japan all appeared to testify to this tragic truth.

The fifth and final lesson pertained to why these dictatorships had been so successful, at least initially, in subjugating their neighbors. They had confronted a divided international community that proved incapable of organizing a united front against them. Each of the major powers sought instead to protect its security by making peace with one or more of the expansionist regimes, often at a rival's expense. The United States, Britain, and France looked the other way throughout the 1930s, allowing Japan to invade Manchuria, then China proper, and, finally, to occupy Indochina before turning on them. Italy, in turn, was given a free hand in Ethiopia and encouraged by the spinelessness of the democracies to plight its troth with Hitler. The German saga is equally well known: renunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, followed by reoccupation of the Rhineland, Anschluss with Austria, Munich and the subsequent dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, and the invasion of Poland. All of these ventures were either unopposed or even abetted by France and Britain or the Soviet Union.

In retrospect, it seems likely that Mussolini would have moderated his foreign policy if Britain and France had opposed him early on. In the beginning, Hitler too only defied the status quo when he thought he could get away with it. In his first military venture, the reoccupation of the Rhineland, he gave his generals strict instructions to beat a hasty retreat at the first sign of French resistance. Later, in May 1938, he backed away from his challenge of Czechoslovakia when it appeared that the Western powers were prepared to go to war in its defense. A.J.P. Taylor has even argued—quite incorrectly in my view—that Hitler really did not want war in 1939 but rather miscalculated. He was allegedly convinced that the British and French would back down once again in Poland as they had at Munich.¹¹ The policy lesson of the 1930s was painfully obvious: aggressive regimes must be opposed from the outset. Failure to do so only invites further challenge.¹²

As the preceding discussion indicates, each of these historical lessons generated specific policy imperatives. Fear of the political consequences of economic collapse led to the commitment to remake the defeated Axis nations into democracies and to encourage the revitalization of their economies in order to provide a fertile soil for democratic institutions to take root and flower. The Americans in particular feared that in the absence of a rapid reconstruction of Europe's economy, Europeans, somewhat demoralized and lacking in self-confidence, would become vulnerable to communist electoral blandishments or even communist-led coups. Well-known policy initiatives that derived from this concern include the integration of the Western occupation zones of Germany, the European Recovery Act and efforts to link West European economies together in the Coal and Steel Community and, later, the common market. American efforts to revitalize the wartorn economies of Europe and Japan by injecting capital into them were extraordinarily successful.

The second policy lesson, very much related to the first, was the need to bind the economies of all of the developed nations together in some kind of institutional framework. The purpose in doing so was to protect them against the shocks that had upset the equilibrium of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. The Bretton Woods Agreements of 1944 marked the first step in this direction. Subsequent agreements further facilitated international economic cooperation and, in the case of Europe, have brought about a high degree of economic integration. Clearly, these policies have been remarkably successful, even allowing for the current economic troubles associated with inflation, high interest rates, and the rising value of the United States dollar.

The third policy lesson was that the United States must not withdraw from European affairs the way it had after World War I. Instead, Washington continued to take an active interest in European affairs, sponsoring or supporting numerous programs designed to facilitate European economic and political recovery. The Marshall Plan, which made billions of dollars available to the Europeans, was a significant departure from American policy following World War I, which had been primarily concerned with recovering funds loaned to the Europeans during that conflict. The United States also committed itself to the defense of Western Europe, a commitment that received institutional expression in the creation of NATO in 1949.

The final and ultimately the most controversial policy lesson was the need to oppose aggression at the outset. Putting pressure on the Russians to withdraw from northern Iran in 1947, the Truman Doctrine calling for security assistance to Greece and Turkey, and the Korean intervention in 1950 are cases in point. The influence of the events of the 1930s on the American decision to fight in Korea is particularly well documented. In his memoirs, Harry Truman relates that he was at home in Independence, Missouri, when he received word of the North Korean attack. He immediately returned to Washington:

I had time to think aboard the plane. In my generation, this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea much as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen and twenty years earlier ... If this was allowed to go on unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war.¹³

The apparent success of early ventures to stop communism encouraged further and more far-reaching initiatives. Korea set the pattern for Vietnam. In July 1964, on the eve of American intervention in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson described the challenge in southeast Asia as fundamentally similar to the earlier challenges the United States had faced in Greece, Turkey, Berlin, Korea, Lebanon, and Cuba. 'The great lesson of this generation', he told a sympathetic college audience, 'is that wherever we have stood firm, aggression has ultimately been halted'.¹⁴

The overall record of the foreign policies derived from these five historical lessons is mixed. There were many ways in which the lessons of the 1930s were directly applicable to the postwar world and led to resounding successes. This was most notable in the economic sphere where initiatives based on the lessons we have discussed facilitated the revitalization of Western Europe and Japan. Their prosperity and political stability exceed the greatest expectations that anyone might reasonably have entertained in 1945 or 1950. The political balance sheet is less impressive. Western influence in the world has declined precipitously since 1945 and Western resources, especially American resources, have often been squandered in pursuit of illusory goals. Public opinion polls reveal that Europeans and Americans alike feel less secure today than

they did 10 or 15 years ago. While there are many complex reasons why this is so, one of them is certainly the almost reflex way in which the lessons of the 1930s were applied to postwar problems.

When the Cold War began, the Soviet Union replaced Nazi Germany as the enemy and what had been learned about Hitler and his regime was held to apply to Stalin and the Soviet Union. The experience of Germany and Italy seemed to demonstrate that totalitarian regimes were driven to pursue aggressive foreign policies as the domestic atmosphere of tension and sacrifice this created was necessary for them to maintain power. They were also compelled to seek the destruction of democracies because the very existence of open societies posed a potent threat to their survival. National Security Council (NSC) 68, written on the eve of the Korean War in April 1950, and by general agreement the most influential American document of the Cold War, described the Soviet foreign policy in much these terms. 'The persistence of the idea of freedom', NSC 68 declared, 'is a permanent and continuous threat to the foundations of a slave society; and it therefore regards as intolerable the long continued existence of freedom in the world'.¹⁵ Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe during and after World War II and the suppression of any democratic governments in these countries were taken as unambiguous confirmation of this truth.

The Soviet threat was further magnified by the application of a second insight from the 1930s to Moscow's foreign policy: the extent to which totalitarian regimes acted in terms of their avowed ideology. One of the tragic mistakes made by statesmen in the interwar years was not to read *Mein Kampf* or not to take it seriously if they had. In fact, it was a clear statement of Hitler's domestic and foreign policy objectives. Realizing their error in retrospect, Western leaders and foreign policy analysts were not going to make the same mistake a second time around. They accordingly took the writings of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin quite seriously, and many became convinced that these constituted a blueprint for Soviet behavior. The secretary of defense, James Forrestal, wondered whether Stalin kept a diary that would readjust like *Mein Kampf*.¹⁶ John Foster Dulles declared that communist plans were all spelled out in Stalin's *Problems of Communism*: 'The present-day Communist bible ... [that] gives us the same preview that Hitler gave in *Mein Kampf*'.¹⁷ The experience with Hitler led to an unfortunate emphasis in the West on ideology as the principal determinant of Soviet foreign policy. In its most extreme expression, Moscow's foreign policy was portrayed as part

of a communist master plan for world domination. As late as 1965, the joint chiefs of staff described Vietnam in these terms to the secretary of defense and the president. In their view, that insurgency was 'part of a major campaign to extend communist control beyond the periphery of the Sino-Soviet bloc and overseas to both the island and continental areas of the Free World ... It is, in fact, a planned phase in the communist timetable for world domination'.¹⁸ Even more moderate versions of the ideological interpretation conveyed a greater sense of threat than perhaps the reality of Soviet policy warranted. Their emphasis on Marxist-Leninist doctrine led these analysts to stress the inevitability of conflict between opposing social systems and the apparent Soviet expectations of the ultimate triumph of socialism over capitalism, probably through war and revolution.

The Soviet Union was accordingly viewed as a revolutionary force out to remake the world in its own image regardless of the price this was certain to entail for the Russian people. Such an image of the adversary made those who shared it blind to the Soviet Union's legitimate security concerns. Everything Moscow did was seen as motivated by aggressive designs. Even conciliatory gestures were viewed in this light. When Stalin's successors tried to ease East-West relations, Dulles was certain that it was a trap. 'Soviet communists', he warned in May 1953, 'have constantly taught and practiced the art of deception, of making concessions merely in order to lure others into a false sense of security, which makes them the easier victims of ultimate aggression'.¹⁹

As the Nazi threat was principally a military one, so too has the Soviet problem been viewed largely in military terms. Western estimates of Soviet aggressiveness have generally presupposed that it is a function of two conditions: a favorable 'correlation of forces' and an external opportunity to act. The more the conventional and nuclear military balance tilts in Moscow's direction, the greater the expectation of Soviet adventurism. NSC 68, which was based on this kind of analysis, argued that Moscow was likely to start a war when it felt certain of winning it. This might occur as early as 1954 when the Soviet Union was expected to have enough atomic bombs to launch a devastating surprise attack against the United States. NSC 68 called for a crash American effort to build up offensive and defensive military capabilities.

More recently, the same argument has been advanced by members of Reagan's administration who have warned of a 'window of vulnerability', a period during the next few years when the Soviet Union will allegedly

have a strategic advantage. Reagan and his advisers (one of whom, Paul Nitze, was the principal author of NSC 68) fear that Soviet leaders will be tempted to exploit their military advantage to act more aggressively or possibly even to launch a surprise attack against the United States. Some foreign policy analysts go so far as to explain the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a function of their supposed strategic superiority vis-à-vis the United States.²⁰

The correlation of military forces approach to the problem of Soviet aggression seems quite misleading. It naively assumes a constant Soviet desire for adventurism regulated only by external conditions that invite or discourage it. Like water pressing against a dam which will break through if there is a crack, Soviet aggression is expected whenever a political-military 'opening' presents itself. This expectation contradicts most of what we know about the sources of aggression: that it is generally a function of both external and internal conditions and carried out at least as much in response to perceptions of self-weakness as of strength.²¹ Soviet policy is probably no exception. It is well to remember that the Cuban missiles crisis, the most serious Soviet challenge of American interests to date occurred at a time when the United States possessed a clear nuclear advantage and overwhelming conventional superiority in the Caribbean. According to most analysts of the crisis, Moscow's decision to put missiles into Cuba was prompted principally by fears arising from its own strategic *weakness*. It may also have appealed to Khrushchev as a means of overcoming his domestic political weakness, the result of previous policy fiascos at home and abroad.²²

If need is an equal or even more important source of aggression than opportunity, a corresponding shift in the focus of efforts to prevent aggression is required. Too much attention is probably devoted in theory and practice to assessing the military balance and not nearly enough to trying to understand what might prompt an adversary to behave aggressively. A more realistic approach to conflict management would attempt to consider both incentives for confrontation. It would seek to discourage aggression by attempting to limit an adversary's need *and* opportunity to carry it out. It would aim never to allow one's own state to be perceived as so weak or irresolute as to invite a challenge, but at the same time, it would seek to avoid putting an adversary into the position where he felt so weak or threatened that he had the need to do so.

A third failing of Cold War policy also derived from the notion that communists are principally motivated by ideology. This belief

encouraged many Western leaders to downplay national interests and differences among communist states. Instead, communist governments were seen as the building blocks of a monolithic structure at whose apex Moscow lay. This thesis was put most forcefully by a Marine colleague of mine at the Naval War College who had a not quite healed shrapnel wound in his leg. He had saved one large piece of the shell and on it was stamped 'S' for Skoda where it had evidently been made. Occasionally, little bits and pieces worked their way out, and he would rush to display them to me as proof of the worldwide nature of the communist threat. 'Look at this piece of steel', he would exclaim. 'It was made in Czechoslovakia. Probably with East German iron and Polish coal. It was then bought by the Russians who made it into a rocket and sold it to the Chinese who in turn passed it on to the North Vietnamese. They gave it to the Vietcong who put it in my leg. Don't tell me communism isn't monolithic!'

Americans who held this view were on the whole insensitive to the development of the Sino-Soviet rift and the emergence of national communism elsewhere within the Soviet bloc. Yugoslavia aside, the United States failed to exploit these differences until the opening to China in the late 1970s. Ronald Reagan still maintains that 'the only argument that caused' the Sino-Soviet split 'was an argument over how best to destroy us'.²³ Fortunately, the reality of intra-communist feuding has nevertheless forced its way into Western consciousness. Today, the continuing overvaluation of ideology has its principal effect with regard to American policy toward Central America.

Washington has been extremely hostile to revolutionary change and the emergence of left-wing regimes, convinced that they will inevitably come under the influence of the Soviet Union. This belief assumes that Marxist ideology rather than self-interest is the force motivating leaders of left-wing movements and that, as a result, they must inevitably be hostile to the West. Their rhetoric aside, the behavior of many so-called Marxist Third-World states belies this assumption. More often than not they have sought to establish amicable economic and political relations with the United States. In the cases where they have turned to the Soviet Union for support, it has often been only after meeting hostility and opposition from the United States and other Western countries. Guinea, Angola, Nicaragua—even Cuba—could be cited as cases in point. To some degree at least, Western policymakers have made their fear of left-wing regimes self-fulfilling.

The fourth policy failure concerns Western policy toward the Third World. For years, the American preoccupation with the Soviet Union made Washington insensitive to other kinds of serious security threats, most notably those arising from within the Third World. The fundamental political and economic instability of so many of these states, which nevertheless possess ever more sophisticated military arsenals and growing control over some very important economic and strategic resources, is a very serious source of conflict. It has taken a number of shocks, among them, the oil embargo, revolution in Iran, and recurrent Middle Eastern wars, to make Western policymakers aware of the extent to which challenges from or upheavals within the Third World can pose threats as grave to their security as any initiatives of Moscow and its allies. The tendency is still pronounced, particularly in Reagan's administration, to view Third-World problems solely within the context of Soviet-American rivalry. This detracts from both the West's understanding of these problems and its ability to respond to them more effectively.

The final policy failing derives from overlearning the lessons of Munich. Anxious not to repeat the British and French failure of the 1930s, American leaders have been positively zealous in their efforts to avoid communicating even the slightest hint of irresolution. They have felt it necessary to attempt to respond to every conceivable 'challenge', lest failure to do so be taken as a sign of weakness by friend and foe alike. 'Should America falter', John F. Kennedy declared, 'the whole world ... would inevitably begin to move toward the Communist bloc'.²⁴ American concern with credibility led to a policy of indiscriminate globalism. The outcome of regional upheavals and struggles for national liberation) were assessed less in terms of America's concrete interests than they were in terms of how they might affect other countries' perceptions of United States resolve. As the consequences of passivity were usually viewed as graver than the costs of intervention, the United States became the third party to power struggles in every corner of the globe.

The American commitment in Vietnam was the most far-reaching expression of this logic. American policymakers perceived the insurrection in the south as an attempt by world communism to expand its dominion by force. In April 1965, Lyndon Johnson explained to the American public: 'To leave Viet-Nam to its fate would shake ... confidence ... in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word'. One month later, he told congressmen: 'There are a hundred other little nations watching what happens ... If South

Viet-Nam can be gobbled up, the same thing can happen to them'.²⁵ Secretary of State Dean Rusk was particularly concerned with the symbolic value of the American commitment to South Vietnam. His fear, widely shared among Johnson's top foreign policy advisers, was of the impact a communist success would have upon future Soviet and Chinese calculations. In July 1965, he warned the president that if the United States commitment to Vietnam became unreliable, 'the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war'.²⁶

Although the Vietnam War ended in disaster, the logic that led to it has continued to influence American policymakers. In 1974–1975, it led the Ford administration to provide covert aid to two of the contending factions in the Angolan civil war. When Congress compelled the administration to terminate this support, an irate Henry Kissinger predicted that this 'will lead to further Soviet and Cuban pressures on the mistaken assumption that America has lost the will to counter adventurism or even to help others to do so'.²⁷ Similar arguments were put forward by the Carter administration to explain its commitment to defend the Persian Gulf and more recently by President Reagan to justify the increasingly active role the United States is playing in helping Central American governments combat left-wing military challenges.

There is more than a little irony in the fact that decades of zealous American efforts to safeguard credibility have done more than anything else to undermine it. Public opposition to Vietnam brought an end to the draft and made it all but impossible for any president, at least for the time being, to commit troops to combat in the Third World. It also inspired the first successful congressional efforts to limit the president's war-making powers. Nixon's concern for protecting his prerogatives led him to sanction wiretaps and other illegal acts culminating in the Watergate break-in. The Watergate débâcle further eroded presidential authority, making it difficult for subsequent occupants of the White House to implement 'linkage' or to attain Senate approval of a painstakingly negotiated arms control agreement. Previously high levels of defense spending during the Vietnam War had triggered a nearly worldwide inflation that undercut the willingness and ability of America's NATO allies to meet their defense commitments. All of this did more to encourage than dispel Nixon's and Kissinger's nightmares that friends and adversaries alike would come to see the United States as a 'pitiful helpless giant'.

A COMPETING IMAGE

The image of the world that has just been described is not the only Western or even American image or set of lessons about foreign affairs. Another image and a set of lessons have emerged with another generation. In recent years, this image finds institutional expression in the European and American peace movements and in the left wing of northern European Social Democratic and Green parties; it generally reflects the views of a much younger generation.²⁸

The median age of the American population is 30 and that of Western Europe, with some national variation, is almost the same. The majority of the electorate in these countries, and even some of their leaders, no longer have any personal memories of the events which were so important to those who have guided our destinies for so long. Much of the population of these countries has formulated its images of the world in response to much more recent events. The most dramatic crises and upheavals of the last two decades that have impinged upon the consciousness of young people in the United States and Western Europe are the Cuban missiles crisis, the several wars in the Middle East, and, above all, the war in Vietnam. As these events highlighted the dangers of the contemporary world and, in the case of Vietnam, represented a moral and political disaster, it is not surprising to find that many younger people are more sensitive to the failures of their elders than they are to their successes. Many of the lessons that younger people have drawn about foreign affairs directly contradict those of their parents' generation. Four such contrasts warrant discussion.

The first contrasting assumption concerns the influence of the superpowers. Peace movement activists, especially in Europe, have come to believe that the superpowers constitute equal threats to the peace of the world. If the Soviet Union has invaded Afghanistan, repeatedly used force to maintain its influence in Eastern Europe, and continues to suppress dissent at home, the United States has for its part fought a long and brutal war in Indochina, overthrown left-wing but democratic governments in Latin America, and is currently supporting numerous military dictatorships around the world. The Russians may be a nasty lot but at least they have the virtue of being predictable and on the whole conservative in their behavior. Americans may be a trifle more benign, some are willing to admit, but they may also destroy everyone by reason of their impetuosity and paranoia. For many in the European peace

movement uncomfortable with the prospect of their countries becoming a nuclear battleground for the superpowers, the way out is through disengagement. This is the thrust of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain, the Green party in Germany, and similar movements elsewhere in Western Europe. While differences of opinion exist within and among these peace movements, most of the activists oppose any increase in military spending, are against NATO's tactical nuclear modernization program, and generally favor withdrawal of their respective countries from NATO.

Advocates of these positions have for the most part adopted a view of the Soviet Union that is conveniently congruent with their policy recommendations. They describe Moscow's foreign policy as motivated more by defensive than offensive purposes. Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, for example, is portrayed as an understandable reaction to the fear of yet another invasion from the West. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is seen in the same light. Peace movement activists also tend to interpret the Soviet arms buildup as a largely defensive measure, as a response to the development of an awesome nuclear arsenal by the West. They maintain that NATO not the Warsaw pact possesses a significant nuclear advantage, an advantage which explains Soviet's efforts to deploy more modern theater and intercontinental weapons. They also hold the United States culpable for pioneering the variety of technological breakthroughs that has fuelled the arms race and led to the present situation where both sides possess the means to destroy much of the human race. E.P. Thompson, for years the leading intellectual in the British campaign for nuclear disarmament, ventures the judgment:

The United States seems to me to be the more dangerous and provocative in its general military and diplomatic strategies, which press around the Soviet Union with menacing bases. It is in Washington, rather than in Moscow, that scenarios are dreamed up for 'theatre' wars; and it is in America that the 'alchemists' of super-kill, the clever technologists of 'advantage' and ultimate weapons, press forward 'the politics of tomorrow'.²⁹

The failure of SALT II, statements by President Reagan and his advisers about the feasibility of limited nuclear war, and, most recently, the administration's commitment to Star Wars have further fuelled anti-American feeling in Europe.

If the older generation has been concerned with the military balance, the younger generation, especially those in the peace movement, is more concerned with weapons themselves. They worry less that war might arise as a calculated act of aggression and more than it could come about as a miscalculated act of defense. In an acute crisis, leaders on either side, convinced that their adversary was preparing to attack, could respond in ways that made their fear of war self-fulfilling.

Some peace movement activists, especially in Europe, hold the United States responsible for the tensions of the Cold War. A more common view interprets the Cold War as an irrational escalating spiral of suspicion and hostility between the superpowers. International theorists have described such a spiral as a 'security dilemma'.³⁰ According to this formulation, the anarchy of the international environment compels national leaders to expand their power and influence even though this may run counter to their inclinations and interests. The ensuing competition among states, undertaken in the name of security, leads to greater insecurity. The more obvious catalyst of insecurity is military preparations. States arm because they feel threatened. But arms build-ups almost inevitably arouse the fear and suspicion of those they are meant to protect against. As adversaries add to their arsenals, each in the eyes of the other accumulates more weapons than it needs for legitimate defensive purposes, only confirming the other's suspicion of its aggressive intent.

In the end, arms buildups, initially an *effect* of tensions between two states, become a principal *cause* of them. Peace movement spokesmen maintain that this is precisely what has happened with the two superpowers; both are armed to the hilt with the most destructive weapons the world has ever seen but feel ever more threatened as their respective arsenals grow. An open letter to Americans from the German peace movement put it this way:

The arms race during the past three decades has only made the United States, Europe, and the countries of the Warsaw Pact less secure and more threatened. A further arms buildup raises rather than lowers the chance of war. The strategy of deterrence, pursued in both East and West, has entered a dead-end street. The gigantic armaments programs increasingly affect the social well-being and quality of life of Americans and Europeans as well as impede necessary aid for the Third World. We therefore need a new security policy and a new peace policy.³¹

The peace movement aspires to cut through the escalating spiral of insecurity and armament by halting the deployment of more means of destruction. As the introduction of such weapons in the past significantly exacerbated the fears of both sides, so they expect that restraint would ease those fears in the future. Such an amelioration might pave the way for an actual reduction in arms, leading ultimately to disarmament. It could also be expected to reduce the intensity of superpower competition in other areas, further diminishing mutual perceptions of hostility. For many activists in the peace movement, the 'tragedy' of insecurity, not the 'evil' of the adversary, is responsible for the danger of war. If the insecurity can be assuaged, peace may follow.

A third important difference between the two generations concerns the meaning of affluence. The generation that came to power in the years after 1945 conceived of economic development as the key to stability and did everything in its power to bring it about. Many among the younger generation see affluence as a curse because it destroys the environment, erodes important traditional values, and encourages corruption. In their view, it has led to a Europe of bureaucrats who are insensitive to the needs of the young, the old, and the poor but very solicitous of the interests of those who disfigure the land with expressways and nuclear power plants. 'We're the generation that grew up asking our parents what they did during the Hitler years and the war', explained Anton Whittner, a 38-year-old cabinet maker and Green activist. 'They told us they were innocent and we didn't believe them. When my son grows up and asks "Daddy where were you when they turned Germany into concrete?" I have to have an answer'.³²

There is truth in this argument. Affluence has often been attained at some cost to the environment and to social values that contribute to the quality of life. Nor has wealth brought happiness or the kind of world young people would like to see. However, no growth, the policy favored by some activists, is not a solution to the problem. Trade-offs must nevertheless be made between development and quality of life even though they are difficult to define with any precision and even more difficult to make in practice.

The fourth lesson that many of the younger generation have drawn from their experience with the world is that their elders erred in giving primacy to East-West questions. For them, the real threat to peace is the widening gap between the rich and the poor and for this reason North-South issues should receive primacy. The West should be more

concerned with alleviating the poverty of the Third World than in opposing the spread of Soviet influence. Those in the peace movement, especially in Europe, call for a shift in resources, emotional, human, and economic, in order to address this problem.

Once again, this critique offers an important corrective to the overemphasis of the older generation of the Cold War.

Economic and political chaos in the Third World may pose a greater threat to the survival of our way of life than do the ambitions of the Soviet Union. Many experts believe that the first nuclear war will not be fought between the Soviet Union and the West but rather between two underdeveloped countries, one of which feels sufficiently threatened to use such weapons against its traditional enemy.³³ This said, the solutions most often put forward to address this problem—more aid and some kind of restructuring of economic relations to free Third-World countries of their continuing dependence on the West—appear simplistic. It is by no means apparent that a trebling or even quadrupling of aid to poorer countries will promote any more development or result in any real improvement in living standards. Much of the aid already given is wasted because the countries in question are structurally unable to absorb it effectively. Even a radical reorganization of North–South economic relations, assuming for the moment that this is possible, would do nothing to affect the political instability or the host of idiosyncratic cultural barriers that often stand in the way of development. Efforts to modernize the countries too rapidly also tend to intensify existing cleavages within them and bring about the kind of anti-modern backlash that we have witnessed in Iran, a phenomenon increasingly apparent in other countries as well.

CONCLUSIONS

The two images of international relations that we have described reflect different generational experiences. They contain foreign policy lessons based on a very different set of events. These images and the lessons associated with them are useful to policymakers in two ways: they provide conceptual tools to understand and order the world, and they offer policy guidelines for dealing with some of the problems so identified. The success of postwar occupation policies in Japan and Germany attests to the prescriptive power of these lessons.

Policy lessons can also be misleading. Lessons appropriate to the context in which they were learned can mistakenly be applied to a new situation because it bears a superficial resemblance to the previous one. While it is certainly true, for example, that the failure to oppose Nazi Germany from the outset helped to bring about World War II, it is by no means obvious that containment was the appropriate response to the problem posed by the Soviet Union. American policy has nevertheless been based on that analogy since the beginning of the Cold War. Tragically, it has also become at least partly self-validating. The American postmortem of the Cuban missiles crisis, itself a major source of foreign policy 'lessons', offers a telling example of how this phenomenon works.³⁴

There is not a shred of evidence in support of President Kennedy's belief at the time that Khrushchev acted as he did to demonstrate American weakness and irresolution to the world.³⁵ As was noted earlier, it seems more likely that the Soviet move was motivated by Moscow's concern for its own strategic weakness and that the missiles were put into Cuba as a 'quick fix' for a questionable Soviet deterrent. Kennedy's view of the matter nevertheless infected the journalists and academics around him who publicized it in their portrayals of the crisis. Confirmed tautologically, the 'courage and commitment' thesis became one of the most entrenched shibboleths of the Cold War. It reconfirmed in the minds of American policymakers the most enduring policy lesson of the 1930s: the axiom that questionable resolve invites challenges and its corollary that unquestioned resolve deters them.

Our critique of historical learning is equally applicable to the competing image of international affairs. It too is based on superficial historical learning and its policy prescriptions are just as unidimensional. Once again, East-West relations provide a useful illustration of this point.

Whereas the Cold War image emphasized the aggressive nature of Soviet foreign policy and totally ignored legitimate defensive motivations, the competing image is extremely sensitive to these defensive needs but denies or seeks to explain away any offensive objectives on the part of Moscow. Both interpretations represent one-sided and simplistic views of both the Soviet Union and the nature of superpower conflict. For this reason, their policy prescriptions also tend to be unrealistic.

The principal policy recommendation of the competing image with regard to East-West relations is to substitute a policy of what might be called reassurance for one of deterrence. Adherents of this image advocate renewal of détente and revival of SALT II, together with new

arms control measures. They also call for a declaration of 'no first use' of nuclear weapons and a nuclear moratorium, even a unilateral one, including withdrawal of the recently deployed Pershing IIs and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe. These recommendations are based on the hope and expectation that Western initiatives to defuse Cold War tensions will elicit a reciprocal Soviet response.

Those who subscribe to the competing image maintain with some justification that the West has more often than not misinterpreted Soviet motives in the past. Western leaders have consistently sought to explain Soviet behavior in terms of their allegedly aggressive design even when such an interpretation was unwarranted by the facts of the situation. John Foster Dulles' belief that the post-Stalin thaw in Soviet policy was a trap, cited earlier, is just one example. Surely, however, there is every reason to suppose that Soviet leaders are just as myopic as their Western counterparts. Their reaction to the Marshall Plan might be cited as evidence. According to John Gaddis, Stalin and Molotov interpreted American offers to postwar reconstruction aid as motivated by America's need to find markets to absorb its expected peacetime over-production. Moscow was accordingly convinced that it would be doing Washington a favor by accepting loans or grants and thus demanded political concessions in return. Needless to say, the Americans, who perceived their offers of assistance as altruistic, took the Russian response as an expression of hostility.³⁶

As 30 years of Cold War tensions have done much to reinforce negative expectations on both sides, it is unrealistic to suppose that Moscow would react to unilateral measures of restraint with reciprocal gestures of its own. It seems possible that initiatives of this kind would be interpreted as signs of weakness instead of good will, as concessions to the increasingly powerful peace movements on both sides of the Atlantic. If so, restraint or concessions might elicit the very opposite response of that intended. This is, of course, what Western 'hardliners' contend and the reason they oppose such initiatives. The tragedy here is that if the hardliners are right, they are also responsible to a great extent for bringing this state of affairs about. The confrontational policies they and their predecessors have for so many years pursued toward the Soviet Union have helped to create an image of the United States in Moscow inconsistent with any notion of American self-restraint or freely granted concessions.

Mutual cognitive rigidity may be the most serious impediment to the amelioration of superpower conflict. Like armaments, the expectation of

hostile intent was initially an effect of Cold War tensions but today has become a principal cause of them. Leaders on either side of the super-power divide who want to improve relations with the adversary must recognize the gravity of this problem and devise a strategy for overcoming it. For any measure, no matter how well conceived, will do little to defuse tensions unless it is somehow perceived as sincerely motivated by the other side.

It is apparent that these two images of international affairs represent different swings of the generational pendulum. The competing image is primarily a reaction to the policy failures, so apparent in the 1960s and 1970s, of the Cold War image of international relations. Its policy prescriptions are in every case the reverse of those derived from the Cold War image. The Cold War image in turn was formulated in response to the foreign policy failures of the 1930s. It too called for strategies of managing conflict that were just about diametrically opposed to the policies that had preceded it. Appeasement and some of the other unsuccessful policies of the 1930s were for their part a reaction to more confrontational policies that were seen in retrospect to have been responsible for the First World War.

This chain of reaction and response is ominous in its implications. In each instance, strategies of conflict management that sought to avoid repeating the mistakes of the recent past succeeded in doing so but failed for an entirely different set of reasons. One explanation for this we have already noted: the tendency to apply policy lessons learned in one context to another in which they are inappropriate and possibly disastrous. Another explanation probably arises directly from the concern to avoid past mistakes.

Policymakers can become so sensitive to particular problems that they become correspondingly insensitive, perhaps even blind, to other issues or causes of conflict. The policies they implement to address the problems or causes of conflict that concern them, whether successful or not, can have the effect of aggravating those which they have ignored. Deterrence, for example, is a strategy designed to discourage aggression by raising its cost. Proponents of deterrence are often insensitive to the ways in which armaments and threats—the currency of deterrence—can intensify hostility between rival powers by reason of the aggressive intentions they convey. Conversely, those who focus on the detrimental effects of the arms race often ignore the range of problems independent of weaponry that cast the superpowers in adversarial roles. Unilateral

restraint with respect to weapons would not address any of these problems and conceivably could make some of them worse.

The preceding discussion is not meant to detract from the fact that both images of international affairs are based on important truths about the nature of conflict and the possible ways of coping with or even preventing it. However, it is equally clear that the flashes of insight permitted to any generation illuminate only a small corner of the truth about the complexities of interstate relations. Policymakers, East and West, nevertheless seem prone to mistake their generation's insights for the total sum of wisdom. Until such time, as scholars and leaders alike can free themselves of this illusion they seem doomed to write yet another act in the continuing tragedy of generational over-reaction and inappropriate response.

NOTES

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2. Robert P. Abelson and Milton Rosenberg, 'Symbolic psycho-logic,' *Behavioral Science* 3 (January 1958), 1-13; Robert P. Abelson, 'Psychological implication,' in Abelson et al., *Theories of Cognitive Consistency: A Sourcebook* (Chicago: Rand- McNally 1968), 112-139, and Abelson, 'Social psychology's rational man,' 59-89.
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 6. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 239–248.
 7. *Ibid.*, 17–42, et passim.
 8. *Ibid.*, 187–191.
 9. On the concept of the generation and its political significance, the two classical works remain a series of short essays by José Ortega y Gasset first published in book form as *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (Madrid 1923) and Karl Mannheim's two-part article, 'Das Problem der Generationen,' *Vierteljahrshäfte für Soziologie* 8 (1928), 157–185, 309–329, reprinted in Paul Kecskemeti, ed, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press 1952). For a critical review of more recent literature on the concept, see A. Esler, *Generations in History* (1982).
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 11. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (2nd ed; New York: Atheneum 1961).
 12. Ernest R. May, "Lessons" of the Past: *The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press 1973), attempts to explain the American intervention in Vietnam as at least in part the result of the lessons American policymakers had learned from the 1930s. Although written to influence thinking during the Vietnam debate, it remains a provocative work by reason of its broader implications about the ways in which policy is influenced by history.
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27. Kissinger speech at Dallas, Texas, 22 March 1976, in Henry A. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (3rd ed; New York: W.W. Norton 1977), 360.
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