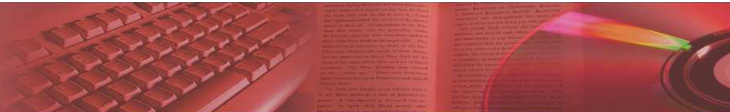

Richard A. Moss. *Nixon's Back Channel to Moscow: Confidential Diplomacy and Détente.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. 404 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-6787-9.

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Shortly after Donald Trump took office, his advisers began the process of creating a back channel to Russia. He intended to use this back channel to bypass traditional diplomatic officials as well as avoid monitoring by American intelligence agencies. The Trump administration was largely borrowing a script from the Richard Nixon administration. In the late 1960s, the incoming Nixon administration sought to find a way to cooperate with the Soviet Union. It too turned to a back channel, where the national security adviser Henry Kissinger could directly negotiate with the Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador. The Nixon administration pursued this approach to maintain control over foreign policy, avoiding the prying eyes of its own intelligence services as well as traditional diplomats.

Understanding how that back channel functioned is more important today than at any other point over the last forty years. This distinguishes Richard Moss's impressive book on the Nixon administration. Whereas many histories of the Nixon years describe the back channel, they do so in order to study issues such as Vietnam, arms control, or the Cold War more generally. Moss, by contrast, is interested in the back channel itself. By focusing on the institution, Moss is able to describe the advantages and liabilities that emerge from secret communications between leaders passed through a short string of intermediaries. This approach makes *Back Channel to Moscow* important for understanding significant modern political issues.

Most of the book describes the creation and use of the back channel until the Moscow Summit in 1972. The first chapter I found the most interesting. It describes the formation of the back channel, tracing its early development from the campaign in 1968 through his taking office. Then, the book traces how this early relationship grew in 1970 and 1971 to become the primary means through which the United States negotiated over issues such as arms control. The final three chapters discuss how the back channel was used in negotiations over crises in South Asia and Vietnam.

The book largely relies on the direct record of back channel correspondence.[1] Whenever Kissinger and Dobrynin met, they each independently produced a transcript or summary. These documents are interesting in part because they provide two perspectives on almost every conversation. Within international relations scholarship, scholars have used these documents to address questions of perception and misperception, but Moss's book is the first to tackle these through the focused lens of a kind of institutional history.[2]

Moss's findings are interesting and perhaps controversial. Many analyses of Nixon's back channel negotiations find that they were often counterproductive. The back channel empowered Kissinger and largely just Kissinger to negotiate. He had little oversight and often did not consult others for advice, even on technical issues beyond his area of expertise. No single person is capable of understanding the details of such far-ranging negotiations.[3] Many historians believe that it was Nixon's paranoia and Kissinger's lust for power that drove them

to pursue secret negotiations at the expense of a more rational, open, and democratic approach.[4] Moss acknowledges that these problems were important in the development of the back channel and often undermined US interests.

Moss, however, also believes that this process was productive. Without the back channel, US-Soviet relations may not have improved as much as they did. He highlights several ways, but I want to concentrate on two particularly important ones. First, back channel negotiations can insulate negotiations from public attention. By keeping negotiations over issues like arms control secret, the superpowers could explore options for compromise without having to publicly commit to positions. This dramatically expands the odds of reaching compromise. Second, as the superpowers began to cooperate and move toward the Moscow Summit, they could collude through the back channel to jointly manage crises. For example, the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive led to a political crisis shortly before the summit. Nixon escalated in Vietnam in response, which threatened an end to détente. Moss describes how confidential communications between Kissinger and Dobrynin helped smooth over relations by allowing the superpowers to reassure each other that this did not threaten the continued improvement of US-Soviet relations.

As a political scientist, I find many ways that Moss's book might inform contemporary debates on international cooperation. One important issue that *Nixon's Back Channel* discusses relates to the collusion between the superpowers to cooperate with one another to prevent the public or bureaucracy from disrupting cooperation. This is a form of "tacit collusion" that has been the subject of increased attention by political scientists.[5] This book raises interesting questions about democratic process and governmental effectiveness that merit attention, especially in a world in which foreign policy has become hyperpoliticized.

Perhaps more importantly, the book raises questions about the interaction of presidential personality and institutions. International relations scholars have long debated the role of institutions in managing collective problems. The factors often cited for the choice of what kind of institution to rely on often relate to the nature of the cooperation problem. For example, some issues might be most efficiently handled in multilateral negotiations, whereas others in bilateral talks. Moss's book, by contrast, accurately observes that the means by which adversaries negotiate may reflect decision-makers' personalities. The problems which they grapple with—bureaucratic infighting, a desire for political credit, or mistrust of the press—also matter and sometimes quite decisively for how institutions are designed and cooperation managed.

Despite these contributions, I am left wondering whether the back channel was as helpful as Moss proposes. Throughout the book, one is left with the impression that the secret nature of the back channel reflected or reinforced an unproductive desire for secrecy rather than solved concrete problems. For example, when writing about the Strategic Arms Limitation talks and Berlin, Moss writes that "traditional negotiations" by Nixon "might have been possible but would have been extremely unlikely considering the personalities and preferences not only of Nixon and Kissinger but also of the Soviet leadership." The problem Moss notes was that Nixon and Kissinger were obsessed with secrecy and were "an administration plagued by leaks and worried that the bureaucracy could deny political capital to the politically sensitive White House" (p. 106).

In this example, the back channel reflected problems (a need for secrecy and desire for credit) more than it overcame tangible barriers to cooperation. The barriers to cooperation that the back channel addressed were barriers created by the administration itself. If the Nixon administration had been willing to spend political capital on its foreign policy, had appointed trusted agents for traditional negotiations, or if Nixon and Kissinger had been more concerned with getting policy right than their status and legacy, then the back channel might not have been necessary. In other words, the problem the Nixon administration faced was itself and the back channel may have reflected rather than solved that problem. Determining whether the back channel does more than gratify presidential egos seems particularly relevant to understanding its lessons for contemporary issues.

Showing that the back channel helped the US pursue its national interests might require a different set of comparisons than Moss makes, focusing specifically on whether it was more successful than traditional negotiations. This is a more difficult question to answer. On its face, it is plausible that traditional talks about issues such as arms control may have been more likely to address a broader range of arms control issues, such as Multiple Independently Targeted Re-entry Vehicles.[6] In addition, open and public talks may have led to longer-lasting results. The Kissinger-Dobrynin channel was as much a personal relationship as an institutional one. Whereas

open and public talks may have created durable fora, the back channel was prone to decay after when Kissinger left the White House and Dobrynin returned to Moscow.

Moss's book is strongest when he explains why and how the back channel was used. Answering these questions, however, requires comparisons to cases in which it was not used. These questions do not undermine the value of *Back Channel to Moscow*. Moss convincingly shows that the back channel often helps insulate issues from political pressure and itself can be used as a form of leverage to encourage others to cooperate. Yet, there are deeper questions triggered by this interesting book that require further reflection by historians, political scientists, and policymakers.

Notes

[1]. State Department, Henry Alfred Kissinger, and Anatoly Dobrynin, *Soviet–American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972*, ed. Edward C. Keefer, David C. Geyer, and Douglas E. Selvage (Washington, DC: United States Department of State, 2007).

[2]. Eric Grynaviski, "Necessary Illusions: Misperception, Cooperation, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty," *Security Studies* 19, no. 3 (2010): 376–406, and *Constructive Illusions: Misperceiving the Origins of International Cooperation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[3]. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1994).

[4]. Jussi Hanhimäki, *A Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit, 1983); and Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

[5]. Austin Carson, "Facing Off and Saving Face: Covert Intervention and Escalation Management in the Korean War," *International Organization* 70, no. 1 (2016): 103–31.

[6]. This perspective is explicitly adopted in Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of SALT I* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980).

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