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 Introduction by Susan Colbourn, Duke University

Arms control is complicated. It is a process marked by countless studies and even more meetings, ranging from early internal deliberations weighing the benefits and drawbacks of talks to the give-and-take of years spent at the bargaining table.

Arms control is a thorny subject to tackle. All of those complexities, not to mention the sheer number of meetings, pose serious narrative challenges. Is it possible to write an engaging and accessible book that treats the very real bureaucracy of the arms control process seriously without becoming bogged down in position papers and a morass of acronyms and technical requirements?

John Maurer's *Competitive Arms Control* is confirmation that, yes, it is possible. The four reviewers in this roundtable, Matthew Ambrose, Kathryn Boehlefeld, Anthony Eames, and Richard Moss, are unanimous in their praise of Maurer's treatment of the internecine bureaucratic arguments that plagued the Nixon administration's approach to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). Moss lauds Maurer's ability to distill the minutiae of arms control into an accessible final product. Eames describes Maurer's narrative as "brilliantly detailed," while Ambrose—the author of an excellent survey of SALT—calls Maurer's an "innovative account."¹

Bureaucratic infighting is the core of *Competitive Arms Control*. Maurer ably narrates the numerous disagreements between two camps within the Nixon administration: those who championed a "cooperative" approach to arms control and those who backed a "competitive" approach. In practice, much of the story revolves around the divide between Gerard Smith, the lead SALT negotiator and director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA)—a "cooperator" in Maurer's taxonomy—and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird—a "competitor." Ambrose highlights Laird as the "break-out character" of Maurer's telling. Laird, as Ambrose puts it, moves through the pages acting with virtual impunity, "unburdened by requirements like intellectual consistency or White House approval."

This close coverage of the Nixon administration's internal politics, as Boehlefeld notes, is the critical contribution of *Competitive Arms Control*. In so doing, Maurer challenges the assessments of participants-turned-chroniclers of the process, including Gerard Smith and Raymond L. Garthoff, whose writings have shaped much of our thinking about the Cold War's trajectory in the 1970s.² Maurer's work is almost certain to become required reading for anyone who is interested in the history of arms control or in the Nixon administration's thinking about the Cold War and arms control's place therein. Given the starting assumptions of Maurer's work, distinguishing as he does between the cooperative motivations expressed in public and a behind-the-scenes rationale that was heavily influenced by competitive thinking, *Competitive Arms Control* is a logical extension of—and complement to—James Cameron's fantastic *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation*.³

Like any good reviewers, the four assembled here also probe some of Maurer's conclusions and emphasis. Some home in on a perennial issue in assessments of the Nixon administration's foreign policy: the notion of linkage. Eames notes that here, Maurer departs from much of the conventional wisdom. Moss pushes back

¹ Matthew J. Ambrose, *The Control Agenda: A History of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

² Gerard C. Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of the First Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985); Smith, *Disarming Diplomat: The Memoirs of Ambassador Gerard C. Smith, Arms Control Negotiator* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1996); Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, second edition (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1994).

³ James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

more explicitly, questioning Maurer's narrow definition of linkage and arguing for a more capacious treatment that moves beyond a connection between arms control and the Vietnam War. Maurer's response acknowledges this critique, setting his own approach in a different historiographical context: the desire to push back on regular claims that Nixon's arms control policy was largely incoherent as a result of being driven by other issues and links.

Ambrose, for his part, calls into question the case Maurer makes for the infamous backchannel negotiations between Nixon's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, and longtime Soviet ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin. "The incredible secrecy of the backchannel," Maurer argues in the introduction, "was necessary to achieve its purpose: to produce SALT agreements with the Soviets that could be presented to the factions within Nixon's own government as a *fait accompli*, the better to head off divisive debates about arms control's ultimate purpose" (6). Ambrose suggests the same evidence could be read in exactly the opposite direction. Is it not a sign of clear failure on Nixon's part that the president was either unwilling or unable to assert his authority over the process and over the subordinates tasked with carrying out his administration's policies? Instead of bringing an unruly process into line, Nixon opted to make an end run around it all.

In telling this history, Maurer does not shy away from the broader implications for theory and practice. This is evident in Maurer's response. He touches on a number of fascinating issues that extend far beyond the Nixon administration's SALT strategy, including the interplay between quantitative and qualitative superiority, the time horizons of how we evaluate success, and the narratives we craft about arms control. At a time when arms control and the rationale (or rationales) behind it is front of mind once more, *Competitive Arms Control* encourages us to think about how and why policymakers come to the negotiating table and to question the lingering assumptions that arms control is always a sign of more cooperative relations.

Participants:

John D. Maurer is an Assistant Professor of Strategy and Security Studies at Air University's School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, and a non-resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. His research focuses on competitive strategy, nuclear weapons, and arms control. He has a PhD in the history of American foreign relations from Georgetown University.

Susan Colbourn is Associate Director of the Program in American Grand Strategy at Duke University. A diplomatic and international historian, she is the author of *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

Matthew Ambrose earned his PhD in History from The Ohio State University. He has previously worked in the Office of the Secretary of Defense's Historical Office and is currently a Senior Defense Analyst at the Government Accountability Office. He is the author of Matthew J. Ambrose, *The Control Agenda: A History of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018): for the roundtable on his book see <http://www.tiny.cc/Roundtable-XX-20> The views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the GAO, the legislative branch, or the US government.

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Review by Matthew Ambrose, Independent Scholar

With his *Competitive Arms Control*, John Maurer offers an innovative account of the forces and ideologies that met to shape the seminal Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) agreements. The traditional view of SALT in the historical literature depicts it as a move towards cooperation and away from the pursuit of an unattainable dominance.¹ Maurer ably shows that many others saw in the negotiations an opportunity to shape the arms race in ways that were favorable to US interests in the long term: to preserve and extend US advantages, while hampering the Soviet Union's ability to compete. Once this influence was established, Maurer argues, the failure to highlight SALT I's competitive purposes obscures its most important legacies.

The break-out character of Maurer's narrative is Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, an oft-neglected figure in discussions of SALT. Maurer shows how Laird, ensconced in his position across the Potomac River, was in fact a powerful advocate for positions and policies in SALT that, taken together, speak to the competitive approach (16). "Powerful advocate" might understate things, however. Maurer shows, quite colorfully,² the efficacy of Laird's bureaucratic tactics. Maurer shows how time and again Laird successfully acted with impunity, unburdened by requirements like intellectual consistency or White House approval, knowing that the White House dared not touch off a battle with his Congressional allies (54, 94).

Maurer identifies Laird as acting with a consistent motivation: that SALT I, as with most of the rest of his defense policy, ought to facilitate what he called the strategy of realistic deterrence. This strategy sought to embrace the coming "quality revolution" in military domains. Smaller, technologically enabled professional armies would replace those of conscription. Large bombs would be replaced by precision munitions and stand-off weapons. Laird sought to include these innovations in an ambitious nuclear modernization program. With these more accurate weapons, the United States could explore new options for fighting nuclear wars. These options would supposedly help to extend planning into smaller-scale and regional nuclear scenarios, thus strengthening deterrence (150).

Maurer also provides an excellent depiction of chief SALT negotiator Gerard G. Smith. The effect is to offer a thorough understanding of Smith's role in guiding the development of SALT positions, while also highlighting some of the personal and bureaucratic factors which limited his influence. Maurer shows that Smith was often influential on the policy formulation process, but struggled to find ways to integrate his views (which were often more dovish than those of the rest of the administration) within his assigned roles (31-33, 49-50). Smith guarded his statutory role as chief arms control advisor to the President, while being unwilling to subordinate himself to the National Security Council process. Smith's independent streak undercut his role as chief negotiator, whose ostensible job was to faithfully execute his negotiating instructions. Being so often out-of-step with many of his colleagues engendered mistrust, particularly from Laird. As the negotiations ground on, Laird would go so far as to oppose certain negotiating positions not on the merits, but in the belief that they would create an opening for Smith to exceed his instructions and make unauthorized concessions (145). The hypocrisy of Laird's own loose-cannon status did not seem to faze him.

The depiction of President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger trying to manage the divides within the administration is not sympathetic, per se, but Maurer captures their predicament. He argues that while Nixon and Kissinger embodied certain competitive tendencies, they were bounded by the need to please various constituencies such that they could not risk alienating either worldview. As a result, SALT I showed how it is possible for divergent worldviews to converge on structurally similar outcomes in the terms of the agreement. In other words, competitive arms control strategy was able to function in parallel with cooperative strategies towards an outcome that was more or less mutually acceptable to both.

¹ See, for example, Raymond Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1985).

² Colorfully, perhaps, by the standards of the federal bureaucracy.

Within the Nixon administration this coexistence was not a happy one, and Maurer depicts the jockeying and arguments between Smith and Laird as one of the main obstacles to an agreement. It is in this context that Nixon authorized Kissinger to embark on the infamous “backchannel” negotiations with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. By end-running the policy process, Nixon and Kissinger hoped to present both sides with *faits accomplis* that each could begrudgingly accept. This strategy was not without its drawbacks, and Maurer does a good job depicting one of the backchannel discussions’ most problematic legacies: confusion about the limits on Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs). This is one of the most difficult and confusing aspects of SALT I to convey clearly, and Maurer succeeds in cutting through the numbers and getting to their actual significance.

Maurer attributes the mistakes and difficulties Kissinger that encountered through the backchannel meetings to well-meaning but strategic errors on Kissinger’s part. One particular episode is instructive. In the opening rounds of the backchannel talks, Kissinger noticed an awkward locution used by the Soviets. Dobrynin used the phrase “strategic offensive launchers,” which Kissinger believed included land-based launchers as well as SLBMs. Hoping to pocket the inclusion of SLBMs as a concession, Kissinger and his staff deliberately avoided seeking clarification to confirm this was the Soviet negotiators’ intention (124-125). This gambit predictably failed. Even if this was Kissinger’s intent (and Maurer admits the documentary record is unclear) the ambiguity in the negotiating record caused more problems than it solved. One wonders how they would have expected this to work. The purpose of secrecy is typically to create deniability. How, then, can one force an opposing party to admit to an unforced error made in a *secret meeting*? Maurer goes so far as to call the episode a “blunder” (125) borne of the backchannel’s unavoidable necessity. This position undersells the impact of readily foreseeable consequences.

Maurer’s account stands in contrast to Smith’s memoirs, and the works of SALT negotiator and chronicler of detente Raymond Garthoff.³ Both figures accused Kissinger of first bungling the SLBM issue in the backchannel talks, and later even manipulating intelligence reports to help ram SLBM proposals through. Following a review of the negotiating record, however, Maurer does not find much credence in the worst of these claims. Unfortunately, Maurer relegates most mention of these criticisms of Kissinger’s performance to his footnotes (241). Even if he ultimately finds those criticisms wanting, this leaves unexplored one of the major controversies surrounding the SALT I negotiating record, which colored the views of many contemporaries of SALT and of Kissinger for years to come.

Neither do I think Maurer successfully makes the case for the backchannel’s necessity. Presenting the level of conflict within the administration as the main obstacle, Nixon’s choice to pursue the backchannel talks seems like an admission of presidential failure. Secret backchannel negotiations seem like the worst possible solution to an administration that was so riven with division it could not formulate policy. Nixon’s strange combination of paranoia and lassitude here seemed to drive him to avoid doing more sensible things like asserting presidential authority over subordinates, or making staff changes as necessary.

To return to Maurer’s central point about the influence of competitive arms controllers, he lays out their thinking well, but under-explains how their strategy would have played out in actual negotiations. Maurer asserts that the perspective he identifies is real (and not simply a pose adopted by de facto opponents of SALT). One wonders then how arms control was supposed to actually *work* in the presence of such a worldview. If policymakers state that they wish to negotiate arms limitations with another party, but purely in the pursuit of their long-term plans to achieve dominance, it is not clear why the other party would participate.

³ Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*; and Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of SALT I by the Chief American Negotiator* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1980).

Maurer hints at some of these questions in his introduction, but discusses them only in his conclusion. He recognizes the counter-intuitive nature of pursuing naked advantage through negotiation. These outcomes are structurally possible, though. As an example, situations may exist in which the parties differ in their assessments of which strategies and technologies will play out for maximum advantage in the long run. Parties may also have differing time horizons. They also may seek to trade off future uncertainties by securing more immediate advantages (187-188). I find these suggestions, and Maurer's invitation to apply them to other arms control negotiations, fascinating and provocative. But placing them where they are at the end of the book means that they are not under consideration for most of the book's narrative.

Finally, Maurer presents SALT I as a mostly successful example of competitive arms control in action. By capping nuclear missile quantities, SALT I made it possible to take advantage of the looming revolution in missile quality, particularly in accuracy. Directing the nuclear competition into this area made it difficult for the Soviet Union to keep pace, setting the stage for US conventional and nuclear dominance well into the future (187-188).

This analysis falls short if we closely follow events in SALT negotiations and the nuclear competition through the remainder of the Cold War. The accuracy improvements that were begat by the nascent revolution in military affairs, supported by SALT, arguably made little difference in the strategic balance prior to the mid-1980s. Until that point, whatever US improvements in warhead accuracy were arguably dwarfed by the success of the Soviet Multiple Independently-targetable Reentry Vehicle (MIRV) program. In 1972, the SALT I Interim Agreement permitted the United States 1,054 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), and the Soviet Union 1,618. In the United States about half of this force were Minuteman-IIIs which hosted three MIRVs each. Compared to that, the Soviet SS-18s and SS-19s hosted as many as ten and six MIRVs, respectively. By the mid-1980s, when the "accuracy revolution" ought to have begun paying substantial dividends for the US deterrent, the Soviet Union deployed 6,420 ICBM warheads of greater destructive potential, as opposed to the United States' 2,110.⁴ Accuracy matters, to be sure, but with 60 percent more ICBM launchers and 300 percent more land-based warheads, the terms of SALT I set the Soviet Union up well to remain competitive for over a decade.

Granted, ICBM launcher and warhead counts do not tell the whole story of the strategic balance. The United States had powerful advantages in bombers and cruise missiles, though their usefulness as first-strike weapons was questionable. What is more, these numbers might not mean much to those inclined towards classical notions of nuclear deterrence and mutual assured destruction. Conversely, if one is inclined to take the "window of vulnerability" thesis at all seriously (if not exactly literally), then these ICBM figures matter a great deal. Under this thesis, policymakers worried that if the asymmetry in first-strike forces grew too wide, it could undermine deterrence and facilitate nuclear blackmail. If one wishes to argue that the structure of nuclear war fighting matters for deterrence, and that therefore the primacy of ICBMs as established in SALT I matters, it is difficult to see how the quality/quantity trade actually extended a US advantage. One can still argue that SALT I was a net positive by virtue of banning missile defenses (thus stabilizing nuclear deterrence), or that the strategic balance would have been more unfavorable to the United States in the absence of an agreement. To claim that the agreements shifted the nuclear competition to areas of US dominance where Soviet competitive strategies would be hamstrung is belied by the basic numbers.

Overall, however, this remains a fascinating book. It provides a very capable, readable, and even entertaining account of the negotiation of SALT I. It is a more accessible account than any of the other books released in

⁴ Robert S. Norris, William M. Arkin, and Thomas B. Cochran, "US - USSR Strategic Offensive Nuclear Forces 1946 - 1987," as excerpted from *Nuclear Weapons Databook, vol. 1*. (Washington, DC: Natural Resources Defense Council, 1987), 14. Archive copy at https://nuke.fas.org/cochran/nuc_87120002a_75.pdf. See also Defense Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Military Power* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 30. Archive copy at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cd/Soviet_Military_Power%2C_1985.pdf

the most recent wave of histories on this subject, including my own.⁵ And Maurer’s central point, that historians must take seriously the strategic thinking of those outside the classic “arms controller” mold, remains as true as ever. Their influence was not just present, but often decisive in shaping these agreements.

⁵ Matthew J. Arnold, *The Control Agenda: A History of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

 Review by Kathryn Boehlefeld, Air University¹

The New START accord inspections, which are mandated to occur eighteen times per year,² stopped during the coronavirus pandemic and failed to resume as the pandemic waned. Russia has linked their unilateral postponement of meetings to a souring of relations due to the United States' support for Ukraine in the wake of the February 2022 Russian invasion.³ Some have seen this breakdown and others—like the US withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty—as a sign that arms control agreements are quickly becoming a relic of the past.⁴ But before we relegate arms control to the dust bin of history, it behooves us to question why statesmen enter into negotiations over arms control in the first place.

In *Competitive Arms Control: Nixon, Kissinger, & SALT, 1969-1972*, John D. Maurer examines the underlying motivations of President Richard Nixon and members of his administration for entering into the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I). Maurer questions why Nixon, a staunch cold warrior and nuclear superiority advocate, became a leader in arms control during his administration. Maurer's picture presents two motivations within the Nixon administration for arms control: those who saw it as an opportunity to engage in cooperation with the Soviet Union towards mutual security; and those who saw it as an opportunity to shift the nuclear arms race from quantity to quality, where America had a clear advantage. Maurer explores the history of the SALT negotiations chronologically, framing it between the state of arms control prior to 1969 and presenting a short summary of agreements that followed after its signing.

The book's biggest contribution is in Maurer's tracing of the bureaucratic in-fighting between the "cooperators," championed by Director of Arms Control and Disarmament, Gerard Smith, and the "competitors," championed by Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird. The narrative demonstrates how Nixon, who personally sided with the competitors, was forced to play peacemaker between the two sides. The role of the bureaucracy becomes almost a character, and Maurer's ability to show how it both hindered and helped the process is a true contribution. Of particular note is the emphasis Maurer puts on Nixon's use of the bureaucratic structure to contain and constrain Smith and Laird, keeping them and their varying positions at bay while the real negotiations took place in secondary channels between National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin.

Most arms control literature assumes that treaties are negotiated for the associated cooperative benefits.⁵ Maurer's work confronts this conventional wisdom, providing a compelling argument that multiple motivations are likely at work within governments that drive states towards arms control agreements. His identification of Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger as falling into a "competitive" camp, who saw the SALT process as an opportunity to increase the US nuclear advantage, is compelling and critical to improving our

¹ Any views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government, the Department of the Defense, or Air University.

² "New START Treaty," United States Department of State, December 1, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/new-start/>.

³ Robyn Dixon, "Russia Postpones Talks on New START Pact, Imperiling Major Nuclear Accord," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/30/russia-us-start-nuclear-treaty/>.

⁴ See for example: Linton F. Brooks, "The End of Arms Control?" *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (April 1, 2020): 84–100, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01791; "After the End of Bilateral Nuclear Arms Control," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 24, 2017. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-end-bilateral-nuclear-arms-control>; Marsha McGraw Olive, "Nuclear Weapons in Europe and the Collapse of Arms Control." *S AIS Review of International Affairs* 39: 2 (Summer/Fall 2019): 83–102. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2019.0018>.

⁵ See for example Robert Jervis, "Arms Control, Stability, and Causes of War," in Michael Sheehan, ed., *National and International Security*, (New York: Routledge, 2018): 193-208; Bernard Brodie, "On the Objectives of Arms Control," *International Security* 1, no. 1 (1976): 17–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538574>; Thomas C. Schelling, "What Went Wrong with Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 2 (1985): 219–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20042570>.

understanding of why the United States, and the Nixon Administration in particular, pursued arms control agreements during the Cold War. As his presentation of the history behind the talks is laid out, Maurer makes a convincing case not only that this competitive motivation was key to the administration's pursuit of SALT, but also that the bureaucratic in-fighting between Smith and Laird was especially critical in understanding why SALT unfolded in the way that it did.

Another prevalent theme within the narrative is the role that Vietnam played in what Nixon allowed to be presented or agreed upon during the negotiations. Maurer writes that Nixon was convinced that the Soviet leaders had sway over the North Vietnamese officials and would be able to convince them to stop fighting and come to the bargaining table. This issue linking does provide insight as to Nixon's motivations for not pushing for a resolution on SALT earlier. However, its inclusion is secondary in importance to the main thrust of the argument.

Finally, Maurer also expands on the development of the Safeguard program. As the SALT talks ended with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the development and congressional funding of this program was critical in determining the various positions that the "competitors" were supporting. While the discussion of the Safeguard program is instrumental in showing the multiple perspectives at play domestically, it is at times hard to determine how precisely all those different views tied together and their varying levels of importance in determining what Nixon would allow into the negotiation options.

One area that would have benefited from additional elucidation is the analysis behind the "cooperative" versus "competitive" arguments. At times, it is unclear why a particular option was favored in the negotiations by one camp or the other. Some additional discussion as to why Laird or Smith favored particular options, particularly in later chapters and especially when they found themselves in agreement, would have been beneficial in understanding the logic and motivations behind their advocacy of specific options. For example, in chapter 5, Maurer discusses "Option E," a negotiating position favored by both Laird and Smith. More in-depth analysis about why these two adversaries found themselves on the same side in this instance would add to the overall understanding of the event. In addition, further discussion would help to clarify Laird's position, as he had a greater tendency than Smith to favor a wider variety of positions. As Maurer's main contribution is the introduction of the competitive motivations of arms control negotiation, having a more comprehensible understanding of Laird's shifting perspective would clarify the role that this competitive motivation played in the ultimate agreement.

In a similar vein, additional descriptions of Nixon's thoughts and positions would have been helpful. In particular, a more in-depth description of Nixon's political obligations to Laird and Smith would have clarified why Nixon was forced to have Kissinger engage in the backchannel negotiations with Dobrynin. When Maurer presents Kissinger's negotiations behind the scenes, it somewhat undercuts the competing motivations narrative that he presents to lead up to that point in chapter 6. A clearer description of either Nixon's breaking point, or reasoning that led to the choice, would have been valuable. I was left questioning the real motivation behind SALT: it no longer appears to be based upon cooperation versus competition, but rather Nixon and Kissinger's positions on the issue. While Maurer does describe both men as being in the competitive camp, more detailed discussion as to their personal views contextualized into the January-May 1971 timeframe would furthered the book's main contribution.

Overall, Maurer's work sheds light on a critically important piece of history: the competitively driven motivations to engage in arms control. His work clearly demonstrates that motivations for arms control exist beyond the cooperative benefits to which such negotiations are normally attributed. The "competitive camp" that Maurer identifies is crucial to understanding not only the Nixon Administration's pursuit of SALT, but is also important for reframing our understanding of arms control agreements. His work also has the power to shift our understanding of the motivations of the Soviet, Russian, Chinese, and other leaders with whom the United States has or desires to engage in such negotiations. In short, *Competitive Arms Control* not only

improves our understanding of this crucial moment in arms control history but provides important lessons for modern policy makers. New START expires in 2026; Maurer's book provides useful considerations for studying the negotiations and those tasked with engaging in those negotiations.

Review by Anthony Eames, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, George
Washington University

The year after the United States and Soviet Union agreed to the first Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement (SALT I) on 26 May 1972, President Richard Nixon complained to his Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, “The great sadness in America today...is the state of the elite class...The character flaw in the elite is they are ashamed of our country. They are unilateral disarmers.”¹ Contemplating ways to restore the US strategic advantage over the Soviet Union, Nixon later stressed to his advisors, “I can’t emphasize too strongly we have to get this research going...The great weakness of any major power is to become frozen in its forces.”² Nixon and his chief lieutenant Henry Kissinger considered arms control an essential tool for restoring a strategic advantage over the Soviet Union, by turning the arms race into a competition over technical quality rather than weapons quantity. They also viewed it as a necessity given what they perceived to be a crisis in national will to fight and win the Cold War.

Contemporaries, however, appeared to misunderstand Nixon’s and Kissinger’s arms control motives. In their diatribe *Kissinger on the Couch*, the activist-admiral duo of Phyllis Schlafly and Chester Ward framed SALT as original sin of US foreign policy and the root cause of every threat to American security.³ The Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the 1974 Trade Act condemned Nixon’s and Kissinger’s willingness to sacrifice numerical equality of nuclear delivery systems in arms control talks in order to transform the arms race into a technology contest that favored American defense innovations. It should come as no surprise that people struggled to understand Nixon’s view of arms control. Nixon—as John Maurer points out—“structured SALT to avoid public debate about the purpose of arms control” (173). Moreover, Nixon’s decision “that [US government] consensus would emerge from the negotiations, rather than before them,” made his position all the more ambiguous (67). This deferential and private approach to arms control stands in stark contrast to that of his successors. President Jimmy Carter is infamous for micro-management, especially on nuclear matters. President Ronald Reagan made arms control a public debate and set clear direction for his arms controllers most notably in regard to the controversial Strategic Defense Initiative.

Critics and celebrants of the SALT agreement and Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty signed by Nixon believed that it had locked the United States into a doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). This narrative creates a riddle. Francis Gavin, Jeffrey Kimball, William Burr, and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, among others, have shown us that Nixon directed military planners to pair new technologies with new doctrines for making nuclear weapons more employable in wartime and more useful in diplomatic brinkmanship.⁴ Why would this be the case if Nixon’s arms control ambitions were supposedly designed to make nuclear weapons less salient in the US-Soviet confrontation?

Maurer’s brilliantly detailed account of the Nixon administration’s approach to SALT negotiations answers the riddle at the heart of Nixon’s nuclear policy. Maurer frames the conflict between ‘competitive’ arms controllers and ‘cooperative’ arms controllers as the central tension in the story of SALT. He begins by resuscitating the work of lesser-known deterrence theorists such as Donald Brennan and Robert Pfaltzgraff Jr., who may not have been as celebrated as Thomas Schelling, Herman Kahn, or Albert Wohlstetter, but nevertheless exercised significant influence over the competitive arms controllers in the Nixon administration.

¹ “Memorandum of Conversation” Nixon, Schlesinger, Clements, and Scowcroft, 22 December 1973. Gerald Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1552646.pdf>

² NSC Meeting Minutes, 21 March 1974, (FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XXXIII, SALT, 1972-1980, Document 58).

³ Phyllis Schlafly and Chester Ward, *Kissinger on the Couch* (Westport, CT: Arlington House Publishers, 1975).

⁴ Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Jeffrey Kimball and William Burr, *Nixon’s Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015); Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

During and in the years immediately following SALT, cooperative arms controllers claimed and were given credit for establishing a new nuclear security paradigm.⁵ The memoirs of cooperative arms controllers Gerard Smith and Raymond Garthoff have echoed loudly in the academic literature, suggesting that SALT was premised on mutual accommodation and thus stood as a cornerstone of détente (5).⁶ In contrast, competitive arms controllers—which included Nixon, Kissinger, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird—considered “SALT as an opportunity to continue nuclear competition on American terms” (2). Ultimately, Maurer contends that SALT I incorporated both competitive and cooperative interests. Maurer succeeds in making a big argument about the Cold War. He shows that SALT was simply a way to fight the Cold War by other means, which means that détente was an illusion. Détente did not represent the first step toward peaceful co-existence, but rather a planned intermission in hostilities that allowed both superpowers the time to re-design their frameworks for strategic and ideological competition.

When Maurer began writing *Competitive Arms Control*, scholars had to rely on John Newhouse’s *Cold Dawn* as the most authoritative account of the SALT negotiations.⁷ Now, one must ask how Maurer’s work fits alongside more recent additions to the historiography, most notably James Cameron’s *The Double Game*, Matthew Ambrose’s *The Control Agenda*, and Ralph Dietl’s *Equal Security*.⁸ These works have given significant attention to public opinion, the role of Congress, and the European politics of SALT. Maurer distinguishes his ideas by tracking the intellectual undercurrents of the two competing schools of arms control and how they manifested bureaucratic power in the federal government.

We learn from Maurer, for example, that the frequently touted policy of “linkage,” which reflected a campaign promise to build the “structure of peace,” was short-circuited in only a month by Kissinger’s ambitions to make the National Security Council (NSC) the epicenter of foreign and defense policymaking. On whether linkage was a central operating concept in Nixon’s and Kissinger’s foreign policy, Maurer’s stance stands out from the pack, especially from Kimball’s and Burr’s argument that the political imperatives of the Vietnam War very much influenced SALT policy considerations.⁹ SALT also appears to be part of a linkage strategy when Europe is taken into consideration. Other scholars have shown that Nixon and Kissinger relied on nuclear arms control to maintain détente as a bilateral arrangement between Washington and Moscow, rather than a multilateral reality managed by Western powers and the Warsaw Pact.¹⁰ The importance of linkage remains a live question for historians. Nevertheless, Maurer’s ability to clarify the complexities of Kissinger’s NSC is one of the hidden values of this book, not just for historians of arms control and the Cold War but for all those interested in the interaction between realism and government bureaucracy.

⁵ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961); Donald Brennan, *Arms Control, Disarmament, and National Security* (New York: George Braziller, 1961); William Kintner and Robert Pfaltzgraff, *SALT: Implications for Arms Control in the 1970s* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 1973); Ron Robin, *The Cold War They Made: The Strategic Legacy of Roberta and Albert Wohlstetter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶ Gerard Smith, *Disarming: The Memoirs of Ambassador Gerard C. Smith, Arms Control Negotiator* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1996); Raymond Garthoff, *A Journey Through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

⁷ John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973).

⁸ Ralph Dietl, *Equal Security: Europe and the SALT Process, 1969-1976* (Stuttgart, Germany: Franz, Steiner, Verlag, 2013); James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America’s First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Matthew J. Ambrose, *The Control Agenda: A History of Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁹ Kimball and Burr, *Nixon’s Nuclear Specter*.

¹⁰ Aiden Warren and Joseph Siracusa, *U.S. Presidents and Cold War Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 147-165; John Baylis and Anthony Eames, *Sharing Nuclear Secrets: Trust, Mistrust, and Ambiguity in Anglo-American Relations, 1939-Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Competitive Arms Control is an endorsement of Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall's call to "recenter" the study of US foreign relations on presidential decision-making and high-level diplomacy.¹¹ Maurer restricts his subjects to a handful of government officials, primarily Nixon, Kissinger, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, and arms control representative Gerard Smith. There is much to be gained from this approach. Maurer's readers will find that personality is more than just policy, it is bureaucracy. While many have shown that Nixon's paranoia led to compulsive decisions, Maurer's tight focus reveals how Nixon's paranoia created structural anomalies in the defense bureaucracy. Many of these anomalies, Kissinger's backchannel negotiations chief among them, appeared to be a response to the political power of Nixon's rivals within his own administration. There are also challenges to recentering the history of US foreign relations. In dramatizing bureaucratic conflict, Maurer's book runs the risk of downplaying presidential power and implies that Nixon's administration behaved like a leaderless politburo.

The value of a great book is that it leads its readers to ask more questions. *Competitive Arms Control* is indeed a great book and will stand the test of time as the authoritative history of the deliberations of US officials leading to the SALT I agreement and the ABM treaty. While Maurer clearly demonstrates how the final SALT I agreement embraced both competitive and cooperative elements, an exploration of how the theory and practice of competitive and cooperative arms control changed as a result of the SALT I deliberations would be welcome. Concepts and issues that emerged from the contest between competitive and cooperative arms controllers during SALT I talks resonated through to the end of the Cold War. The idea of a freeze on the production of nuclear weapons was seized upon by antinuclear activists a decade later.¹² "Mirror-imaging," or rather the notion that American and Soviet strategists held the same assumptions about nuclear war fighting and deterrence, emerged as a source of tension among Washington policymakers during SALT I negotiations and went on to become a central critique of arms control from peace through strength advocates.¹³

Then there are the players themselves, many of whom continued to influence the arms control process for many years after SALT I. In 1987, Nixon and Kissinger famously opposed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, the first agreement to eliminate an entire class of nuclear weapons. The INF treaty is now seen as a critical step in bringing about an end to the Cold War and the subsequent US unipolar moment in international affairs. From this perspective, the INF treaty appears to have been the perfect agreement for an American advocate of competitive arms control. However, US INF systems—specifically the Pershing II missile—were far more advanced than the equivalent Soviet systems. Nixon also came to believe that Americans had overcome the 'Vietnam Syndrome' in large part due to the Reagan administration's restoration of the nation's will to invest in the military dimension of the Cold War.¹⁴ These realities suggest that Nixon's and Kissinger's opposition to the INF treaty were consistent with their competitive arms control instincts. A competitive arms controller would ask why the US would voluntarily denuclearize if American political will and technological capabilities could guarantee strategic superiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union? Other arms control figures are more confounding. Paul Nitze, the prototypical Cold War warrior, appears to have been a rogue that fit neither the competitive nor the cooperative arms control mold. He ignored presidential guidance in SALT negotiations under Nixon. True to form, Nitze's famous walk-in-the-woods proposal also went beyond presidential arms control guidance in the Reagan years. Nitze's behavior leads one to ask whether the competitive-cooperative dichotomy accurately captures the operative arms control philosophies of US strategic elites. Examining the entire period of strategic arms control in the Cold War will go a long way toward determining whether strategic philosophies, political realities, technical factors, or something else altogether exercised the preponderant influence over US approaches to arms control.

¹¹ Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3 (Spring, 2020): 38-55.

¹² Henry Richard Maar III, *Freeze!: The Grassroots Movement to Halt the Arms Race and End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

¹³ Anne Cahn, *Killing Détente: The Right Attacks the CIA* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Richard Nixon, *Real Peace* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1984).

One of Maurer's most significant achievements in *Competitive Arms Control* is that he articulates the importance of studying strategic arms control. One hopes that readers will be inspired to investigate other aspects of SALT. Maurer's book begs for a complementary study focused on the Kremlin. For example, Maurer, as do most historians of the Cold War, asserts that mirror-imaging had a pernicious effect on US national security. This claim is long overdue for a re-examination. I have yet to see a post-Cold War Soviet-source-based study that conclusively shows that nuclear war planners in Moscow did or did not actually mirror-image the Americans' MAD assumptions. Industry prerogatives are another aspect that warrant further consideration. Throughout the era of strategic arms control, industrial prerogatives came under scrutiny from peace activists and pentagon reformers, but how those interests directly or indirectly shaped arms control policy remains a black-box.

Competitive Arms Control is a major achievement, and a rare book that holds value for scholars and practitioners alike.

“Making Arms Control Great Again”

On September 18, 1971, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger entered the Oval Office to report on the progress—or lack thereof—of the latest round of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) to President Richard Nixon and Attorney General John Mitchell.¹ After describing disagreements between Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) chief and SALT lead negotiator Gerard Smith, Kissinger lamented aloud that the SALT negotiating teams who were working out details over offensive and defensive limitations, “raised so many abstruse points that you have to be a theologian to understand them.”²

Nixon was concerned that the Soviets were trying to get a defensive limitation (e.g., an Anti-Ballistic Missile [ABM] agreement) while avoiding substantive discussion about an offensive limitation (e.g., capping the Soviet Union’s buildup of strategic nuclear weapons). The president thought in terms of “hawks” like Laird and “doves” like Smith, and the inherent disagreements over arms control policy between the White House and Department of Defense on one hand, and ACDA and the Department of State on the other hand.

In *Competitive Arms Control: Nixon, Kissinger, & SALT, 1969-1972*, John D. Maurer frames the issues of the Nixon administration and arms control more broadly as between “competitive” arms controllers and “cooperative” arms controllers. “For Nixon and his advisers, arms control negotiations were not meant to end nuclear competition,” Maurer contends, “but to reshape it on American terms.” Maurer adds, “Within nuclear competition, arms control would be an important tool of American strategy” (3). Fundamentally, Nixon and the competitive arms controllers sought to preserve US advantages, such as Multiple Independently Targeted Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs), emphasizing weapons’ quality, accuracy, and precision over raw numbers.

Maurer’s book is a welcome addition to the scholarship on Nixon’s foreign policy generally and arms control specifically.³ He distills complicated technical issues, the arcane part of arms control, such as forward-based systems (e.g., US bombers bases ringing the Soviet Union), Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs), ABM radars versus air-defense radars, “heavy” versus “light” intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), among other concerns, into layman’s terms.

Maurer does a commendable job revealing the back-and-forth details of various negotiating rounds and the intense, bitter bureaucratic battles between competitors and cooperators. He documents the evolution of US negotiating positions from Options I, II, III, etc. to Options A, B, C, D, E, etc., that eventually became the

¹ The views presented here are personal and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Department of Defense or its components.

² Nixon Tapes (NT), Oval Office (OVAL) Conversation No. 576-6 between Nixon and Kissinger, 18 September 1971, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. XXXII, 608.

³ For a broad sampling on Nixon’s foreign policy, see: Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds. *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York, Oxford UP, 2004); Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983); Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002). On arms control, see: Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: U.S.-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, revised edition (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1994); Gerard C. Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of the First Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (New York: Doubleday, 1980); Gerard C. Smith, *Disarming Diplomat: The Memoirs of Ambassador Gerard C. Smith, Arms Control Negotiator* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1996); John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

basis of a compromise—not just with the Soviets, but also the different factions in the United States Government. In particular, Maurer documents the evolution of the many disagreements between Laird and Smith and the role each man played in the Nixon administration.⁴ This is especially impressive as both Laird and Smith changed their views on various subjects, such as the Safeguard ABM System, and occasionally overlapped in their views.

Maurer shows that Laird ultimately exercised a “pivotal role in the administration’s arms control policy” (136). According to Maurer, Laird “sought arms control agreements that would promote American technological advantages, limiting specific weapons that would play to Soviet strengths, while still allowing those weapons that were advantageous to the United States” (30). As Maurer summarizes, “When Laird opposed Smith’s ideas, Nixon too opposed them; when Laird agreed with Smith, Nixon was willing to go along” (136).

In contrast, Maurer details several faults with Smith’s approach. Maurer explains that like other cooperators, “Smith argued that the United States and the Soviet Union had a mutual interest in ending the arms race, dismantling damage-limitation capabilities while relying on retaliatory arsenals to keep the peace” (32). However, for the hawks, “Smith’s views on the possibilities for Soviet-American cooperation seemed hopelessly naïve” (32). First, Smith’s dual-hatted role as the head of ACDA *and* the lead SALT negotiator put him into something of a Catch-22 vis-à-vis the competitive arms control advocates. Intentionally or not, Smith created the optic that he gave preferential treatment to ACDA’s positions on issues like MIRVs and ABM in the negotiations, rather than presenting the competitors’ positions equally. Second, Smith appeared to exceed his instructions.

If the Nixon tapes, which the president began surreptitiously recording Nixon’s Oval Office and White House Telephone conversations in February 1971, make one thing clear, it is that Nixon frequently invoked pejoratives when Smith came up in discussions. Perhaps these issues stemmed from Smith’s role as an appointed expert, his blindside to political considerations, his challenges understanding “those who disagreed with him,” and his “patrician demeanor” that made him suspect in Nixon’s view (32). Yet, Maurer reminds readers, it was Nixon who appointed Smith and could have asked for his resignation or fired him.

Maurer gives a balanced appraisal of the successes and failures of the actions of the myriad players. For example, he recognizes Smith’s enduring and repeated mistreatment from Nixon and Kissinger, as well as his lobbying for congressional approval of the SALT agreement and ABM treaty after the Moscow Summit of May 1972. Likewise, Maurer agrees with most of Raymond Garthoff’s assessments of SALT in *Détente and Confrontation*, but calls out some of Garthoff’s criticism of Kissinger and Nixon.⁵ Although Kissinger’s “leaving the [submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM)] question ambiguous was a terrible blunder,” Maurer clarifies that it was not a question of Kissinger failing to rely on experts or being ignorant of details, as Garthoff and Smith later asserted (125; 241). Maurer’s willingness to question the authoritative work on détente and arms control is a good reminder to dig into the sources.

In terms of sources, Maurer primarily relies on multiple volumes of the published documentary record from *The Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, which he supplements with original primary source research, memoir accounts, and secondary sources.⁶ Maurer also relies on the *U.S.-Soviet Relations in the Era of Détente*,

⁴ Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*; Smith, *Disarming Diplomat*.

⁵ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*.

⁶ For the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series on the Nixon and Ford administrations, see: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/nixon-ford>. Among the ~66 volumes for the Nixon-Ford era, there are multiple volumes on the Soviet Union (volumes XII through XVI) and SALT (volumes XXXII and XXXIV). Kissinger wrote 3 volumes of memoirs, but the volume relevant for the time period discussed here is: Henry A. Kissinger, *White*

1969-1972, jointly compiled, annotated, translated, and published by the US Department of State and the Russian Foreign Ministry in 2007.⁷ *U.S.-Soviet Relations* includes the complete record of the backchannel exchanges between Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. Separately, material from the notorious Nixon tapes that is included in *FRUS* is particularly revealing on arms control for giving a sense of how often and how much Nixon discussed arms control with his advisors, in addition to the aggravation and bureaucratic infighting. In addition to *FRUS* and Luke Nichter and Douglas Brinkley's two important volumes of Nixon tapes transcripts (which Maurer cites), the Miller Center's Presidential Recordings Digital Edition (PRDE) has a thorough collection of tapes (including digital audio clips) and transcripts from February to May 1971 on SALT, which he does not.⁸

The sources bring Maurer and the readers back to President Richard Nixon. Nixon has always been a study in contradictions; on arms control, Nixon's contradictions are visible enough that he defies categorization as a cooperative or competitive arms controller. Maurer hones in on this point:

The Nixon that emerges from the documentary evidence is not a president forced into arms control, but rather one who pursued negotiations with the Soviets with great determination and at significant political risk. Nor is there evidence that Nixon's views evolved toward embracing greater cooperation—instead, even as he engaged in high-level dialogue with Soviet leaders, Nixon took steps to advance American nuclear competitiveness. The tension between Nixon's competitive motives and his arms control policy choices remains (6).

It was Nixon's distrust of arms control deliberations done under his predecessor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, combined with a failure to develop or enunciate a clear strategy from the beginning of his administration, that led to many of the bureaucratic problems that plagued the Nixon administration. Nixon came to rely on Kissinger for interagency deconfliction and for the development of a strategy; he also became his anointed backchannel interlocutor to Dobrynin to bypass the formal SALT negotiations. Nixon's inability to offer clear guidance or rein in his subordinates meant that "Kissinger's increasing responsibility for arms control policy...reflected a failure of the White House's influence, rather than a success" (35). While a house divided against itself cannot stand, perhaps it could negotiate arms control with the Soviets.

Maurer's illumination of bureaucratic infighting shows exactly why Nixon and Kissinger resorted to backchannels to achieve SALT breakthroughs in May 1971 and during the May 1972 Moscow Summit. Indeed, according to Maurer, "By late 1970, however, the real obstacle to progress on SALT was not the Soviets, but rather the deep divisions between Nixon's advisers" (120). For Maurer, the buck stopped at the Oval Office. It was Nixon who—unable to decide which options to pursue with the Soviets—sent instructions for the SALT delegation to pursue two different options simultaneously. Likewise, it was Nixon who instructed Kissinger to work around his own Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and ACDA chief via the channel with Dobrynin.

House Years (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1979). See also, Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Touchstone, 1978). See footnote 3 above for a sampling of the secondary literature.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972*, eds. David Geyer and Douglas Selvage (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2007). The Russian Foreign Ministry published the collection as two volumes, *Soyetsko-amyerikanskkiye otnosheniya. Godi razryadki. 1969-1976: sbornik dokoomyentov, tom 1 i tom 2 (Soviet-American Relations. The Détente Years, 1969-1976: documentary collection, volume 1 and volume 2)*, (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007).

⁸ Douglas Brinkley and Luke Nichter. *The Nixon Tapes: 1971-1972* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014); Douglas Brinkley and Luke Nichter. *The Nixon Tapes: 1973* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). "Nixon And Arms Control: Forging the Offensive/Defensive Link in the SALT Negotiations, February-May 1971," edited by Patrick Garrity and Erin Mahan, no date, https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/nixon_SALT.

Perhaps rather than viewing Nixon as a competitor or cooperator, he may be understood as a pragmatist and a politician. It is said that politics is the art of the possible. While Nixon gravitated to the hawkish viewpoint, he seemed to understand fundamentally that arms control could not work for the United States if it did not get the offensive limitation it wanted (to constrain the Soviet buildup) in return for giving the Soviets the defensive limitation Moscow wanted. Nixon was extremely concerned with how issues would play in the press, and he was a political animal with an eye toward the next election. Nixon could be ruthless and push policies to have more cards to play. For example, in order to add pressure on the Soviet bargaining position, the White House and the Defense Department insisted not only on the development and deployment of an American ABM system, but also continued R&D and production of new offensive systems. As Nixon explained to Senator John McClellan (D-AR) in 1971, “We’ve got to have something to give, and what we’ve got to give is the fact that we are building an ABM system, all right? We give on that, then they have to give on something on the offensive side. Otherwise we can’t make a deal. Put yourself in their position.”⁹

With a number of arms control agreements entering the dustbin of history over the last two decades—the landmark 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and the 1992 Open Skies Agreement, to name a few—arms control seems almost quaint in 2022. Maurer notes, “If New START expires as scheduled in February 2026 without replacement, the American and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals will be unconstrained by agreement for the first time since 1972” (188). The underlying logic that there should be a cap on the number of nuclear-armed missiles Moscow and Washington that have pointed at each other as a means of strategic stability remains as true today as it did when Nixon took office in 1969. However, as Maurer points out, Russia’s repeated violations of treaties and ongoing violation of international norms with its war of aggression in Ukraine, there is little room for optimism on arms control. As Maurer also notes, the rise of China and other nuclear powers, such as North Korea, means that meaningful arms control needs to go beyond bilateral US-Russia agreements. These concerns are further complicated by the advent of hypersonics (beyond exo-atmospheric missiles, like ICBMs, that have always traveled at hypersonic speeds), nuclear-powered and -armed drones like Russia’s Poseidon torpedo, nuclear-powered cruise missiles like Russia’s Skyfall, and other systems that defy easy categorization into existing arms control frameworks.¹⁰

Whether one views arms control as hawks versus doves or competitors versus cooperators, there are always underlying tensions that must be compromised domestically and externally. The problem with competitive arms control is that prospective adversaries are unlikely to accept agreements that blatantly solidify their adversary’s competitive advantages. Thus, perhaps Nixon’s approach was not so fundamentally flawed, even if many aspects proved counterproductive. It conjures the scene in the film *For Your Eyes Only*, with Roger Moore as James Bond, when he throws a cryptology device over a cliff and says to KGB General Gogol, “That’s détente, comrade. You don’t have it. I don’t have it.”¹¹

I have only one minor quibble. Maurer mentions “linkage” in passing as Nixon’s hope to “dangle the prospect of arms control in front of the Soviets to win their support for ending the war in Vietnam on American terms” (15). Maurer adds, “Much has been made of this linkage approach, but in reality Nixon’s linkage policy lasted one month” (15). First, linkage was broader than an attempt to link a Vietnam settlement to arms control. It was the concept that seemingly unrelated areas be linked, such as arms control and Vietnam, or arms control and US support for the ratification of the treaties settling the status of Berlin, or other unrelated areas. As Nixon explained to Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers, “I am convinced that the great issues are fundamentally interrelated. I do not mean by this to establish artificial linkages between specific elements of one or another issue or between tactical steps that we may elect to take...I

⁹ NT, OVAL 482-22 between Nixon, John McClellan, Clark MacGregor, and Kenneth E. Belieu, April 19, 1971.

¹⁰ Richard Connolly, September 2021, “Putin’s Super Weapons,” Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/advanced-military-technology-russia/03-putins-super-weapons>

¹¹ *For Your Eyes Only*, directed by John Glen (Paramount, 1981).

believe that the Soviet leaders should be brought to understand that they cannot expect to reap the benefits of cooperation in one area while seeking to take advantage of tension or confrontation elsewhere.”¹² Nixon repeatedly linked Soviet-American relations to Vietnam, but also to other issues.

Overall, Maurer has made an important, well written, well sourced, fair and analytical contribution to the history of arms control and the Nixon administration. It is suitable for professional historians and undergraduate audiences and will, hopefully, reignite discussions on the past, present, and future of arms control.

¹² Letter from President Nixon to Secretary of Defense Laird, February 4, 1969, FRUS, v.X, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d10>. Nixon sent an identical letter to Secretary of State Rogers.

Response by John D. Maurer, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Air University

As an avid consumer of H-Diplo roundtable reviews, it has been a real joy to have my own work subjected to such varied and useful criticism.¹ Many thanks to Matthew Ambrose, Kathryn Boehlefeld, Anthony Eames, and Richard Moss for their kind and insightful engagement with my work, as well as to Susan Colbourn for her introduction.

Competitive Arms Control is very much a book about aspirations. More than anything, I sought to reconstruct the hopes and fears of American decision-makers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to understand why they made the arms control choices that they did. My conclusion, contrary to much previous arms control literature and indeed my own expectations, was that several key American leaders, including President Richard Nixon, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, hoped that they could manipulate the Soviets through arms control negotiations as part of a broader competitive strategy to reassert an American strategic nuclear advantage. Much of the rest of the book describes how those decision-makers took the first tentative steps towards implementing such a competitive arms control policy. Fortunately, the reviewers agree that the book accomplishes this much.

Nothing could have pleased me more than to see the reviewers single out the accessibility of the work.² The combination of technical arms-control issues with labyrinthine bureaucratic infighting makes for potentially dense reading. This was especially the case as I sought to layer on top a bifurcated account of competing arms control motivations, which often necessitated explaining certain developments from multiple viewpoints. I was fortunate to have several sympathetic readers of earlier drafts with very little background in the subject, including my research assistant Evan Abramsky and my very, very patient wife, both of whom provided useful identification of the many things that I had assumed were self-explanatory. While the results were not perfect, I am glad that the reviewers believed they were worthwhile.

I was also happy to see the generally positive reviews of the character work. One major area of effort in translating my dissertation manuscript into a book was working to strengthen both the definition of the major players in the administration, as well as the ways in which their disparate personalities and preferences interacted to produce unexpected results. As Ambrose and Moss point out, Laird was an unexpectedly important contributor to this process, given his small role in the traditionally cited memoirs.³ I smiled to see Ambrose describe him as the “break-out character” of the work, which is indeed how I feel about him.⁴ I also appreciated the opportunity to reinterpret Gerard Smith’s contributions, retaining the importance of his work on SALT while also highlighting some of his shortcomings as a bureaucratic operator.

The reviewers also provide a good deal of useful criticism. Boehlefeld especially hones in on the critical need to lay out in succinct terms how, exactly, American competitors sought to pursue “advantage” in negotiation. If I could change one thing about the book, it would be to clarify this issue further. Specifically, I could have done more to highlight how novel and thus contested was the “qualitative turn” in American arms control

¹ Any views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Air Force, Department of Defense, or US Government.

² Colbourn’s rhetorical introduction is especially gratifying given her own excellent work in rendering complex arms control issues in accessible prose, most recently in her *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons that Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

³ Laird emerges as an occasional player, but usually as an obstacle to be overcome, never a major arms control actor in his own right. See, for example: Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), 540, 813, 1219; Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of SALT* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1980), 28-29; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, Revised Edition (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994), 147.

⁴ I felt similarly about Ambrose’s own treatment of Paul Nitze in his *The Control Agenda: A History of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

policy. As scholars like James Cameron have noted, prior to 1969 most American arms limitation policy had actually been aimed at establishing *quantitative* superiority by “freezing” force construction in such a way that the Soviets would be left with fewer launchers than the United States.⁵ This pursuit of quantitative advantage actually lived on through Nixon’s first term, and is visible in the form of continued informal “freeze” proposals that, if implemented, would have left the Soviets with fewer overall offensive or defensive launchers.

Yet the American desire for quantitative nuclear superiority was increasingly in tension with the growing realization that *qualitative* force improvements might provide the United States with an even-larger margin of advantage over the Soviets. How to square the quantitative and qualitative approaches to strategic competition became a central challenge for competitive arms control in the Nixon administration. As the Soviet Union’s construction of strategic launchers continued apace, American leaders gradually deemphasized quantitative limits in favor of the qualitative advantages that the United States might accrue under an arms control regime. Hence, we see the key discussions crystalizing Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird’s conception of qualitative competition occurring in the summer of 1971, rather than the spring of 1969. As with many elements of arms control policy in the Nixon administration, the very definition of competitive arms control was improvised and contingent.

Indeed, an account more attuned to the improvised nature of the “qualitative turn” in American arms control might have better explained why Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird’s arms control prescriptions seemed to change so often, and so often in opposition to each other. In their big-picture views, Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird were loosely united by a desire to use arms control as a tool of competitive strategy. In 1969, all three hoped that arms control could break the momentum of Soviet construction and retain American quantitative advantage. By 1972, all three also saw that the accumulation of Soviet quantitative advantages meant that the future of American competitive strategy would depend heavily on the quality of American weapons. That late-blooming realization, set against the slow-rolling emergency of continued Soviet nuclear expansion, meant that the specifics of realizing “qualitative advantage” were highly contested *within* the competitive camp. A clearer framework on quantitative versus qualitative advantage probably could have clarified some of these differences.

The reviewers also highlight several points at which the argument of the book may have gone too far. In setting out to write a book about SALT, my hope was to produce a work that could leverage new sources to challenge conventional wisdom and cause people to consider an old subject in a new and useful way. Given this intention, I am glad that the reviewers have offered the opportunity to highlight some of these historiographic disputes.

For example, Ambrose and Eames question whether I might be too forgiving of Nixon and Kissinger’s bureaucratic maneuvering, especially their use of a secret backchannel for direct negotiations with the Soviets, unbeknownst to their own SALT negotiating team. Decades of commentary has tended to emphasize the confusion and ill-will that Nixon’s backchannel engendered within the government. By comparison, I emphasize the domestic and bureaucratic political situations that drove Nixon to employ the backchannel in the first place. Ambrose and Eames find this argument less than convincing; after all, Nixon was the president, and if he was unhappy with his bureaucratic subordinates, he ought to have disciplined them in a more forthright manner. In an ideal world, this would be so. Perhaps it is the dysfunction of our current political moment that excites my sympathies for Nixon’s maneuvering. After all, Nixon’s 1972 success in getting a major US-Soviet nuclear arms control agreement through Congress would not be replicated for fifteen years (until Congress’s ratification of the INF Treaty in 1988). As in all political judgments, there is

⁵ James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America’s First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 49-78.

significant room for differences of opinion, but I am still inclined to see the vices of Nixon's approach (significant though they were) as outweighed by its virtues.

In a similar way, Eames and Moss weigh in on my treatment of the concept of "linkage." I intentionally downplayed the importance of linkage in Nixon's arms control diplomacy. Moss notes that I may be too narrowly defining linkage, which he argues was more about moving forward on a number of issues simultaneously, without (as Nixon wrote) making any "artificial" links between separate areas of policy.⁶ This is a fair critique. In downplaying the importance of linkage, my main concern was the long-running argument that Nixon's arms control policy lacked any real strategic coherence and was driven *almost purely* by his concern to produce progress on other issues.⁷ As I hope the book demonstrates, Nixon's concerns about seeking competitive advantage over the Soviet Union through arms control negotiation were genuine. On balance, I think I would still maintain that linkage's importance to SALT has been drastically overstated, though to Moss's point I could have better defined what linkage meant when it came to Nixon's SALT motives specifically.

Ambrose and Eames also question my assessment of the longer-term implications of Nixon's SALT "achievement." Both draw attention to how American perceptions of SALT worsened over the 1970s and 1980s, leading to deep skepticism that the agreements could serve American competitive interests.⁸ That many American hawks turned against SALT in the late 1970s and early 1980s is certainly noteworthy in assessing the durability of Nixon's competitive success. A fuller account of American competitive strategy in the period would need to interrogate why American hawks so often failed to acknowledge the United States' successes in competitive strategy (especially in the undersea domain, where the US military led in both tracking Soviet missile submarines and developing more accurate Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles [SLBMs] like Trident), as well as why American competitive strategists failed to follow through on force improvements that might have further emphasized American advantages (for example, the decision not to deploy M-X in 1978).⁹

More generally, my hope in the conclusion was to sketch what a broader story about arms control *might* look like if we took the competitive motivations of Nixon and his peers seriously. In that regard, I welcome Ambrose's critique as a useful example of the sorts of stories we might tell—namely, that SALT was disappointing not because it failed to lock in mutual strategic stability, but because it failed to establish clear American strategic superiority. In trying to sketch this broader story, my main intent was to avoid treating the arms control negotiations of the Cold War as a *cul-de-sac* from which nothing lasting emerged. Indeed, whatever SALT's success in manipulating the military balance of the 1970s, I see the competitive strategy begun by Nixon, Kissinger, Laird, and their peers as setting the initial conditions for the massive military preponderance that the United States accumulated from the mid-1980s onwards, much in the same way that Nixon's monetary policy set the stage for the globalized economy of the post-Cold War period.¹⁰ In neither case could Nixon take credit for having foreseen the full consequences of his choices; yet in both cases

⁶ Readers interested in the broader scope of Nixon and Kissinger's diplomatic maneuvering should consult Moss's *Nixon's Backchannel to Moscow: Confidential Diplomacy and Détente* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), which is an indispensable guide to piecing together Nixon and Kissinger's more covert behavior.

⁷ See, for example, Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 209; David Tal, *US Strategic Arms Policy in the Cold War: Negotiations and Confrontation over SALT, 1969-1979* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 6-14, 279-281.

⁸ Eames has written a good deal on how thinking about nuclear weapons matured over time, especially in his forthcoming *A Voice in Their Own Destiny: Reagan, Thatcher, and Public Diplomacy in the Nuclear 1980s* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023).

⁹ For a third take on the strategic balance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, see Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control and the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 259-262.

¹⁰ On Nixon's lasting monetary choices, see Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 100-130.

Nixon's policies proved far more enduring and influential than many contemporary observers would have recognized.

Finally, Ambrose, Boehlefeld, and Eames all emphasize the critical question of the book's relationship to the broader theory of arms control. If arms control is meant to produce competitive outcomes, then how do arms control agreements emerge at all? While fully cognizant of that important question, I chose to set it outside the scope of the book, whose aspirations were simply to demonstrate that such competitive motives occurred and were important in driving policy. I fully agree that the process of competitive arms control negotiations is an important theoretical question that deserves significant further attention.