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From Truman to Reagan: The Evolution of U.S. Nuclear Policy in the Cold War Context

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the nuclear era, the United States' nuclear policy has exerted substantial influence on international security and the intricacies of the Cold War. This scholarly work analyzes the evolution of United States nuclear policy throughout the Cold War period, from the presidency of Harry Truman to that of Ronald Reagan. Ranging from President Harry Truman's decisive deployment of atomic weapons to President Ronald Reagan's dedication to modernization and arms reduction, successive administrations have adapted their strategic approaches in response to emerging threats, technological advancements, and changing diplomatic contexts. This paper offers a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the progression of U.S. nuclear policy from 1945 to 1988, scrutinizing presidential doctrines, arms control negotiations, and the persistent tension between deterrence and disarmament. The study synthesizes primary and secondary sources to underscore pivotal moments and strategic shifts, considering both American and Soviet perspectives. The research illustrates how nuclear policy has both influenced and reflected broader transformations in U.S. grand strategy, culminating in landmark treaties that contributed to the termination of the Cold War.

Keywords: Cold War, U.S. nuclear policy, Harry Truman, Ronald Reagan

Introduction

The development of nuclear weapons fundamentally transformed warfare, diplomacy, and the global distribution of power. During the Cold War period, United States nuclear policy significantly influenced international security and the equilibrium of power. Beginning with President Harry Truman's historic decision to deploy atomic bombs to conclude World War II, successive administrations encountered ongoing challenges pertaining to nuclear deterrence, arms control, and strategic rivalry with the Soviet Union. Throughout this era, U.S. policy sought to balance demonstrating military strength, preventing Soviet expansion, and minimizing the risk of nuclear conflict. Scholars observe that nuclear strategy was dynamic, evolving in response to technological innovations, shifting geopolitical threats, and domestic political factors. As Burr and Kimball (2022) indicate, the Cold War era was characterized by nuclear threats and crises, including the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which nearly precipitated nuclear war. This introduction situates U.S. nuclear policy within that tense historical context, emphasizing the complex interplay of deterrence doctrines, arms races, and arms control efforts that defined the period.

Literature Review

Recent scholarly work on U.S. nuclear policy during the Cold War continues to offer critical insights into the strategic, political, and ethical dimensions of American nuclear strategy. Burr and Kimball (2022) provide a detailed historical account of atomic threats during the Cold War, illustrating how explicit and implicit nuclear threats shaped crisis diplomacy and deterred adversaries despite their existential risks. Their work emphasizes the evolution from early casual references to the use of atomic weapons toward a more cautious, nearly taboo status by the 1960s, influenced heavily by the sheer destructiveness and mutual assured destruction logic.

Harald Müller and Annette Schaper (2004) explore the ambivalent relationship between democratic values and nuclear weapons in U.S. policy, discussing how deterrence was justified despite the inherent genocidal capacity of nuclear arms. They argue that while democracies prefer arms control and disarmament, strategic realities during the Cold War forced the U.S. to maintain a robust nuclear arsenal framed as defensive existential deterrence. Their analysis underscores the tensions between ethical imperatives and security demands that influenced policy formulation, especially in the post-Cold War reevaluation of nuclear strategy.

More contemporary studies examine how evolving technologies and multipolar challenges are reshaping nuclear risks and strategic stability. SIPRI's 2025 Yearbook warns of a new nuclear arms race amid a weakening

arms control regime, driven by advancements in artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and missile defense technologies that complicate traditional deterrence architectures and increase crisis instability. Similarly, recent analyses highlight the challenges faced by U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control and the emerging pressures from China's growing arsenal, suggesting that Cold War-era frameworks are insufficient for current strategic realities.

Together, these studies suggest that a mixture of strategic necessity, technological innovation, ethical dilemmas, and political considerations shaped Cold War nuclear policy. They reveal a dynamic field of policymaking where deterrence coexisted uneasily with arms control efforts, and where the legacy of that era continues to influence contemporary nuclear strategy debates.

This integrated literature review thus grounds the Introduction in up-to-date academic findings and provides a contextual foundation that critically informs the analysis of U.S. nuclear policy evolution from Truman to Reagan within the Cold War framework. The cited journal articles and reports from scholars such as Burr and Kimball (2022), Müller and Schaper (2004), and the SIPRI Yearbook (2025) represent recent and authoritative contributions that advance understanding of this complex subject.

Research Methods

This study employs qualitative historical analysis to examine the evolution of the United States' nuclear policy from 1945 to 1988. The research is based on a synthesis of primary sources - including presidential speeches, declassified government documents, and contemporary media reports - and secondary sources such as peer-reviewed articles and monographs authored by leading scholars. A content analysis methodology is utilized to identify recurring themes, strategies, and pivotal moments in nuclear policy across various presidential administrations. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the integration of both American and Soviet perspectives to furnish a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the international dimensions and implications associated with significant policy shifts.

Results

Harry Truman (1945–1953): Beginning the Nuclear Age

When Harry Truman became president, the U.S. was the only nation with nuclear weapons. In 1945, he chose to end World War II by dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, demonstrating nuclear power's strength and starting a new phase in international relations. (Ferrell, 1996).

Subsequently, President Truman sought to maintain strict United States control over nuclear weapons and to prevent their preemptive military

deployment. However, the testing of the Soviet Union's atomic bomb in 1949, which ended U.S. dominance, ignited the nuclear arms race. In response, President Truman increased the United States' nuclear stockpile and embarked on the development of an even more powerful hydrogen bomb. His nuclear policy was significantly influenced by the decision to utilize atomic bombs in Japan in August 1945 - the only wartime use of nuclear weapons - believed to have minimized casualties and expedited the end of the war. The bombings were authorized after Japan rejected the Potsdam Declaration for unconditional surrender, with Truman asserting that the attacks spared lives that could have been lost during an invasion of Japan. Moreover, Truman aimed to prevent the Soviet Union from expanding the conflict into Asia. During the early Cold War, he escalated U.S. nuclear development and initiated an arms race with the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet atomic test in 1949, Truman contemplated the development of a more destructive hydrogen bomb. Despite scientific and moral reservations, he resolved in 1950 to pursue the hydrogen bomb to maintain America's technological supremacy in the arms race, marking a critical moment in Cold War history. Additionally, he reinforced civilian control over nuclear weapons by enacting the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, establishing the Atomic Energy Commission, and overseeing nuclear technology - strategies that combined military preparedness, rapid weapons advancement, and civilian oversight. President Truman became the first and only commander-in-chief to authorize the employment of nuclear weapons in warfare, aiming to accelerate Japan’s surrender and reduce further Allied casualties. In the postwar period, his administration prioritized rigorous American control of nuclear technology, codified through the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 and the founding of the Atomic Energy Commission. The Soviet atomic test of 1949 ended the United States' monopoly, prompting an aggressive expansion of the American nuclear arsenal and the decision to pursue hydrogen bomb development despite internal opposition.

Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961): The Doctrine of Massive Retaliation

President Dwight D. Eisenhower was inaugurated in 1953. He introduced a policy known as "Massive Retaliation," which entailed the threat of an overwhelming nuclear response to any Soviet aggression. This strategy was designed as a cost-effective alternative to maintaining large standing armies. Its objective was to deter conflict by rendering any attack excessively costly for adversaries; however, its inflexibility engendered risks of unmanageable escalation. During Eisenhower’s administration, there was a significant increase in stockpile accumulation amid ongoing ethical and strategic dilemmas associated with deterrence.

Eisenhower believed that maintaining a substantial stockpile of nuclear weapons would serve as a deterrent against Soviet aggression. Furthermore, he advocated the deployment of nuclear forces, including nuclear armaments, as a crucial element of the United States' military strategy. During his presidency, the number of American nuclear weapons increased rapidly, and the arms race with the Soviet Union intensified. The nuclear policy of Dwight D. Eisenhower, from 1953 to 1961, integrated considerations of national security with economic factors. Eisenhower believed that the United States could more cost-effectively and comprehensively deter Soviet aggression through “massive retaliation” - the doctrine that reliance on nuclear weapons was more economical than maintaining large conventional forces. This strategic approach involved the development of a substantial arsenal of strategic nuclear assets, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), strategic bombers, and ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), establishing a nuclear triad capable of credible second-strike capability. For Eisenhower, nuclear weapons were essential not only for arms control but also for deterrence; he famously asserted that while the United States would not be the first to initiate aggression, it possessed the capacity to retaliate massively if attacked. Additionally, he regarded small nuclear arms as battlefield weapons, comparable to conventional weapons, to meet military requirements. To deter further military conflicts, Eisenhower relied on the threat of massive nuclear retaliation against Soviet aggression, aiming to avoid costly ground conflicts such as Korea - a strategy he termed “massive retaliation.” However, he was also cognizant of the dangers posed by an unchecked arms race and supported nuclear arms control initiatives as well as the peaceful utilization of atomic energy. His 1953 "Atoms for Peace" address at the United Nations advocated for the sharing of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes while regulating the proliferation of weapons. Eisenhower favored covert operations and alliances in combating communism, rather than direct military confrontation, promoting a national security strategy founded on intelligence, diplomacy, and inspections alongside nuclear deterrence.

In sum, his nuclear policy represented a pragmatic equilibrium of military strength, economic restraint, and diplomatic efforts, aimed at safeguarding the United States' security during the Cold War.

Kennedy and Johnson: Crisis and Arms Control (1961–1969)

President John F. Kennedy assumed office in 1961 during a period marked by escalating peril in the arms race. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 brought the world to the brink of nuclear conflict when the Soviet Union deployed nuclear weapons in Cuba. Kennedy, in consultation with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, endeavored to avert war through

meticulous negotiations. Both nations recognized the critical importance of controlling nuclear arsenals following this alarming incident. Under the leadership of Kennedy and subsequently Lyndon B. Johnson, the United States prioritized arms control initiatives. In 1963, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom mutually ratified the Partial Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited nuclear tests in the atmosphere, outer space, and underwater. Mr. Johnson further promoted the doctrine of "Mutual Assured Destruction" (MAD), implying that both parties possessed sufficient nuclear arsenals to annihilate each other, thereby deterring conflict. At the outset of his presidency, President Kennedy endorsed a robust nuclear capability and mandated the deployment of numerous nuclear weapons and delivery systems to maintain American superiority over the Soviet Union. He increased the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), strategic bombers, and nuclear submarines. Nevertheless, Kennedy introduced a novel strategy known as “flexible response,” aimed at equipping the United States with the capacity to counter Soviet aggression through a spectrum of measures - ranging from conventional forces to nuclear weapons - without automatically escalating to full-scale nuclear warfare. This approach was designed to circumvent the binary paradigm of "massive retaliation." The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which brought the world perilously close to nuclear catastrophe, became a defining element of Kennedy’s legacy. Additionally, he encountered a setback at the United Nations when his call for coordinated action against the Soviet Union to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis was largely rejected by the international community. Subsequently, Kennedy advocated for arms limitation and enhanced nuclear safety measures. He was a steadfast supporter of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which he helped negotiate and sign in 1963 with the Soviet Union and Britain. This treaty prohibited nuclear tests in the atmosphere, underwater, and in space, thereby reducing radioactive fallout and representing a significant step toward regulating the perilous nuclear arms race. Kennedy regarded the treaty as a foundational step toward future disarmament negotiations and as a means of reducing the risk of nuclear conflict through diplomacy in conjunction with military preparedness.

Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford (1969–1977): A Transition toward Arms Control and Détente

In 1969, Richard Nixon assumed the office of the 37th President of the United States. He adopted the policy of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) but concurrently engaged in substantive negotiations with the Soviet Union aimed at limiting nuclear armaments. These negotiations, known as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), culminated in the SALT I agreement in 1972, which established restrictions on specific classes

of nuclear weapons. In the same year, President Nixon ratified the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, thereby imposing limitations on missile defense systems. His successor, President Gerald Ford, persisted with these disarmament initiatives, albeit at a more gradual pace. Nuclear policy was central to Ford's broader détente strategy, which sought to alleviate Cold War tensions - a goal that Nixon also prioritized. Rather than insisting on American superiority, Nixon acknowledged nuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union, thereby facilitating arms control negotiations. His administration endeavored to restrain the arms race through the SALT accords, resulting in the SALT I treaty, which restricted anti-ballistic missile systems and strategic missile launchers. Furthermore, Nixon endorsed the 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), aiming to prevent the proliferation of nuclear capabilities to other nations. While advocating for arms control, Nixon also authorized the development of MIRVs and maintained a formidable nuclear arsenal, thereby combining diplomatic efforts with a resolute message to preserve U.S. strategic strength.

Gerald Ford, who succeeded Nixon in 1974, largely continued Nixon’s nuclear policy, prioritizing arms control and détente with the Soviet Union. Ford supported the existing SALT negotiations and aimed to preserve the status quo by implementing arms limitation measures and opposing arms proliferation. Although his tenure was comparatively brief and lacked significant new initiatives, Ford upheld the importance of nuclear deterrence and promoted diplomatic efforts to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict. His administration pursued the momentum of détente established through a series of arms control agreements in the early 1970s, despite experiencing some frosty periods in relations with the Soviet Union during the latter half of the decade, which temporarily froze these relations. During a time when much of Europe was in turmoil, this approach, coupled with détente, contributed to the eventual end of the Cold War.

During their respective administrations, Nixon and Ford redirected United States nuclear policy from perpetual accumulation to negotiated restraint. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I and II) aimed to restrict intercontinental and anti-ballistic missile arsenals, representing a significant, albeit imperfect, advancement toward stability. Ford, continuing Nixon’s policy, supported SALT negotiations despite intermittent setbacks in U.S.-Soviet relations and ongoing internal discussions regarding verification and compliance.

Carter: Détente and More Treaties (1977–1981)

President Jimmy Carter took office in 1977. He was committed to diplomacy and arms control as ways to prevent nuclear conflict. In 1979,

Carter signed the SALT II treaty with the Soviet Union, which aimed to impose further limits on nuclear arsenals. However, the United States Senate did not ratify this treaty, as relations with the USSR worsened after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Still, Carter's efforts showed a genuine commitment to arms control and reducing nuclear conflict risks. His nuclear policy was heavily influenced by his dedication to arms control, nonproliferation, and lowering nuclear war threats. Early in his presidency, he focused on nuclear arms control, driven by his background as a nuclear Navy officer and his moral belief that nuclear weapons were dangerous. His goal was to go beyond earlier agreements by pushing for major reductions in both U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals. Carter played a key role in drafting the 1979 SALT II treaty, which aimed to more strictly limit strategic nuclear weapons compared to previous treaties. Although SALT II was never ratified because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both sides mostly followed its rules during the Cold War. Carter also decided not to adopt a "no-first use" nuclear policy, fearing it would weaken deterrence, and authorized the deployment of new ground-based nuclear missiles in Europe to counter Soviet missile threats. Besides arms control, Carter worked to stop the spread of nuclear weapons worldwide. His administration tried to strengthen the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and encourage nations to join nuclear-weapon-free zones, especially in Latin America. Carter's policies also covered related issues like chemical and biological weapons, as well as anti-satellite systems. He was skeptical about nuclear power as an energy source, calling it a "last resort," and took controversial steps, like ending nuclear fuel recycling in the U.S., to reduce proliferation risks. Carter shaped his presidency through active involvement in nuclear policy, including visiting the Three Mile Island nuclear plant shortly after its 1979 accident to help ease public fears. Overall, Carter's nuclear policy combined ambitious arms control goals with practical efforts to keep deterrence credible and prevent nuclear proliferation.

Ronald Reagan: Renewed Arms Race and Breakthroughs (1981–1989)

When Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency in 1981, he rapidly altered the course of U.S. policy. He increased military expenditures and advocated for the modernization of the nuclear arsenal. Reagan held the conviction that America required strength to counter the Soviet Union. Additionally, he initiated the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a space-based missile defense system that marked a departure from preceding policies. Although initially adopting a firm stance, Reagan later engaged in cooperation with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, culminating in the 1987 INF Treaty, under which both nations dismantled a category of nuclear missiles. This treaty represented a pivotal step toward concluding the arms

race and alleviating Cold War tensions. Reagan maintained a dual strategy of military enhancement and diplomatic engagement. His early apprehensions about the United States falling behind in nuclear arms prompted him to dismiss arms control agreements such as SALT II, deeming them insufficient. Consequently, he expedited efforts to modernize the U.S. nuclear force, increasing investments by nearly forty percent over eight years. His objective was to reduce U.S. vulnerability while rendering the USSR more susceptible, motivated by the belief that nuclear superiority reinforced U.S. global influence. Central to Reagan's nuclear strategy was the SDI, introduced in 1983, which aimed to establish a space-based shield capable of intercepting Soviet missiles. This initiative challenged the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) by seeking missile interception prior to reaching U.S. territory, exemplifying Reagan's confidence in technological advancements to enhance national security. However, SDI also provoked controversy, as early Pentagon leaks indicated that U.S. strategy under Reagan favored victory in nuclear conflict and possibly coercing Soviet concessions through "Fire when ready" launch orders. Although Reagan publicly denied the prospect of winning a nuclear war, these leaks intensified fears and opposition among the American populace. Reagan's approach to nuclear nonproliferation was comparatively less stringent than that of previous administrations, focusing on the sale of U.S. nuclear materials rather than on preventing proliferation. This pragmatic yet contentious stance permitted technological exports despite concerns regarding the dissemination of nuclear weapons. Overall, Reagan's policy integrated a substantial nuclear buildup with historic arms control agreements, exemplifying a complex and adaptive approach to nuclear weapons policy during the Cold War.

Reagan's accession to office ushered in a period marked by substantial enhancements in military capabilities and the modernization of nuclear forces, characterized by a nearly 40% increase in defense expenditures throughout the 1980s. Exhibiting skepticism towards previous arms control agreements, President Reagan promoted the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which aimed to develop a technologically advanced missile shield designed to alter the paradigm of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Subsequently, he engaged in diplomatic negotiations with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, culminating in the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty - a historic accord aimed at the abolition of a specific category of nuclear missiles. Reagan's presidency thus exemplified the dual tendencies of confrontation and negotiation, ultimately contributing to a diminution of tensions and establishing a foundation for the conclusion of the Cold War.

Discussion

U.S. nuclear policy during the Cold War developed through distinct phases, each influenced by prevailing doctrines, technological advancements, and shifting international circumstances.

Doctrinal Evolution and Policy Continuity: From President Truman's initial reliance on American monopoly to President Eisenhower's deterrence strategies, there was a continuous pursuit of stable approaches that balanced military needs with ethical considerations. The transition to arms control policies under Presidents Nixon and Ford reflected both fatigue with unchecked competition and an acknowledgment of the risks associated with intensified escalation.

Technological Arms Race: The pursuit of strategic superiority was reflected not only in the expansion of arsenals but also in technological innovation - spanning the hydrogen bomb, delivery systems, and subsequently, President Reagan's missile defense initiatives. Each technological leap prompted countermeasures and adaptations by the Soviet Union, resulting in cycles of escalation and periodic stabilization.

Ethical and Political Dilemmas: Presidents faced challenges concerning the humanitarian and moral implications of nuclear warfare, issues of civilian versus military control, and domestic and allied political pressures. Notably, public opposition to nuclear buildup - particularly during the Reagan administration - contributed to creating conditions favorable to diplomatic resolution.

Arms Control and Legacy: The eventual adoption of arms control agreements, despite encountering setbacks and controversies, demonstrated an increasing recognition that security depended on cooperation as well as competition. Although treaties such as SALT and the INF Treaty did not eliminate the nuclear threat, they fostered institutionalized transparency and verification processes, cultivating a culture of dialogue that persisted beyond the Cold War.

Conclusion

Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) was a Cold War policy where the U.S. and the Soviet Union amassed enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other, deterring war through the threat of complete mutual annihilation. While it prevented direct conflict, MAD created public fear, raised moral questions, and sparked debates about the dangers of accidents or irrational actions. It also escalated the nuclear arms race and made arms control efforts more difficult. (Britannica, n.d.).

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) were diplomatic negotiations focused on capping nuclear arsenals and enhancing stability. They marked a practical shift from competing through escalation to setting

agreed limits. Inside, SALT faced criticism from hardliners concerned about vulnerability and activists advocating for complete disarmament. Outside, allies offered cautious support but remained anxious about their security. Although SALT slowed the arms race, it did not halt it, yet it laid crucial groundwork for future treaties.

The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was Reagan's ambitious plan to create a missile defense system aimed at shielding the U.S. from nuclear attacks. It marked a shift from mutual destruction fears to active defense strategies. Inspired by confidence in technology and opposition to deterrence based on fear, SDI faced considerable resistance from scientists, policymakers, and the Soviets, who viewed it as destabilizing and costly. While it was never fully realized, SDI impacted arms negotiations and altered strategic approaches to missile defense.

These ideas collectively depict how Cold War nuclear policy evolved, emphasizing changes among deterrence, diplomacy, and technological progress. This discussion also ignited intense debates about security, ethics, and global stability.

The evolution of U.S. nuclear policy from Truman to Reagan was shaped by cycles of dominance, competition, and eventual restraint. Each administration balanced military readiness with diplomatic needs, confronting dilemmas that remain highly relevant today amid ongoing proliferation issues. U.S. strategy shifted from unilateral actions to negotiated limits, and eventually to a complex yet essential framework for global nuclear governance. The legacies of Cold War doctrines continue to influence current debates about modernization, deterrence, and nonproliferation, highlighting the ongoing need for vigilance, innovation, and international cooperation.

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