

From finessing the war Johnson moved to lying about the war. His efforts to stand firm on the frontier while effecting reforms at home led him to create enormous inflationary pressures within the economy and to engage in ever more serious self-deception and public dissembling to sustain popular support for the imperial war. In the end, LBJ was the victim of the basic fear, so candidly expressed in NSC-68, that America was fundamentally threatened by any disorder in the world (a fear also revealed in the President's 1965 intervention in Santo Domingo).

That fog of trepidation and dread continued to influence the conduct of foreign affairs by President Richard Milhous Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Their bone-marrow anxiety provides the key to resolving the apparent paradoxes in a diplomacy that sought to stabilize relations with the Russians while simultaneously recognizing the Communist government of China, falsifying official records to hide an illegal and devastating expansion of the Vietnamese war into Cambodia, launching an effort to subvert an elected socialist government in Chile, and supporting a dictatorship in Iran that was instrumental in raising oil prices.

No one yet knows the precise nature of the relationship between Nixon and Kissinger. But Kissinger could not have functioned as he did without the support of the President. The Secretary of State has provided the most information about the assumptions that underlay their policies, and it seems apparent they recognized that the grand objective of NSC-68 — the subversion of the Soviet Union — was no longer realistic. Kissinger had long agreed with Churchill, for example, that the United States should have negotiated a broad settlement with the Russians in 1947-48, and concluded during the 1950s that American policy had "reached an impasse."

Thus it was necessary to stabilize the existing balance between the two superpowers. The first step on that road, at least in their view, was to assert their power over the bureaucracies in the State Department and other branches of government, a task Kissinger undertook with much relish as an exercise of his own ego in the service of his great-man interpretation of history. That done, Kissinger could begin the effort to order and balance the world.

He now and again admitted the impossibility of doing that without a clear conception of such a system, and likewise spoke of the importance of justice, but he never provided either the vision or definition of justice. Indeed, Kissinger had little patience with anyone who was concerned with the character of the world order he invoked so often. In one classic instance, he dismissed such people for "confusing social reform with geopolitics." Yet his favorite word to define geopolitics was "equilibrium" — little more than a fancy synonym for order. As for justice, Kissinger might usefully have remembered the rabbi's wisdom about Deuteronomy 16:20, "*Justice, justice shalt thou pursue.*" Asked why the word "justice" is repeated, the rabbi explained it was done to emphasize the necessity of pursuing justice with justice.

Given the Nixon/Kissinger willingness to settle for controlling nothing more than the world outside Russia and Eastern Europe, their policy of détente and strategic arms control was a rational first step toward that objective. And it is certainly arguable their approach to China (despite their tactics of secrecy and shock) was on balance a positive and stabilizing maneuver as long as it was not allowed to become a part of a new strategy of containment designed to destabilize the Soviet Union. And that caveat applies to subsequent American leaders as well as to Nixon and Kissinger.

The weaknesses of the Nixon/Kissinger approach became clear in their dealings with the rest of the world. They defined stabilization as allowing the United States to decide what is permissible beyond the Soviet sphere on the one hand — but on the other, they lacked any significant comprehension or understanding of the dynamic causal interrelationships between economics, politics and social affairs with the poor regions of the world, or between the global rich and poor. They mistakenly linked any changes not approved or controlled by the United States to influence of the Russians. The unhappy results became most apparent in Cambodia, Chile and Iran.

The unconditional bombing of Cambodia, which clearly did more to destroy the fabric and morale of that society than the incursion of the North Vietnamese which Kissinger used to justify the monstrous act, is less revealing of Nixon/Kissinger diplomacy than their actions in Chile and Iran. The American ambassador to Chile began his report on that nation's Presidential election of 1970 with these words: "Chile voted calmly to have a Marxist-Leninist state, the first nation in the world to make this choice freely and knowingly." In keeping with the primary responsibility of a foreign service officer, that is an essentially factual report; although adding the term Leninist to Marxist was the routine ploy used by those in power in America to turn an avowed socialist into a communist pawn of the Kremlin. The ambassador then offered in a wholly legitimate way his evaluation of the evidence; it was in his view "a grievous defeat" for the United States.

Kissinger's account of America's subsequent efforts to prevent Salvador Allende from becoming President of Chile, and later to destabilize and subvert his government, is remarkable for its conscious and unconscious revelations of the Nixon/Kissinger conduct of foreign affairs. Before Allende became President, Kissinger presented the man as a doctrinaire communist in the Russian mold. Once Allende became President, Kissinger raised the possibility he would become a puppet of Moscow. In a similar way, the former Secretary of State stressed Allende's narrow plurality in 1970 without once noting even in a footnote that Allende increased his vote in the next election, which was held in accordance with Chile's constitution.

All that tells us more than Kissinger intended for us to know, but he is even more illuminating in his revelations when he insists "our concern with Allende was based on national security, not on economics," and emphasizes "American interests in the hemisphere." Kissinger could not seriously expect anyone to believe Washington was worried about the Russians turning Chile into a base for a strategic (geopolitical) military attack on the United States. Even he admits the matter had been settled during the Cuban missile crisis, and, for that matter, refined during his tenure in the basement of the White House.

In view of Kissinger's presentation of himself as a realist, he wholly ignored the feasibility of working with an elected socialist government as a hardheaded as well as a moral strategy to counter the Soviet appeal in the Third World and to give hope to all democratic reformers in the poor nations. Instead he sponsored a bloody coup backed by the CIA that overthrew Allende (killing him) and replaced him with General Augusto Pinochet's brutally repressive rightwing dictatorship.

Kissinger's performance in dealing with Iran was at least as dismal. It is difficult to imagine how anyone of his intelligence could combine more errors of perception, understanding, analysis and policy in dealing with Iran. Neither he nor Nixon exhibited any sense of that nation's history, or even its intensely religious and nationalistic pride. And they obviously assumed that Iranians had accepted or forgotten that the United States had grossly intervened to control the resources and government



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of their country even before overthrowing the elected regime of Muhammad Mossadeq in the 1950s.

Given all that, it is not surprising that Nixon/Kissinger embarked upon a policy doomed to failure. In embracing and arming the Shah (Muhammad Reza Palavi), in truth a petty despot, they committed America's geopolitical interests to a government guaranteed to generate every growing opposition to its princely pretensions. And in supporting, even encouraging, the despot to raise the price of oil to pay for his Tinkertoy regime they undercut the foundation of the American imperial way of life they sought to preserve.

The oil crisis is not a simple matter of the poor determined to become rich. It defines far more important issues. It asks to what lengths the United States is prepared to deny its commitment to self-determination, to freedom and liberty, in order to preserve its imperial way of life.

America began to produce oil near Titusville, Pennsylvania, on August 27, 1859. Fifty years later the United States pumped more oil than the rest of the world combined. The political economy of capitalism shifted away from coal and neglected to explore other forms of energy. There was a short but intense oil scare between 1917 and 1924, a hullabaloo created by the Navy shifting to oil-fired turbines, the Mexican revolution, the boom in automobiles and airplanes, the beginnings of the petrochemical industry, and the struggle for market supremacy (and survival) among American petroleum corporations.

That crisis disappeared in the cloud of confidence puffed up by the finding of new reserves abroad (as in Venezuela), by new discoveries at home (as in Texas), by more efficient exploration and production at home, and most particularly by gaining access to the vast reserves in Saudi Arabia and other poor and weak countries in the Middle East. No better example ever of the rewards of empire as a way of life. But make no mistake, we also came to rely on other cheap materials from the provinces.

The United States continued to produce half the world's oil until, in 1948, it became a net importer of oil. True imperial dependency upon the natives. But a statement by John McCloy that we should "have our cake and eat it too" perfectly captures the euphoria of the imperial way of life as applied to oil. Americans, citizens as well as leaders, simply assumed they could sell their oil abroad for a good profit while importing it from the provinces at pennies a barrel.

The imperial way of life was disrupted by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries in 1973-74. But the oil-fired empire, once symbolized by the Navy and then by intercontinental bombers and missiles, could not talk about the problem in a realistic way because it had never come to terms with its imperial way of life. The euphemisms began to dissolve. The United States supported the creation of Israel for three

reasons: a commitment to the principle of self-determination, the financial and political power of Jewish-Americans in domestic politics, and the imperial usefulness of Israel as a client state in the oil-rich Middle East. The problem was that Palestinians are as much human beings as the Israelis and also have a right to self-determined nationhood. And so the crisis deepened as we came ever closer to the dangers inherent in lying to ourselves about our imperial way of life.

Kissinger said it all in one sentence: The United States must somehow "shape events in the light of our own purposes." A marvelously subtle definition of empire. But note particularly that "somehow." What a wonderful way of avoiding any coming to terms with the reality of empire. But to evade that moment of truth means going to war.

No candor, more flight from reality. More flight, no peace — no chance finally to confront the central challenge: Is the idea and reality of America possible without empire?

We come full circle. History never provides programmatic answers, but it does guide one to ask the right questions and that is crucial to developing the right answers.

It all calls to mind, once again, the wise observation offered by Carl Becker. We Americans must "always be transforming the world into (our) idea of it." Such a culture, "knowing that it is right...wishes only to go ahead. Satisfied with certain conventional premises, it hastens on to the obvious conclusion."

What are the right questions? I suggest they are the same ones Eugene Debs and Charles Beard — even Herbert Hoover — began to ask a few generations ago. Asking the right questions is what we are about. I do not think that even Debs, let alone Beard or Hoover, have given us the right answers. Those people are important because they asked the right questions.

The best thing that can be said for our American empire is that we produced some very good questions. Now is the time to begin answering those questions.

I like to return to the essential question raised by our history: Is the idea and reality of America possible without empire?

Can you imagine America as not an empire?

I think often these days about the relationship between those two words — imagination and empire — and wonder if they are incompatible.

So there we are.

Do you want to imagine a new America or do you want to preserve it as an empire?

Now, as surely we all know, preserving the empire is an exercise in futility. We will sizzle or suffocate.

So let us get on with imagining a new America.

Once we imagine it, break out of the imperial idiom, we just might be able to create a non-imperial America.



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William Appleman Williams died on March 5, 1990, at the age of 68. He had retired as a professor of history at Oregon State University and was former President of the Organization of American Historians. He was often called a "maverick" and "revisionist" historian because he challenged prevalent ideas about American history and criticized the country's self-righteous imperialism before and especially after the Cold War. He inspired a younger generation of historians to be less nationalistic than their predecessors, and in the words of a former student, he "changed the whole course of the way Americans studied the history of foreign relations." David Horowitz, a professor of history at Portland State University, wrote in an article in the Jan/Feb, 1990 NCTE that Williams "particularly hoped to assist young scholars in integrating the history of women and minorities into broad accounts of the nation's development."

Williams was the author of several books, among them *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), *Contours of American History* (1962), *America Confronts A Revolutionary World: 1776-1976* (1959), *The Roots of The Modern American Empire* (1969). "Empire As A Way Of Life" has been adapted from his book of the same title, and first appeared in *The Nation* in 1982 as a work in progress. His final article, "The Annapolis Crowd," a severely critical analysis of USMC Lt. Col. Oliver North and Navy Admiral John M. Poindexter and their involvement in the Iran/Contra scandal during the Reagan administration, which, Williams wrote, "far more than Watergate created a fundamental threat to constitutional government," was published in the April, 1990 NCTE just after his death. He was a 1944 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and served as the executive officer of a Navy LSM in the Pacific Theater of World War 2, in which he was wounded.