

## **Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World**

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**Author:** Luke A. Nichter

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The Presidency of Richard Nixon has stimulated much study from historians and political scientists mostly focusing upon the Vietnam War, ‘triangular diplomacy’ with China and the Soviet Union, Nixon’s partnership with Henry Kissinger and of course the Watergate scandal. The dark corners of Nixon’s personality have never failed to fascinate, various interpretations of which have been represented in numerous books, films and even West End plays. However, Richard Nixon’s policies towards, and relationship with, Europe have received less attention. This is why Luke Nichter’s new book, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World*, is a welcome addition to the historiography of the period. Many of the events described in the book had far reaching consequences and are still highly relevant today.

The book opens by outlining the state of transatlantic relations when Richard Nixon took office in January 1969. President Lyndon Johnson had expended so much energy on his twin concerns – the Vietnam War and his Great Society programmes – that US-European affairs had been neglected. NATO was due to expire in 1969, the post-war Bretton Woods monetary system was coming under strain, European integration had stalled after two French vetoes of British European Community (EC) applications and public opinion in much of Western Europe was opposed to American actions in South East Asia. The book examines how the Nixon administration (with a necessary inclusion of Gerald Ford’s first months in charge) sought to tackle these inherited issues as well as the major events that impacted upon the transatlantic relationship between 1969 and 1975. In particular, *Richard Nixon and Europe* concentrates on the renewal of NATO, the closing of the gold window and the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the stalled ‘Year of Europe’ initiative and the British renegotiation and referendum on EC membership.

Nixon began his first term with a flurry of activity, touring a number of European capitals in early 1969. His speech on the 20th anniversary of NATO’s founding in April that year outlined the need for military, political and – more surprisingly – social dimensions to NATO’s role of collective security, as opposed to its previous objective of collective defense (p. 6). One of the strengths of the book is the light it shines on less known aspects of the Nixon Presidency. One such example is Nixon’s 1969 NATO initiative, the

'Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society' (CCMS), which included discussion of such issues as 'Disaster Assistance Program', 'Road Safety' and 'Air Pollution' (p. 14). These themes are not instantly associated with the image of a cold, calculating and intensely political Nixon, but Nichter points out that the President pursued domestic goals of environmental protection from the start of his time in office (p. 15). The CCMS developed into a forum to discuss topics such as the environment and management of natural disasters. As such, Nichter uses the CCMS as an example of the reorganisation of NATO (p. 18). The CCMS endured and later became incorporated into NATO's Science for Peace and Security programme.<sup>(1)</sup>

Nichter describes how Nixon sought to renew NATO's sense of purpose following the cracks that had appeared after France withdrew from the integrated chain of command in 1966 and amid the heightened tension during and after the quashing of the Prague Spring in 1968 (p. 9). The administration's attempts to engage with France and bolster NATO only moderately succeeded, in part due to an increasingly isolationist Congress.

The extent to which US foreign policy under Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger represented a grand strategy has been debated, but Nichter specifically links the Nixon Doctrine, first outlined in a speech in Guam in July 1969, with transatlantic relations: 'critics say that his remarks at Guam were intended mainly as a vehicle to articulate his policy of Vietnamization ... However, to test whether the Nixon Doctrine had application beyond Asia, we can see whether or not the concepts of the Nixon Doctrine were applied to other areas of foreign policy, such as transatlantic relations' (p. 3). The Doctrine's application to Western Europe appeared to show how Nixon required continuing commitment to the alliance but wanted his allies to share the military and economic burden. This shift in the American approach had a number of consequences, for instance an acceleration in EC integration, and throughout the book the author convincingly argues that a 'transformation in transatlantic relations took place according to the principles of the Nixon Doctrine' (p. 5).

*Richard Nixon and Europe* makes excellent use of primary sources, in particular the infamous White House taping system. Luke Nichter, an associate professor of History at Texas A&M University, is an expert on the Nixon tapes and his website ([www.nixontapes.org](http://www.nixontapes.org) [2]) offers free access to all 3000 hours of the publicly released material. This is a truly wonderful resource and a historian's dream. Nowhere does Nichter utilise this better than in his account of how Nixon closed the dollar's convertibility to gold. As American gold reserves came increasingly under pressure the administration became concerned that it would not be able to satisfy a mass conversion of dollars into gold, eventually closing the 'gold window' on 15 August 1971. The book tells the story of how this decision was reached (chapter two: 'Closing the gold window') and how the US subsequently attempted to sell the new reality to its European allies (chapter three: 'The European response'). There are several lengthy – and utterly compelling – sections that transcribe key conversations between the President and – amongst others – Chairman of the Federal Reserve Arthur Burns, Secretary of the Treasury John Connally, and Director of the Office of Management and Budget (later Treasury Secretary between 1972 and 1974, and Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan) George Schultz. The President's personality and political approach leap from the page in his clipped, terse phrases. John Connally, perhaps better known for being injured during President Kennedy's assassination, is so direct it is hard not to raise a wry smile. The conversations also demonstrate the zero-sum nature of the Nixon administration and its belief that even its allies were deemed adversaries that had to be defeated. In addition, they are an example of Nixon's famous secrecy, his love of bold and unexpected announcements and his dislike of having to seek congressional approval. Also in keeping with Nixon's calculations was his desire to be seen by the right as looking after American interests ahead of the 1972 election. The sudden announcement on 15 August was consistent with Nixon's announcement of his trip to China a few weeks before, in July 1971 (p. 62).

After the gold window was abruptly shut the US had to persuade the Europeans to accept new monetary conditions with different fixed currency bands (the 'currency snake') that became the first attempt at European monetary cooperation. Nixon described to Arthur Burns the likely response from his European partners:

‘Now I have to tell you about the British. By God, Heath has taken heat over there ... we do everything we can for the British, but the British ... they consulted their interests, and they stung us (by joining the EC, (p. 72)). Now, let’s take the French. The French are selfish bastards ... We say to France, where would you be without the United States? Down. Nothing. And, when you think of the damned Netherlands, and the Belgians, and the rest, all those people, Arthur, would be nothing without us (p. 73).’

As a result Nixon sent the indiscreet Connally to bulldoze the Europeans into accepting US demands, upsetting most of the leaders in the process. This was exacerbated by the ‘Year of Europe’ initiative, which stuttered throughout 1973 under Henry Kissinger’s stewardship, and in particular a poorly received speech in April 1973 that apparently linked military support to Europe with economic cooperation. Nichter concludes that by the summer of 1973 Western European leaders, as a result of Nixon’s détente policies, the changes in the monetary situation and the implications and tone of the Year of Europe, had realised they would have to depend less on the United States. Nichter states: ‘The reality of the Nixon Doctrine was beginning to set in, even in a year that was supposed to make transatlantic relations a priority’ (p. 124). The rest of the book examines the implications of this shift.

Closing the gold window and the end of the Bretton Woods arrangement, as the author rightly points out, has been viewed by political scientists as a key moment in the acceleration of globalization. For those interested in the history of ideas and that loaded term ‘neoliberalism’, the proximity of Milton Friedman to the administration in 1971 that the book highlights will be of significance. The narrative, however, gives the reader the impression that the administration felt they had little choice but to end dollar-gold convertibility. As the decisiveness of this step on the expansion of world trade has had so much attributed to it, often critically, I would be interested to know if there were other policies seriously considered up until August 1971, particularly those that sought to retain more of the constrained Bretton Woods framework.

Chapter five (‘Europe coalesces’) describes how these rapidly changing events led European leaders to ‘self-absorption’ and a drift between Nixon, and in particular Kissinger, and their transatlantic counterparts (p. 155). However, as the President became embroiled in the Watergate proceedings in 1974, the dynamic in the relationship began to shift. The leadership of the big three European countries changed, putting in power the more pro-American Harold Wilson, Helmut Schmidt and Valerie Giscard d’Estaing. Nichter describes in detail the process of Britain’s renegotiation of its terms inside the EC and the subsequent referendum, which took place after Nixon had left office in 1975. We see how the Americans were suspicious of Britain’s accession to the EC in the early 1970s as it viewed Western European economies in general as competitors, but that it had shifted by 1974 to conclude Britain as a more important strategic partner if it was inside the Community (p. 188). As the US Embassy in London wrote, ‘If Britain opts out of Europe, the U.S.-UK relationship could become lop-sided and a drain on the U.S. Adrift from Europe, a progressively enfeebled Britain would find it hard to avoid becoming internationally irrelevant. The U.S. could not gain from such an outcome’ (p. 189).

This sounds strikingly familiar. We are currently seeing another British Prime Minister trying to unite his Party by renegotiating – and probably overestimating the ability to achieve significant concessions – the UK’s terms in Europe and then calling a referendum. This is, however, not the only historic parallel. The role and legitimacy of NATO is again being questioned following events in Ukraine, the US is engaged in a ‘pivot’ towards Asia (as opposed to its Triangular Diplomacy under Nixon and Kissinger) and a President practising foreign policy that appears based on *realpolitik* and interests, as opposed to idealism. For those looking for lessons from history regarding the referendum on EC membership the support for Harold Wilson’s renegotiation by the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt proved crucial (p. 203). David Cameron may well need something similar from Angela Merkel over the next year. The two chapters that examine the British question provide a fresh examination of the renegotiation process, although there is less from the Nixon administration’s point of view. The author has plenty of sources from the UK Public Record Office

but from the British side relies heavily on the memoirs of Bernard Donoghue. It would be beneficial to know what the main British politicians had to say, for instance in the number of books written about Harold Wilson, James Callaghan and even Roy Jenkins, as well as their own memoirs. Nichter is perhaps overly generous towards the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary Callaghan during 1974–5:

‘In that span of only a year, Wilson had not only secured what many felt was the best possible outcome for Britain, but he had also kept the Labour Party intact, revitalized the special relationship with the United States, and achieved a working relationship with his European counterparts’ (p. 204).

For all Wilson’s political skill, his success was short-lived because Labour split in 1981 when the SDP was formed by disgruntled MPs to the right of the party, and the issue of Britain’s EC contributions returned under Margaret Thatcher’s leadership. Nevertheless Nichter provides stimulating analysis of the impact of the Year of Europe initiative, then British EC renegotiation: ‘Both processes divided the alliance, but in the end brought it back together again’ (p. 216).

With such sources at his disposal Nichter could have broadened the scope of the book. In fairness during the introduction he does set out that the study is not about every issue in US-European relations during Nixon’s administration, but I would be intrigued to know more about how Central and Eastern European countries were affected by these policies, and the strategy of the transatlantic alliance towards the Eastern bloc. We are introduced to 1969 with a mention of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, and there were a number of significant events in the region during Nixon’s years as President, such as the Croatian Spring and its quashing by Tito in 1971, the fear of Soviet invasion in both Yugoslavia and Romania, as well as protests in Poland in 1970.<sup>(2)</sup> Most prominently, Willy Brandt’s and Egon Bahr’s *Ostpolitik* changed the foreign policy calculus in Europe. This book could have gone into more of the detail and significance of *Ostpolitik* and the relationship of Nixon and Kissinger with Brandt and Bahr, which elsewhere has been described as tense.<sup>(3)</sup> *Ostpolitik* was also important in Western Europe’s revitalised relationship with its communist neighbours in the east and the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, which has been seen elsewhere as the high point of détente and the culmination of Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy.<sup>(4)</sup> Authors like William Bundy have viewed the policies of détente as a driver for an increased role for a more autonomous EC, in reaching out to Central and Eastern Europe and as an important step towards the end of the Cold War.<sup>(5)</sup> I would be interested to see how the author interprets this narrative.

The major personalities loom large in *Richard Nixon and Europe*. Apart from the President himself, individual decisions appear to have major policy outcomes, whether from the American side like Henry Kissinger or John Connally or from the European side such as Harold Wilson, Helmut Schmidt or Georges Pompidou. It would be interesting to find out whether the author thinks that these personalities were decisive or if they assisted long term trends, such as a more arms-length transatlantic relationship. Was the Bretton Wood system, for instance, doomed or could it have been maintained in a different format? Was European monetary cooperation inevitable?

Luke Nichter’s book is a superbly researched work and essential reading for those with an interest in the détente era, Nixon and Kissinger’s foreign policy and US-Europe relations during the Cold War. *Richard Nixon and Europe* is an excellent study of the transatlantic relationship during this period and a fine addition to the historiography of the Nixon Presidency.

## Notes

1. NATO, ‘Creation of the new Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Committee’, 12 February 2007 <<http://www.nato.int/science/news/2006/n060711a.htm>> [3] [accessed 26 August 2015].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Tom Buchanan, *Europe’s Troubled Peace. 1945 to the Present*. (Chichester, 2012, 2nd ed.), pp. 134–5. [Back to \(2\)](#)

3. William Bundy. *A Tangled Web. The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency*. (London, 1998), p. 510.[Back to \(3\)](#)
  4. Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente. American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War*. (Washington, DC, 2013), p. 76.[Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. William Bundy. *A Tangled Web. The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency*. (London, 1998), p. 510.[Back to \(5\)](#)
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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/144873>

[2] <http://www.nixontapes.org/>

[3] <http://www.nato.int/science/news/2006/n060711a.htm>&gt;