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Reagan's Foreign Policy: A Meager Sense of Reality

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## Reagan's Foreign Policy: A Meager Sense of Reality

### Interview with Arthur Schlesinger

*Sporting his signatory polka-dot bow tie while articulating transhistorical political issues of our times, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. recently spoke with Contributing Editor Cynthia A. Bell in his New York City office. He delights in being christened a quintessential liberal in the contemporary philistine American landscape, and this piquant partisanship continues to endow his prose as he works on his next volume of The Age of Roosevelt.*

*A long-time student and historian of the American Presidency, Schlesinger is also the Pulitzer Prize winning author of The Age of Jackson, A Thousand Days, a study of the Kennedy Administration, and Robert Kennedy and His Times.*

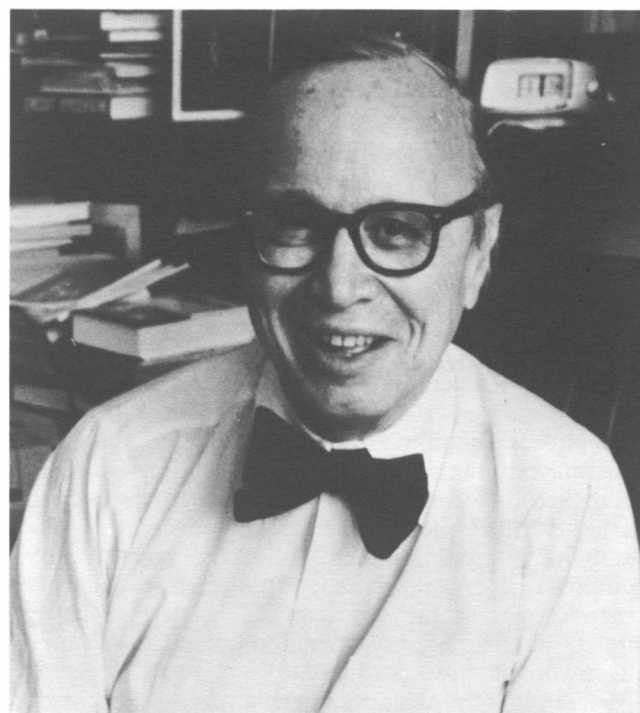
*Professor Schlesinger presently holds the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities at the City University of New York.*

**IR:** The nuclear arms race is a principal concern of the American people today. Over twenty years ago, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, you witnessed first-hand the burden this issue brings to the presidential office. How has nuclear weaponry altered the state of presidential power—at home and abroad?

**Schlesinger:** If nuclear weaponry has any effect on the state of presidential power, it ought to be to widen the basis for nuclear decision. When the future of humankind is at stake, one man can't be permitted to do all the deciding. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a very special case. The structure of that crisis—the fact that the Russians did not know that we knew they had installed nuclear missiles in Cuba—imposed a requirement for secrecy. Moreover, President Kennedy thought that the risk of nuclear war then lay not in deliberate decisions by either superpower but in aberrations or accidents caused by some incompetent, zealot or madman somewhere down the line. That is why he was so determined to establish minute control over the deployments and decisions of those anxious days. But Cuba, in my view, is an exception, not a precedent. Future nuclear decisions should be undertaken only after the most extensive and responsible consultation—with Congress at home, with our allies abroad.

**IR:** In this post-Vietnam era Americans appear to have become more insular in their approach to international affairs. How, since World War I, has our perception of our involvement overseas changed?

**Schlesinger:** I'm not so sure we've become more insular, but it might be said that we have become more sensible. Obviously we have a long "isolationist" tradition in this



Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

country. This was not so much economic or cultural as political isolationism; as Washington said, "No entangling alliances." This political unilateralism was the rule in this country until the Second World War. We strayed from this philosophy only when our vital interests were under challenge, as in the First World War, but we generally regretted such involvement and have hated ourselves in the morning. The isolationist tradition lost its vitality after the Second World War when it became evident that we could not secure many essential interests by unilateral action but only in association with other countries.

One abiding interest, for example, has always been to forestall the threat to the United States should we see, in Jefferson's phrase, "the whole force of Europe wielded by a single hand." This commitment on our part to preserve the balance of power in Europe involved us in two World Wars and subsequently in the Cold War. The problem with Vietnam was that it did not fall into the traditional range of American interest; it was not a direct threat to national security. The leading writers in the "realist" approach to foreign affairs, with its emphasis on the importance of national interest, Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Lippmann, all strongly opposed the Vietnam War.

I would like to think that one effect of Vietnam has been to chasten our messianic propensities. We are not

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under the obligation to save the world. We must recognize that our power and our wisdom are severely limited.

**IR:** In viewing the ingredients that comprise presidential ambitions, how important have international affairs been in the election of this country's leader?

**Schlesinger:** Not very important historically. Throughout most of American history domestic policy has dominated. One notable exception perhaps was the election of 1916 in which Wilson promised to keep us out of the war. But in general domestic policy has been far more important. This is why we have mainly chosen our Presidents from among state governors. Only in recent times have we looked to the Senate, and this indicates the growing importance of foreign affairs. Senators are exposed to world problems; governors are not.

With regard to Presidents, the balance is dependent upon the man himself. I believe that Reagan sees his mission as primarily domestic and gives foreign policy second place. On the other hand, the last strong Republican President, Nixon, gave priority to foreign policy.

**IR:** What is and what is not "Reaganism"?

**Schlesinger:** In domestic policy, Reaganism is based on two propositions. The first is that government is the root of all evil. The second is that, once we get government off our backs, our problems will solve themselves. This is a modern expression of nineteenth century social Darwinist and *laissez-faire* dogmas.

**IR:** What have been the major issues in foreign policy that President Reagan has had to confront in the past two years?

**Schlesinger:** Because foreign affairs are secondary in his mind, President Reagan appears to have attitudes rather than policies. On the most crucial issue of all, I fear that this President, or at least some of his most influential advisors, are not interested in stopping the arms race. Quite the contrary: they see an unlimited arms race as the way to do the Russians in. Either the Russians will wreck their economy by trying to keep up with us; or they will fall behind and give us the clear military advantage. This course—the prosecution of the arms race—seems unmitigated folly to me. The multiplication of nuclear weapons can only insure that, one day or another, nuclear weapons will be used.

**IR:** How can we evaluate Reagan's actions in terms of 1) the presidential office, 2) Republican ideology, 3) the man?

**Schlesinger:** Reagan was not elected because of his ideology, or because the public perceived him as a great leader. He was elected because the voters could not abide the thought of four more years of Carter, and Reagan was the only alternative.

As President, Reagan has shown, especially in his dealings with Congress, that the power of his office is as strong as ever. The fact that he was able, in his first year, to get through Congress an economic program that made no sense at all proves this. He is in trouble today, not

because there is a structural log-jam in the system, but because his program has failed. If his program had worked, he would be irresistible.

He has two qualities of supreme importance for a President: a sense of where he wants the country to move; and a power of persuasion. His predecessor, Jimmy Carter, for example, lacked these qualities. Moreover, most Americans see Reagan as a disarming fellow. He can say the most terrifying things and take the sting out of them.

However, one does have the feeling that Reagan has a meager sense of reality. His face, as he enters his third year in office, has hardly aged at all. Possibly this is because Reagan has spent the greater part of his life as an actor, playing a role, living in terms of a script. Today he is playing his greatest role—but that may be a different thing from experiencing the anguish of presidential decision.

**IR:** In the 1980 election you turned to the Independent party and supported candidate John Anderson. Some would view this as a rejection of Carter, others would see it as a breach with the Democratic party. What was the motivating force behind this action? Also, what role does an Independent party play in a democracy?

**Schlesinger:** I was never an enthusiast for Carter. In the 1976 campaign I was dismayed by his attacks on the national government and by his rejection of the tradition of the modern Democratic party, the Roosevelt-Truman-Kennedy-Johnson commitment to the affirmative state. My belief in his candidacy was not strengthened when a few days before the election I read in the *New York Times* that Carter had written a letter to the *Atlanta Constitution* saying he accepted the story of Genesis as a literal and historical fact. He believed, he wrote, that woman was literally created from the rib of Adam. I thought to myself: what would I be doing in the year 1976 voting for a man who says he believes that? So I did not vote at all for President in 1976. Nothing that happened over the next four years reassured me about Carter. He said in his 1978 State of the Union message, "Government cannot solve our problems . . . cannot reduce inflation . . . cannot save our cities," and so on. This statement represents a repudiation of the modern Democratic party—not by me but by Carter.

In 1980 I strongly opposed his nomination, and I supported Senator Kennedy. After Kennedy was defeated, I felt I could not vote for Carter. Anderson's candidacy seemed a reasonable alternative. The role of the third party has been historically to provide an outlet for frustration and a platform for issues that might otherwise be ignored.

**IR:** This country has not had a two-term Presidency since Eisenhower. The circumstances (assassination, resignation) surrounding this development are varied but many now feel that an incumbent Presidency is no guarantee for re-election. Why has this transient post of the Presidency evolved?

**Schlesinger:** But how many Presidents since Jackson a century and a half ago have served two full consecutive

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terms? Only four—Grant, Wilson, FDR and Eisenhower. The notion that incumbency guarantees reelection has little historical warrant. One-term Presidents are more customary than two-term Presidents. Besides, what is so desirable about two terms for a poor President?

**IR:** What are your projections for the 1984 election?

**Schlesinger:** I continue to think there is a discernible rhythm in American politics. We alternate between seasons of action, passion, idealism and reform, which go along until the country is worn out, and then seasons of respite, drift, hedonism, cynicism. The first two decades of the century were dominated by two demanding Presidents—the first Roosevelt and Wilson—who exhorted the people first to democratize their political and economic institutions at home, then to make the world safe for democracy. By 1920 the country was exhausted and begged for “normalcy”—and got Warren G. Harding. The do-nothing twenties were followed by two more activist decades—FDR and the New Deal, the Second World War, Truman and the Fair Deal. By 1950 the country was exhausted again. Then we had the Eisenhower years of recuperation and drift, till after a decade people began to feel it was time to get the country moving again. So we had Kennedy and the New Frontier, Johnson and the Great Society, the racial revolution and the war against poverty. But this time the activist mood took a destructive turn—partly because of the assassination at Dallas, partly because of the Vietnam War. In time the energies discharged seemed to be rending the very fabric of society itself. So much trauma

compressed in so short a time meant that the activist period did not run its usual two decades. Somewhere in the seventies the country entered the conservative swing of the cycle. The seventies and early eighties are in a sense a replay of the twenties and the fifties.

But two things happen during these periods of drift. On the one hand, rest recharges the national batteries; on the other, the problems we neglect become acute, threaten to become unmanageable and demand remedy. When these things happen, we move into a new time of affirmative government. My guess is that the present conservative mood is coming to an end. Sometime in the 1980s there will be a breakthrough into a new political epoch, with a release of energy and innovation in Washington comparable to that which took place when TR became President in 1901, FDR in 1933 and Kennedy in 1961. The new period can't come too soon!

**IR:** What are your current endeavors?

**Schlesinger:** Over twenty years ago I wrote the first three volumes in a study of the Presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. I then reached the point when it was necessary for me to deal with foreign policy. But many essential documents were still classified, so I could not complete my research. Then I got involved in other matters. In the intervening years the foreign policy documents in both the United States and Britain have been declassified through the end of the Second World War—indeed through 1950. So I am now working on Volume IV of *The Age of Roosevelt*. This volume will deal with FDR and the coming of the Second World War. □

## The Making of Reagan Foreign Policy

With the appearance of George P. Shultz as the relief pitcher at the State Department, the often-troubled Reagan foreign policy team seems to be finally getting off the ground.

During the first seventeen months, the only thing visible other than the Reagan Administration's outward bellicosity toward the Soviet Union was the internal bickering that put former Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr. against Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and the Reaganites in the White House. Nobody knew for certain who was “in charge” of U.S. foreign policy. More than half a year after Shultz was sworn in as the new Secretary of State, however, the chief participants in the team have been narrowed down to three Californians besides President Reagan himself: Shultz, Weinberger, and National Security Adviser William Clark.

Of the three, Weinberger and Clark are both advocates of the use of economic warfare in order to force a change in the Soviet system. Their hard-line view was one of the reasons for their clash with Haig, who stressed U.S. relations with its allies as

the first step in facing the Soviets. Although Shultz has a similar view to Haig's, the new Secretary of State is also known for soft-spokenness and ability to foster consensus. His presence in the Administration is a counterweight to the hawkish tendency of Weinberger and Clark.

All of them are close friends of the President. Yet Clark, as the National Security Adviser, sees Reagan every morning for briefing on current international events. A former California judge, Clark had no experience in foreign affairs before he came to Washington. On the other hand, he is renowned as an effective manager of his staff. Also, his ability to quickly summarize the vast amount of information that arrives for President Reagan every day from all parts of the world may be crucial in a crisis situation. So far, the Shultz-Weinberger-Clark troika has functioned smoothly. One of its major achievements is the easing of the tension that arose between Washington and the Europeans over the Soviet pipeline issue.

—Yoichiro Taniguchi