

"To Shape the National Debate:" The Coalition Against Détente 1973-1981

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From 1973 to 1981, the United States and Soviet Union engaged in a diplomatic process aimed at reducing the risks and costs of a nuclear war. Despite initial momentum and intense efforts by three administrations from both parties, this process, known as détente, became increasingly unpopular within the United States, leading even key supporters to renounce and abandon it. This result was the work of a well-organized coalition of anti-Soviet academics, intelligence analysts, and military professionals. They successfully targeted key American political institutions, from legislative offices to intelligence agencies to the media, to reframe and win the debate over nuclear diplomacy. A small group provided decisive contributions across this integrated effort. Many of these leaders, such as Paul Nitze, Richard Pipes, and Eugene Rostow, were associated with the neoconservative movement, a faction of the Democratic Party that rejected the politics of the “New Left.” Sen. Henry ‘Scoop’ Jackson and Ronald Reagan also played important roles. Through a series of orchestrated confrontations, the anti-détente coalition highlighted the dangers of diplomacy with the Soviets. Important episodes included the fight over the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, the Solzhenitsyn visit, the Team B estimates of Soviet arms, and the negotiations over SALT II. By the beginning of the 1980s, the movement had shaped American geopolitical strategy and provided the foundation for a military-centric foreign policy.

Détente began in 1969 with the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT), the first nuclear weapons reduction agreement between the United States and Soviet Union. With the

United States exhausted by the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger sought to transition from the long-term policy of containment to strategic engagement. Military spending was unsustainable, with a 1972 survey estimating that the US government had spent \$1.3 trillion dollars on the Cold War.¹ Willing to make significant concessions, Nixon and Kissinger allowed the Soviets to reach parity on nuclear weapons numbers.² The number of Soviet missiles and nuclear-armed submarines were even allowed to exceed the American caps.³ At the Moscow Summit in May 1972, Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed SALT I.⁴ With his anti-communist credibility muting criticism from the right, the popularity of the landmark agreement helped Nixon win a landslide victory in the 1972 elections.⁵ Negotiators set to work on a second agreement, SALT II, to expand on the arms reductions in SALT I. For a brief moment of time, Soviet-American diplomacy seemed conceivable.

Even as SALT I was being negotiated, there were objectors. The most committed were the neoconservatives, a group of former leftists who opposed the Soviet influence abroad and policies like affirmative action at home. The movement's earliest members like Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer had their roots in 1930s Jewish Trotskyism at City College in New York, where they debated Marxist doctrine.⁶ From the start, anti-Stalinism was central to their beliefs.⁷ After World War II, many neoconservatives worked at *Commentary*, the official

¹ James L. Clayton, "The Fiscal Cost of the Cold War to the United States: The First 25 Years, 1947-1971," *The Western Political Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1972): 92.

² Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1994), 337.

³ Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Virginia: Potomac Books, 2013), 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵ H.W Brands, "The World in a Word: The Rise and Fall of Détente," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1998): 45–60.

⁶ Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 22.

⁷ Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Origins of a Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013), 30.

publication of the American Jewish Committee, as well as at liberal and left-wing journals.⁸ By the 1950s, this group advocated an anti-communist liberalism which called for containment of the Soviet Union coupled with domestic Keynesian investment and government reform.⁹ The breakthrough of the counterculture in the mid-1960s shocked the neoconservatives into a reactionary posture.¹⁰ Their writings increasingly warned of the undermining of American democracy and society.¹¹ The 1972 nomination of dovish Democrat George McGovern spurred further anxieties regarding the global decline of democracy.¹²

From the neoconservatives' perspective, Nixon's landslide victory proved the Democratic Party's slide to the left was a mistake, and they organized to reverse the trend. Key neoconservatives formed the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), which tried to roll back the 'New Politics' reforms that had led to McGovern's nomination.¹³ With members that included Eugene Rostow, Richard Pipes, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer, the group's focus shifted to arguing for increases to the defense budget.¹⁴ The CDM's analysis was ignored by most Democrats, but they had one powerful ally: Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA).¹⁵ Although more liberal on domestic issues than most neoconservatives, Jackson was motivated by many of the same international concerns. His office became an early legislative power center for the movement. Neoconservatives like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz began their careers working for Jackson.

⁸ Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 34.

⁹ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 30.

¹⁰ John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995), 34.

¹¹ Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives*, 50.

¹² Theodore Draper. "Détente," *Commentary*, June 1974, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/theodore-draper/detente>.

¹³ Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, 60.

¹⁴ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 96.

¹⁵ Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution*, 142.

Jackson started his career as a liberal isolationist but after the Korean War emerged as a strident Cold Warrior.¹⁶ He was a consistent Nixon supporter on foreign affairs and considered as a potential Secretary of Defense in 1968.¹⁷ The specifics of SALT I drove a wedge between the administration and Jackson, who thought the agreement disadvantaged America. He proposed an amendment that declared the US would never allow its strategic nuclear forces to be inferior in number to the Soviets. Critics derided his cozy relationship with the defense industry, nicknaming him the Senator from Boeing, but his amendment passed the Senate, 56-35.¹⁸ His more potent attack on détente came later that year, via the Trade Act. An issue of growing importance to American Jews was the status of Soviet Jewry. Many Jews who wanted to emigrate were harassed and forced to pay extortionate exit taxes.¹⁹ With the co-sponsorship of Rep. Charles Vanik (D-OH), Jackson introduced an amendment, drafted by Richard Perle, that stipulated the Soviet Union's most favored nation (MFN) status would be removed unless the Soviets rescinded the policy.²⁰ The fight over the amendment was able to derail the passage of the Trade Act through 1973 and 1974. The Yom Kippur War, in which Soviet-armed Arab states launched a surprise attack on Israel, reinforced the image of the Soviets as anti-Semitic, a portrayal promoted by Jewish anti-détente advocates,²¹ and made Nixon seem like an accomplice.²² To Kissinger and Nixon, the Jackson-Vanik Amendment was a cynical attempt to interfere with détente.²³ But the attack worked.

¹⁶ Jeff Bloodworth, "Senator Henry Jackson, the Solzhenitsyn Affair, and American Liberalism." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 97, no. 2 (2006), 69-71.

¹⁷ Väisse, *Neoconservatism*, 113.

¹⁸ Hanhimäki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Virginia: Potomac Books, 2013), 54.

¹⁹ Julian E. Zelizer, "Détente and Domestic Politics." *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 4 (2009), 657.

²⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, "The Rise, Fall and Future of Détente." *Foreign Affairs* 62, no. 2 (1983). 354-77.

²¹ John Rosenberg, "The Quest against Détente: Eugene Rostow, the October War, and the Origins of the Anti-Détente Movement, 1969-1976." *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 4 (2015), 732.

²² Bloodworth, "Senator Henry Jackson," 72.

²³ Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution*, 141.

In August 1974, Nixon resigned in the wake of Watergate, replaced by Gerald Ford, with Kissinger as Secretary of State. With tenuous political standing and continued criticism from Jackson, Ford signed Jackson-Vanik in January 1975. Rather than eliminate the exit taxes on Jewish immigration, the Soviets abandoned MFN status, a setback for détente.²⁴ The visit of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn provided another opportunity for Jackson. The Nobel Prize-winning dissident was invited to the United States in July 1975. In the interest of détente, Ford refused to meet Solzhenitsyn, even while he was honored across the political spectrum, at banquets for the AFL-CIO and by conservative senators Strom Thurmond (R-SC) and Jesse Helms (R-NC).²⁵ With this broad support, Jackson seized the initiative. He invited Solzhenitsyn to the Senate offices to speak about Soviet human rights abuses.²⁶ By the end of 1975, Jackson emerged as a leading contender for the 1976 Democratic nomination.²⁷ The strategy of linking détente to Soviet abuses resonated with the public. Concern over the USSR increased from 24% in 1972 to 50% in 1976. Favorability dropped 19% to 8%.²⁸ As the anti-détente coalition found success, its next attack would target the US intelligence community.

The CIA's annual National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on Soviet military strength were central to the arms reduction debate. Authored by career intelligence professionals, these estimates tended to describe the Soviet buildup as moderate and limited by their failing economy.²⁹ As the Ford Administration grappled with growing disenchantment with détente, the NIEs fell under increased scrutiny.³⁰ In mid-1976, CIA Director George H. W. Bush agreed to an

²⁴ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 118.

²⁵ Phillip Shabecoff, "Ford Avoided Visit By Solzhenitsyn," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1945.

²⁶ Bloodworth, "Senator Henry Jackson," 74.

²⁷ Rick Perlstein. *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 613.

²⁸ Tom W. Smith, "The Polls: American Attitudes Toward the Soviet Union and Communism," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1983), 280.

²⁹ Jerry W. Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Massachusetts: South End Press, 1999), 197.

³⁰ Richard Pipes, "Team B: The Reality Behind the Myth," (*Commentary*: October 1986)

unusual review by outside analysts, a so-called ‘Team B,’ working independently of the CIA’s Team A.³¹ While there is no evidence that Team B was proposed by neoconservatives, its membership included key adherents. Richard Pipes, a Russia historian at Harvard and *Commentary* contributor, led the team,³² which included retired diplomats and generals skeptical of arms control and détente, and advised by Paul Nitze, former Deputy Secretary of Defense and a Jackson ally,³³ and former Jackson aide Wolfowitz.³⁴

The Team B report attacked the strategic assumptions underpinning détente. The first line claimed NIEs had “misperceived the motivations behind Soviet strategic programs... underestimate[d] their intensity, scope, and implicit threat.”³⁵ To the contrary, the Soviets were pursuing an offensive strategy, striving for strategic superiority.³⁶ Détente and SALT agreements were a strategy for the Soviet Union to surpass the US in the arms race.³⁷ The report simultaneously argued for communism’s inevitable decline *and* its enduring danger, insisting that Soviet military spending had been shielded from government budget cuts.³⁸ When Team B’s report was leaked, it was met with negative coverage from the press.³⁹ Concerns were raised about the intelligence access provided to an ideologically-motivated group and objectiveness in compiling their estimates.⁴⁰ Some viewed it as an attempt to sabotage the incoming president.⁴¹ The controversy ensured the work of Team B was covered by the press, deepening doubt about

³¹ Ehrman, *Neoconservatism*, 111.

³² Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 155.

³³ Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, 152.

³⁴ Cahn, *Killing Détente*, 148-150.

³⁵ Intelligence Report of Team B, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume XXXV, National Security Policy. 1973–1976 (Washington: December 1976), Document 171. 1.

³⁶ Pavel Podvig, “The Window of Vulnerability That Wasn’t: Soviet Military Buildup in the 1970s: A Research Note,” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008), 120.

³⁷ Intelligence Report of Team B, 6.

³⁸ Matthew Evangelista, “Second-Guessing the Experts: Citizens’ Group Criticism of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Estimates of Soviet Military Policy,” *The International History Review* 19, no. 3 (1997), 563–93.

³⁹ Cahn, *Killing Détente*, 158-162.

⁴⁰ John W. Finney, “Assessing Soviet Strength Is a Team Task,” *The New York Times*, February 6, 1977.

⁴¹ Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution*, 144.

further diplomacy.⁴² Rick Perlstein describes the American political elite “atwitter with debates over whether détente hadn’t been a naïve, disastrous mistake.”⁴³ As President Carter took office and members of the anti-détente coalition left the government, Team B’s findings would provide the basis for the Committee on the Present Danger.

Armed with estimates, the anti-détente coalition set about bringing their message to America. The instrument would be the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), organized by two veteran national security policymakers: Paul Nitze and Eugene Rostow, former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs. Rostow, then dean of Yale Law, had been pro-détente until the 1973 Yom Kippur War forced him to reassess Soviet diplomacy as enabling aggression.⁴⁴ After running the Coalition for a Democratic Majority’s Foreign Policy Task Force with Richard Pipes, Rostow worked with Nitze in 1975 to create the CPD, a bipartisan anti-détente organization.⁴⁵ Their founding policy statement, published in *The New York Times* in early 1977, made clear its debt to Team B’s findings. The primary threat to America and world peace was “the Soviet drive for dominance based upon an unparalleled military buildup.”⁴⁶ Nitze and many other members of Team B were on the board of directors.⁴⁷ The CPD’s membership was broader, with representatives from organized labor, big business, and two future presidents: Reagan and Bush Sr.⁴⁸ All 34 members of the CDM joined, including Nathan Glazer, Podhoretz, and Pipes, along with former Jackson staffer Richard Perle.⁴⁹

⁴² David Binder, “New CIA Estimate Finds Soviet Seeks Superiority in Arms,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 1976.

⁴³ Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America’s Right Turn 1976-1980* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021): 44.

⁴⁴ Rosenberg, “The Quest against Détente” 722.

⁴⁵ Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, 150.

⁴⁶ CPD, “Common Sense and the Common Danger” (November 11, 1976), 3.

⁴⁷ Ehrman, *Neoconservatism*, 112.

⁴⁸ John Boies, and Nelson A. Pichardo, “The Committee on the Present Danger: A Case for the Importance of Elite Social Movement Organizations to Theories of Social Movements and the State,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 38 (1993), 66-69.

⁴⁹ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 158.

The CPD's positions on diplomacy were not shared by the Carter administration. During the transition period, Nitze had requested an urgent meeting with the president-elect to discuss Team B findings. Carter was unconvinced.⁵⁰ He excluded anti-détente advocates from foreign policy posts and nominated Paul Warnke to lead the SALT negotiations as director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Administration. He served as former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs under Johnson.⁵¹ Warnke was notable for his pro-détente views, publishing a much-discussed essay in *Foreign Affairs*, "Apes on a Treadmill," which advocated against the arms race. He suggested that if the US paused development of weapons systems, the Soviets would reciprocate.⁵² The CPD questioned Warnke's credibility and competence as a negotiator, with Nitze testifying at the confirmation hearings.⁵³ Warnke was confirmed 58-40, suggesting that the two-thirds supermajority needed to ratify the treaty might be impossible.⁵⁴ The Warnke fight established the CPD as the foremost voice in the anti-détente movement and previewed their tactics in the debate over SALT II.

By spring 1977, the anti-détente movement was confident in their ability to influence the administration. CPD director Charles Tyroler told *The New York Times* that Americans were "troubled by the steady rise in the Russian [arms] buildup" and desperate for action.⁵⁵ Despite the shift in public opinion, Carter remained determined to halt the arms race, telling the Notre Dame graduating class that America "must put an end to it."⁵⁶ But his inclusion of human rights issues in SALT II negotiations, a stance advocated by détente skeptics, slowed progress to a crawl.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 44.

⁵¹ Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution*, 144-145.

⁵² Paul C. Warnke. "Apes on a Treadmill." *Foreign Policy*, no. 18 (1975), 29.

⁵³ Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, 206.

⁵⁴ Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, 209.

⁵⁵ Linda Charlton, "Groups Favoring Strong Defense Making Gains in Public Acceptance," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1977.

⁵⁶ Jimmy Carter, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame." *The American Presidency Project* (speech, University of Notre Dame, May 22, 1977).

⁵⁷ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 635.

During the summer, Carter decided to try to bring the CPD onboard, drawing on their expertise to create a better proposal. He asked them to participate in a review of détente policy, and invited Nitze and other CPD leaders to the White House in August.⁵⁸ Despite alignment on human rights, the encounter was unproductive. According to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president was “excessively defensive and showed real signs of anger.”⁵⁹ A witness to the meeting described Nitze as “abrasive and hectoring.”⁶⁰ By early 1978, the CPD recognized that Carter would not adopt their recommendations and transitioned to a strategy of direct assault on the administration.⁶¹ With their four-to-one financial advantage provided by wealthy supporters over détente supporters, the CPD used direct mail, phone call campaigns, and film screenings to spread anti-SALT messaging, with *Commentary* publishing their statements and Ronald Reagan citing them in his radio broadcasts.⁶² In concession to this effective operation, Carter was forced to expand the military budget, although not enough to satisfy his critics.⁶³ Later that year, under pressure from the anti-détente movement, Warnke was forced to resign.⁶⁴

For the CPD, winning the debate on détente meant ensuring SALT II was not ratified in the Senate. The treaty was signed mid-1979 by Carter and Brezhnev in Vienna. CPD members testified seventeen times in the Senate, more than all pro-SALT witnesses combined.⁶⁵ The debate revealed that, without modifications the Soviets would not accept, SALT II would fail.⁶⁶ Only months later, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Whatever support remained for the

⁵⁸ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 171.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 172.

⁶⁰ Michael Krepon, in email correspondence with author. April 2022.

⁶¹ Brands, “The World in a Word” 56.

⁶² Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 59.

⁶³ Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, 256.

⁶⁴ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 177.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 178.

⁶⁶ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 812.

treaty collapsed, and Carter withdrew it.⁶⁷ The new geopolitical reality led to further increases in military spending and the Carter Doctrine declared the US willing to use military force if the Soviets threatened the Persian Gulf.⁶⁸ The CPD called his response inadequate.⁶⁹ In November 1980, CPD member Ronald Reagan defeated Carter. After the election, Reagan thanked the committee for their work “to shape the national debate on certain problems.”⁷⁰ Reagan brought sixty of his fellow CPD members into his administration, including many former Democrats.⁷¹

During the 1970s, a relatively small group of insiders, elites, and intellectuals were able to exert enormous influence to disrupt nuclear détente between the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite the initial popularity of nuclear arms reduction from all sides of the political spectrum, this coalition successfully shifted both elite and public opinion. The neoconservatives, a faction of Democrats disillusioned with their own party, provided essential organizing energy and deep connections to important streams of American society. Using culturally-sensitive issues like the Jackson-Vanik Amendment and the visit of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, they were able to hamper further progress on SALT II. Through the unusual, extra-governmental framework of ‘Team B,’ the coalition was able to undermine the intelligence community’s claim that the Soviets had moderated their arms development. The election of Jimmy Carter, a president intent on peace with the Soviets, might have been a setback for the movement. But forming the Committee for the Present Danger, they ‘weaponized’ Team B’s estimates to quickly shift public opinion. By the late 1970s, the historic window opened by détente had closed, as both Americans and Soviets retreated to more militaristic foreign policy approaches. The debate over détente

⁶⁷ Phil Williams, “Détente and US Domestic Politics.” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 61, no. 3, (1985), 443.

⁶⁸ Brands, “The World in a Word” 57.

⁶⁹ CPD, “The 1980 Crisis and What We Should Do About It,” (January 22, 1980), 177.

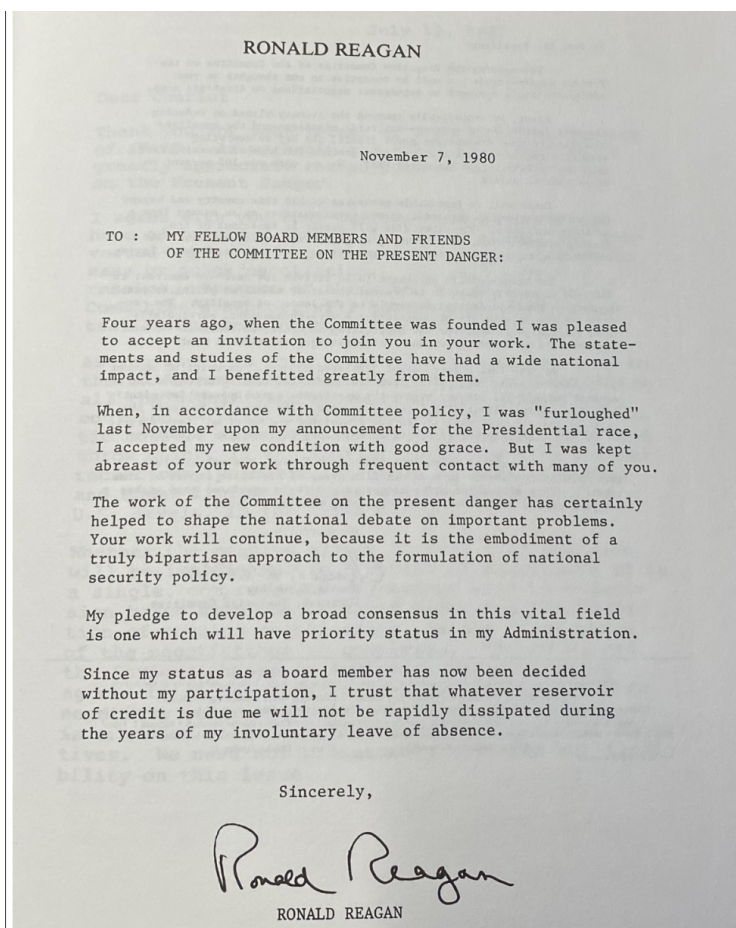
⁷⁰ CPD, “Ronald Reagan, Newly Elected President, Writes to His Former CPD Colleagues” (November 7, 1980), 329.

⁷¹ Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution*, 152, Peter Steinfels, in email correspondence with author, November-December 2021.

emerged as a template that the core group of objectors would employ to successful effect in the decades to come.

Appendix I:

I focused on the primary source volume of the original Committee for the Present Danger documents edited by one of the CPD members, Charles Tyroler II, *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger*. The book is a compilation of original articles, notes, letters and opinion polling data. A quote from the book, where Reagan wrote to the CPD in a letter confirming their contributions to national security policy, is used as my title and supports my thesis.



"Letter from Ronald Reagan to the CPD." from Tyroler, Charles, ed. *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger*. Washington, D.C, Frankfurt. D.C: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publ, 1984.

Appendix II:

What emerged across my primary source research throughout the paper was the interconnections between people and organizations pursuing a debate against détente. The chart below describes the connections between Team B (*Team B Report*), the Committee for the Present Danger (*Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger*), *Commentary* (magazine archives), and ultimately joining the Reagan administration. Understanding the organizations helped determine which figures and episodes to focus on to tell the story of the anti-détente movement.

| | Member of Team B | Member of the CPD | Published in Commentary | Member of Reagan Admin. |
|------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Norman Podhoretz | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Eugene Rostow | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Paul Nitze | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Richard Pipes | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Richard Perle | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Paul Wolfowitz | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |

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