

4-1-1977

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Recommended Citation

Walker, J. Samuel. "Confessions of a Cold Warrior: Anderson and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1972." *New Mexico Historical Review* 52, 2 (2021). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol52/iss2/4>

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THE CONFESSIONS OF A COLD WARRIOR:
CLINTON P. ANDERSON AND
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1945-1972

J. SAMUEL WALKER

ON MAY 1, 1970, Clinton P. Anderson, New Mexico's senior representative in the U.S. Senate, rose to address his colleagues on an issue that was convulsing the nation. The previous evening, President Richard M. Nixon had announced his decision to use American troops to destroy North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. Anderson, while remarking that he seldom spoke out on foreign policy matters and admitting that he lacked any special expertise on the situation in Southeast Asia, felt compelled to express publicly his unequivocal opposition to the Cambodian incursion. Nixon's action, he said, pointed the United States "on a new, dangerous, and potentially very tragic course." He rejected the president's assertion that invading Cambodia was basically a defensive measure, and argued that it would widen the war. He predicted that enemy troops driven from their Cambodian sanctuaries would exert greater pressure on the capital city of Phnom Penh, resulting in new and urgent pleas from Premier Lon Nol's government for increased American assistance. Anderson harbored grave doubts that the Cambodian offensive could be "a clean, fast, surgical military operation," and declared: "War in Asia is like quicksand. . . . It is tempting to believe that a quick raid into heretofore forbidden territory could hasten the end of the Asian conflict, but, sadly, Vietnam has taught us that this cannot be." Nixon's decision, he added, raised profound constitutional questions about the roles of the president and Congress in making war. Confessing that he was "as blameworthy as anyone" for permitting the executive branch to involve the United States so deeply in



Anderson conferring with Lyndon B. Johnson aboard Air Force One. Photo courtesy of the Clinton P. Anderson Agency.

Southeast Asia without a declaration of war, the New Mexican urged that Congress reassert its constitutional authority and assume its proper responsibilities in the conduct of American foreign policy.¹

Anderson's remarks were but a small part of the storm of angry protest that followed the announcement of the Cambodian invasion; many other voices were more prominent, more eloquent, and more impassioned. But his views were still noteworthy because they represented a sharp contrast with the positions he had taken on foreign affairs during most of the cold war era. As Harry S. Truman's Secretary of Agriculture from 1945 to 1948, he played a role, albeit a secondary one, in the formulation and execution of American diplomatic policies that eventually culminated in the Vietnamese imbroglio. After his election to the Senate in 1948, he continued to support America's cold war posture and willingly consigned primary responsibility for foreign affairs to the chief executive. For Anderson, as for most Americans, it required the magnitude of the tragedy in Vietnam to force a reexamination of long-held but too little questioned ideas about foreign policy. The war in Southeast Asia prompted him to modify his world outlook to the extent that, in 1970, he expressed regret for his own and the entire Truman administration's role in contributing to the tensions that produced the cold war. In a broad sense, the metamorphosis in Anderson's thinking reflected the widespread discontent with American foreign policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a more narrow sense, it evolved from the private reappraisal by a cold warrior who was flexible and open-minded enough to reconsider positions he had espoused during a generation in public office.

Anderson's cold war views were rooted in his distrust of the Soviet Union and concern about the spread of communism. In January 1945, while serving as congressman from New Mexico, he told a Wooster, Ohio, dinner meeting that he disapproved of Russia's territorial claims in eastern Poland and worried that an unfair settlement would jeopardize chances for a lasting peace. One of his first decisions after becoming Secretary of Agriculture in June 1945 was to stop shipment of butter and fat products des-

tined for Soviet ports. Although his motives were not malevolent, he later wrote, such actions aroused Soviet suspicions and fueled increasing American-Russian tensions.²

Anderson's antipathy toward the Soviet was most obvious in the stand he took on the question of sharing atomic information with them. He made his position clear in a cabinet meeting on September 21, 1945. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson opened that day's discussion by pleading for free exchange of scientific information about atomic energy among members of the United Nations, including the Soviet Union. Since scientific knowledge was already widely disseminated and Russia would be able to develop its own atomic bomb within a few years, Stimson recommended that the United States share its expertise as a step toward international control of atomic energy. If America flaunted its atomic supremacy and failed to invite the Soviets into an atomic partnership based on mutual trust, he feared, an arms race that threatened the future of civilization would occur. Stimson's ideas elicited a mixed response from the cabinet. Among those supporting his position was Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace, who carefully distinguished between general scientific information and specific facts about the design and manufacturing processes involved in building the atomic bomb. He pointed out that the subject under discussion was the exchange of basic data and not disclosure of the secret of how to produce atomic weapons.³

Anderson and Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal were the most outspoken opponents of Stimson's proposals. Both ignored the distinction drawn by Wallace and contended that America should not yield its atomic secrets. Forrestal commented that the bomb was "the property of the American people" and the knowledge of how to build it should not be revealed without their consent. Anderson argued that sharing atomic information would be a major political blunder. The American people would never accept it, he said, and the president's prestige and ability to lead the country would be gravely impaired. Anderson was sharply critical of Soviet behavior, declaring that Russia was subjugating Mongolia, Manchuria, and other areas.⁴

The cabinet debate ended inconclusively, and Truman asked those attending to submit their views to him in writing. Anderson responded with a long letter that expanded on his remarks at the meeting. He continued to base his argument on the false premise that supporters of Stimson's position favored disclosure of the secret of the atomic bomb. He reiterated his central point that Truman would lose the "confidence, love, and respect of the American people" if he delivered atomic data to Russia. The Agriculture Secretary disputed the assertion that the Soviets could develop their own bomb within a short time because he doubted that their technological and mechanical aptitude could match American inventive genius. He was also skeptical that Russia would prove to be a trustworthy friend of the United States. "If the Russians did not trust us in time of war when we were their allies," he asked, "what reason do we have to believe that they would be our friends in time of peace?" Anderson not only submitted his own letter, but also helped Treasury Secretary Fred Vinson and president pro tempore of the Senate Kenneth McKellar prepare their opinions for the president. Vinson and McKellar sought Anderson's assistance because he had spent time at the atomic laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico, but he later confessed that his experience there had not given him special scientific insight into the problem. Truman never made a clearcut decision on sharing atomic information, but uncertainty, inertia, and increasing American-Soviet discord effectively settled the debate in favor of those who opposed Stimson's position.⁵

As escalating world tensions developed into full-fledged cold war, Anderson stood squarely behind America's firm posture toward the Soviet Union. He applauded Truman for dismissing Henry Wallace from the cabinet for publicly airing his doubts about American foreign policy. In March 1947, after the president enunciated what soon became known as the Truman Doctrine, the Agriculture Secretary reported that "we are all supporting him as vigorously as we know how and encouraging him to stand his grounds."⁶ A short time later, Truman urged Anderson to do what he could to send more wheat to Italy in an effort to influence its voters to elect anti-

communist candidates. The New Mexican complied by ordering wheat bound for South America shipped to Italy instead, where it arrived just before the election and was distributed in cars clearly marked with American flags. The Agriculture Secretary strongly backed the Marshall Plan. He asked the House Foreign Affairs Committee to approve it not only because it would aid farmers by increasing exports but also because "the implications of the program . . . involve the future of democracy in Europe, the strength of our allies on that continent, and in fact, the very peace of the world."⁷

Anderson resigned from the cabinet in May 1948, and took his seat in the Senate the following year. His opinions about foreign policy remained unchanged; he had not tailored his views as Agriculture Secretary merely to conform with the administration he served. Throughout the pre-Vietnam era, he stood in the mainstream of American thinking about foreign affairs and endorsed a number of corollaries that grew from American perceptions about the nature of the cold war. He believed that communism was monolithic and that Marxist movements around the globe were a part of the Soviet drive for world conquest. Drawing on the "lessons of Munich," he warned against appeasement and held that America must take prompt, firm, and if necessary, forceful action to halt communist expansion. The Soviets and their allies, he insisted, respected only strength. Anderson accepted the wisdom of the domino theory and thought that communist aggression ultimately threatened American security and well being. "I think there's no question but what the Russians are doing everything they can to use up our manpower and our resources in a war with China," he wrote during the Korean conflict. "Naturally, if they could accomplish that and wear us out in China, Iran, Iraq, [and] Burma, they would then be able to overrun all of Europe at their convenience . . . and having overrun Europe, Asia and other parts of the world, we would find ourselves in a most difficult situation."⁸

Convinced that international communism threatened American national security and the future of the free world, Anderson maintained that the president should be allowed wide latitude in the

conduct of foreign policy. In part, his willingness to acknowledge executive prerogatives stemmed from his limited interest and lack of expertise in international affairs. He preferred to concentrate on domestic issues while leaving diplomatic matters largely to the chief executive. When questioned about American aid to Poland by a constituent in 1961, he replied that Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy were responsible for sending assistance there and added: "Whether they were wise or foolish in doing that is not my problem."⁹

Anderson had other, more compelling reasons for deferring to presidential authority in international relations; he believed that the constitution granted the chief executive broad powers in that area and undue congressional interference could endanger the welfare of the country. A staunch advocate of bipartisanship, his ideas about executive supremacy in diplomatic affairs applied as much to Eisenhower as to Democratic presidents. He opposed a constitutional amendment championed by Senator John Bricker during the 1950s that sought to check the president's power to make executive agreements with foreign countries and to prevent treaties from interfering in domestic affairs. The Bricker amendment, Anderson wrote, "would hamper the President in his Constitutional authority to conduct foreign affairs." He informed its supporters that he thought the president "should have my support in this important field of foreign relations and . . . I should not try to tie his hands." In keeping with those convictions, the New Mexican voted in favor of congressional resolutions allowing the president wide discretion in dealing with crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1955 and the Middle East in 1957.¹⁰

Although most Americans accepted the same basic assumptions as Anderson about world affairs, there were important shades of opinion within the prevailing cold war consensus. His position was not entirely compatible with any single point of view. He rejected the isolationist tendencies and Asia-first emphasis of such leading Republican spokesmen as Herbert Hoover, Robert Taft, and William Knowland. Anderson felt greatest affinity for the ideas of liberal internationalists who denounced colonialism, favored arms

control and disarmament, and argued that economic assistance was more effective in containing communism than was excessive military aid. Yet he frequently joined fiscal conservatives in slashing executive requests for foreign aid expenditures. In 1956, he voted for a proposal of Republican Senator Styles Bridges to terminate aid to Yugoslavia. His reason, Anderson explained, was that wool sent to clothe needy children had been used for fancy army uniforms instead. He preferred to spend money for domestic programs such as social security rather than wasteful foreign assistance. He taunted those who claimed that "the Treasury can stand aid for Tito, but it cannot stand aid for grandma."¹¹

Until the Vietnam war forced a major reassessment in his thinking, Anderson's ideas about foreign affairs underwent a significant change in only one area—atomic energy. Because of the importance of the atomic industry in New Mexico, he eagerly sought appointment to the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy after his election to the Senate. His interest in that assignment, he later wrote, "was as natural for me as the attraction to military affairs for a senator from, say, Georgia or Texas, where military bases have proliferated." He secured a seat on the Joint Committee in 1951, and three years later became its chairman. In 1955, Anderson headed the congressional delegation to the International Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy in Geneva, Switzerland. His observations and experiences there convinced him that the United States should be more willing to share basic scientific atomic information and play a greater role in fostering worldwide development of atomic energy for peaceful purposes.¹²

In an article written for the *New York Times* after his return from Geneva, Anderson outlined his ideas about sharing atomic information. The position he took in 1955 in many ways contradicted arguments he had made on the same subject a decade earlier. He suggested that the situation had changed since the end of World War II, when interest in atomic energy centered on its military uses. Now, however, a number of nations were making significant progress in developing atomic power for peaceful applications. Anderson recommended that the United States, while

carefully guarding military secrets, should more rapidly declassify and more willingly share basic atomic data. In that way, it would play a leading role in exploiting the atom's vast potential for constructive purposes because "the exchange of fundamental scientific information is the very lifeblood of scientific progress." The New Mexican was particularly impressed with Soviet achievements displayed at Geneva, and admitted that Russia was not "slavishly imitating our own atomic program" and had "demonstrated great originality." Essentially, he was advocating the same position on exchanging scientific data taken by Henry Stimson, Henry Wallace, and others he had opposed in 1945. He even echoed a favorite phrase of Wallace's when he cautioned Americans against a "Maginot Line philosophy" of clinging to a false sense of security while being surpassed by foreign countries in scientific advancement.¹³

At the same time that Anderson was urging freer exchange of scientific information, he was calling for a halt to the arms race and steps toward nuclear disarmament. He appealed for international cooperation on atomic energy to "raise the standard of living throughout the world" and "diminish tensions arising from international rivalries." He recognized that under existing conditions, competing nations were unlikely to agree to destroy their stockpiles of atomic weapons and noted that resolving the issue of mutual inspection was "very difficult, if not impossible." But Anderson argued that important progress toward world peace and survival would be ensured if nuclear powers would "disarm the future" by refraining from developing new and more awesome weapons. Then modern technology could be applied for constructive purposes and "a war-weary world might achieve in time a form of disarmament by obsolescence."¹⁴

Despite the urgency of his plea for arms control, Anderson saw little prospect for its implementation "until we find ways and means of cracking the Iron Curtain." He thought the United States had been "more generous than any nation in history" in its proposals to forestall an arms race, but it had been constantly frustrated by Soviet intransigence. His hopes for nuclear disarmament and his admiration for Russian scientific achievement had not

moderated his distrust of the Soviet Union. The strain of idealism in Anderson's thinking was always tempered by his perceptions of existing world realities.¹⁵

When the Soviet Union proposed a nuclear test ban treaty in March 1960, Anderson responded negatively. The Russians agreed to a prohibition of nuclear testing in the atmosphere, oceans, and outer space as well as underground explosions that recorded 4.75 or above on a seismic scale. Underground tests below that level would be halted for five years. Anderson objected to the Soviet offer because it did not clearly permit nuclear blasts for peaceful purposes and did not specify how many on-site inspections would be allowed annually. He was also troubled by the five-year ban on all types of nuclear tests because he feared that American laboratories would close and scientists would disperse, making it difficult to resume a viable nuclear program if the treaty were not extended. Anderson's grave reservations about the proposed agreement reflected his suspicion of Soviet motives. But he also worried about the harmful impact such an accord would have on the economy of New Mexico. He pointed out to editors of the state's leading newspapers that the treaty, if consummated, "would mean that we would have less need for the laboratories at Los Alamos and Livermore, much less need for Sandia Corporation and the South Albuquerque Works, and absolutely no need for Project Gnome at Carlsbad." Although distrust of Russia was the overriding factor in Anderson's criticism of the test ban proposal, he was also influenced by the compulsions inherent in the military-industrial complex.¹⁶

Despite his opposition to the Russian proposal for a nuclear test ban, Anderson still hoped for progress toward arms control and disarmament. He firmly supported and actively worked for Senate approval of the limited test ban on which the United States, Russia, and other nations agreed in 1963. It prohibited nuclear blasts in the atmosphere, oceans, and outer space but placed no restrictions on underground testing. Anderson helped ease the minds of his Senate colleagues on scientific and technical questions about the treaty. He won praise from chairman J. William Fulbright for

clarifying issues and reducing confusion in the hearings of the Foreign Relations Committee. "I think the committee, the Senate, and the country owe the Senator from New Mexico a great debt," Fulbright declared. From Anderson's point of view, the limited test ban treaty had many attractive features. It represented a positive step towards arms control and promised to curtail nuclear pollution of the earth's atmosphere without adversely affecting American security or threatening the economic well-being of New Mexico. In fact, several nuclear installations in New Mexico received extra funds for research and development deemed necessary by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to make certain the treaty would not undermine America's defense posture.¹⁷

Anderson's support for the limited test ban treaty in no way implied that he had modified his assumptions about the cold war. The gradual metamorphosis in his thinking occurred only after the United States became deeply involved in Vietnam. His initial reactions to American policies in Southeast Asia were entirely consistent with his overall position regarding foreign affairs. Anderson was gravely concerned with the dilemma that confronted the United States when France stood on the verge of defeat in Vietnam in 1954. He did not want America to underwrite French colonialism in Indochina and contended that military assistance would be effective only if France guaranteed independence to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. He adamantly opposed sending American ground troops to Southeast Asia, declaring that "the American people want no coffins back from Indochina." But he worried about the spread of communism in Asia and feared that the fall of Indochina would undermine the security of Thailand, Burma, Malaya, and Indonesia. The only way to halt the "communist menace," Anderson believed, was to give Asian peoples sufficient incentive to fight their own battles. The United States could supply military equipment and advisors, but the effort would be futile unless "the people of South Asia recognize that Soviet imperialism can be as degrading and dangerous as the old colonialism has been."¹⁸

Anderson found Ngo Dinh Diem's dictatorial rule in South Vietnam as distasteful as French imperialism. In September 1963,

just before Diem's death, he cosponsored a Senate resolution that called for termination of economic and military assistance to South Vietnam unless its government "abandons policies of repression against its own people and makes a determined effort to regain their support." But Anderson's concern about the type of regime the United States upheld in South Vietnam did not prevent him from backing Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the war. In part, his position derived from his affection and respect for Johnson, who he thought had the ability and experience to "make a remarkably fine President." Even more important was his continuing deference to presidential authority in world affairs. He remained convinced that constitutional jurisdiction and access to expert advisory opinion made foreign policy "an area largely and properly dominated by the President." Finally, Anderson believed that the United States had an obligation to defend its client state from "aggression encouraged from outside South Viet-Nam." Not only would it be wrong to abandon America's ally, he wrote in 1965, but also "if we pulled out of Southeast Asia, Red China would take over and then endanger areas as far away as the Philippine Islands." The New Mexican's thinking embodied his basic cold war credos; respect for presidential supremacy in foreign affairs, adherence to the idea of monolithic communism and the domino theory, and a belief that the United States must act firmly to thwart communist aggression.¹⁹

Anderson maintained his hawkish stance in the face of rising protests against the war across the nation in general and from his New Mexican constituents in particular. After President Johnson's State of the Union address in January 1966, he commented: "I like very much the assurance we are not going to walk away from the situation in Vietnam. We proved that in Korea and the results have been good." He approved of American bombing in Vietnam as a means to shorten the war and thought that if the United States intensified the bombing, "a favorable result could be much earlier than if we are soft." Although he hoped that negotiations might produce a settlement, he doubted that the communists seriously wanted a fair peace.²⁰

But Anderson was not oblivious to arguments against the war. On one occasion in 1966, he refused Johnson's request to make a Senate speech asserting that the cost of the war would not require any sacrifices from the American people or undermine the stability of the economy. When he ran for reelection the same year, he parried questions about his views on Vietnam with the noncommittal answer that "I want to see the war end." Although he believed that most New Mexicans supported the administration and agreed with his position, he became increasingly perplexed about what the best course of action was in Vietnam. He opposed unilateral withdrawal but also worried that further escalation might bring Russia and China into the war. He saw little prospect for a negotiated settlement and admitted that he did "not know how to solve our problem in a manner which will be agreeable to everybody." Without any clear ideas of his own, he placed his faith in the president and his advisors to resolve the Vietnam dilemma in a satisfactory way. He approved of Johnson's bombing halt of October 1968 because he believed the president had access to enough secret intelligence and informed advice to make a wise judgment. "We are going to have to trust the President and his negotiators because they are doing their very best," he told one concerned constituent.²¹

Anderson had less faith that President Nixon could end the war gracefully than he had placed in Lyndon Johnson. By early 1969, he was also growing increasingly impatient and disillusioned with American involvement in Vietnam. "I agree with you that this is a bad war and that it should be ended," he wrote to a correspondent. "If some President doesn't stop it very shortly, the Congress may do so. I will not mourn if that should happen." The New Mexican supported Nixon's policy of "Vietnamization" because he thought it was a responsible path toward peace. The idea of training and supplying South Vietnamese soldiers to fight their own war was consistent with the position he had espoused in 1954, and he opposed keeping American troops in Southeast Asia "just to prop up the Thieu government." His only major objection to Nixon's phased withdrawal was that it was not proceeding rapidly enough.²²

The April 1970 announcement that American forces were moving into Cambodia caused Anderson to suspend his guarded support for Nixon's Vietnam policies and shattered his belief in presidential supremacy in foreign affairs. The Cambodian incursion, he remarked, "represented a dangerous departure" from Vietnamization because it deepened American involvement in the war. The letters that poured into his office from New Mexico opposed Nixon's action by a margin of seven to one, but Anderson, who had no intention of seeking another Senate term, was not motivated by political factors in taking his position. He reacted as he did because the Cambodian invasion persuaded him that the United States had grievously blundered in its Vietnam policies. "I agree with you we should not have sent our boys to Vietnam," he told one constituent. "I think we made a mistake." Regretting that he "had been late in seeing the error of continued escalation" and that he had consistently deferred to presidential authority in foreign affairs, he favored measures that he hoped would hasten the end of the war and check presidential abuse of power.²³

Anderson voted for an amendment to a foreign aid authorization bill proposed by Senators John Sherman Cooper and Frank Church that prohibited using funds to maintain U.S. combat forces in Cambodia. The Cooper-Church amendment, he believed, would prevent the president from initiating future military actions in Cambodia. He also backed a measure introduced by Senators George McGovern and Mark Hatfield to deny appropriations for American troops in Vietnam after a specified date. Anderson contended "that Congress must fulfill its obligation to the President and to the people by assuring a prompt and definitive end to American participation in the war." The most dramatic indication of his disenchantment with allowing the president too much latitude in foreign affairs and his determination to reaffirm rightful congressional authority was his vote in favor of the War Powers Bill in April 1972. By agreeing that the president's power to make war should be closely monitored by Congress, he was sharply departing from his previous view that restraining executive discretion in diplomatic matters could endanger the nation's welfare.²⁴

The Vietnam war led Anderson to modify his thinking about international affairs in other significant ways. Although he remained suspicious of the Soviet Union and concerned about the spread of communism, he was no longer certain that firmness and force were necessarily the best ways to deal with the communists. When President Nixon resumed intensive bombing raids against North Vietnam in April 1972, Anderson denounced him for pursuing "an irresistible urge for 'action' as opposed to patient, frustrating diplomacy." He no longer believed that communism was monolithic and that all Marxist movements took their orders from Moscow or Peking. He recognized the rivalry within the communist bloc between Russia and China, and also conceded that the Vietnamese struggle was more a civil war than a part of an international communist conspiracy. "The 1956 [sic] Geneva accords were never intended to divide Vietnam into two nations," he wrote in 1970, "and so it is true that we are indeed involved in a civil war in Asia." Anderson also lost faith in the soundness of the domino theory and its assumption that the loss of one domino could set off a chain of events that could undermine American security. He remarked to one war opponent after the Cambodian crisis: "I agree with you that our national interests are not served by the war."²⁵

In addition to precipitating a change in his outlook on current foreign policy issues, the Vietnam war altered Anderson's perspective on historical events. When he published his memoirs in 1970, he wrote of the early days of the cold war: "I realize better now than I did then that we made important contributions to the creation of mutual hostility and fear." As for the 1945 cabinet debate about sharing atomic information with the Soviet Union, he commented: "I often wonder now what different turn our relations with the Russians would have taken had Stimson's argument prevailed over mine. I certainly think we made our decision too casually and, with a quarter century of perspective to apply to the moment, I also think we were wrong in the decision we made." Anderson also wondered whether he might have influenced Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policies had he spoken out against the

war instead of opting to "remain faithful to my friend, the President." He concluded, however, that he could not have swayed Johnson because "Lyndon was a stubborn man and . . . was set on having his way."²⁶

Clinton P. Anderson's transformation from dedicated cold warrior to Vietnam dove was not unique, but it was significant nevertheless. Like most public officials not directly involved in diplomatic affairs and the overwhelming majority of Americans, he was usually preoccupied with matters of more immediate concern to him than foreign relations. When he was inevitably confronted with foreign policy problems, he generally relied on presidential judgment and the continuing applicability of policies formulated during the Truman years. The Vietnam war eroded his faith in superior executive wisdom and his commitment to the credos of the past. Anderson's protests against further escalation of the Vietnam war, his votes to restrict presidential power, and his revised historical perspective on the cold war did not assure the emergence of a more judicious or successful American position in world affairs. But the change in his views, along with a similar metamorphosis in the thinking of millions of other Americans, did signify a refusal to cling to doctrines devised in the late 1940s and a willingness to seek a more flexible foreign policy that could meet the demands of the vastly more complex world of the 1970s.

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