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Domestic Political Considerations, Presidential Credibility, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Cold War

If I don’t go in [to Vietnam] now and they show later I should have gone, then they’ll be all over me in Congress. They won’t be talking about my civil-rights bill or education or beautification. No sir, they’ll push Vietnam up my ass every time. Vietnam. Vietnam. Vietnam. Right up my ass.

Lyndon B. Johnson

Ronald Reagan was by no means the first American president to have his foreign policy options curtailed by constraints at home. It is only logical, given its form of government, that U.S. foreign policy be strongly influenced by domestic political considerations; the post-World War II era, however, saw domestic politics assume a decidedly central role in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. After World War II international affairs became vitally important to the American public. The new policy of engagement abroad required an overseas presence; U.S. lives were now at risk, and Washington’s foreign policy decisions became a matter of serious concern to voters. “[T]he triumph of internationalism,” one account notes, “did more than inject America into the world...foreign policy was also injected into American politics as a constant issue.”

The post NSC-68 military build-up and the creation of the draft reinforced this trend; the overarching threat of nuclear war rendered it irreversible. As political scientist Alexander

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1Quoted in Destler et. al., p. 61-62.
2Destler et. al., p. 34.
George notes: “No one who reviews the history of U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War II can fail to be impressed with the importance of domestic constraints in the shaping and conduct of that policy.”

As much as presidents and diplomats might wish it otherwise, U.S. foreign policy would never again be divorced from domestic political considerations. The well known “conversion” of isolationist Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from 1947 to 1949, is a conspicuous early example. “The Republican Party has this dilemma,” he once observed. “If it does not cooperate in the world, it will be blamed for destroying the peace, as in 1920. If it cooperates too much with the Democratic administration, it will be charged with having no policy of its own.” In the Cold War, the foreign policy arena became a stage upon which presidents, presidential hopefuls, and their parties postured in order to achieve electoral gains at home. To an extent previously unknown in the U.S. experience, foreign affairs became “tied to the rhythms of the electoral cycle.” Every four years it fell to the president to “convince people...that he understand the evolving world situation well enough to enable him to influence the course of events in the desired direction.” His opponents sought to convey the same impression, often basing their campaigns upon the incumbent party’s foreign policy failings.

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4Quoted in Destler et. al., p. 34.  
6George, Constraints, p. 585.
The worst sort of failure of all, of course, was the loss of American lives. U.S. citizens wanted to contain the Red threat, certainly, but containment’s monetary costs were hard enough to sell; when the cost was measured in body bags instead of dollars, a strong domestic backlash was certain. Paradoxically, however, almost as bad as sacrificing American lives on foreign soil was letting the communists take control of that soil: China’s “fall” to communism and Western setbacks in the Korean War, for example, produced domestic political backlashes which were never forgotten in Cold War Washington. The administration of Harry Truman withered under a barrage of right-wing attacks criticizing his foreign policies as not only weak, but tantamount to treachery. By the 1952 campaign, Truman’s approval ratings had dropped to 23 percent—the lowest in the history of the poll. Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson—faced with GOP charges that his party’s foreign policies amounted to “twenty years of treason”—did not have a chance. “Eisenhower reaped,” one historian notes, “what McCarthy sowed.” The lesson was clear: any administration that “lost” a former ally to international communism during its watch suffered a loss at home as well. This domestic political reality has influenced the foreign policy making of every president since.

Subsequent presidents—keenly aware of the political damage that “the loss of China” had wrought in 1952—cautiously eyed the domestic political scene when formulating their foreign policy and worked to insure that setbacks overseas would not dim their political

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7The loss of foreign territory in the Cold War was not so much about actually maintaining physical territory in U.S. power as about the Cold War psychological balance of power and the perceived “spread” of communist influence.

8Ambrose, Presidency, p. 125.

9Rabe, Eisenhower, p. 29.
aspirations at home. In the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Guatemala in 1954, for instance, the U.S. ambassador to that country observed that “public opinion could force us to take measures to prevent Guatemala from falling into the lap of international Communism.

We cannot permit the organization of a Soviet republic between Texas and the Panama Canal.”

Historian Douglas MacDonald notes that “[n]ot only have various administrations been attacked politically for losing nations during the Cold War, but their approach to the problem has also come under fire.”

The Republicans attacked Truman for not backing Chiang Kai-shek; the Democrats attacked Eisenhower for backing status-quo-oriented rightist regimes; the Republicans attacked Kennedy for his ambitious reformist policies; the Democrats attacked Nixon for his backing of rightists; and the Republicans attacked Carter for his reformist human rights campaign. In the 1984 presidential campaign, Democratic contender Walter Mondale attacked Ronald Reagan for backing rightist regimes and an insensitivity to human rights.

Another analysis adds that

the good [presidents did abroad] was often colored, even overwhelmed [by domestic political politics]. Lyndon Johnson’s creditable efforts in Europe and the Third World were ignored because of Vietnam. Richard Nixon’s policy of détente with Moscow and the opening to China were weighed down by his divisive rhetoric, by prolonging the war in Vietnam, by invading Cambodia, and by helping to ‘destabilize’ a democratically elected government in Chile. Gerald Ford’s steadiness in his first year paled beside his later walking away from his own policies under pressure from Mr. Reagan. Jimmy Carter’s fine performances in achieving the Camp David accords, and gaining Senate approval of the Panama Canal Treaties...lost their luster in the political maneuvers of 1980. Ronald Reagan’s success in establishing greater respect for American power was undermined by early anti-arms-control statements [and the Iran-Contra scandal].

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10Ambrose, Globalism, p. 133.
11Johnson, Improbable Dangers, p. 155
12Quoted in Blasier, The Hovering Giant, p. 164, citing Time, January 11, 1954, p. 27.
14Destler et. al., p. 13.
Indeed, the account continues, “the political bodies of Presidents are strewn all over the place.”\textsuperscript{15} The period from 1933 to 1961 saw three American presidents hold office for a span of seven four-year terms. Between 1961 and 1984, however, six presidents served just six terms: in each of these electoral turnovers, foreign policy issues played a key role.

On the other hand, just as foreign policy failures could have negative domestic political consequences, demonstrations of presidential resolve and determination could be counted on to improve an administration’s standing with the electorate. Kenneth Waltz notes that when Cold War presidents reacted assertively to challenges abroad, their public approval ratings often responded favorably. Truman’s initial decision to take a stand in Korea, he observes,

gave a lift to [his] low standing with the public. In June of 1950, immediately before the attack, 37 per cent of those polled approved of the way Truman was doing his job, while 45 percent did not. In July of 1950, the corresponding figures were 46 percent and 37 per cent...In April of 1958 the deepening of an economic recession, following upon Russia’s lofting her first sputnik, drove Eisenhower’s popularity down to 49 percent, a low point. The following summer, a contretemps in Lebanon, which led the President to send American troops, boosted him to his 1958 high of 58 percent. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October, 1962 worked similar wonders for Kennedy.\textsuperscript{16}

The relationship between displays of tenacity in the international arena and favorable ratings at home did not go unnoticed by the Oval Office. Presidents of the era experiencing domestic difficulties knew that success overseas could deflect attention away from their shortcomings and serve as a tonic for faltering domestic political credibility.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
The advent of television as the most important news media in the United States reinforced these trends. By 1963, more Americans acquired their news from television than from any other source, a fact which irreversibly altered electoral politics in several ways. For one, televised campaigns meant that as election campaigns became national in scale, U.S. foreign policy received more attention. Winning office was no longer “a matter of stitching together regional coalitions,” but instead required the broader unifying issues that external events provided. Most significantly, the focus provided by television’s cameras centered attention on the figure of the president. An executive or candidate’s charisma—as never before—played a decisive role in influencing the mood of the electorate, as vividly demonstrated by JFK’s animated decimation of Richard Nixon in the televised 1960 presidential debates.

The rise of Cold War “imperial presidencies” geared toward effective international management of U.S. affairs and the attendant increase in attention to the figure of the president, coupled with the growing importance of the televised image in domestic political processes, meant that, ultimately, presidents themselves became symbols of U.S. strength and determination. John F. Kennedy, for example, was highly cognizant of the President’s avatar-like role in the American psyche, and quickly learned to make good use of TV. He also knew that foreign affairs offered him the best chance to look “presidential.” “It really is true that foreign affairs is the only important issue for a President to handle, isn’t it?” he noted during the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs invasion. “I mean who gives a shit if the

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19 Destler et. al., p. 60.
minimum wage is $1.15 or $1.25 in comparison to something like this.” In turn, as television became the nation’s key source of news and the mood of Congress and the electorate became attuned to the new media, assessments of possible national reactions to foreign affairs issues became a sort of policy compass for presidents.

Examples abound. When Fidel Castro took Cuba into the Soviet orbit under Eisenhower’s nose, partisan recriminations similar to those of 1949 dominated political discourse in Washington. As a presidential candidate, John Kennedy charged that the Republicans “lost” Cuba and permitted a dangerous “missile gap” to form; as president, he would later face the very same pressures he had brought to bear against the Republicans. Department of State intelligence chief Roger Hilsman later reflected that because Kennedy had used Cuba “in his campaign against Nixon to great effect, asking over and over why a Communist regime had been permitted to come to power just ninety miles off our coast, his administration was peculiarly vulnerable on Cuba.” His decision to approve the CIA’s planned invasion of the island, according to one account, was grounded on the premise that “an impression of weakness would...be very damaging. It would be a denial of Kennedy’s whole approach to foreign policy, of his toughness, his courage, his capacity for cool decision making in a crisis.” The 1961 debacle at the Bay of Pigs, however, made Kennedy

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20Quoted in Small, p. 112.
22Destler et. al., p. 52.
doubly vulnerable on the Cuba issue. Afterward, he fretted that he had “handed his critics a stick with which they would forever beat him.”

Not surprisingly, then, the Kennedy administration’s response to the Cuban Missile Crisis was significantly affected by concern over domestic political considerations. As the November 1962 Congressional elections approached, Republican challengers vehemently attacked the president’s “do-nothing” policy toward Castro. Having decided that Cuba would be “the dominant issue of the 1962 campaign,” the GOP repeatedly charged that the island was a “symbol of the tragic irresolution of the Administration.” Presidential hopeful Senator Kenneth Keating (R-NY) took the lead in attacking the White House, making some 25 public statements regarding Kennedy’s failures in the Caribbean in the months preceding the Missile Crisis. He soon charged—eerily prescient—that Moscow had placed missiles in Cuba and that Kennedy had done nothing about it. As rumors of a Soviet military build-up in Cuba grew, so did criticisms of the White House’s handling of the situation: another senator opined that JFK “lacked the courage” to take decisive action; Newsweek referred to Kennedy as a “profile in indecision;” and Eisenhower reproached the administration for weakness in the face of international communism.

These attacks worried the already-unsettled young president. According to one

26Gaddis, Know, p. 268; Allison p., 445.
account:

As the...elections approached, [Kennedy] perceived himself a failure...in foreign affairs he had lost at the Bay of Pigs, been bullied by Khrushchev at the Vienna Summit in June 1961, accepted the neutralization of Laos, and stood by while the Russians built a wall between East and West Berlin.\(^{28}\)

In the domestic arena, the president’s New Frontier program had enjoyed little success. Although Democrats controlled both the Senate and the House, in 1961 only 48.4 percent of Kennedy’s legislative endeavors made it through Congress; in 1962, his legislative success rate dropped to 44.6 percent.\(^{29}\) Spreading Congressional unrest linked to Cuba threatened to exacerbate Kennedy’s struggles on the Hill. J. William Fulbright privately brooded that if the President did not get Congress “in hand and cooperating, his regime will be a failure.”\(^{30}\) National security adviser McGeorge Bundy worried that the administration appeared “weak and indecisive,” and warned JFK that “the Congressional head of steam on this [Cuba] is the most serious that we have had.”\(^{31}\)

When the administration verified that missiles had indeed been placed in Cuba, it paid significant attention to domestic political considerations as it formulated its response. Kennedy had previously sought to diminish the chances that foreign policy might hurt his political fortunes by securing an agreement with Khrushchev—who was “aware of the president’s domestic political problems” and more inclined to work with a Democratic

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\(^{28}\)Small, p. 113.
\(^{29}\)Paterson and Brophy, p. 88.
\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 96, citing Herbert Matthews, “Memorandum of Conversation with H. William Fulbright, July 3, 1962,” Box 27, Herbert Mathews Papers, (NY: Colombia University, Butler Library.)
\(^{31}\)Ibid., p. 96, quoting McGeorge Bundy, “Memorandum on Cuba for the Press Conference, September 13, 1962,” Theodore C. Sorensen Papers, Box 48, (Kennedy Library.)
administration—that the Soviets would take no actions that might affect the outcome of the November elections. Now, the President discovered, Khrushchev had reneged on his promise by deploying Soviet missiles in Cuba. “He can’t do that to me!” Kennedy exploded. Realizing the potential impact the missiles’ deployment could have on the U.S. political system, JFK said: “We’ve just elected [GOP Senate candidate] Capehart in Indiana, and Ken Keating will probably be the next President of the United States.”

The policy group assigned to tackle Kennedy’s Cuba problem, the Ex-Comm, was clearly cognizant of the domestic political aspects of the affair. On October 16, Robert McNamara told the group that “I’ll be quite frank. I don’t think there is a military problem...the problem...is a domestic, political problem.” His assessment coincided with that of Theodore Sorensen, who reported to the President that the Ex-Comm “generally agreed that these missiles, even when fully operational, do not significantly alter the balance of power—i.e., they do not significantly increase the potential megatonnage capable of being unleashed on American soil.” Be that as it may, it was clear that Congress and the American electorate would not tolerate the existence of Soviet rockets 90 miles off the coast of Florida; they certainly would not tolerate a President who did. Robert Dillon, a Republican who sat on the Ex-Comm, passed Kennedy a cautionary note that reflected this understanding. “Have you considered the very real possibility that if we allow Cuba to

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32 Allison, p. 447; Small, p. 113.
33 Quoted in Allison, p. 447.
36 Quoted in Lebow, p. 478, footnote 34.
complete installations and operational readiness of missile bases,” it read, “the next House of Representatives is likely to house a Republican majority?” 37

The outcome of the crisis was, obviously, a victory rather than a defeat for the young president and his party; Kennedy’s brinkmanship in the missile crisis made a highly favorable impression on the American electorate. “We were Cubanized,” one Republican sourly observed after his party’s unremarkable showing in the November elections. 38

Similar political pressures affected JFK’s thinking regarding his policy toward South Vietnam. The U.S.-supported regime of despot Ngo Dinh Diem had become highly unstable by 1960; by 1963, the problem of how to prevent Communist subversives from taking advantage and toppling Diem increasingly occupied the administration’s attention. Kennedy feared that if South Vietnam were to fall, he would pay a heavy political price. He told Walt Rostow that Eisenhower had been able to weather the domestic political consequences of the West’s retreat from Vietnam in 1954 because the blame fell on the French, but confessed that “I can’t take a 1954 defeat today.” 39 Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara agreed that any perceived failure in Indochina would severely hamstring the administration, and cautioned that the “loss of South Vietnam would stimulate bitter domestic controversies in the United States and would be seized upon by extreme elements to divide the country and harass the administration.” 40

37Quoted in Reeves, p. 381.
38Unidentified Republican quoted in Small, p. 114.
39Quoted in Destler et. al., p. 54.
The President was determined not to suffer a loss in Asia to match Truman’s in China. In 1960, there were 800 U.S. advisers in South Vietnam; by the end of 1962, there were roughly 10,000; by late 1963, 15,000.\footnote{Ambrose, Globalism, p. 208.} As one scholar observes, “Kennedy appears to have seen his personal credibility at risk as he made his initial decisions on Vietnam following the Bay of Pigs fiasco, his bruising encounter with Khrushchev in Vienna in May 1961, a Berlin Crisis shortly thereafter, and increasing criticisms from the political right of the supposed weakness of his policies.”\footnote{Johnson, Dangers, p. 158.}

Spreading public doubt regarding the U.S. involvement in Vietnam did not reverse Kennedy’s belief that he had to stand tough there or be ostracized as a weakling. When criticized by Senator Mike Mansfield for his policies in Indochina, for instance, JFK purportedly replied “I can’t [pull out of Vietnam] until 1965.” White House aide Kenneth O’Donnell later explained that “President Kennedy felt...that if he announced a total withdrawal of American military personnel from Vietnam before the 1964 election, there would be a conservative outcry against returning him to the Presidency for a second term.”\footnote{Destler et. al., p. 54.}

Any shift from his “pay any price” approach to the Cold War, Kennedy thought, would be political suicide.\footnote{Maga, p. 79, citing NSF/Box 194, Box WH-19 of the Arthur Schlesinger Papers, POF/Box 88, JFK Library.}

Lyndon Johnson, like his predecessor, found domestic political factors coloring the formulation of his policies toward Indochina. A congressional leader during the McCarthy period, LBJ was all too aware of the disastrous consequences that foreign policy blunders
could have on a president’s domestic effectiveness.\textsuperscript{45} In his 1964 campaign, LBJ had averred that Vietnam “ought to be fought by the boys in Asia to protect their own land,” but—bound by the commitment of his predecessor—soon found himself trapped in the unenviable position of trying to win a war overseas in order to avoid political ruin at the hands of the conservative wing of the Republican Party, which he referred to as the “Great Beast to be feared.” \textsuperscript{46} “Lyndon,” one of his closest friends warned him, “don’t be the first American President to lose a war.”\textsuperscript{47}

Johnson needed the “Great Beast” to build his Great Society. His decision to escalate the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was informed by his awareness of the “strong feelings of many...members of Congress who believed that we should be taking stronger actions against the North...not less. Some of these legislators held key positions in Congress.”\textsuperscript{48} LBJ needed the support of these “powerful men” to make headway domestically: “I wanted to put on the books every attainable bill,” he later reminisced.\textsuperscript{49} Johnson feared, however, that if we let Communist aggression succeed in taking over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country an endless national debate—that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy. I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{45}Macdonald, p. 14.  
\textsuperscript{46}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{48}Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 368.  
\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., p. 430.  
\textsuperscript{50}Quoted Destler et. al., p. 62.
The achievements of the Great Society could not outweigh the images of Vietnam that the electorate watched each night on their television sets.\textsuperscript{51} February 1968’s Tet Offensive added to public unrest and undermined the credibility of White House assertions that the war was going well. “Most Americans found it difficult to believe that Tet was a communist defeat,” notes one scholar, “when they saw newsreel footage of Vietcong sappers inside the American embassy compound in Saigon.”\textsuperscript{52} As anti-war sentiment gained momentum and the November presidential elections approached, the White House found itself increasingly unpopular.

Disillusionment with LBJ’s handling of the war translated into electoral vulnerability. Fellow Democrat Eugene McCarthy challenged the President in the New Hampshire primary and nearly won, the dynamic Robert Kennedy (D-NY) announced his candidacy, and Nixon’s promises to end the war in Vietnam were earning him gains in the polls.\textsuperscript{53} It quickly became clear that LBJ was, simply, no longer a viable candidate, and that his re-nomination might guarantee a GOP victory in November. In March 1968 he announced that he would not seek re-election. He left office with an approval rating of less than 30 percent.\textsuperscript{54}

A decade later, the foreign policies of Jimmy Carter were subjected to similar pressures. Carter came to office as a Washington outsider untainted by Vietnam keenly aware that despite the 1975 pullout, many Americans were dissatisfied with U.S. foreign policy. His administration, he promised, would reassert a sense of morality into U.S. foreign

\textsuperscript{51}Quoted in Small, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{52}Small, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{53}Ambrose, Globalism, p. 235.
\textsuperscript{54}Ambrose, Presidency, p. 131; p. 128.
policy. This approach worked to his political benefit in the elections, but as the Soviet Union entered into a period of vigorous involvement overseas and radical nationalism in the Third World mounted, conservatives began a protracted campaign to unseat Carter that involved vehement attacks on his soft, “unrealistic” approach to international affairs. In 1977, the President’s drive to negotiate new canal treaties with Panama (more fully explored in the next chapter) was decried by his opponents as “the culmination of a pattern of appeasement and surrender.”

In 1976 a collection of conservative politicians and intellectuals re-created the Committee on the Present Danger to lobby against what they saw as flawed and weak foreign policies; its efforts to counter the Salt II agreements plagued Carter for his entire term. The administration’s formal recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1978 brought strident complaints from members of Congress and the Taiwan lobby. His perceived inaction after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan earned him more criticism. Finally, the Iran hostage crisis hung like a weight around the administration’s neck.

Damage control became a White House obsession. As the contretemps in Iran dragged on and the 1980 elections approached, Carter struggled to reverse the deleterious effect the hostage crisis was having on his presidency, announcing, for instance, that he was suspending campaign trips in order to stay in D.C. monitor the situation. The morning of Wisconsin’s April primary, he was conveniently able to tell reporters that the Iranian students

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56Small, p. 137.
58Top Carter aide Lloyd Cutler complained that “[w]hatever urgent but less televised problem may be on the White House agenda on any given morning, it is often put aside to consider and respond to the latest TV news bombshell in time for the next broadcast.” Quoted in Small, p. 159.
holding the hostages had agreed to hand them over to the pro tem government being assembled in Tehran. That news probably contributed to his decisive victory in Wisconsin. When it was learned afterward that the Iranian government declined to take custody of the captives, even Carter’s aides noted that his statement made him appear manipulative and deceitful.60

The decision to attempt a rescue of the hostages later that month was also influenced by domestic political concerns. White House chief of staff Hamilton Jordan supported the rescue attempt on the grounds that it would “prove to the columnists and our political opponents that Carter was not an ineffective Chief Executive who was afraid to act.” The President himself assessed that he had “to give expression to the anger of the American people. If they perceive me as firm and tough in voicing their rage,” he mused, “maybe we’ll be able to contain this thing.”61 After the failed rescue attempt, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance—disturbed at the role electoral considerations had played in the decision to use force—resigned in protest. “[S]mart politics produce bad policies,” he noted coolly.62

Problems cropped up closer to home as well. By late 1978 it seemed obvious that U.S. ally Anastasio Somoza Jr. could not remain in power in Nicaragua for long. The November elections were drawing near, the Iran issue was already providing Carter’s political challengers with plenty of ammunition, and a failure in that Central American nation would surely spell electoral disaster. In Nicaragua, public dissatisfaction with Somoza’s

61 Quoted in Small, p. 139.
62 Ibid.
repressive regime had steadily gathered momentum throughout the 1970s, and by 1978 a previously ineffective guerrilla group—the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)—was waging an energetic terrorist war against Somoza’s National Guard. Among the lower classes, dissatisfaction quickly blossomed into violence. Even conservative businessmen gave up on the regime.63 By 1979 the FSLN seemed destined to topple Washington’s long-time ally, and anxiety that a post-Somoza, Sandinista-led government was certain prompted the Carter foreign policy team to scramble for a way to prevent that from happening. Given the Soviet expansion into Afghanistan and the tepid U.S. response, Cuban activities in Africa, the collapse of the Shah in Iran, and the Marxist insurrection in El Salvador, a victory for the left in Nicaragua would represent a major U.S. defeat in an era of re-ignited Cold War tensions. “A ‘second Cuba’ in Central America?” pondered the Washington Post. “It is not out of the question.”64

As the intensity of the fighting in Nicaragua increased, so did conservative efforts to take Carter to task. In late September 1978, seventy-eight members of Congress published a letter in the New York Times and the Washington Post exhorting Carter to “come publicly to the support of the government of Nicaragua during this period of crisis.” Accompanying the letter was a large illustration of a hammer and a sickle slicing through Central America.65

Dissatisfaction with the president’s inability to combat ‘international Marxism’ in the region

63LaFeber, Inevitable, pp. 229-230.
65Pastor, Repetition, p. 98.
spread. The New Right’s tactics seemed to be working: “The election of Ronald Reagan no longer is unthinkable,” *U.S. News & World Report* announced.66

As a result of this sort of pressure, concern over a potential political backlash stemming from Somoza’s fall filtered into White House discussions regarding Nicaragua. “Domestic politics did not determine policy,” recalls former National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, “but it provided a context of which decision makers could not be unaware. After a year in office,” Lake notes,

Carter was coming under ever harsher attacks for perceived weakness both in his management of the government and in his commitment to the containment of communism. Increasingly he was accused in conservative quarters of waging his human rights campaign more strenuously against authoritarian but traditionally friendly regimes in the Third World than against Communist States. How then could he seek Somoza’s removal...without seeming to confirm the charge? What would that do to his political standing, and to his ability to persuade even members of his own party.67

During policy planning sessions, Zbigniew Brzezinski repeatedly warned “that events in Nicaragua would not only impact on U.S.-Soviet relations” but also “on the President’s political standing.”68 A “Castroite take-over in Nicaragua,” he counseled, would have “devastating domestic implications.”69

Carter’s approach to foreign relations shifted decidedly toward the right as a result of these fears. In addition to intervening militarily in Iran, he withdraw SALT II from Senate consideration to protest Russia’s occupation of Afghanistan and attempted to secure OAS approval for an intervention in Nicaragua by an inter-American peace keeping force.70 His

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68Quoted in ibid., p. 221.
foreign affairs approval rating was at 18 percent, and the shift in tone, writes Anthony Lake, “was being produced at least in large part by political calculations. It was no secret that Carter’s White House political advisers wanted him to appear ‘tough on East-West issues.’”71 According to one staffer, “seventy-five percent of [the President’s shift toward a more hard-line foreign policy stance] is political within the United States.”72 But the President’s attempts to assume a tougher foreign policy posture could not reverse the setbacks of the previous four years. These foreign policy problem were “disastrous...politically for Carter,” Zbigniew Brzezinski later wrote. They

undid the political benefits of his effective leadership in obtaining the Camp David agreements...obsurred public appreciation of his boldness in achieving normalization of relations with China...weakened the credibility of his efforts to oppose the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan...[and] hurt his image as a world leader at the very mid-point of the first Presidential term [and] contributed centrally to Carter’s political defeat.73

The Carter experience, like that of Johnson and Truman before, taught Washington insiders that contrary to the old adage, domestic politics do not stop at the water’s edge.

Ronald Reagan’s successful assault on Carter’s foreign policy credibility created widespread expectations of a revitalized overseas presence for the United States. Reagan’s conservative backers wanted to see the new President translate his campaign rhetoric into reality; even moderates—haunted by the sense of impotence Vietnam had created and frustrated by Carter’s foreign policy blunders— hoped to see U.S. dignity restored. Opinion polls taken in 1980 indicated that much of the nation wanted a “foreign policy of self-

72Unidentified Carter official quoted in Moreno, p. 76.
73Brzezinski, p. 364; p. 398.
interest,” increased security spending, and a more vigorous overseas defense of U.S. national interests.74

As previously noted, however, the first years of the Reagan administration were marked by fiery foreign policy rhetoric but little decisive action. One analyst notes that

[a]s the President developed a record noted more for words than for acts, the right became uneasy about the leader who had promised it so much. At first the attacks came against Reagan’s Secretary of State, Alexander Haig. As Haig was jettisoned...conservative unease remained as “neoconservative” ideologues such as Norman Podhoretz constantly attacked Reagan for apostasy. His constituency on the right had believed him; now its faith seemed shaken. And after a year of near silence (save on El Salvador), in 1982 critics on the left began to pick up the cudgels, charging Reagan both with bellicosity in his rhetoric and failure in his policies, especially with regard to the state of our alliances. On arms control, Reagan met a surprisingly strong public reaction. In 1981, the European peace movement...drove the Administration to the negotiating table on limiting theater nuclear forces. In 1982, the burgeoning nuclear ‘freeze’ movement at home joined with European concerns to produce the START proposal for strategic weapons reduction.75

By 1983, the presence of U.S. armed forces as part of an international peacekeeping force in Lebanon had become the focal point for criticisms of the blustery Reagan White House.

White House Chief of Staff Jim Baker (later Secretary of State under George Bush) was certainly aware of the potential domestic powder keg the deployment to Lebanon represented. However, though his “political instincts told him that it would be imperative to remove the marines from Lebanon well before the 1984 election,” writes journalist Lou Cannon, “he had no sense of urgency about it.”76 Baker’s assessment proved faulty. As sniper fire against U.S. troops increased, public opinion regarding Reagan’s Lebanon policy

74Destler et. al., p. 79.
75Ibid., p. 81.
waxed negative. In September 1983 a *New York Times* poll revealed that for the first time more people disapproved than approved of the Marine deployment.\(^{77}\)

The situation was compounded by a protracted Congressional effort to challenge Reagan’s authority to keep troops in Lebanon and the encroaching 1984 electoral campaign.\(^{78}\) Democratic calls to pull the Marines out gathered steam, and it soon became “unmistakably clear,” writes one author, “that the American public was strongly opposed to a U.S. military presence in Lebanon and that the Democratic leadership in Congress was prepared to exploit this sentiment against Mr. Reagan in an election year.”\(^{79}\) Matters took a turn for the worse when a terrorist bomb killed 241 of the marines in Lebanon.

The bombing had a tremendous impact on Reagan’s popularity. It was one of the worst disasters in the history of U.S. foreign policy, and seemed to indicate that the President was as impotent in the face of Middle Eastern terrorism as his predecessor had been. “Once again,” remonstrated a *New York Times* editorial,

> America is held hostage by a Middle East circumstance beyond its control. And this time there’s no escape through daring rescue missions or ransom negotiations. Honor and prestige are again on the line, but the marines who claim them are dead, victims of a murky diplomatic cause that the President feels bound to reaffirm but still cannot fully define.\(^{80}\)

“Even more worrisome to White House political strategists than the congressional and editorial reaction,” relates Lou Cannon, “was [a White House] poll that on Monday showed a

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precipitous overnight decline in Reagan’s approval rating.”81 “Events in Beirut,” concludes another analyst, “placed great demands on the president’s credibility, demands that were too large for even the popular Reagan to meet. Somehow, he had to restore his good will with the American public.”82

The White House found an answer to its dilemma close to home. Reagan’s foreign policy planners had been monitoring events on the Caribbean island of Grenada since a small, radical clique came to dominate that country’s ruling junta in mid-October. Relations between the U.S. and Grenada had been under strain beginning late in the term of Jimmy Carter. Since 1980, the White House had been taking rhetorical potshots at the ruling New Jewel Movement because of its affiliation with Cuba and its left-leaning policies. Now, in the wake of the disaster in Lebanon, the presence of some 800 U.S. medical students on the island offered the possibility that anti-American sentiment might spark violence against U.S. citizens. After an October coup brought the most militant New Jewel members to power, the White House convened a meeting of its Special Situations Group to analyze the situation.

“Uppermost on the agenda,” relates one chronicler, “was a worst-cast scenario whereby the students would be taken hostage in a mirror image of the Teheran embassy debacle.”83

81p. 445.
82Bostdorff, p. 181.
83Ivan Musicant, The Banana Wars: A History of United States Military Intervention in Latin American from the Spanish-American War to the Invasion of Panama, (NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), p. 373. While only one of several considerations, the potential a hostage situation in Grenada was certainly more important to U.S. decisionmaking than some accounts indicate. For example, according to Robert Beck’s thorough treatise of the invasion: danger to U.S. citizens was a key topic at the first State Department meeting on the issue; initial plans for intervention were characterized as an “evacuation;” and at the first cabinet-level meeting on Grenada on October 20, Lawrence Eagleburger “specifically raised the specter of the Tehran hostages.” Additionally, Beck notes, at that meeting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Vessey “observed now that a surgical strike simply to remove Americans would be extremely difficult without securing the entire island.” After the Beirut bombing, adds Beck, “Reagan’s overriding concern seems now to have been over possible hostages. One administration official would recall, ‘The president and those around him thought
On October 25, 1983—two days after the Beirut explosion—U.S. military forces launched an assault against Grenada. Early official justifications stressed the danger to American lives which the situation had presented; later, the administration made the case that the island was becoming a proxy of Havana and Moscow. Others offer a different assessment of U.S. motivations, however. In his memoirs, Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill recounts a conversation he had with a top adviser while on his way to a confidential meeting with President Reagan on October 24, a day after the attack on the marines in the Middle East.

[O’Neill:] ‘I don’t know what this is about, but I bet we’re invading Grenada.’
[Aide:] ‘Grenada? You can’t be serious.’
[O’Neill:] ‘I am,’ I replied. ‘I just have a feeling about it. The administration has been wanting to go in there for a long time. I heard on the radio that one of our ships on its way to Lebanon has been turned around, and that got me thinking. Besides, the prime minister down there has been killed, so they have the perfect excuse.’
[Aide:] ‘Then you don’t think the meeting is about Lebanon?’
[O’Neill:] ‘Sure I do,’ I said. ‘They’re invading Grenada so people will forget what happened yesterday in Beirut.’

After the invasion, O’Neill was convinced. “Despite what the administration claimed,” he later wrote, “as far as I can see, it was all because the White House wanted the country to

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forget about the tragedy in Beirut.” The overriding consideration was the re-election of the president,” he writes. “Because he had been elected on the basis that he would be tough with challenges to U.S. power in the Third World, the debacle in Beirut looked like a tremendous failure. A bold move was required to restore the president’s credibility, especially as new elections approached.”

Positive TV coverage of the event lifted Reagan’s approval rating to its highest level in two years. An ABC-Washington Post survey found that 71 percent of U.S. citizens supported the intervention. Another survey revealed that 65 percent of Americans considered the President “good in times of crisis,” and 63 percent felt he was an “effective leader.” Time reported that

Through careful tracking of public opinion polls, the White House was able to confirm that the President has been [] helped by the tumultuous events. Just before the Beirut disaster two weeks ago, private White House polls showed his approval rating had reached a high point for recent months of close to 60%. That showed immediate slippage when news of the carnage [in Beirut] shocked the public...after the news from [Grenada] began to come out, and after Reagan went on television with one of the most polished performances of his presidency, his standing was restored. Said one top adviser to the President: ‘We really believe that everything turned out well.’

All in all, the invasion attracted little criticism, either among the public or in the ranks of Washington politicians. Congressional opinion followed a similar pattern: the Democratic

85Ibid., pp. 366-367.
90Magnuson, Back to Normal, p. 17.
leadership of the House, in fact, quickly silenced calls for an investigation into the invasion raised by members of the Black Caucus.  

Operation Urgent Fury effectively defused negative domestic reactions to the Beirut bombing. As one analyst comments, “Grenada served as a victory over Iran and the haunting specter of the hostage crisis. By renaming the invasion a ‘rescue mission,’ Reagan allowed Americans the chance to relive a hostage situation and win.”

“Coming on the heels of Beirut and the frustration over the deaths there,” remarked a TV anchorwoman, “it was something to cheer about.” Moreover, the perceived success of the Grenada invasion did much to dispel the post-Vietnam notion that the era of U.S. global predominance was over. Under his predecessor, Reagan asserted,

we had lost the respect of friend and foe alike, and our willpower had grown weak and soft, undermining commitments to allies like Israel. Our leaders seemed to have lost faith in the American people and in America’s future. They spoke of a national malaise. On television, we saw the Stars and Stripes being burned in foreign capitals. And from Afghanistan to Grenada, the Soviets were on the march. Seldom in all its proud history had the United States of America reached such a pathetic state of apparent impotence. Well, today, just four years later, we’re seeing not humiliations but well-justified pride—pride in our country, our accomplishments, and ourselves.

“Under this administration, our nation is through wringing its hands and apologizing,” he vowed. “We’re seeing to it that America stands proud again. American citizens, whether they’re navy pilots in the Gulf of Sidra or medical students in Grenada, can no longer be attacked or their lives endangered with impunity,” the President said. “And about that

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91 Kenworthy, Theater, p. 648.
92 Bostdorff, p. 198.
93 Unidentified anchorwoman quoted in Time, Rallying Round, p. 39
95 Time, Rallying Round, p. 37.
Grenada rescue mission—wasn’t it nice for a change to see graffiti on foreign walls that read, ‘God bless America,’ not ‘Yankee go home’.

Urgent Fury certainly made for good speeches in the 1984 presidential campaign. With the Democrats in power, Reagan warned, “our defense would still be growing weaker while the Soviets grew bolder. Troops would have landed on Grenada, that’s for sure. They just wouldn’t have been American troops...So let’s approach this election year with the high spirits...We can tell the people that, yes, America is back.” The era of “paralyzing self-doubt” engendered by the Vietnam War, concluded the President, was over. Reagan was a tough act to follow, as his successor to office soon learned.

Next to the dynamic Reagan, George Bush came off looking wan and ineffective. Bush had years of experience in foreign affairs, and some of his views did not coincide with the President’s; as Vice-President, however, he was careful to toe Reagan’s line. Although he had condemned Reagan’s economic platform as “voodoo economics” during his 1979 campaign for the Republican nomination, after his selection as Reagan’s running mate, Bush carefully remained in the shadows. “We’re now a wholly owned subsidiary and we’re going to behave like one,” he told his staff. But as a candidate for President in 1988, Bush found that this approach had earned him a reputation as “Reagan’s dutiful deputy.” Other less

100“The Torch is Passed,” Time, August 22, 1988, p. 16.
gracious observers referred to him as the President’s “lapdog.”\textsuperscript{101}

The Vice-President needed an issue to take a stand on, an issue that would bring him out from Reagan’s shadow, give him the chance to present himself as a tough, able-minded leader, and invigorate his lack-luster campaign. Reagan’s policies toward “the drug dealing dictator” of Panama, Manuel Noriega, provided Bush with his opening. Little did he or his staff know what they were getting in to.