



**Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).**

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At one point in Jeremi Suri's ambitious and wide ranging book, *Power and Protest*, he argues that for key political leaders in the late 1960s, a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union had become far less important than quelling political and social unrest domestically. Such was true for China, West Germany, and France, he asserts, in addition to the superpowers themselves. Suri hits upon a critical element in foreign policy decision-making: How did concerns about stability, or conversely fears of instability or, even worse, revolution from below, affect policy considerations during this turbulent period in world history?. For Suri what arose from this anxiety was the pursuit of detente. Detente, in his words, "was a mechanism for domestic fortification" (213). It became a counter-revolutionary policy, designed or agreed upon by leaders of capitalist states as well as communist ones, ironically enough. Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong thus had more in common than Nixon's claim in their 1972 meeting that both men came from humble origins. Mao evidently did not just like rightists, as he told Nixon, he acted like one. The two saw the need to pursue, in Suri's words, a "balance of order" even more than a balance of power. The traditional focus of detente-inter-state affairs and improved relations in the context of the Cold War-is thus turned around. The rapprochement between the capitalist West and the communist East became an essential way for political leaders from both blocs to thwart popular reform efforts from below.

It is a fascinating idea, one in which detente becomes something of a conspiracy amongst policymaking elite across nation-state boundaries. And why not? From the perspective of policymakers, things had gotten out of hand in the sixties: from Berkeley to West Berlin, from Washington to Wuhan, from Paris to Prague, and from Detroit to Newark and Tokyo (though the last three cities are not discussed by Suri), protests erupted around the world, many in opposition to Cold War policies. Initially, the problem was nuclear weapons. Later objections arose to the American War in Vietnam.

Many of the protests turned increasingly violent as the decade wore on. At one point, Charles de Gaulle had to whisk his wife away from Paris. Things got so carried away in Prague, the Soviets sent in tanks to restore order. Something had to be done. The notion of detente as a policy intent on promoting stability and in the process stifling revolution and reform -- and thus normalizing

the Cold War -- is an alluring, ingenious idea, and the hint of conspiracy gives the added attraction of something out of *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Parallax View*, or *JFK*. As a key assertion in *Power and Protest*, it presents much for historians to consider, or reconsider, in looking over the sixties and seventies, all in broader context of world history.

Suri's ambitions with this work are impressive. The stunning breadth of his comparative framework puts him squarely in camp with world historians whose emphasis on establishing linkages across geography is very much critical to Suri's approach. In struggling to come to grips with the upheavals in the political, social, and cultural milieus of so many different countries during this pivotal decade, Suri has to address the fundamental question: Why did so many protests erupt around the world during the mid to late nineteen sixties?

Suri begins his study with a discussion of nuclear weapons and the constraints they imposed during the fifties. He moves to the charismatic leadership that arose in part as a response to that atmosphere. Suri singles out Nikita Khrushchev, John F. Kennedy, Charles de Gaulle, and Mao Zedong for special attention, especially de Gaulle and Mao because those two tried to carve out alternatives within the Cold War structure created by the Americans and Soviets.

From there, Suri moves to the percolating discontent within the existing order, invoking Michael Harrington, Daniel Bell, John Kenneth Galbraith, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Wu Han, and Herbert Marcuse. They, among others, provided the language of dissent, and that language was increasingly drawn on as the illiberal consequences of America's liberal empire, to borrow the title of chapter four, became apparent. In chapter five, Suri examines key cities around the world to assess the ramifications of Cold War policies in conjunction with the American War in Vietnam. "A global wave of urban protests produced a crisis of authority in nearly every society" (164). The comparison he offers is a daring venture on his part, for it opens him to careful scrutiny from area specialists. His treatment ranges from Wuhan in 1967 to Prague, West Berlin, and Paris in 1968 as well as Washington in the immediate aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in April 1968, to Berkeley, but in this last case, Suri is really discussing an earlier period, specifically from 1964 to October 1967. He also discusses Poland (not any particular city) later on since the uprisings of 1968 left such a deep impression on the Poles.

It is in the selection of cities that certain issues arise about methodology. Suri never explains why some cities are mentioned, while others are left out. Washington and Berkeley are considered, while Newark and Detroit are not, even though serious riots rocked both in 1967. Tokyo never gets mentioned, and yet young Japanese objected to their country's security treaty with the United States in 1960 to such an extent that they caused an uproar that led President Eisenhower to cancel his trip out of safety concerns. Eight years later, Tokyo students protested the American War in Vietnam as well as a host of other issues.

Given the ambitions of this book, mentioning what it does not cover seems both gratuitous and unfair, but Suri started down this road, and he does not lay out why he selected the cities he did for discussion. Why leave out Japan? Perhaps because Japanese students were as focused on domestic concerns as much as they were on the Cold War at this point. Certainly, the American war in Vietnam worried many Japanese, but other, perhaps more salient, issues included pollution, governmental policies, and whether or not Japan should try and resurrect the imperial

household that had dominated Japanese politics before the American occupation. Perhaps Suri simply realized, with ample justification, that he could not cover every single incident, and that the ones discussed were sufficient to get across his larger point: namely that policymakers responded to events in Washington, Paris, Berlin, Prague, and Wuhan by relying on the military to restore order.

The Berkeley section creates a problem as does the discussion of Washington in 1968. In both cases, specific domestic issues played larger roles in what developed than did larger concerns with the nature and development of the Cold War. Suri understands this at one level, but on another he ignores it. Discussing the riots in Washington is no more logical than the riots in Newark the previous summer as far as I can tell. Both incidents required authorities to restore order. As the nation's capital, Washington warrants attention certainly, but without an explicit reason given for selecting certain cities while leaving others out, it is hard to ascertain what the methodology is behind the process.

The discussion of charismatic leaders is also curious. On one level, Suri displays a broad understanding of the policies pursued by de Gaulle, Mao, and Kennedy. On another level, Suri almost seems wistful about the promises of change the three presented. It's a matter of tone, really, since Suri acknowledges the dark sides of things. Kennedy went ahead with the Bay of Pigs invasion, then personalized the issue and sought over the next eighteen months to have Fidel Castro assassinated or overthrown, eventually leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Years ago, James Hershberg, among others, detailed the surreptitious efforts to eliminate the Cuban leader. Khrushchev responded with brashness and impetuosity of his own, causing him to back Castro with intermediate range missiles. The result was a showdown in October 1962.

Kennedy was reckless indeed. In addition to taking the world to the brink of nuclear exchange, he escalated the American involvement in Vietnam quantitatively as well as qualitatively, and his personal life was replete with numerous affairs. Reckless youth, Nigel Hamilton wrote of Kennedy's early years, but it was more like a reckless life. Recklessness, of course, can serve as a kind of charisma. It certainly has its attraction, and virtually no one has attracted a greater number of admiring historians or sycophantic followers than John F. Kennedy has.

Mao himself was charismatic, but in his quest to maintain dominance over Chinese politics, he too became reckless, even irrational. Unlike Kennedy, who worked within a system that greatly limited the damage someone of his appetites could do, Mao had much greater freedom. The result was the Great Leap Forward, an ideologically driven policy that purported some silliness about how China could catch the West in steel production by resorting to backyard furnaces. Mao was no economist, but he need not be one, he insisted. Exhortation replaced rational analysis, and the rigidly enforced policy brought famine of stupefying scale.

Suri knows all this. He has read widely, and he writes with conviction. Given that, there is that strange wistfulness in his conclusion about the charismatic leaders of the early sixties. More than simply overlooking the kinds of problems created by those charismatic leaders, Suri underappreciates the reforms that percolated throughout the seventies and beyond. Richard Nixon authorized the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. Eighteen year olds gained the right to vote in the United States with the twenty-sixth amendment in 1971. Women

acquired the legal right to have an abortion with the *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973. Domestic reforms, in short, did not die with the onset of detente, and neither did offer challenges to the existing international system. The Vietnamese never did give up their struggle to achieve independence from foreign intervention, finally succeeding in 1975. Deng Xiaoping succeeded Mao and embarked the Chinese economy on major reforms.

Just as importantly as his discussion of charismatic leadership in the early sixties is Suri's decision to overlook the role economics played in the changing circumstances of this period. Suri's analysis is not economically based; he is more focused on other areas, but when discussing political leaders' decisions to pursue policies specifically designed to ease Cold War tensions, it really does seem remiss not to discuss how the costs of programs came to affect future policies.

In his discussion of 1968 and the Tet offensive that began the year so poorly for American designs in Southeast Asia, Suri makes much of the protests that Tet sparked in the United States. He has a detailed discussion of what happened in Washington after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, for example. What he overlooks are the economic costs of the war and the importance they had in bringing about reconsideration of the policies being pursued. The oversight is unfortunate, since Robert Buzzanco handled this issue especially well in his book *Masters of War*. It certainly warrants attention.

Economic considerations are not Suri's primary concern, however. He is interested in how the sixties represented a period of "global conjunction" and that an international history of this era has to consider both "*multicultural* and *multidimensional*" factors (italics his, 263). Perhaps economic issues are part of multidimensional, but that reference comes at the end of the book, and nowhere else is there a discussion of the economic factors that influenced the way policymakers looked at circumstances in the late sixties. The summer before Nixon went to China, the United States went off the gold standard, but that decision really became one of timing by late 1967 or early 1968. In other words, at the very same time protests erupted around the world, policymakers were having to contend with the costs of the promises made by the charismatic leaders earlier in the decade. By late 1967, members of the Johnson administration realized that the war in Vietnam had created certain burdens that threatened the nation's financial and economic leadership. The pressures reached a point that the administration had to act. On January 1, 1968, the month that would later see the onset of the Tet offensive, the Johnson administration announced policy changes to address the nation's chronic balance of payments problem. As the president pointed out in his statement, the nation had run a deficit for seventeen out of the past eighteen years. At the beginning, such deficits had been necessary to assist other nations in rebuilding their economies shortly after World War II. But by the early nineteen sixties, those deficits threatened to undermine the international financial system based largely on the US dollar. The reason was fairly simple: with the United States sending and spending so much more money abroad than it was taking in, too many dollars were flooding the international system. Lyndon Johnson observed that progress had been made on reducing U.S. deficits from 1960 to 1965, from \$3.9 billion to about \$1.3 billion. (1) Then came the war in Vietnam. "In 1966, because of our increased responsibility to arm and supply our men in Southeast Asia, progress was interrupted, with the deficit remaining at the same level as 1965, about \$1.3 billion." Two years later the progress of the decade's first half had been reversed, and Johnson estimated that 1967 would see a deficit of about \$3.5 to \$4 billion. There were

three culprits for this turnaround: 1) the costs of fighting in Vietnam; 2) increasing American investment abroad; and 3) Americans spending more money on travel overseas. Added to that, the nation's trade surplus did not increase sufficiently to cover these monetary outflows. Exacerbating the situation were two European developments. Since 1965 France had been insisting on payment for trade deficits in gold, not dollars. In November 1967, the British government, under its own financial pressures, devalued the pound sterling, which weakened investor confidence in currency holdings, which, in turn, caused a run on gold stocks. Since US dollars had been flowing freely for many years and since the dollar remained at \$35 per ounce despite the increase in the number of dollars circulating, people, corporations, and governments holding dollars began to exchange them for gold. All of this reduced US reserves, which worried Johnson administration officials.

In short, another way to look at detente is as a response to the out-of-control costs of trying to fight-directly, indirectly, or through proxies-the Cold War. Take away the protests in Berkeley and Nixon still goes to China. He has got to.

Attitudes in the business community were changing in 1967 and 1968. After having supported the war effort in Vietnam from the start, *Business Week* changed its attitude after Tet. On March 30, 1968, the day before President Johnson spoke to the nation in a televised address, the weekly took a very different tone from its previous support of the administration. "This is a war in which the U.S. has consistently underestimated the enemy's strength and determination." Although some people wanted to continue the fight, the country was clearly divided, and as such "it would be extremely difficult for the President of a democracy to lead his nation into what could become a major war without far stronger support for such a war than now exists." *Business Week* pointed out that with so many American forces tied down "in a contest with an elusive guerrilla army and a minor Asian power, backed by the two major Communist powers," the nation suddenly found itself endangering its own security by being unable to respond effectively to new challenges, as had become clear in January when the North Koreans seized the surveillance ship *Pueblo*. That, coupled with the domestic costs, which were political as well as economic, meant that "there is nobody in this country who would not breathe a sigh of relief if this cruel costly war could just be brought to a quick end." Indeed, there was an obvious need for a fresh reconsideration of the nation's major foreign policy assumptions. "Vietnam has made clear that even the mighty U.S. lacks the means to fight anywhere, anytime, and prevail. A pax Americana is proving much harder to enforce in a revolutionary world than was the pax Britannica in the 19th Century. (2)

In other words, Suri's impressive breadth raises so many questions, it is hard to know where to start. In his conclusion, Suri laments that "Détente constrained political and economic reform in the last quarter of the twentieth century" (263). It is important to remember that détente was removed from the Ford administration's vocabulary in the wake of Ronald Reagan's challenge for the Republican nomination in 1976. When Reagan became president in 1981, he cut taxes, reinvigorated the Cold War, and increased defense spending, and in the process pursued a set of actions that mirrored Kennedy's early months to a considerable extent. For the remainder of the decade, U.S. aggressive action undercut any semblance of the détente pursued by Nixon and Kissinger. But did all this mean that détente itself was abandoned? At one level, certainly not.

At another level, it obviously was, especially in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and Reagan's electoral victory in November 1980.

On a more general level, I wonder whether Suri's pessimism in the conclusion is warranted. Suri has tackled an extraordinarily broad topic in his book. Such ambition is admirable, but in the end, the book does not hold together all that successfully. That is too bad, really, for the ambition of the enterprise itself is impressive, almost heady in its breadth of scope. It is just not as convincing as it is intoxicating.

Notes:

(1) Lyndon B. Johnson, "Where We Stand Today," Statement by the President on the Balance of Payments, 1 January 1968, p. 2, NSF NSC History, box 54, LBJ Library.

(2) "A New Policy for Vietnam," *Business Week*, 30 March 1968, 174.

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