

Cold War-Detente brief intro

Détente (a French word meaning release from tension) is the name given to a period of improved relations between the United States and the Soviet Union that began tentatively in 1971 and took decisive form when President Richard M. Nixon visited the secretary-general of the Soviet Communist party, Leonid I. Brezhnev, in Moscow, May 1972.

Both countries stood to gain if trade could be increased and the danger of nuclear warfare reduced. In addition, Nixon—a candidate for reelection—was under fire at home from those demanding social change, racial equality, and an end to the Vietnam War. The trip to Russia, like his historic trip to China a few months earlier, permitted him to keep public attention focused on his foreign policy achievements rather than his domestic problems. Nixon's trip to China had also heightened the Soviets' interest in détente; given the growing antagonism between Russia and China, Brezhnev had no wish to see his most potent rivals close ranks against him.

On May 22 Nixon became the first U.S. president to visit Moscow. He and Brezhnev signed seven agreements covering the prevention of accidental military clashes; arms control, as recommended by the recent Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (*salt*); cooperative research in a variety of areas, including space exploration; and expanded commerce. The *salt* treaty was approved by Congress later that summer, as was a three-year agreement on the sale of grain to the Soviets. In June 1973, Brezhnev visited the United States for Summit II; this meeting added few new agreements, but did symbolize the two countries' continuing commitment to peace. Summit III, in June 1974, was the least productive; by then, the *salt* talks had ground to a halt, several commercial agreements had been blocked in Congress because of Soviet treatment of Jews, and the Watergate investigation was approaching a climax. Nixon's successor in the talks, President Jimmy Carter, supported *salt ii*, but also pressed a military buildup and a human rights campaign, which cooled relations between the countries. With the election of Ronald Reagan, who emphasized military preparedness as the key to Soviet-American relations, détente as Nixon had envisioned it came to an end.