

The American Political Establishment Since FDR

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The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 was a turning point in American history. It marked the eclipse of the center-right Republican establishment that had dominated American politics since the Civil War and the emergence of a center-left Democratic establishment that has permeated American politics ever since. The Great Depression was the context of the power shift and American preparation for and entry into WWII accelerated it.

FDR's policies transformed the United States. Under the impact of crisis and war, President Roosevelt built an all-pervasive federal bureaucracy that extended from the central government to local citizens across the land. He forged a union of big government with America's banks and big business. In the process, there emerged an overarching left-of-center political establishment that became imbedded in America's traditional two-party political system and permeated governmental and non-governmental institutions alike, including most of the media,

corporations, big banks, the education system, publishing enterprises, and the arts.¹

Following George Orwell's dictum that he who controls the past controls the future, the establishment understood the supreme value of controlling the narrative of belief, publishing through multitudinous outlets a positive interpretation of the government's policies. Establishment writers, historians, and commentators subsequently crafted the narrative record of the past, selecting facts that supported their collective interpretation while downplaying, crowding out, or suppressing (through "classification") facts that did not fit their interpretation. It was only late in the game that facts began to emerge that enabled a revised interpretation of America's recent past; and it was only with the arrival of the Internet that alternative interpretations could be widely disseminated. This essay attempts to cast new light on the political establishment that has dominated American politics since the Great Depression.

Policy Differences and Strategic Continuity

The political establishment, variously known as the Deep State, Political Elite, or Political Machine, evolved to exert influence over both parties at every

¹ The rise of the center-left political establishment had precedents in earlier American history. For a survey of that history, see the author's "America's Four Revolutions," *Journal of Strategy and Politics* 2, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 1-22.

level, but especially at the level of national strategy. The establishment's leaders were animated by the grand idea of a world at peace based on cooperation with an implacable foe. To that end, the establishment pursued—and continues to pursue—a chimerical vision of détente, or accommodation with Communist power, initially with the Soviet Union until 1991 and with Communist China since then. This last shift has had a particularly perverse and harmful impact on America.

The establishment's strategy was to seek détente with the Communists pursuant to withdrawing from forward geopolitical positions gained during and after WWII on the Eurasian landmass. The persistent search for accommodation with the Communists could fairly be described as a futile quest for the impossible dream, yet failure after failure to achieve détente has not discouraged the establishment from continuing its quest. Withdrawals from forward positions have occurred in any case, defined mostly as foreign policy defeats. Even more astounding, establishment control of the narrative has neutralized voters who sought to reject the strategy.

On the surface, it seemed that leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties supported different foreign policy strategies, but appearances were deceiving. The number of Democratic and Republican presidents, for example, appears to have been in rough balance, with seven Republican presidents of the total of fifteen that have held that office during this period. The seven Republican presidents were: Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush, Bush, and Trump, but that picture is highly misleading. During the eighty-nine years since 1932 only four Republican presidents opposed the establishment strategy of

accommodation with the Communists, and even they were required to pay obeisance to that line at some point during their administrations. More important, theirs were coalition governments that included members of the establishment.

These four were Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and Trump. Except for Eisenhower, who served out two terms, scandal-free, the remaining three were driven from power based on spurious pretexts of entanglement in scandals combined with Democratic threats of impeachment followed by congressional, that is Democratic, investigations. Nixon, engulfed in Watergate, resigned to avoid impeachment. Reagan, dragged into Iran-Contra, also threatened with impeachment, relinquished power and served out his term, a weakened chief executive. Trump, tarred with a Russia collusion hoax, defeated an impeachment attempt but lost power in what was a highly irregular “election.” How these four Republicans achieved power is also of interest. Each was elected in the wake of a Democratic administration whose policies had alienated a significant portion of the electorate and/or establishment leaders.

The Democratic presidents were Truman, Johnson, Carter, and Obama. The establishment declined to support Truman, who instituted the anti-Soviet containment strategy, became mired in the Korean War, and was succeeded by Eisenhower. They dropped Johnson, who escalated and became bogged down in the Vietnam War and was succeeded by Nixon. They walked away from Carter—who partially rejected *détente* when

the Soviet Union strove for strategic weapons supremacy, invaded Afghanistan, and actively penetrated the Western Hemisphere—and was succeeded by Reagan. They shrank from Obama's chosen candidate, Hillary Clinton, who was poised to continue Obama's disastrous policies that facilitated China's rise to become a threat to the United States and was defeated by Trump.

The election of Republican successors came in the context of the failure of the *détente* strategy and the obvious need for course corrections. Each of the four Republican presidents succeeded in repairing the damage wrought by Democratic *détente* policies, and once corrected, the establishment moved to reclaim power and return to the quest for *détente*. In most cases, the means chosen were flimsily concocted and transparent scandals, combined with impeachment threats and congressional investigations that resulted in toppling incumbent presidents from power. The mainstream media and intellectual elite were active collaborators in each of these concocted schemes.

Eisenhower was an outlier. His physical debility meant that the establishment machine was able to influence his presidency without recourse to public scandal. He had suffered a heart attack in 1955 and was diagnosed with Crohn's disease in 1956. Recovering, he ran successfully for a second term, but had a stroke in 1957, which left him visibly impaired. In partial testimony to the establishment's influence, three of the most liberal Supreme Court Justices in the court's history took office during Eisenhower's tenure: Earl Warren, Walter Brennan, and Potter Stewart.

When Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, died in May 1959, the establishment's clout increased. Eisenhower became the first American president to welcome a Communist leader to Washington when he invited Nikita Khrushchev for a visit that same year. He also was the first to propose a summit meeting to end the Cold War, though the 1960 summit was disrupted by the U2 incident and came to nothing. Meanwhile, it was during the Eisenhower presidency that a "military-industrial complex" emerged to support the Truman-devised containment strategy designed to oppose the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The containment-détente dichotomy splintered the establishment and would bedevil American politics thereafter, but the bedrock strategy would always be détente.

The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 saw the resumption of full Democratic establishment control of the United States government and an attempt to revive détente, or more properly, détente and withdrawal. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy withdrew missiles from Turkey, offered to combine the US and Russian moon and space programs, agreed to the limited nuclear test ban treaty, set up the hot line, and began to withdraw from Vietnam. But internecine party conflict erupted between Kennedy and his vice president Lyndon B. Johnson over strategy—Johnson supported the war in Vietnam and the strategy of containment. After Kennedy's assassination, Johnson escalated in Vietnam but could not win, producing a stalemate despite the deployment of over half a million troops. The rupture

within the Democratic party clearly called for charting a new course.

The Democratic Party's brand had been severely tarnished by stalemate and failure in Vietnam and the internal factional crisis of 1968, characterized by the bloody riots in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention. Richard Nixon was chosen as a compromise candidate, selected because the establishment had dropped Johnson. After half a decade of conditioning in John Mitchell's law firm in New York city following his defeat by John F. Kennedy and failure to win election to the governorship of California, Nixon reached a compromise with the political establishment: He would support détente with Moscow in return for their support for an honorable withdrawal from Vietnam. His administration was a coalition government, with Nixon the advocate of containment and Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor (and a Kennedy Democrat), the advocate of détente. The establishment's propagandists falsely asserted that Nixon and Kissinger were the closest of allies.

Nixon outmaneuvered the political establishment, even while fulfilling his promises. He reached agreements on arms control and missile defense as well as significant commercial deals with the Russians, but he also opened the door to China, supporting Beijing against Moscow, which offered the promise of a successful extrication from Vietnam. Strengthening containment and especially rapprochement with China, and the settlement of the Vietnam war by returning to the status quo ante, was anathema to the détenteists, who wanted complete withdrawal. Despite Nixon's overwhelming electoral victory by the second-largest margin in history, the establishment drove

him from office based on the manufactured Watergate scandal and the threat of impeachment.²

At first Nixon acquiesced and acceded to the establishment's demands for full withdrawal from Vietnam; but after his inauguration he attempted to reclaim power and maintain support for an independent South Vietnam. At that point, in the spring of 1973, the establishment decided to abandon the idea of kicking Nixon upstairs and acted to remove him from power entirely, employing the Watergate scandal, impeachment threats, and congressional investigations against him.³

As Nixon became mired in the Watergate scandal, Kissinger assumed control of American foreign policy and immediately reversed strategy and sought to reach *détente* with Moscow (demonstrating *inter alia* the falsity of the Democratic establishment's claim that Nixon and Kissinger were the closest of allies). Central to this turnabout was withdrawal from forward positions created under containment, permitting Nixon's China opening to lie stillborn, pulling the plug on South Vietnam, consigning twenty million South Vietnamese to an undeserved fate, and attempting but failing to withdraw from South Korea.

² See the author's *The Nixon-Kissinger Years: The Reshaping of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Paragon House, 2001).

³ Geoff Shepard, *The Real Watergate Scandal: Collusion, Conspiracy, and the Plot that Brought Nixon Down* (New York: Regnery, 2015).

As an American Shogun under Gerald Ford, Kissinger offered the Soviets a bargain: increased trade and transfer of technology in return for an arms control treaty and mutual geopolitical restraint. Demonstrating American restraint, his exit from Ethiopia and adventurous policy in Angola precipitated only another crisis in US-Soviet relations, as Moscow rejected the bargain. Kissinger hoped through cooperation with Moscow to arrange a settlement in Angola, but the Russians chose to support their side, instead. Nor did they agree to Kissinger's proposals for an arms control treaty, commencing the most massive missile buildup since the advent of the ICBM.

Gerald Ford, our accidental president, languished as a place holder for Kissinger and the political establishment's efforts to promote détente with Moscow. Nelson Rockefeller, a nominal "Republican" and leader of the establishment in those days, assumed the position of vice president to ensure that there would be no deviation from the plan. The Soviets, as they would consistently do, paid lip service to détente, but pursued their own objective of seeking world dominance based on an unprecedented investment in intercontinental and intermediate-range ballistic missiles.

Despite the utter failure of Kissinger's détente strategy, Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter campaigned on and promised his full dedication to restoring détente with the Soviet Union pursuant to the withdrawal of the United States from forward positions on the Eurasian landmass. During the year prior to his election, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the man who would become his national security adviser, made periodic trips to Plains, Georgia, to tutor candidate Carter in the intricacies of foreign policy. Brzezinski was president of the Trilateral

Commission, which was filled with establishment figures whom Carter would select to serve in his administration. The commission was established by Nelson Rockefeller.

Carter declared as his first orders of business his intention to withdraw US forces from South Korea and reach agreement on SALT II, but circumstances precluded both. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the chief protagonist for détente in the Carter administration, attempted to bring about the president's objectives. Accordingly, Vance managed what appeared to be failure after failure from Europe to Africa, from Asia to Central America, including the collapse of the shah in Iran, the crisis with the Soviet Union over its buildup in Cuba, and the Communist revolution in Nicaragua. In fact, however, US withdrawal from forward positions on the Eurasian landmass was the intended but unstated objective. Unfortunately, Vance could not secure the prerequisite relationship that would have facilitated orderly withdrawals: détente with Moscow in the form of a ratified SALT II treaty and Soviet withdrawal from the Western Hemisphere, the issue that lay behind the crisis over the Soviet brigade in Cuba.

Instead, the Soviet Union advanced, invading Afghanistan, engineering war by its client Iraq against Iran, and supporting "revolutionary" movements on every continent, including in the Western Hemisphere, in Nicaragua.⁴ In his fourth year, attempting to respond to

⁴ See the author's *The Carter Years: Toward A New Global Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

the Soviet challenge and to restore some semblance of a credible balance of power, President Carter established diplomatic relations with Beijing, but vacillated between containment and détente. Carter was unable to jettison détente entirely, nor embrace containment fully, alienating the establishment in the process. Secretary Vance resigned to show his opposition to Carter's shift.

Carter presided over disastrous domestic policies that left the nation reeling in economic crisis with the highest inflation rate in post-war history, but it was Paul Volcker, establishment leader and Fed Chairman, who sharply reduced the money supply during the two months prior to the election that tilted the outcome to Reagan. Domestic travail combined with what was popularly perceived as foreign policy ineptitude, such as in the Iran hostage rescue attempt and the response to the Cuban boatlift, doomed Carter's reelection bid. He would be the only Democratic president in the 20th century to serve a single term in office.

Ronald Reagan was the most formidable opponent of the establishment, elected to resolve the problem of the massive Soviet military threat to the nation that had emerged during the détente era. Reagan would rebuild American military power, reestablish American strategic preeminence, and make a broad-based attempt to negotiate an end to the Cold War on favorable terms. His administration, like Nixon's, was also a coalition government. His secretaries of state, first Alexander Haig, then George Shultz, both opposed the president's victory strategy against the Soviet Union. Haig, claiming prerogatives beyond his office, pressed for "hardheaded détente," but détente, nonetheless.

After Reagan dismissed Haig, his replacement, George Shultz, was far more successful in opposing his president, resembling Cyrus Vance's style of pandering to Soviet power.⁵ It would be George Shultz who masterminded the capture of the foreign policy helm from the president in the wake of another manufactured scandal, the Iran-Contra affair. Incidentally, Shultz was advised by Henry Kissinger, whom Shultz provided with an office next to his in the State Department. (Personal friends, they had worked together in the Nixon administration.)

Reagan, fearing impeachment by the Democrats who gained control of both houses of Congress in 1986, chose to promote his legacy over continued struggle with the establishment, and so he relinquished control over foreign policy to Shultz. For the final two years of his administration, he would be reduced to watching movies in the family quarters of the White House, signing on to Shultz's initiatives when called upon. Unfortunately, choosing to burnish his legacy instead of fighting to maintain control meant that the center-left establishment would entrench itself and dominate American political life in both parties from then until now in a quixotic quest for détente.

Barely acknowledged by historians, Shultz's takeover was a critical turning point in American history. From December 1986, he reversed Reagan's policies in

⁵ See the author's recent studies: *Ronald Reagan: Revolution Ascendant* and *Ronald Reagan: Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Academica Press, 2021).

his effort to reach an accommodation with the Soviet Union, now led by Mikhail Gorbachev. Engaging in negotiation with the Russians over Nicaragua, Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia, and Afghanistan, Shultz “settled” resistance movements in favor of Moscow—every single one—and began the process of disengaging from American allies, like the Philippines and South Africa. Reagan (and UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher) vetoed anti-Apartheid bills in 1986 but were overruled by their respective legislatures.

Shultz rejected Reagan’s attempt to replace mutual assured destruction with strategic defense and negotiated the treaty on elimination of theater nuclear weapons, which was flawed from its inception. The effect of the 1987 treaty to remove and destroy intermediate-range missiles was to confer on Moscow nuclear missile domination of Europe. While the US withdrew the Pershing II from West Germany, the Soviets substituted other missiles for the SS-20 they scrapped. The INF Treaty was hailed as the harbinger of détente, but no further arms control agreements followed (until the George H.W. Bush administration signed the START I treaty in July 1991, five months before the Soviet Union self-destructed as a Communist state). SDI, the Strategic Defensive Initiative, was quietly shelved, as the Cold War presumably ended.

Establishment Failure and Protracted Decline

Shultz's victory led to the consolidation of establishment control over American politics for the next thirty years, until the election of Donald Trump in 2016. But the objective they had so long sought was compromised almost immediately. The collapse, or rather, the controlled demolition and rebranding of the Soviet regime into a pseudo-democratic state, forced a major change in strategy. The dissolution of the Soviet empire left the United States as the last superpower—but facing the problem of how to stabilize the vast regions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia that were no longer under Russian control and nominally free.

One response was NATO expansion eastward, incorporating states formerly under Soviet control, but the price was the emergence of a unified Germany in tacit entente with the new Russian state. The surprise development was George H.W. Bush's offer to assist in the modernization of China to provide stability in the Far East in the immediate wake of the Soviet collapse in late 1991. As part of that decision, Bush disengaged from the Philippines, closed the US naval base at Subic Bay, and withdrew the Seventh Fleet from Southeast Asian waters. Beijing immediately claimed all the islands in the South China Sea and began to build bases in the Paracel and Spratly Island groups.

The decision to promote Chinese modernization was a strategic blunder of the first order, yet it was followed without deviation by Presidents William

Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama to the grave detriment of the nation. It also demonstrated inter alia establishment control over both parties. And it was George W. Bush who gave us the global war on terror and the endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The net effect of these perpetual wars was to weaken the United States against its principal enemies and give the Russians and the Chinese time to catch up. But, of course, to the leaders of the political establishment (and their nominally Republican allies) there are no enemies on the Left. For the United States the decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union were decades of lost opportunity, as America frittered away its military power to no effect.

These were the years of so-called “globalization” and the proclaimed “Washington consensus,” when it seemed that the ideological dilettantes running the establishment believed that democracies could emerge anywhere and everywhere if enough money and technology were injected into the mix. This was particularly true of China, where it was asserted endlessly that the Chinese Communist regime would be transformed, Pygmalion-like, into a democracy, if enough Western capital and know-how were supplied. China’s inclusion into the World Trade Organization sharply accelerated the transfer of American and Western wealth, technology, industrial plant, expertise, and jobs to China in the amount of several trillions of dollars. Many grew rich from these transfers, but the nation grew poorer as a result. The transfer of wealth from America to China alone was on a scale greater than that which occurred after WWII to rebuild West Germany and Japan.

The policies the United States pursued during this period could not have been more beneficial to Communist China if the

Chinese Communists themselves had crafted them. In this same time frame, the Russians under new leader Vladimir Putin were busy parlaying resentment against American globalism into a dominant faction in OPEC, determined to raise oil prices by restricting supply. The rise of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, who immediately cut oil production, greatly facilitated this process. The price of crude oil rose steadily during the early 2000s and skyrocketed to a high of \$147 per barrel, contributing greatly to the Great Recession of 2008-09.⁶ During these years the United States imported most of its oil from Venezuela, Canada, and Mexico, not the Middle East.

The clear failure of the establishment's strategy, culminating under the presidency of Barak Obama, with its terribly damaging effects upon the country—hollowing out of the economy, the inundation of drugs, the weakening of the military, and the fracturing of social cohesion by promoting class conflict—convinced the American people that enough was enough. The Tea Party, named after the Boston Tea Party, emerged in 2009 and gathered momentum during these years, gaining control of the House in the 2010 mid-term election. The Tea Party dramatically altered the Republican Party and strengthened its appeal to the people. Increasingly, the people perceived the Democratic and Republican Parties as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, similar and equally inept, and this led to the

⁶ See the author's "The US-Russian Struggle for World Oil: 1979-2010," in Alain Beltran, ed., *Le Pétrole et la Guerre: Oil and War* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2012).

rise of Donald Trump who rode to the presidency on the surge of popular discontent in 2016.

Trump promised to build a new Republican establishment, but though the Republican Party controlled both houses of Congress for the first two years of his term, the Republican majority in the Senate was thin and divided, with Republicans in name only frustrating any lasting legislative change. From his first moments he had to contend with the resistance of the long-entrenched center-left establishment leaders determined to do everything in their power to thwart the emergence of a new Republican movement.

Understanding Trump's appeal to the people, the established political order immediately attempted an internal coup based on the spurious charge of Russian collusion in the election. When that failed ignominiously, the Democrats, gaining control of the House in 2018, carried out an impeachment charade, even though all knew that control of both houses was a necessary precondition for success. Democratic hysteria went to the lengths of charging the president with being a Russian agent and demeaning his person and denigrating the office of the presidency itself. In all of it, the main-stream media openly sided with the Democrats, revealing themselves as agents of the Democratic establishment.

The Trump administration, like the Nixon and Reagan administrations, was a coalition government in which the machine was strongly represented with John Kelly as chief of staff, Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, and James Mattis as defense secretary. Mike Pompeo, originally slated as CIA director, replaced Tillerson at State, but a merry-go-round of musical chairs at DOD meant that firm control eluded the

president. Late in the game, the president named his supporter, Mark Meadows, as chief of staff. Throughout, the president altered foreign, trade, tax, regulatory, and border policies to craft the most vibrant economy in the previous eighty years. He also undertook the first major modernization of American military power since the Reagan era, to provide the wherewithal to ensure that the nation's role would remain decisive as the ultimate arbiter on the world stage.

Nevertheless, resistance by the old establishment's allies, Democrat and Republican, lurking in just about every institution inside and outside of government, constituted a graphic illustration of what amounts to the Deep State in action. After all, the center-left Democrat-dominated political order had been in power for three generations and built the institutional structure to serve their interests. They would not relinquish it without a fight. Throughout, their weapons have been political scandals and threats of impeachment, heavily larded over with media disinformation.

The 2020 election—believed by many to have been rigged—was certainly questionable. It was nothing if not a counterrevolution by the Democratic political machine. The Biden administration, stocked with members of the former Obama administration, moved immediately to roll back policies enacted by Trump, from reopening the borders, rejoining the Paris Accord on Climate, re-engaging with Iran, and more subtly declining to take policy positions that would exclude prospects for accommodation with the Communists.

The pell-mell drive to reverse Trump's policies seems petty and personal but is an attempt to return to the failed strategy of détente with the Communists and their allies. Like Democratic administrations before his, Biden's policies are destined (purposefully, in this author's view) to shrink US global power, reduce gross national product through inflation and high taxes, open the country's borders to illegal immigration and drugs, increase turmoil in cities across the country, and weaken national security in consequence.

What Is to Be Done?

What I have demonstrated in this brief survey of American politics is the preeminent role of the political establishment that, since 1932, stands above the two political parties, dominates American politics, and directs American strategy. I have also shown the repeated policy failures of the establishment to achieve the impossible dream of an accommodation to the Communists and their allies, and the reliance on Republican leaders to rescue them. And it was conspiracies by the Democratic establishment against three Republican presidents combined with threats of impeachment that enabled them to maintain power. Worst of all was the blunder of building China into a great power that has redounded to the detriment of the United States, perhaps making rescue impossible this time.

Continued dominance over the electoral process despite repeated policy failures reinforces the thesis of the pervasiveness of a ruling establishment. Thus, Democratic control of the House and Senate determined Nixon's fate. It took the Democrats six years to gain control of both chambers against Reagan and when they did, they immediately threatened impeachment. Trump was

elected in 2016 with Republican majorities in both chambers, but the Democrats won control of the House two years later. Trump's tenuous hold on the Senate meant that he could make no lasting change in the establishment and encouraged the Democrats to believe that they could impeach him, too, with the support of Republican allies.

Indeed, no Republican president controlled both chambers of Congress long enough to make a fundamental challenge and displace the dominant political establishment.⁷ The presidency of George W. Bush is the exception that proves the rule. Bush held a majority in both chambers for six years in the aftermath of 9/11. However, while George W and his father George H.W. Bush, ran as Republicans, both supported the political establishment's strategy of accommodation with the Communists. George H.W. Bush spoke publicly of creating a New World Order with the Russians and when that failed, it was he who inaugurated the strategy of building China into a great power.

The growing gap between the establishment's strategy and popular wishes can no longer be papered over with false narratives. Biden's deliberate pursuit of policies promoting national weakness brings to mind the warning in the 1950 strategy paper, NSC-68, as the United States and the Soviet Union faced off against each other in confrontation:

⁷ Wikipedia, "Party Divisions of United States Congresses."

No people in history have preserved their freedom who thought that by not being strong enough to protect themselves they might prove inoffensive to their enemies.⁸

Trying hard not to offend our enemies by assuming a deliberate posture of weakness is the worst possible choice, yet it appears to be the course taken repeatedly by the leaders of the political establishment, raising the question of what is to be done, not to mention who should do it? The United States is at an historical crossroads undecided between moving forward and building a new Republican establishment or falling backward and reverting to the failed strategy of the past. The coming mid-term and the next presidential elections will determine the direction the nation will take.

⁸ "NSC-68: A Report to the National Security Council, April 14, 1950," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Volume 1*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1977), Document 85.