

“Jerry, Don’t Go”: Domestic Opposition to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act

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Though now seen as a key turning point in the Cold War, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act provoked considerable opposition in the United States. The principal line of criticism was that the United States had given away too much in the negotiations and had required little of the Soviets. The Helsinki Final Act initially was unpopular domestically with Eastern European ethnic groups as well as members of Congress due to concerns about its implications for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. At the root of many of these complaints was a larger critique of United States President Gerald Ford’s policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union. Understanding the sources of opposition to the Helsinki Final Act in the United States illuminates the potential conflict between foreign policy formulation and domestic politics, and it reflects the Ford administration’s inability to explain his support for the agreement to the American public. Furthermore, the controversy engendered by the Helsinki Final Act illustrates how contentious Cold War politics remained even in an era of supposed *détente* with the Soviet Union and demonstrates the extent to which the pact’s long-term benefits were unforeseen by participants at the time. The Ford administration was never able to counter condemnation of the Helsinki Final Act sufficiently, enhancing existing skepticism about his leadership and policy toward the Soviet Union.

The 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which was the concluding document of the three-year Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and contained far-reaching agreements on political borders, military confidence-building measures, trade, and human rights norms, has often been described as the “high point of *détente*.” It was a key diplomatic turning point in the Cold War, as over time the Helsinki Final Act spurred the development of a transnational network committed to its implementation and inspired popular movements against the communist regimes.¹ Yet initially the agreement

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¹ Representatives of 35 European and North American countries signed the Helsinki Final Act on 1 Aug. 1975, including United States President Gerald Ford and Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. Mike Bowker and Phil Williams, *Superpower Détente: A Reappraisal* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1988), 63; Peter Wallensteen,

proved to be controversial in the United States, as the Soviets claimed triumph in its wake and both the Western press and the American public interpreted the agreement negatively. The principal line of criticism was that the agreement served Soviet, not American, objectives; many critics incorrectly believed that the Helsinki Final Act formally recognized the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and acquiesced to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.² Opposition to the Helsinki Final Act in many ways echoed the broader debate within the United States about détente with the Soviet Union, as critics argued that the United States was giving away too much without securing sufficient concessions in return. Hostility mounted in the spring and early summer of 1975 as the CSCE negotiations concluded, with United States President Gerald Ford coming under considerable public pressure not to attend the signing ceremony in Helsinki. Nevertheless, Ford traveled to Finland to affix his signature to the controversial document, believing his presence was important for allied unity and Soviet–American détente. The White House, however, failed to manage the controversy deftly, which politically damaged Ford’s presidency and contributed to his electoral defeat in 1976.

Scholars have increasingly focussed on the CSCE negotiations that produced the Helsinki Final Act, on the meetings that followed to review its implementation, and on the agreement’s long-term influence in Europe, but there has been limited examination of domestic responses to the agreement.³ Understanding the sources of opposition to the Helsinki Final Act in the United States illuminates the potential conflict between foreign-policy formulation and domestic politics and reflects the Ford administration’s inability to explain its support for the agreement to the American public. Furthermore, the controversy engendered by the Helsinki Final Act illustrates how contentious Cold War politics remained even in an era of

“American Soviet Détente: What Went Wrong?,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 22, 1 (March 1985), 1–8, 1; Gregory A. Flynn, “The Content of European Detente,” *Orbis*, 20 (Summer 1976), 401–16, 402–3; William G. Hyland, *Mortal Rivals: Superpower Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1987), 10; and Sarah B. Snyder, “The Helsinki Process, American Foreign Policy, and the End of the Cold War” (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2006).

² Flynn, 411; and William Korey, *The Promises We Keep: Human Rights, the Helsinki Process and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Institute for East West Studies, 1993), xxii.

³ See, for example, Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Andreas Wenger, Vojtech Mastny, and Christian Nuenlist, eds., *Origins of the European Security System: The Helsinki Process Revisited, 1965–75* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Leopoldo Nuti, ed., *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975–1985* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

supposed détente with the Soviet Union and demonstrates the extent to which the pact’s long-term benefits were unforeseen by participants at the time.

The initial impetus for the CSCE was a 1954 Soviet proposal, but momentum did not develop in support of a European security conference until the late 1960s. The CSCE negotiations were not a high priority for Richard Nixon’s administration; Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger focussed their attention instead on strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) with the Soviets, the quadripartite negotiations regarding Berlin, and the situation in the Middle East. As the CSCE progressed, however, the United States became increasingly engaged in the conference due to Soviet and Western European interest. By the time Ford became President in August 1974, the United States had been immersed in CSCE talks for almost two years. Nonetheless, the United States remained uninterested and aloof from the day-to-day bargaining for much of the negotiations, which may have hindered its later efforts to portray the agreement as significant and beneficial to United States interests.

Ford’s policy toward the Helsinki Final Act must be analyzed in the context of United States relations with Western Europe and the Soviet Union, which were the key factors in American involvement in the CSCE and support for the agreement. First, the long-held American commitment to allied unity within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had guided United States actions for much of the CSCE negotiations.⁴ Given the number of Western European leaders traveling to Helsinki, it would have been divisive for the United States to refuse to attend the signing ceremony.⁵ In addition, the desire to perpetuate Soviet–American détente motivated Ford. The United States had agreed to join the CSCE negotiations to preserve détente with the Soviets, and the same rationale persisted when the administration decided to attend the CSCE summit finale, as the high-profile meeting was important to the Soviet leadership.⁶ Moreover, Ford thought that in political terms, the Helsinki Final Act was a victory for the West, especially the language that stated that borders could be changed by peaceful means.⁷

⁴ Briefing Transcript, 23 July 1975, Material Not Related to the Press – Background Briefings by Administration Officials (File No. 2), Box 40, Ron Nessen Files, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan (hereafter GRFL).

⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (New York: Little, Brown, 1982), 1164–65.

⁶ John C. Campbell, “European Security after Helsinki: Some American Views,” *Government and Opposition*, 11, 3 (Summer 1976), 322–5.

⁷ Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 298–99.

Support for the Helsinki Final Act was consistent with the Ford administration's commitment to allied unity and to a strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, but it engendered considerable domestic controversy and weakened Ford's political clout at home, highlighting the difficulty in balancing American diplomatic aims with domestic realities. In the United States, the agreement initially was unpopular particularly with Eastern European ethnic groups as well as with members of Congress due to concerns about its implications for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. The presidents of the Polish American Congress and the Baltic World Conference, for example, expressed strong opposition to the Helsinki Final Act in letters to Ford.⁸ Some Eastern European interest group leaders even likened Ford's upcoming trip to Helsinki to the Yalta summit, which many regarded as having consigned Eastern Europe to Soviet domination.⁹ Similarly, Jewish groups were particularly concerned about the effect of the agreement on emigration from the Soviet Union.

Ethnic groups were not alone in their opposition to the Helsinki Final Act. A sampling of White House correspondence on the issue revealed 558 letters against the agreement and only thirty-two letters of support. One example was from John J. Stang, commander-in-chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who alleged that there was a "gratuitous write-off of Eastern Europe implicit in the Helsinki Accord."¹⁰ As Ford prepared for his trip to Helsinki, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial pleaded, "Jerry, don't go."¹¹

Making matters worse, members of both parties criticized Ford. Former California governor Ronald Reagan condemned Ford's trip to Helsinki, saying it had placed "our stamp of approval on Russia's enslavement of the captive nations" of Eastern Europe, and he declared at a different point,

⁸ Weissman to Ford, 24 July 1975; Declaration, 30 July 1975, 8/1/75 CSCE (4), Box 176, Robert T. Hartmann Papers, GRFL; and Jacobs to Ford, 30 July 1975, IT 104 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Box 14, White House Central Files (hereafter WHCF), *ibid.*; and Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 301.

⁹ Representatives from the Polish American Congress, Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, Slovak League of America, Hungarian Organization and Churches, Albanian Liberation Fund, Lithuanian Organization Center, Croatian Organization of Michigan, Latvian Association of Michigan, Estonian War Veterans, and the Bylorussian Association of Michigan signed the letter. Mailgram et al. to Ford, 23 July 1975, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe 8/9/74-7/31/75, IT 104, Box 13, WHCF, GRFL.

¹⁰ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 301; and telegram, Stang to Ford, 25 July 1975, IT 104 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe 8/9/74-7/31/75, Box 13, WHCF, GRFL.

¹¹ Editorial, "Jerry, Don't Go," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 1975, 14.

“I’m against it.”¹² Conservative Democrats disagreed with Ford’s policies as well. In criticizing the Helsinki Final Act as “one-sided,” Senator Henry M. Jackson (Dem., WA) said, “There are times in international diplomacy when the President of the United States ought to stay home.”¹³ According to diplomatic historian Jussi Hanhimäki, Jackson’s critique of Ford’s foreign policy and his trip to Helsinki was more damaging than Reagan’s because Jackson was “even more ferocious – and certainly more articulate” than the former governor.¹⁴ In addition, George Ball, Under Secretary of State during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, charged that the agreement represented “a defeat for the West,” saying, “It is one thing to refrain from starting World War III over Prague; it is quite another to drink toasts to the division of Europe and implicitly sanctify with banal phrases Germany’s continued amputation.”¹⁵ Much of the opposition was ideological, though some of the resistance can be attributed to insufficient consultation with Congress on the issue, prompting White House attempts to assure members of Congress that their concerns had been addressed in the CSCE negotiations and that the Helsinki Final Act was a success for the Western allies.¹⁶

The nation’s editorial pages tended to agree with Ford’s critics, suggesting that Ford should not travel to Helsinki and dismissing the content and value of the Helsinki Final Act. A *Charlotte Observer* editorial declared, “We believe [Ford] is guilty of a serious misjudgment and should not be going to Helsinki.”¹⁷ The *New York Times* expressed a degree of skepticism about the

¹² Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 444; and Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 661.

¹³ AP, “Helsinki Border-Setting Denied,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 23 July 1975, Press Clipping Helsinki, 1975, Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe Archives, Prague, Czech Republic (hereafter OSCE Archives); and Kim Wilkinson et al., “Ford’s Big Gamble on Détente,” *Newsweek*, 4 Aug. 1975, *ibid.* ¹⁴ Hanhimäki, 436.

¹⁵ Robert Kennedy Eichhorn, “The Helsinki Accords and Their Effect on the Cold War” (M.A. thesis, California State University, Fullerton, 1995), 8.

¹⁶ Memorandum, Marsh to Ford, 22 July 1975, Trips – Foreign (1), Box 49, Presidential Handwriting File, GRFL; Transcript, 24 July 1975, No. 280, Box 11, Ron Nessen Files, *ibid.*; Robert Kleinman, “Détente: Past and Future,” *International Herald Tribune*, 23 May 1975, Press Clipping Helsinki, 1975, OSCE Archives; Editorial, “A Price from Russia,” *The Economist*, 3 May 1975, *ibid.*; Press Conference, 25 July 1975, Presidential Foreign Trips: July 26–August 4, 1975 Press Notes (1), Presidential Subject File, Box 5, John W. “Bill” Roberts Papers, GRFL; and Kendall to Curtis et al., 29 July 1975, IT 194 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Box 13, WHCF, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Editorial, *Charlotte Observer*, 29 July 1975, Judith F. Buncher, ed., *Human Rights & American Diplomacy, 1975–77* (New York: Facts on File, 1977), 28. See also *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 July 1975, 7/26-8/4/75 News Summaries (1), Box 67, Presidential Trips, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL; and Alfred Friendly Jr., “Cold War to Cold Peace,” *Newsweek*, 21 July 1975, 6.

agreement and its long-term significance: “Moscow will thereby get what it wants immediately – the summit meeting that will seem to consecrate the status quo. But it will be years before the West will know how much, if at all, the Soviet Union will carry out its own vague promises.”¹⁸ The American media misread the results of the CSCE negotiations and portrayed the agreement as a Soviet victory, leading one CSCE supporter to write, “What the USSR may have failed to achieve at Geneva, it almost totally recouped at Helsinki through the North American press.”¹⁹

The opposition was not universal, however, as a minority of observers recognized the potential impact of an international obligation to express concern over domestic practices.²⁰ A July 1975 *Los Angeles Times* editorial observed, “There is a feeling in some quarters, nonetheless, that the declaration is worthwhile because it establishes a code of conduct that the Soviet Union cannot ignore without being called to account.”²¹ The *Chicago Sun-Times* noted that critics neglected “the reality of Europe 30 years after World War II and the extraordinary achievement of having the two camps free to co-operate in the political, economic and humanitarian fields.”²²

Domestic opposition to the Helsinki Final Act must also be viewed within the broader context of American–Soviet relations, because at the root of much of the criticism was a larger critique of Ford’s policy of détente. In advance of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, the fall of Saigon, fighting in Angola, the 1973 war in the Middle East, and failure to reach a SALT II agreement had signaled the “virtual breakdown of détente.”²³ Thus in the summer of 1975, the CSCE became a focal point for critics who believed the United States had conceded too much in pursuit of détente and questioned whether the policy’s promise had been fulfilled.²⁴

¹⁸ Editorial, “The 35-Nation Summit,” *International Herald Tribune*, 21–22 June 1975, Press Clipping Helsinki, 1975, OSCE Archives. *New York Times* editorial reprinted in *International Herald Tribune*.

¹⁹ Harold Russell, “The Helsinki Declaration: Brobdingnag or Lilliput?” *American Journal of International Law*, 70, 2 (April 1976), 252. The CSCE negotiations had dragged on behind closed doors for years, a recipe for an uninterested and misinformed press. To characterize the scale of the CSCE, there were 4,700 proposals, drafts, and papers; 2,500 formal sessions; and thousands of informal meetings. Yuri Kashlev, “The CSCE in the Soviet Union’s Politics,” *International Affairs* (USSR), 7 (1992), 66–7.

²⁰ Elizabeth Spiro, “A Paradigm Shift in US Foreign Policy,” *Worldview*, 20, 1–2 (1977), 42–47, 47.

²¹ Editorial, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July 1975, 8/1/75 CSCE (1), Box 175, Robert T. Hartman Papers, GRFL.

²² Editorial, “Europe’s Act of Trust,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 23 July 1975, Press Clipping Helsinki, 1975, OSCE Archives.

²³ Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect*, xx, 271.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 433; and Campbell, “European Security after Helsinki,” 322–36.

Given growing opposition, Ford and his advisers worked to dispel concerns about the terms of the agreement with mixed results. In one instance during the CSCE negotiations, Ford met with nine representatives from Baltic American ethnic groups and Representative Edward J. Derwinski (Rep., IL) on 27 February 1975 and reiterated the United States commitment to nonrecognition of Soviet control of the Baltic states.²⁵ This meeting marked the beginning of a long pattern of administration officials reaching out to ethnic interest groups to gain support for United States CSCE policy. In a later, more prominent move, Ford invited sixteen ethnic leaders as well as seven members of Congress to the White House to raise their objections on 25 July 1975 shortly before his departure for Helsinki.²⁶ In the meeting, Ford reaffirmed United States nonrecognition of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states, saying,

I would like to make it clear that the United States official non-recognition of the Soviet incorporation of the Baltic states is not affected by the results of the CSCE. We have never recognized the Soviet incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and we are not doing so at CSCE.²⁷

He noted that the failure of the Helsinki Final Act would not fundamentally harm United States or European interests, but the Act’s success could improve the lives of those living in Eastern Europe.²⁸ Highlighting that it was the “first time in American political history that a President met with a cross-section of American ethnic leaders before attending an international conference,” Ford’s remarks prompted Representative Derwinski to declare, “I think President Ford’s decision to participate in the conference was proper.”²⁹ Thus the meeting with ethnic leaders “temporarily defused”

²⁵ John B. Genys, “The Joint Baltic American Committee and the European Security Conference,” *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 9, 3 (Fall 1978), 245–58, 249–50. The United States had long maintained nonrecognition of the Soviet acquisition of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

²⁶ As outlined by Kissinger to Ford, the purpose of his meeting was to convince ethnic leaders that the Helsinki Final Act was not a treaty, would not harm the interests of Baltic Americans, and could foster European peace. Memorandum, Kissinger to Ford, Administrative Subject File, Presidential Meeting with House Members, July 1975, Box 6, Max L. Friedersdorf Files, GRFL; Transcript, 24 July 1975, No. 280, Box 11, Ron Nessen Files, GRFL; and Genys, 251–4.

²⁷ Amy Schapiro, *Millicent Fenwick: Her Way* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 166.

²⁸ Statement, 25 July 1975, IT 104 10/1/75-10/7/75, Box 14, WHCF, GRFL.

²⁹ News Release, 25 July 1975, Folder 2, Box 138, Aloysius A. Mazewski Papers, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

criticism on one front, though Ford could not replicate his success with the broader public.³⁰

To American negotiators and policymakers, criticism of the Helsinki Final Act was frustrating because, in their view, it was based on a flawed interpretation of the final agreement. In Ford's words, "No journey I made during my Presidency was so widely misunderstood."³¹ Kissinger and Ford realized it would be difficult to garner public support for the Helsinki accords, but through his speeches at home and in Finland, Ford tried to change public opinion.³² Ford also visited with many Americans to discuss the agreement, arguing as always that the United States was not recognizing the Soviet annexation of the Baltics but rather was strengthening the independence of Eastern European countries.³³

The Ford administration was stymied in its attempts to build support for the Helsinki Final Act by a long track record of inept relations with the public, as it repeatedly mismanaged public perceptions of the agreement. One of the most prominent factors in fostering mounting criticism was the controversy that developed over a proposal that exiled Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn visit the White House.³⁴ The debate began when American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO) President George Meany invited Ford to attend a 30 June 1975 banquet hosted by the AFL–CIO to honor Solzhenitsyn. The State Department recommended that Ford decline the invitation and that no representative from the White House be sent in his place due to concerns not only about offending the Soviets, but also about the awkward questions such a meeting could raise concerning Solzhenitsyn's negative opinions of the United States and its allies.³⁵ The National Security Council (NSC)

³⁰ Donald Pienkos, *For Your Freedom through Ours: Polish American Efforts on Poland's Behalf, 1863–1991* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 170.

³¹ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 300; Wilfried Loth, *Overcoming the Cold War: A History of Détente, 1950–1991*, trans. Robert F. Hogg (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 7; and Korey, *The Promises We Keep*, 1.

³² Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect*, 437.

³³ Not surprisingly, NSC staffer A. Denis Clift reported that many were not convinced. A. Denis Clift, *With Presidents to the Summit* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1993), 95.

³⁴ The Soviets expelled Solzhenitsyn in February 1974 after threatening him with treason charges for his writings about Soviet prisons.

³⁵ Memorandum, Springsteen to Scowcroft, 26 June 1975, Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I, Presidential Name File, National Security Adviser, GRFL; and Memorandum, Clift to Kissinger, 26 June 1975, *ibid.*

similarly advised against a meeting, fearing that it could be an “insult” to the Soviet Union.³⁶

Outside the administration, however, the lack of White House participation caused considerable consternation given Solzhenitsyn’s moral authority. Senator Jesse Helms (Rep., NC), one of many conservative Republicans unhappy with the administration’s refusal to honor Solzhenitsyn, demanded the President explain it.³⁷ The White House decision also received widely negative press coverage, including a column by George F. Will that said, “Obviously Solzhenitsyn is correct: Détente, as practiced by the United States, prevents even gestures of support for the cause of human rights in the Soviet Union.”³⁸ Inept White House management of the story exacerbated the reaction; when Press Secretary Ron Nessen was asked if there were diplomatic reasons behind Ford’s choice, he replied, “I don’t get the feeling that that is a factor ... The President has quite a crowded schedule this week.” His response raised incredulity when the press noted that Ford’s schedule was free enough to meet the soccer player Pelé.³⁹

In response to criticism, White House Chief of Staff Dick Cheney suggested changing Nessen’s press guidance to indicate consideration of a meeting with Solzhenitsyn. In Cheney’s view, a visit could improve Ford’s standing with conservative Republicans in advance of the strategic arms limitations talks, as well as signal that Ford supported resisting Soviet oppression.⁴⁰ Echoing Cheney’s concerns, Ford staffer Max Friedersdorf summarized the political implications of this refusal: “I am concerned about the Solzhenitsyn issue and its impact on the right wing on the Hill ... I just don’t think this issue is going to go away with the conservatives and, of course, it has adverse impact with the liberals too.” In contrast to the advice from the State Department and the NSC, Friedersdorf disagreed with the suggestion that receiving Solzhenitsyn would threaten détente: “With all due deference to Dr. Kissinger, I believe that if détente is so fragile that it cannot

³⁶ Memorandum, Rourke to Marsh, 26 June 1975, Solzhenitsyn, Box 30, John Marsh Files, GRFL.

³⁷ Memorandum, Rourke to Marsh, 30 June 1975, Solzhenitsyn, Box 30, John Marsh Files, GRFL.

³⁸ George F. Will, “Solzhenitsyn and the President,” *The Washington Post*, Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, Box 10, Richard Cheney Files, GRFL.

³⁹ The press pushed Nessen on this answer noting that the “President can see anyone he cares to see, and that he can fit anyone he wants to see into his schedule. There must be a reason why he is not willing to see Mr. Solzhenitsyn.” News Conference Transcript, 1 July 1975 (No. 259), Box 10, Ron Nessen Files, GRFL.

⁴⁰ Memorandum, Cheney to Rumsfeld, 8 July 1975, Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, Box 10, Richard Cheney Files, GRFL.

stand a meeting with Solzhenitsyn, it will fall on some other account.”⁴¹ As the White House reconsidered its decision, Solzhenitsyn issued a statement that condemned Ford’s stance on Helsinki, describing it as a “betrayal of Eastern Europe,” effectively ending the chances of a Ford–Solzhenitsyn meeting.⁴²

The combination of Ford’s refusal to see Solzhenitsyn and his planned trip to Helsinki exacerbated conservatives’ concerns about Ford as President.⁴³ Foreshadowing his upcoming nomination challenge to Ford, Reagan wrote in his newspaper column on 18 July 1975,

Apparently some of President Ford’s foreign policy advisers are so nervous about bruising the sensibilities of the Soviets that they have persuaded him not to meet the man who is considered by many to be the world’s greatest living writer and its most profound spokesman for human freedom and morality.⁴⁴

Controversy over Solzhenitsyn and the Helsinki Final Act would persist throughout their competition for the Republican nomination and the general election campaign that followed.

The absence of a clear, consistent message explaining the significance of the Helsinki Final Act to the American people mired the Ford administration’s communications strategy. Earlier in the negotiations, Kissinger and the administration had tried to downplay the substance of the talks.⁴⁵ The administration had de-emphasized the CSCE in part to avoid suggesting that the agreement signaled an end to the Cold War, which could have led to a decline in public support for troop deployments and arms spending,

⁴¹ Memorandum, Friedersdorf to Ford, 12 July 1975, Solzhenitsyn, Box 30, John Marsh Files, GRFL.

⁴² Editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, 23 July 1975, Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy*, 52; and Editorial, “Europe’s Act of Trust.”

⁴³ Robin Kolodny, “The 1976 Republican Nomination: An Examination of the Organizational Dynamic,” in Bernard J. Firestone and Alexej Ugrinsky, eds., *Gerald R. Ford and the Politics of Post-Watergate America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 586; Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 165; Curt Lewis Rose, “Political Suicide: The Controversial Decisions of the Ford Administration” (M.A. thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1996), 74–5; and Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 140.

⁴⁴ “The Ronald Reagan Column,” 18 July 1975, 8/1/75 CSCE (1), Box 175, Robert T. Hartman Papers, GRFL.

⁴⁵ The conduct of American foreign policy under Kissinger, secretive and guided by realpolitik, led to a suspicious and often confused public response to the Helsinki Final Act. John J. Maresca, *To Helsinki: The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1973–75*, rev. edn (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 217.

concerns raised by the Mansfield Amendment.⁴⁶ The administration’s strategy also prevented more widespread education about the Act and its potential benefits to the West. Most significantly, members of the Ford administration did not effectively communicate that by the time CSCE negotiations had begun, the Soviets already had achieved many of their goals through bilateral treaties with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).⁴⁷ As a result, most Americans did not recognize that the Soviets did not actually gain ground relative to previously existent international agreements and that, in Kissinger’s words, “the borders were legally established long ago.”⁴⁸

Beyond failing to present its case to the public articulately, the Ford administration bungled numerous public relations opportunities. The first prominent example was the White House’s mishandling of the proposed Solzhenitsyn visit, and the second major controversy occurred on the day Ford left for the Helsinki summit. Before departing on 26 July 1975, he spoke to an assembled crowd at Andrews Air Force Base, stressing the long negotiations required to achieve the agreement and the potential positive influence of the Helsinki Final Act on European relations.⁴⁹ His speech, however, omitted a sentence that had been included in the version previously provided to the press: “The United States has never recognized the Soviet incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and is not going to do so at Helsinki.” According to his biographer Walter Isaacson, Kissinger was furious about the sentence when he saw a draft of Ford’s remarks because he interpreted it as an insult to the Soviets and reportedly told National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and White House aide Robert Hartmann, “You will pay for this! I tell you, heads will roll.” Kissinger was adamant that Ford not utter the sentence during his speech at Andrews Air Force Base. The President did not, but the press had seen the original version of his speech and picked up the story. This discrepancy, especially because the omitted sentence referred to the Baltic states, resurrected many concerns about the CSCE and Ford’s decision to go to Helsinki.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Russell, “The Helsinki Declaration,” 242. Senator Mike Mansfield (Dem., MT) regularly introduced an amendment calling for a significant reduction of American forces in Europe beginning in 1966.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 245–6. Russell points out, however, that the Soviets remained committed to the conference due to the significant personal prestige that Brezhnev had invested.

⁴⁸ Jussi Hanhimäki, “‘They Can Write it in Swahili’: Kissinger, the Soviets, and the Helsinki Accords, 1973–1975,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 1, 1 (2003), 37–58, 38; and Russell, 249.

⁴⁹ Gerald R. Ford, *Public Papers of the President 1975: II* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), 1043–47.

⁵⁰ The remarks were intended to placate Americans of Eastern European descent. Isaacson suggests that the controversy over Helsinki was more grounded in rhetoric than in

The controversy followed Ford on his trip to Europe. Later that day in Bonn, en route to Finland, Nessen tried to imply that the differences between Ford's prepared remarks and the actual statement were unsubstantial, but a reporter noted that Ford "omitted a significant concession that they had persuaded the Warsaw Pact nations to talk about peaceful adjustments to the frontier. He omitted the fact that the United States had never recognized Soviet incorporation of the Baltic states."⁵¹ The international press picked up American journalists' close attention to the last-minute changes and ran stories on the issue in a number of European newspapers the following day.⁵² Henry Jackson later criticized Ford's revision of his departure remarks at Andrews Air Force Base, writing, "One can only conclude that the President of the United States has been either intimidated by Brezhnev or cajoled by Kissinger into backing away from the principled United States position on the national independence and individual rights of the Baltic and Eastern European peoples."⁵³ Ford's departure statement also prompted protests from ethnic groups; Edward Derwinski contacted the White House to suggest a public statement on the Baltic states during Ford's trip to diminish the outcry.⁵⁴

In his speech to the assembled heads of state, Ford made his most prominent effort to cast the Helsinki Final Act in a positive light, suggesting that the CSCE offered an opportunity for Europe to overcome its divisive past and reestablish positive intra-European relations. Ford had asked his speechwriters to emphasize "hope" and, against Kissinger's advice, strengthen the speech's rhetoric.⁵⁵ He referenced the long-standing connections between the American and European peoples, including the ancestral links to Europe that many Americans felt. In his most famous remarks, Ford emphasized implementation of the agreement: "History will judge this Conference not by what we say here today, but by what we

substance and that that was why disagreements over speeches became so significant. Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 661.

⁵¹ Press Briefing Transcript, 26 July 1975 (No. 283), Box 11, Ron Nessen Files, GRFL.

⁵² Telegram, USINFO to RUEADWW, 27 July 1975, 7/26-8/4/75 Media Reaction, Box 66, Presidential Trips, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL.

⁵³ News From Senator Henry M. Jackson, 28 July 1975, European Security Conference Helsinki, Box 15 Unprocessed, Joint Baltic American National Committee Records, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁵⁴ Memorandum, Marsh to Cheney, 29 July 1975, Helsinki Trip, 7/75-8/75, Box 18, John Marsh Files, GRFL; and Genys, "The Joint Baltic American Committee and the European Security Conference," 252-3.

⁵⁵ AP, "Ford Overruled Kissinger, Toughened Helsinki Speech," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 9 Aug. 1975, A-3, Press Clipping Helsinki, 1975, OSCE Archives; and Note, 3 July 1975, Speeches (3), Box 43, Presidential Handwriting File, GRFL.

do tomorrow – not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep.”⁵⁶ Ford’s strong stand at Helsinki was intended to impress Eastern leaders and to quiet domestic critics of his trip. The *Los Angeles Times* regarded it as “probably Mr. Ford’s most impressive speech.”⁵⁷

Nevertheless, Ford’s speech did not diminish the disapproving editorial coverage of the trip and the Final Act, and the enduring controversy testified to the Ford administration’s inability to frame the agreement as in American national interests. As Kissinger noted, Ford faced a difficult challenge in Helsinki:

The solemnity of the occasion will favor the Soviet Union, as will the simplicity of the Soviet message – that peace has arrived. The West has a more complex story to tell: that CSCE achievements are modest, that the proof of the CSCE’s success lies in the future, and that a strong Allied defense posture is a precondition for security and future détente.⁵⁸

Opposition had hardened such that a single speech could not shift the consensus, particularly given the intangible, short-term impact CSCE proponents predicted. The *Manchester Union Leader*, a staunchly conservative paper, sharply criticized Ford and Kissinger for having “gone to Helsinki to put their stamp of approval on this recognition of the permanent enslavement of these millions of people.”⁵⁹ Similarly, a *Chicago Daily News* columnist opined, “If the experience of the past 50 years teaches us anything, it should teach us that the Soviets have no intention of seriously honoring any substantive part of the Helsinki declaration.”⁶⁰

Upon his return on 4 August 1975, Ford asserted that his trip to Helsinki had reinforced American support for liberty and peace in Eastern Europe.⁶¹ However prescient Ford may have been, at the time few recognized the accord’s potential strategic value for improving human rights in Eastern

⁵⁶ Address, 1 Aug. 1975, United States Department of State, *The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: Public Statements and Documents, 1954–1986* (Washington: US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of the Historian, 1986).

⁵⁷ Schapiro, *Millicent Fenwick*, 167.

⁵⁸ Memorandum, Kissinger to Ford, n.d., Folder 8, Box 15, Office of the Secretary, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–1977, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

⁵⁹ Editorial, *Manchester Union Leader*, 1 Aug. 1975, Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy*, 25.

⁶⁰ James J. Kirkpatrick, “Helsinki: Windblown Ambiguity,” *Chicago Daily News*, 1 Aug. 1975, Press Clipping Helsinki, 1975, OSCE Archives.

⁶¹ Statement, 4 Aug. 1975, 8/1/75 CSCE (4), Box 176, Robert T. Hartmann Papers, GRFL.

Europe.⁶² In retrospect, Cheney suggested that Ford was motivated by his own moral compass, saying,

At Helsinki, we were about to establish an international standard for the recognition of human rights – standards which the Soviet Union agreed to and has been held accountable for ever since. The president took a detailed and personal interest in these accords, and I believe they have been helpful to people everywhere who love freedom. As we all know, the president was handed a good deal of criticism for Helsinki, much of it from within his own party. Still, he did what he thought was right, and not simply what he thought would help him win in November.⁶³

Available documentation reveals that Ford's decision to travel to Helsinki was guided as much by his personal understanding of the agreement as by its significance to Soviet and NATO leaders.⁶⁴

Unforeseen at the time was the extent to which the Helsinki Final Act's follow-up mechanism, commitment to respect for human rights, and provisions for human contacts would foster the development of a transnational network that would shape political and social reform in the late 1980s and fundamentally alter the Cold War division of Europe. In his memoirs, Robert Gates, who served on Ford's NSC, writes,

The results of the Helsinki Conference and Declaration were so different from what was anticipated at the time ... In retrospect, it is indeed apparent that CSCE provided the spark that kindled widespread resistance to communist authority and the organization of numerous independent groups throughout Eastern Europe and even in the Soviet Union determined to bring change.⁶⁵

Although the opposition to his trip distressed Ford and complicated his political career, he later described Helsinki as "my finest hour."⁶⁶ In retrospect, Ford commented that he was "prouder than ever to have signed the Helsinki accords" because they "were a major factor in bringing about the human rights revolt in Poland, Czechoslovakia, [and] Hungary and current

⁶² More skeptical observers suggested that the agreement might be more appropriately compared to the notoriously ineffective Kellogg-Briand Pact of the 1920s. Editorial, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6 Aug. 1975, Buncher, 20; and Editorial, *Washington Star*, 29 July 1975, *ibid.*, 23.

⁶³ Dick Cheney, "The Ford Presidency in Perspective," in Firestone and Ugrinsky, *Gerald R. Ford and the Politics of Post-Watergate America*, 5.

⁶⁴ Sarah B. Snyder, "The U.S., Western Europe, and the CSCE, 1972–1975," in Matthias Schulz and Thomas A. Schwartz, eds., *The Strained Alliance: U.S.–European Relations from Nixon to Carter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 257–74; and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 1164–65.

⁶⁵ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 87.

⁶⁶ Gerald R. Ford, "The Ford Presidency: How It Looks Twelve Years Later," in Firestone and Ugrinsky, 671.

ramifications in the Soviet Union.”⁶⁷ The controversy over the Helsinki Final Act left him vulnerable to attacks from the right and the left, contributing to a tense fight for the Republican nomination in the primaries and ultimately a losing bid to be elected President. The Ford administration was never able sufficiently to counter condemnation of the Helsinki Final Act, enhancing existing skepticism about his leadership and policy toward the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the Helsinki Final Act would prove beneficial to United States interests, but the immediate political backlash against Ford’s signature of the agreement became a lasting and damaging issue for his presidency, in no small part due to his administration’s inability to manage public perception.

⁶⁷ Ford made these comments in 1991 and 1989 respectively. Thomas F. DeFrank, *Write It When I’m Gone: Remarkable Off-the-record Conversations with Gerald R. Ford* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2007), 89–90; and Leo P. Ribuffo, “Is Poland a Soviet Satellite? Gerald Ford, the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine, and the Election of 1976,” *Diplomatic History*, 14 (Summer 1990), 385–403, 402.