



Through Military Force if Necessary: US Notes on 'Fears' in Eastern Europe in the Carter Years, 1977-81

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Albeit rather short and 'uncompleted', as one-term US presidencies may seem, Jimmy Carter's stay at the White House from January 1977 to January 1981 prompted brave and often wise choices in numerous fields of US foreign policy. It is undeniable that many mistakes, too, were made in those crucial years that included both the last wave of *détente* developed in the 1970s and the beginning, from the end of 1979, of the final period of hard confrontation between Washington and Moscow, due to characterize the following half decade. However, many were also the fruitful outcomes of the decisions taken by Carter that his Republican successor, Ronald Reagan, cleverly exploited to further strengthen the position of the US in the last phases of the cold war. It is not surprising, therefore, that the academic literature published on Carter and his presidency has gradually grown to a wide range of contributions, offers relevant research on many sectors of the US interaction with the international system during his term, and provides very differently nuanced assessments of its failures and successes. As George Herring has written, for example, "Carter attained some major successes. More than was appreciated at the time, he redirected U.S. foreign policy in important and enduring ways". However, "by the end ... his achievements were lost in an administration afflicted by mismanagement, burdened with unrelenting political opposition, and simply overwhelmed by events" (Herring 2008: 831)¹.

Against the backdrop of the innovative human rights policy adopted by the administration, on which remarkable historiographical interpretations are now available (e.g. Keys 2014: 242-277; Bradley 2016: 123-127 and part 2 *passim*), relations between the US and Eastern Europe certainly were an important part of the overall picture. Raymond L. Garthoff (1994a: 633-634) correctly summarized in his book on *Détente and Confrontation* that "the Carter administration, if not consciously seeking to undermine the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, nonetheless created the impression in the minds of the Soviet leaders that the United States would be satisfied only with a fundamental change in their system". The human rights campaign certainly built an even stronger connection between US policy towards Eastern Europe and US-Soviet relations than in the past, as Garthoff (1984) had already highlighted in his earlier study of the area in the context of Washington-Moscow relations. However, it is still acceptable his general assessment that the policy elaborated by the new administration "did not evidence

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¹ Cf. among others Smith 1986, Thornton 1991, Skidmore 1996, Strong 2000, Kaufman-Kaufman 2006, Gaillard 2007, Leffler 2007: 259-337, Kaufman 2008. In the last ten years e.g. Glad 2009, Zanchetta 2014: 189-314; Hanhimäki 2013: 101-142; Sargent 2015: chs. 8-9; Westad 2017: ch. 18. The author is very grateful to his two anonymous reviewers for their inspiring comments and their precious hints at available sources and literature.

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any great change", even though "it stressed a criterion of differentiation, under which the United States would reward Eastern European communist countries showing either greater independence from the Soviet Union or greater internal liberalization" (Garthoff 1994a: 634).

The final result of this attitude, planned in 1977 and gradually implemented throughout the presidency, was that US policy in Eastern Europe contributed to the unraveling of *détente* within an overall scheme that Olav Njølstad has convincingly drawn as "the mutual lack of restraint that stemmed from the zero-sum logic of Cold War geopolitics". In fact, as he has rightly observed, the US also "tried to improve its strategic position", besides other initiatives, "by supporting opposition groups and governments in Eastern Europe seeking independence from Moscow" (Njølstad 2011: 154). Vladislav Zubok has clearly highlighted that this happened just while "the East European regimes' desperate need to prop up their legitimacy pushed them inexorably toward asserting their 'national' character as distinct from the Soviet model" (Zubok 2011: 97; based also on Rothschild and Wingfield 2000: 73). The 'national' factor, combined with the economic rapid decline of the Soviet empire in Central and Eastern Europe, also contributed, as Zubok (2011: 98) correctly concludes, to the fact that leaders in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) "began looking to the West in their desperate search for investments, new technology, and consumer goods". The Carter administration, just like Western European countries through their respective *Ostpolitik* models, was able to take good advantage of this situation. It is true, as Nancy Mitchell has commented, that especially in the Polish case in 1980 Washington "failed to appreciate the formidable power of the doctrine – human rights – that Carter himself had proclaimed with such passion a mere three years before" and "failed to grasp the impotence of the Kremlin" (Mitchell 2001: 86). Nonetheless, at least it warned the Soviet not to invade. So, in "the bewildering complexity of international affairs in the late 1970s", this and other challenges faced by the administration in its last year, including revolution in Iran and the war in Afghanistan, led Carter "to adopt the muscular rhetoric of Cold War and to put into motion an exploding defense budget", a policy that Reagan would soon fully embrace. Mitchell's overall conclusion seems applicable to Eastern Europe, too: "The irony is that, in the Cold War during the Carter years, Americans were much stronger than they, or their president, knew" (*ibid.*: 88).

The growing number of published and unpublished sources available for research on the Carter administration offers space for specific minor considerations against the backdrop of the established academic literature. By focusing on the *leitmotiv* of 'fear' the present contribution aims to display and comment on a small sample of documents produced by the administration in those crucial years, when the cold war was about to end but nobody could bet on it yet. It thereby tries to understand – where various nuances of that "unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger" (Merriam-Webster 2019) were explicitly noted and quoted by US officers – how Washington observed and interpreted fears in Eastern Europe *vis-à-*

vis the Soviet threat as well as, occasionally, symmetrical Soviet fears of unfavourable developments in the area². By highlighting single episodes and events analyzed in Washington, the article certainly does not aim to demonstrate, but only to show that the most important features and good qualities of Carter's foreign policy emerged also in the limited field selected here. These good qualities, although not necessarily in terms of US national interest, included a remarkable mix of idealism and realism. It is true, as Betty Glad (2009: 280) has observed, that Carter "embraced a morality that did not prepare him for the dilemmas and ambiguities that any head of state must confront". However, he and his collaborators were fully aware of the complex relation between the protection of short-term concerns and the long-term strategic construction of a pivotal role of the US as *primus inter pares*, at least formally, in a future post-cold war system. Through such awareness, they were often capable of flexibly updating the schemes of wilsonian idealism, of its rooseveltian transformation and of the post-war patterns drawn by Truman, Kennedy and Johnson. Carter's term was a special time in the history of US foreign policy, when the White House boldly aimed to find innovative ways – and radically different methods in reaction and comparison to the style of Nixon, Ford and Kissinger – to interpret the cartesian coordinates of *ethos* and *realpolitik*. The Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Zbigniew Brzezinski, called them 'power and principle' when he titled his memoirs, meaning ethical reference points on one side and realism, pragmatism or even cynicism on the other, as they emerge in the foreign planning and action of any major or minor power³. Glad (2009: 282) correctly highlights that "not only did Carter's moralist approach to the world make the diplomatic task of dealing with the Soviets very difficult, it also led him into actions that could only be seen as manifestations of double standards". This was true also in Eastern Europe when, for example, relations with Romania were at stake. However, despite specific setbacks and mistakes, the administration's approach, based on precise moral values, and just because it was rooted in them, enabled the US to effectively reach important objectives in several parts of the globe, one of which was Eastern Europe itself.

The title of this article quotes a rather predictable comment presented in a confidential document that the US Department of State prepared in the first days of February 1979, just at the middle of the Carter presidency, bearing the title "Eastern

² The article is mainly based on records of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Ga. (hereafter, JCL) and on documents published in *Foreign Relations of the United States, Jimmy Carter Administration, 1977-1980*, vol. 20, *Eastern Europe*, 2015 (hereafter, F and doc. no.); cf. Sitography (hereafter, S; checked on 25 Nov. 2019), a/2. The volume includes an overall section on Eastern Europe as a whole and six chapters covering Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia, besides a section on the broadcasting policy to Eastern Europe and the USSR. The attitude of the Department of State could therefore seem here more influential than it really was, even though it goes without saying that also other branches of the administration, such as the Department of Defense, the Treasury and the intelligence community, strongly contributed to define the US perception of the situation in Eastern Europe. However, the broad variety of documentary sources included in the *FRUS* series as well as the clues, offered by the White House papers, to the key debate within the US decision-making process may partly offset this possible imbalance. See also *infra* the final 'Note on sources'.

³ On these aspects cf. e.g. Rosati, 1987, Hargrove 1988, Morris 1996, Fink-Graham 1998, Holmes 2012: 143-172; Steding 2014: 25-85.

Europe, the Soviet Union and Foreign Policy Autonomy" (F 30)⁴. Only ten months later, the ominous decision of invading Afghanistan taken by the Soviet leadership would trigger a shift in the global policy of the US, both in general terms and specifically in relation with the USSR, thereby creating a 'new' and different Carter, proto-Reaganite in his way. The document, however, still belonged to the period of a 'pre-Kabul' *détente*-builder Carter, who was actively negotiating SALT II, the second treaty for the limitation of nuclear strategic arms, and would soon sign it side by side with Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, on 18 June 1979 at the imperial Hofburg in Vienna. Concluding the first section of the paper, devoted to the "Soviet/East European Political Framework", US officials summarized: "Soviet leaders are determined to maintain overall control in East European politics, through military force if necessary". Moscow, therefore, as one reasonably assumed in Washington, would likely use force once again to face too adverse perspectives or circumstances in the area. However, as the paper immediately added, Soviet leaders also aimed to contain and reject Eastern European "pressures for change" by partial concessions. It was predictable that the evolution of this balanced approach might prove to be a "major factor for Europe" in the following decade (F 30: 101)⁵. The administration, therefore, clearly noted in 1979 that a key element for the future of the old continent was to be the changing mixture of two ingredients. The first one coincided with Eastern European fears of the Soviet Union, and especially of a new military intervention, be it in Poland or elsewhere, aimed to settle accounts and restore order in the imperial periphery through the usual 'colonial' methods. The second ingredient, also in connection with fear, consisted of the parallel willingness and ability – more or less strong, depending on the country – in both European camps to venture steps of change. Drawn and still separated by the cold war, the two camps actually shared some objectives and were certainly lumped together by the strenuous and anguished attention to Soviet moves and possible plans.

In the two previous years Carter and his administration had manoeuvred in Eastern Europe according to a certain degree of continuity with the Republican presidents in office from 1969 to 1977, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, as Paschalis Pechlivanis has recently confirmed in his accurate study on the US and Romania in the 1970s: "Differentiation remained the keyword and the official doctrine"⁶. Relations with the area, therefore, had remained explicitly subordinated to the main game with Moscow both at regional level – in diplomatic terms and through the communication streams set by Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty and Voice of America – and with single interlocutors in bilateral patterns. In the absence of significant relations with Tirana, seven had been the governments and capital cities of reference, or better six plus one, given the particularities of the Yugoslav situation, i.e. East Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Sofia and Belgrade. The diverse approach to the seven, namely,

⁴ The undated paper was attached to a letter sent on 7 February by Director of Policy and Planning Anthony Lake to Ronaldo Sandenberg, Special Adviser to the Ministry of External Affairs of Brazil.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Mitchell 2011, Zubok 2011. On Eastern Europe in the Cold War see the essays collected by Kramer-Smetana 2014 and the "Forum" 2017 on the book.

⁶ Pechlivanis 2019: 135; cf. 116-139, on Carter and Eastern Europe.

the differentiation policy already pursued by Nixon and Ford, was confirmed on 13 September 1977 by a Presidential Directive approved by the National Security Council, PD-NSC/21 (F 16; cf. Pechlivanis 2019: 123-128). The innovative momentum came in terms of human rights, since that key element of the Carter *weltanschauung* had to be introduced in Eastern Europe, too. This meant that relations with those among the seven counterparts that would hopefully prove, or had already showed, to be ready to build prudent liberalization patterns at home could and should become tighter and more cooperative. Washington, however, would keep on assessing their foreign policy moves more or less subservient to Soviet interest by force, albeit partly inspired by attempts at (or false hopes of) autonomy.

In this complex and nuanced framework, enlightened by the administration's deliberate wish to exploit at best the results reached by the Helsinki Conference in 1975, Directive no. 21 clearly explained that the relationship with the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria had to work within limited margin for manoeuvre. Relevant initiatives involving those three governments were not at stake. Washington, therefore, would just aim to protect US interests and set bilateral relations in a formal context of growing normality. Such were the projects in 1977 and such, with obvious adjustments, would prove to be the overall record checked at the end of the presidency in January 1981. On the contrary, as planned in 1977, the new administration would invest energies till the end of 1980 in the more promising relations with Hungary, Romania, Poland and Yugoslavia. In the first case, for instance, the return of the Hungarian Royal Crown to Budapest in January 1978, an idea supported by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance that Brzezinski firstly opposed but eventually endorsed, marked an important breakthrough in bilateral relations during the four-year term. "This gesture, although ceremonial, had great historical significance for the Hungarians and removed a major obstacle to expanding the U.S.-Hungarian relationship", wrote Brzezinski (1983: 299). A bilateral trade agreement was successfully negotiated in March and a Double Taxation Treaty was signed in February 1979. As for Yugoslavia, "a special case deserving particular attention" according to the annual report prepared by the National Security Council (NSC) Staff for Eastern European Affairs at the end of 1977 (F 18), the most urgent issue was Tito's increasing age and therefore his succession. The Department of State was persuaded that Moscow would try to take advantage of the circumstances to restore full Soviet control over Yugoslav domestic and foreign policies. This should be pre-empted since any such course would certainly work to the disadvantage of the Western bloc. Weaknesses and alarm warnings hinting at an economic and political collapse of the Federation were already detectable. Washington would therefore aim to cope with them and pave the way to cooperative relations with the future leadership, called upon to maintain the country united, strong and as autonomous as possible despite Soviet intentions and wishes (F "Preface": xi).

Deep attention was devoted to Romania, whose momentum towards more autonomous patterns of foreign policy the US constantly tried to encourage and strengthen. In this case, the point of peak intensity was reached during President Nicolae Ceausescu's visit to Washington in 1978. However, within the typical dilemma

between ethics and *realpolitik* that the administration could not escape in Europe as elsewhere, even in those days the brutality of the regime had to be taken into due account, all the more so given the pressure coming from Congress in order to impede the renewal of Romania's most-favoured nation trading status because of repressive domestic policies. As early as February 1977, in his first weekly national security report prepared for Carter, Brzezinski had warned: "We have a stake in Romanian independence but we also have a stake in human rights"⁷. Later, in January 1978, he wrote: "In the past" the country was "given very favorable consideration; there has been some slippage in importance". It was true that "Romania's human rights record is in need of improvement"; however, it was "the Warsaw Pact state that has clearly demonstrated the greatest degree of independence from the Soviet Union". Hence, the administration undoubtedly "should take advantage" of Ceausescu's next visit, "scheduled after that of Tito", in order "to underscore our interest in Romania"⁸. Aware of the dichotomy, Pechlivanis correctly highlights that "the case of Ceausescu's Romania ... is the most representative example of the drawbacks that Carter's policy entailed given that Romania remained Washington's prominent partner despite its rigid and far from satisfactory human rights conditions" (2019: 135; 140-171).

As for Poland, especially until 1979, Washington aimed to encourage visits of the country's leaders to the US and other interaction patterns, with particular emphasis on the convergence of economic interests and possible financial aid that could help Warsaw improve its debt position at international level. In June 1977, forwarding an overall intelligence report on Eastern Europe to the president, Brzezinski wrote that although a Soviet military intervention could not be ruled out since Moscow had the capability to invade and occupy Poland, it was also true that in the last twenty years, along three politico-economic crises, the USSR had always chosen to endorse minor concessions made by the Polish leadership to the people (F 9)⁹. In his weekly national security report, sent that same day, Brzezinski also highlighted that Moscow knew "better than we do" that the USSR might "face an explosion in Poland. That possibility is the more likely if repression is intensified, but perhaps less likely if tensions seem to be receding"¹⁰. Carter decided that his first major world trip at the end of that year would include Poland, "clearly the most important country in Eastern Europe", as he told Brzezinski (Brzezinski 1983: 297). During his meetings with the authorities he "indicated a willingness to increase American commodity credits to Poland" and throughout the visit "made a point of stressing U.S. support for Polish independence and for greater ties between Poland and the West" (*ibid.*: 299): "For the first time a U.S. President visited an Eastern European country without first visiting the Soviet Union, while the visit to Cardinal Wyszyński by Mrs. Carter and myself underlined our support for internal pluralism", noted Brzezinski in his weekly report to the president¹¹. It was

⁷ JCL, Brzezinski Donated Material, Subject File (hereafter, ZBDM), box 41, Weekly National Security Reports (WNSR) no. 1, 19 Feb. 1977.

⁸ *Ibid.*, WNSR no. 42, 13 Jan. 1978, p. 12.

⁹ On Hungary see Kádár Lynn 2000. On the perception of Soviet decline in the US cf. e.g. Hatzivassiliou 2018; for an overall view, Kemp-Welch 2011, Stöver 2013.

¹⁰ See S/a3: *Foreign Relations of the United States, Jimmy Carter Administration, 1977-1980*, vol. 6, *Soviet Union* (2013), WNSR no. 18, 24 June 1977, p. 148.

clear to the administration that hard-currency debts to the West continued “to be a problem for Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. These debts now amount to about \$40 billion. We need to be alert to both the course of that indebtedness and its political implications. (...) For several of the countries – notably Poland – foreign borrowing has provided a vital margin in meeting consumer demands, hence has direct political implications”¹². As a result, the offer of commodity assistance was implemented in 1978 and in 1979 Carter approved a total of \$500 million in assistance to the country. As Brzezinski had noted in January, Poland’s economy was “in bad shape and *getting worse*. Further deterioration might lead to internal upheaval which could be highly adverse to our interests in Eastern Europe. Consequently, the next six months could be critical for the survival of the Gierek regime”¹³. In 1980 Commodity Credit Corporation assistance was increased to \$670 million in credit guarantees, reflecting the administration’s assessment that “it was in the interest of the United States to help Poland work its economic problems out on its own” (Brzezinski 1983: 299-300). In that crucial Summer, while the situation evolved rapidly, the challenge of Solidarność to the regime posed new problems also for the US.

Two were the main US objectives towards Eastern Europe pictured in September 1977 – enhancing a certain degree of autonomy in the international arena, where this was viable, and fostering internal liberalization. In order to reach them the administration would adopt relevant initiatives towards those counterparts that looked more open and promising in either direction within the scope of an overall structured goal, namely, stimulating stability, progress and security throughout the region, with special attention to the “reconciliation between both halves of Europe”, according to the final words of the presidential directive signed by Carter (F 16: 57). This attitude was in line with some suggestions Brzezinski had already given Carter in February 1976: “The abandonment of the policy of benign neglect toward Eastern Europe is desirable, for the United States ought to be at least as interested in Eastern Europe as the Soviet Union is in Latin America” (Brzezinski 1983: 150). The outcome in September 1977 confirmed the option that the Assistant to the President had strongly supported since early discussions on the matter in April, namely, “to favor those states which were somewhat liberal internally or somewhat independent of Moscow (...) encouraging ‘polycentrism’ and pluralism in the region” (*ibid.*: 296-297). Later, in January 1978, in a report for the president prepared by the NSC staff on the “first year’s performance”, Brzezinski would observe that “the most important fact in our relationship with Eastern Europe now is that they understand that we do not regard them as a closed geopolitical precinct of the Soviet Union, and that, at the same time, we will shape our policy toward them in light of the treatment of their people”. It was also encouraging that “for their part, the East Europeans show every sign of a will to expand their relationship” with Washington and that “economic imperatives as well as political interests will provide continuing incentive and leverage in this direction”¹⁴.

¹¹ JCL, ZBDM, box 41, WNSR no. 42 cit., 13 Jan. 1978, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, WNSR no. 38, 2 Dec. 1977, p. 3.

¹³ JCL, ZBDM, box 42, WNSR no. 85, 19 Jan. 1979, pp. 3-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, WNSR no. 42 cit., 13 Jan. 1978, pp. 1; 11.

Against this backdrop, in 1977 and then the following year, Washington often noticed clear signals of fear in Eastern Europe towards possible Soviet moves. Part of this concern focused on the issue of dissent, which the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) carefully analyzed in September 1978. The dilemma gripping Governments in the region was how much should be allowed: according to the report, "the toleration of any measure of dissent" would remain indeed "a risky course, both for the national leaders and for their relations with the USSR" (F 26). A typical example was Romania, whose regime was considered the most repressive of the area towards its citizens. Ceausescu and his power bloc perfectly knew they could not exaggerate if they wished to maintain a special relationship with the US – which provided them also with a major asset *vis-à-vis* Moscow – and especially the most-favoured-nation status. However, they were afraid that dissent at home could grow. Therefore, they chose to persecute political opponents or encourage them to emigrate (F 26)¹⁵. On the other side, as intelligence officers had already reported in March, just the symmetrical fear of potential dissenters with respect to the Government's repressive attitude, combined with the efficiency of the security organs and a certain degree of passivity "of the Romanian character", was one of the main reasons why the dissent average in the country was rather low (F 193; cf. Deletant-Ionescu 2004; Watts 2012). Still about Romania, on the eve of Ceausescu's visit to Washington in April 1978, the Department of State detected fear in Bucharest for the possibility that public debate in Budapest on the Hungarian minority in Transylvania might trigger dangerous irredentist attempts against the Trianon border settlement between the two countries (F 196). Even more interesting, however, was the synoptic overview of Romanian and Yugoslav worries proposed by Vance in a memorandum sent to Carter on 7 April, when he noticed that both countries, in pursuing autonomous foreign policy patterns, were "intermittently gripped by alternating fears of Yalta and the Cold War, of US-Soviet collusion and US-Soviet collision" (F 198).

Different nuances, as for domestic dissent, characterized the Hungarian case. In April 1977, the US Embassy in Budapest noticed that the country had to face much lighter challenges under this respect than other Eastern European governments. János Kádár had not undertaken repressive measures against a group of 34 intellectuals who had signed a petition supporting Charter 77, the manifesto prepared by the human and civil rights movement in January, symbol of Czechoslovakian dissent. Fear, in this case, stemmed from a different root: that Carter's human rights policy might worsen US-Soviet relations and therefore oblige Hungary to deflect from the path of cooperative relations with Washington that Budapest had cultivated with extreme care especially during the last two years elapsed since the Helsinki Act (F 139)¹⁶. As for Yugoslavia, on the more traditional ground of security and relations with neighbours, in September 1978 the Federal Secretary for National Defence, General Ljubičić, visited Washington to return the visit to Belgrade of Harold Brown, US Secretary of Defense, in October

¹⁵ On the regime's repressive policies cf. e.g. Bottoni 2017.

¹⁶ On these aspects see e.g. the collection "Records of the Warsaw Pact Committee of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 1976-1990", section "Faltering *Détente*, 1976-1980", S/f2. On Charter 77 cf. Bolton 2012.

1977. During the official talks with the top military delegation Brown reaffirmed that the US meant to strengthen cooperation ties and highlighted that Greece, a NATO member, was not afraid of a military threat from a strong Yugoslavia (F 258).

Beyond Eastern Europe, looking at Moscow, Washington noticed fears in the Soviet leadership's attitude and behaviour that were exactly symmetrical to the ones detected above in the bloc. A document prepared by the Department of State in July 1977 showed that the Soviet were deeply worried that the influence of the US and its Western European allies might destabilize Eastern Europe (F 11). According to an NSC paper of March 1978, Moscow was certainly afraid of a "political evolution" in Eastern Europe (F 21). A meeting of the GDR Interagency Group organized on 9 January 1979 pictured a scenario in which the Soviets feared the development of a "quadrilateral entente" including the US, Europe, Japan and China, and were therefore more than ever concerned about the German threat on the Western flank. Since the GDR government, too, was paranoid about any possible "infection" from the West, advantageous developments in the country's relations with the US and its allies were heavily hampered (F 124). Two more nuances of fear emerged in this case – fear in Moscow of China's behaviour and fear in the GDR of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

The Soviet dilemma, in February 1979, halfway of Carter's presidency, was clear to the State Department. Moscow knew that a "gradual appeasement" of Eastern European aspirations – in economic terms as well as with regard to domestic liberalization and stronger autonomy in foreign policy – would almost inevitably feed rather than satisfy the region's appetites. Furthermore, given the economic and likely energetic problems that worried them, the Soviets neither wished nor could reallocate scarce resources from their own domestic necessities towards Eastern European countries, which were indeed more developed and also more in need of Western than Soviet technology. These two elements, according to the Department of State, had a major impact on relations between Moscow and Eastern Europe and consequently on Western policies. In the long run the dynamic structure of those relations offered Eastern Europe a certain degree of hope, constituted a threat for strict Soviet control and implied the possibility of "occasional eruptions" when – here came the focal point – "Eastern European hopes and Soviet fears collide" (F 30: 100-101)¹⁷.

The case of Poland, already in 1979, was emblematic. Given the country's strategic position, Moscow was primarily keen to preserve stability and therefore ready to look at the Polish leadership's moves with a certain degree of tolerance. Among the partners of the Warsaw Pact, Poland had been the first to cultivate ties with countries such as France, Britain and Italy. Edward Gierek, First Secretary of the United Worker's Party since 1970, had sent out clear signals of continuity in that policy of cooperation with the West. His leadership had showed partial moderation towards dissidents and the Catholic Church of Poland, "greatly strengthened by the accession to the Papacy of John Paul II". The regime was pursuing a course of economic reform even in support of

¹⁷ An interesting perspective on these aspects is offered by the essays collected in Bren-Neuburger 2012.

private land property. Warsaw reciprocated Moscow's threatening tolerance through faithful endorsement of Soviet foreign policy and of the Kremlin's indications in terms of Eastern European economic integration. This was also due to a specific Polish fear that had to do with the Soviet Union and the post-war European order – that Moscow might one day change attitude on the German question to the disadvantage of Poland (F 30: 104). In this case, therefore, fear had another nuance, linked to Moscow's role as guarantor of a specific *status quo* both *vis-à-vis* the Western bloc – namely, in the relationship between Poland and the FRG – and within the Eastern one, with regard to relations between Poland and the GDR. Just the same nuance of fear that, even more complicated by the Yugoslav borderline position between the two blocs, could be checked in Albania, afraid of her neighbour for at least three reasons – since Yugoslavia was bigger and stronger, had an Albanian minority within her borders and was ideologically stigmatized by Tirana as revisionist (F 30: 108).

The issue of dissent emerged again in September 1979 in the report on the GDR focused by the Bureau of Intelligence Office of the Department of State on the “new hard line” adopted by Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party and Chairman of the Council of State. Dissidents in the GDR criticized the regime “for prostituting Marxist ideals”, invoked a more “humanistic socialism” and therefore moved towards the spirit and theses of Western Eurocommunism. Hence the government's fear that these arguments might reach youth, technocrats and other key sectors of the population, filtering down to the mass level and thereby paving the way to political unrest. Honecker and his collaborators also feared that frustration among East German youth might raise street violence and conflict, as in the case of the anti-police and anti-state attitudes manifested by the Alexanderplatz riots on 7 October 1977 during a rock concert (F 133).

As for new fears triggered by the invasion of Afghanistan, at the end of January 1980 the Department of State sent Brzezinski a report focusing on relations with Eastern Europe. The document highlighted that Romania was afraid of Soviet economic pressures and Yugoslavia, whose government had bravely and heavily criticized Moscow's move in Central Asia (just in a region, one might add, that had been of specific importance for the whole non-alignment environment since the 1950s), was eager to strengthen political and military ties with the US, for example through arms purchases, as well as political and economic relations with the European Communities. Both patterns, from Belgrade's point of view, had to do with fear of the Soviet Union (F 36)¹⁸. Yugoslavia, according to the NSC, was also afraid that NATO discussions of contingency plans might stimulate Warsaw Pact pressures on Belgrade (F 276). US Ambassador Lawrence Eagleburger summarized the situation in March as follows: Tito was dying and the government, maybe for fear maybe to show Moscow that it could

¹⁸ Doc. 36 had been produced and approved by the Interagency Group on Europe on 24 Jan. with the participation of the National Security Council, the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Commerce, Agriculture, the CIA, the Export-Import Bank and other governmental branches. Cf. CIA, National Foreign Assessment Center, memo, “Romania: A Situation Report”, 7 Apr. 1980, S/h1. See the recent contribution offered by Zaccaria 2017. On the EEC and Eastern Europe in the 1970s cf. e.g. Romano 2014.

not “be pushed around”, or for both motivations, had decided to reinforce military cooperation with Washington on a scale unseen since the 1950s, perfectly aware that the Soviets would immediately be informed of this (F 286).

A symmetrical nuance of fear, however, could be detected also on Moscow’s side. After Tito’s death in May, between Vance’s resignation and the appointment of Edmund Muskie as new Secretary, Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher wrote Vice President Walter Mondale, on departure to attend the funeral, that the USSR had underestimated what had proved to be a very intense world reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan. Moscow was therefore unlikely to make new moves of such scope and impact just for fear of further retaliation (F 288). In September, Brzezinski, Muskie and Brown discussed the military supply role the US might play if the Soviets increased pressure “or attempt to intervene” in Yugoslavia, but decided to postpone further specific approaches to the Yugoslavs until after the presidential election¹⁹. Some months later, in December, Eagleburger suggested that Belgrade should be reassured that, if Moscow decided to invade Poland, the US would provide early and very clear warning to the Soviets lest they be tempted, in the turmoil and fear raised by the new intervention, to guess that a post-Tito Yugoslavia might be beyond the reach of Western assistance like Warsaw (F 300)²⁰. Finally, in January 1981, just as Carter was leaving the White House to Ronald Reagan, the ambassador observed that two parallel debates had emerged after Tito’s death, one political and the other economic, between “reformers”, who accepted the need for change, and “conservatives”, who feared it (F 301).

An NSC document on East-West relations sent to Brzezinski in September by his Military Assistant, Gen. William Odom, highlighted that the Soviets were deeply afraid of a Western united economic front. Since Moscow and Eastern Europe however had willy-nilly to look to the West in order to relieve their economic pains, this would make room for conditioned assistance in exchange for rigorous and measurable political engagements. According to the NSC staff it was indeed “time to reduce the spheres of Soviet influence” for large were the opportunities. “We already have a policy for East Europe of encouraging its autonomy *vis-à-vis* the USSR”, added Odom, and “we must help Poland consolidate recent gains”. In his view, the Soviet Union, “however militarily strong it is becoming, suffers enormous centrifugal political forces. A shock could bring surprising developments within the USSR, just as we have seen occurring in Poland”. In conclusion, since “the dissolution of the Soviet Empire is not a wholly fanciful prediction for later in this century”, Washington “should sight on that strategic goal for the longer run” (F 39: 138-140).

In the GDR, in October, fear raised by events in Poland was “palpable” according to a US diplomat who had collected the opinions expressed by his contacts – lawyers, academics, intellectuals but also some workers, all endowed with political awareness

¹⁹ JCL, ZBDM, box 42, WNSR no. 152, 5 Sept. 1980, p. 1.

²⁰ Cf. CIA, Director of Central Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate no. 15-79, “Prospects for Post-Tito Yugoslavia”, 1 Feb. 1980, S/h2.

and able to faithfully reflect the mood of their professional circles and communities as well as an overall "East German popular mood". Everybody feared that the deterioration of East-West relations triggered by the Polish issue might even lead to war. Most contacts were persuaded that Moscow would likely use military force against Warsaw. In such case, it was out of question that the GDR would find itself void of any decision-making autonomy on the front line, albeit in the shadow of the USSR, and that the Polish would resist at any price, as in 1939, thereby at the very least determining the breakdown of *détente* for decades and at most a general war. Fears in Moscow and East Berlin of destabilization within the bloc due to the situation in Poland would also freeze inner-German relations. The courage and audacity shown by the workers were admirable but the diplomat's contacts were afraid that lack of self-control and realism in their movement might eventually provoke Soviet intervention (F 135)²¹. Another nuance of fear emerged in this case – those who had the possibility and bravery of daring in Poland what could not be dared in the GDR were admired but the impact of their audacity was at the same time deemed dangerous and worrisome. A report sent from the US Embassy in Prague in November highlighted that the overall impression of Czechoslovakia in those days was, as it had been for more than a decade after the "Spring", of "an apathetic, disengaged population ruled by a nervous, unselfconfident regime". The 1968 trauma still kept the government fearful of any innovation that might foster Moscow's negative reactions. Which, according to US observers, also contributed to the stagnation of the economy (F 116). In the same weeks, in Hungary, another kind of "genuine fear" troubled the Kádár government, namely, that the Polish example might become a political alternative and therefore a dangerous challenge to the ruling party. The population seemed impressed that the Polish workers had by then "got away with it" by organizing their own unions and base of power. Both the people and the leadership still suffered from the 1956 scar and many believed that the Soviets could not tolerate the Polish new position towards Communist ideology and control. According to the US Embassy in Budapest, the longer the experiment lasted, the greater the Polish example would influence attitudes and behaviours in Hungary (F 175)²².

In October, writing an assessment of foreign policy consequences that the electoral victory of Reagan could trigger, Brzezinski had noted that in Eastern Europe "there would be great fear that the United States is again writing Eastern Europe off (the Sonnenfeldt doctrine) and this would be particularly felt in Poland". As for the USSR, "the Soviets would have no alternative but to conclude that American-Soviet relations have become one-dimensional, focused entirely on the arms race, with SALT in effect abandoned; a Soviet move against Poland in that context would become somewhat more probable"²³. Furthermore, given the Afghan precedent, one could actually fear that Moscow would sooner or later yield to the temptation of military intervention. So, on 3 December, while an alert memorandum prepared by CIA analysts detected "preparations for an imminent unscheduled joint service exercise involving Soviet, East

²¹ On the crisis see e.g. S/e2. Cf. Kramer 2009. See also the collections of the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies headed by Kramer, S/i. On the CIA website, MacEachin 2000.

²² Cf. Borhi 2016, esp. ch. 8.

²³ JCL, ZBDM, box 42, WNSR no. 158, 17 Oct. 1980, p. 1.

German, Polish and possibly Czechoslovak forces"²⁴, Carter publicly stated that the US was "watching with growing concern the unprecedented building of Soviet forces along the Polish border" and concluded that "the attitude and future policies of the United States toward the Soviet Union would be directly and very adversely affected by any Soviet use of force in Poland"²⁵. At the same time, as noted by Pechlivanis (2017: 134), he assured Brezhnev "via a 'hot line' message that the United States did not intend to exploit the crisis to upset the current balance of power in Eastern Europe". However, as Carter wrote in his diary on 8 December, "the Soviets have not denied our public statement, and Brezhnev has not answered my hot-line message. This is the first time that has occurred"²⁶. Three days later, on the 11th, as we know from the transcripts of the Soviet Politburo meeting published by Andrzej Paczkowski and Malcolm Byrne (2007: 167-168, doc. 25), the Kremlin decided that a military action could be postponed while the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party, Stanisław Kania, tried to handle the situation by "taking to heart the advice" which had been "offered to him by the other alliance leaders" in a crucial Warsaw Pact leadership meeting taken in Moscow on the 5th²⁷. Meanwhile, as Helene Sjursen has effectively summarized in her book on the West *vis-à-vis* the Polish crisis, the NATO allies took "concrete steps (...) to ensure a unified response if the Soviet Union did intervene" during the meetings of the Defence Planning Committee on 10 December and of the Foreign Ministers on 11-12 December. By the end of the year, therefore, "the West had started to implement its principal measures in response to events in Poland. There was a clear effort to signal that the West was not indifferent to the situation and that Soviet interference would not be taken lightly" (Sjursen 2003: 44-45).

On 12 December Brzezinski wrote to Carter that thanks to "a seemingly reliable account of what transpired in Moscow, based on a debrief by the Polish Foreign Minister who attended", the situation was "consistent with the position that we have adopted: that an intervention is ready but that the final decision to launch it may not have been made, and thus there is a chance that we can perhaps help to deter it". He noted that the US attitude and statements "should help Kania and Walesa to calm the situation in Poland while the good progress made on generating Allied solidarity should give Moscow further cause to reassess the potential results of intervention"²⁸. A week later, Brzezinski could observe with some satisfaction that, according to "the same Soviet clandestine source who provided the report detailing Soviet invasion plans", the invasion had been "postponed for the 'indefinite future'. The principal reason for the postponement, according to the sources, was the effectiveness of the Western counter propaganda campaign". Even though invasion forces remained "in

²⁴ Paczkowski and Byrne 2007: 138, doc. 20; cf. Pechlivanis 2019: 134 ff.

²⁵ PPP 1982 (vol. 3): 2771-2772, Statement by the President, "Situation in Poland", 3 Dec. 1980. Cf. e.g. Sjursen 2003: 42; Pechlivanis 2019: 134; Sargent 2015: 293-295.

²⁶ Quoted in Carter 1995: 594; however, the entry for the same day in Carter 2010: 492 does not include these lines.

²⁷ Paczkowski and Byrne 2007: 141-161, doc. 22; cf. "Stenographic Minutes of the Meeting of Leading Representatives of the Warsaw Pact Countries in Moscow," 5 Dec. 1980, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, SAPMO-BArch, J IV 2/2 A-2368, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111232>.

²⁸ JCL, ZBDM, box 42, WNSR no. 160, 12 Dec. 1980, p. 1.

a high state of readiness" and might "move into Poland at any time", that campaign had clearly "convinced the Kremlin the West would retaliate 'massively' with political and economic sanctions"²⁹. So, as Glad (2009: 240-241) has rightly concluded, the US had successfully "provided the backing that would make a military intervention potentially costly for the Soviet Union". According to Sargent (2015: 295), the Polish crisis "sharpened Cold War tensions" but also "augured the Cold War's resolution on the terms that Brzezinski predicted: not in a military confrontation but with the Soviet Union's assimilation to an integrating world order ... This was more or less how things turned out in the 1980s". Therefore, Sargent comments, "Carter's misfortune, it would appear in retrospect, was his timing; the moment for a post-Cold War foreign policy had in the late 1970s not yet arrived".

In those weeks, the Department of State had begun to prepare a draft paper on the policy response the US should adopt in Eastern Europe in the event that Moscow opted for a military intervention in Poland. In a section devoted to Hungary the paper observed that the country, together with Romania, would likely prove to be the least enthusiastic supporter of a potential invasion of Poland. Budapest had certainly been pressured by the East Germans, the Soviets and the Czechoslovaks to take a harder and more outspoken position on the issue and formally would go along with any kind of initiative launched by the Warsaw Pact. However, as the report highlighted, the Hungarians' heart would certainly not beat for the endeavour and they would greatly fear for the image of Hungary as a country adhering "only formalistically, where possible" to the alliance with the USSR, an image that they rightly deemed "increasing beneficial". Indeed, as the analysts of the Department of State concluded, the US had made more progress in relations with Budapest over the last few years than with any other country in Eastern Europe (F 44)³⁰. However, notwithstanding these progress steps in relations with Hungary and some other countries in the area, the US and Western Europe, due to residual cold war constraints, were not yet in a position to provide Eastern Europe with "freedom from fear and want", according to the ambitious task defined forty years earlier by the Atlantic Charter formula. Only Moscow had that power. The old leadership, however, was not far-sighted enough to take real advantage of Carter's enlightened openings and to choose substantial *détente* rather than confrontation for the sake of the Soviet empire. Eastern Europe, therefore, as a key periphery of that empire, had to wait and tremble for some years more. Eventually, from 1985 on, Mikhail Gorbachev and his new élite of collaborators set in motion powerful liberalization processes and elicited fresh responses from the

²⁹ *FRUS, 1977-1980*, vol. 6, WNSR no. 161, 19 Dec. 1980, p. 921 (the words about "the Soviet clandestine source", not declassified in the published doc., may be read in JCL, ZBDM, box 42). Cf. Pechlivanis 2019: 134. A year later, in another crucial meeting of the Soviet Politburo on 10 December 1981, three days before the declaration of martial law in Poland, the Kremlin decided that "under no circumstances" Soviet troops were "to be introduced". Paczkowski and Byrne (2007: 446-453, doc. 81) rightly highlight that this "seemingly unequivocal stance would have shocked most observers, particularly in the United States, where the unshakable assumption was that Moscow would never allow control of Poland to slip through their grasp".

³⁰ On the position of the Soviet leadership cf. e.g. "CPSU CC Politburo Report – On Theses for the Discussion with Representatives of the Polish Leadership", 3 Sept. 1980, translated and published with other documents in Kramer 1999.

US and its Atlantic allies. Those processes would emancipate Europe from fear in the second half of the decade and pave the way, since 1989, not only to the unification of Germany but also to a promising – alas unexploited – opportunity of political unification of the two halves of Europe itself.

The short comments proposed in this article are certainly not sufficient to demonstrate the thesis which, despite many different assessments spread in the academic literature, still persuades the author, namely, that the above-mentioned mix of idealism and realism of the Carter presidency was, if not the best, a very good way to fight the cold war in the late 1970s. That mix prepared the moral and substantial ground, *vis-à-vis* the Afghan challenge, to adequately face Moscow's dangerous initiatives in 1980 and later to give a fresh start to *détente* from a position of strength and authority. During his first term Reagan walked the war path. During the second one, thanks to Gorbachev's brave policies, he could shift to the peace pattern and rapidly march towards a previously unconceivable consensual end of the cold war. The division of Germany and the division of Europe had obviously been two of the more evident manifestations of the long and risky tension between Washington and Moscow. The ability of the Carter administration to interpret and prudently encourage the signs of change both in the Western part of the continent – where the integration process, as in the past, was reaching new goals that were not necessarily in line with the US national interest – and in the Eastern one was a strong contribution to eventually overcome those divisions.

Brzezinski wrote in his memoirs that he “felt strongly that for the United States to respond effectively to opportunities to promote change in Eastern Europe, we should not treat the Soviet bloc either as a monolithic adversary or simply as a group of uniformly friendly neighbors. Greater diversity in Eastern Europe was clearly desirable”. The administration, in his view, “sought to make careful decisions to advance the larger goal of gradually transforming the Soviet bloc into a more pluralistic and diversified entity”. This policy, he concluded, was in the “long-range interest” of the US since it offered “a better way of dealing with the Soviet challenge” (1983: 300-301). Therefore, he listed the policy of differentiation chosen in Eastern Europe, the development of relations not only with countries in that area that “defied Soviet foreign policy” but also with those that “engaged in quiet domestic liberalization”, and the deterrence of a possible Soviet invasion of Poland in 1980 among the foremost accomplishments of the administration (*ibid.*: 528). The reader will decide whether the view from Washington of fears spread in Eastern Europe in the Carter years – on which this article has aimed to focus while leaving aside many other important elements of the bilateral and multilateral interactions between the US and that area – may show some interesting details of this picture or whether that view was just a minor factor in the construction of the US decision-making process in a very complex phase of the cold war.

Paschalis Pechlivanis has concluded that US policies towards Eastern Europe “brought to the surface one of the biggest weaknesses of a universalist policy based on moral ideals such as human rights” that may “clash with strategic, economic and other

political priorities", so that "the need for exceptions in the name of the national interest paves the way to the criticism of inconsistency and double standards" (Pechlivanis 2019: 135; cf. Keys 2014: 256-259). Furthermore, about criticism, as Odd Arne Westad has remarked in his more recent book on the cold war, the Carter administration had to constantly face "a growing public opinion at home that thought the Soviet Union was taking advantage of America's weakness" (Westad 2017: 486). This was certainly true concerning US relations also with Eastern European countries and contributed to nullify the possibility of a second term. "Most Americans – Westad rightly concludes – were simply not willing to tolerate that the United States could have an equal in international affairs, in the 1970s or ever. And they elected Ronald Reagan president to make sure that such a devaluation of the American purpose would not happen again" (*ibid.*: 500). However, the analysis offered in this article may contribute to support a more balanced assessment of the administration's record in historiographical perspective than the one which led the public's choice in 1980. Using Betty Glad's persuasive words, "whatever problems Carter had in balancing US interests with his moral goals, he also undertook major efforts to promote world peace, arms limitation, and a new moral order"; in this framework he "pursued a foreign policy that was in the old 'city on the hill' tradition, sharing some of its virtues as well as its flaws" (Glad 2009: 285). The US notes on fears in Eastern Europe presented here suggest that the way he interpreted that tradition certainly had a strong impact beyond the Atlantic and beyond the Berlin Wall as well as in other parts of the rapidly changing world of the 1970s and 1980s.

Note on sources

Declassification of US sources useful to study the broader picture behind the subject chosen for this brief contribution has already reached an advanced stage, especially at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta and the National Archives at College Park: cf. *infra* the 'Sitography' for the finding aids and the digital collections made available by the Carter Library (S/b1) and the "Oral Histories" series (S/b2). See also the National Archives catalog (S/c) and the useful browsing tool offered by Wikileaks (S/d). As for published documents of the Carter series in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* collection, one may rely by now on the twentieth volume, on Eastern Europe, as well as on the sixth volume, devoted to the USSR, whereas the volumes intended to illustrate relations with Western Europe and Poland are still under declassification review: cf. S/a2 for details of the *FRUS* documents quoted in the article; see S/a1 for vol. 6, *Soviet Union* (2013); vol. 7, *Poland, 1977-81*; vol. 27, *Western Europe*.

Key Soviet and Eastern European sources on the Polish crisis have been available since 1998 thanks to the well-known Cold War International History Project launched by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the website of which keeps maintaining and expanding an excellent rate and quality of publication of new sources in its Digital Archive: cf. Ostermann 1998, esp. 3-133, "New Evidence on the Polish Crisis, 1980-1982"; see also S/e1. Important documents on the Warsaw Pact, its choices and inner mechanisms were published in the book *A Cardboard Castle*, edited by Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne in 2006 in the context of the crucial Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security, and in the volume on the Polish crisis written by Byrne and Andrzej Paczkowski the following year: Mastny-Byrne 2006, esp. 402-445; Paczkowski-Byrne 2007; cf. the digital collections on the Warsaw Pact made available by the Parallel History Project, S/f1. A remarkable task has been accomplished for many years by the National Security Archive in Washington to offer researchers an inexhaustible wealth of material through its action in the framework of the Freedom of Information Act and beyond: cf. S/g1; see e.g. sections of *The Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev*, S/g2.

Memoirs were offered soon after the end of the presidency by Jimmy Carter, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Zbigniew Brzezinski (Carter 1995, Vance 1983, Brzezinski 1983; see also Carter 2010 and 2015). Subsequent contributions include the book written in the new century by Raymond Garthoff, US Ambassador to Bulgaria in 1977-79, who added his personal viewpoint to the two major studies previously devoted to US-Soviet relations from the Nixon presidency to the end of the Cold War (Garthoff 2001; 1994a, esp. 623-1121; and 1994b). In 2010 also Vice President Walter Mondale published his memoirs (Mondale 2010). Stuart Eizenstat, Executive Director of the White House Domestic Policy Staff and Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs and Policy, has recently written a very interesting account of his own experience (Eizenstat 2018).

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(a) United States Department of State – Office of the Historian

(a1) *Foreign Relations of the United States, Jimmy Carter Administration, 1977-1980*

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(b) Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum

(b1) <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/collections>

(b2) https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/oral_histories

(c) National Archives and Record Administration

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(d) WikiLeaks

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(e) Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

(e1) <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org>

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(f) Parallel History Project

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(g) National Security Archive

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