As with earlier volumes in the series, this superbly edited document collection is a vital source for serious study of the history of U.S. foreign policy. The current volume includes an array of material from the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, most notably staff and Brzezinski files from the National Security Affairs collection. It also draws, among other sources, from the lot files of Marshall Shulman (special adviser on Soviet affairs at the State Department). Albeit in less readily accessible form, much of this material has been used in the two outstanding book-length accounts of President Carter’s foreign policy by Scott Kaufman and by Betty Glad.1 This FRUS volume on Carter’s Soviet policy does, however, include documents which have previously been unavailable. It also contains many useful editorial cross references to the memoirs of key players, notably President Carter, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Anatoliy Dobrynin, the long-serving Soviet Ambassador to the U.S.

The volume sheds light on the various phases of Carter’s Soviet policy and on many of the main associated academic controversies. In broad terms, the policy developed from the détente agenda inherited from the Ford administration, through a

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renegotiation of strategic arms limits, to the U.S. reversion to explicitly containment-oriented Cold War policy in the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Along the way, Washington-Moscow relations were buffeted by Carter’s focus on human rights issues within the USSR and by a host of regional conflicts, including those in Central America, the Horn of Africa, the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia. The documents reveal a highly personalised dimension to the relevant diplomacy. Washington was consistently exercised by the implications of the failing health of Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Communist Party leader; while Moscow sought to comprehend an American president who at times seemed to combine naivety with an irritating moralism. Washington set great store by its often intimate dialogue with Dobrynin, while the U.S. ambassadors in Moscow (Malcolm Toon and Thomas Watson) often appeared isolated from the main diplomatic cross-currents of U.S.-Soviet relations in this period.

The documents collected here are particularly strong in shedding light on shifting mutual perceptions between the American and Soviet capitals. In the early years, Moscow was certainly irritated by Carter’s public involvement with the cause of Soviet dissidents, though that irritation did not of itself destroy the structures of détente. Moscow was clearly exasperated by the ‘deep cuts’ arms control proposals of 1977. As a State Department report of 1977 argued, Moscow saw “deep cuts” as a case of the US “trying unilaterally to revise agreed Vladivostock formulas” on arms control inherited from the Ford years (171). Various documents deal directly with a range of arms control issues. The general impression is of an American administration struggling to make up lost ground following the early decision to abandon the Vladivostok agreements. In general terms, there are indications in these documents of an American awareness of underlying Soviet weaknesses and of the possibility of exploiting them. A Central Intelligence Agency analysis of August 1977 reported on the “deepening economic problems and resource stringencies facing the Soviet economy” (176). Following Brzezinski’s preferences, Washington’s main concern by 1978 related to Soviet activity in the Horn of Africa.2 For its part, Moscow began to develop a view of Brzezinski as (in the words of Politburo member Andrei Kirilenko) “viscerally anti-Soviet” (316). However, in a 1978 conversation with an unnamed American official, Kirilenko “stated that the Soviet government does not feel the need to deal with the Carter Government because Moscow assumes it will disappear in 1980” (316).

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From the spring of 1978, the FRUS volumes trace the rapid deterioration in U.S.-Soviet relations. Despite this, serious and wide-ranging discussion between the superpowers was at times still possible. In April 1978, Secretary Vance had a revealing discussion in Moscow with Leonid Brezhnev about the meaning of ‘détente.’ The Soviet leader protested about the American habit of linking behaviour in one dimension of Soviet foreign policy with all other dimensions. Brezhnev “stated his belief that African affairs and the relations of the Soviet Union with African countries had no bearing on relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, no more bearing than, for example, the relations of the United States with Chile or Iran or any other country”. Where Brezhnev condemned the U.S. penchant for “artificial linkage”, Vance insisted that détente could not be “selective” (333-9). The signing of the second Strategic Arms Treaty (SALT II) in Vienna (June 1979) was, in effect, the last hurrah of the era of détente. In Vienna, Carter and Brezhnev were still able to discuss the arms race – in effect, the ‘security dilemma’ whereby each superpower constantly interpreted the other’s actions as an increased threat to its vital security – with a degree of detachment (617). However, the American administration’s increasingly tough line was balanced by burgeoning Soviet suspicion of Washington. Particularly galling to Moscow was the policy of normalising relations with Beijing. Brezhnev in Vienna complained to Carter about the U.S. policy of “smiles and bows to China” (617). Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko repeatedly complained about “the US effort to build bases far from US shores as an effort to threaten the USSR and encircle it” (887). Against this background, the developing crisis in Afghanistan emerged with slow inevitability. In February 1979, Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher informed Ambassador Dobrynin that “Soviet advisors” in Kabul were complicit in the kidnapping and assassination of U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph Dubs (513). By April 1979, Cyrus Vance was insisting to Dobrynin that the U.S. “is not interfering in the affairs of Afghanistan and is in no way responsible for the current unrest in that country” (540). The FRUS documents vividly convey the intensity of Carter’s personal reaction to the eventual Soviet invasion. In January 1980, Marshall Brement of the National Security Council staff analysed what he saw as the President’s dramatically “changed perception” of Soviet behaviour since the Vienna summit. According to Brement, President Carter (presumably as a result of continued Soviet human rights violations as well as evidence of Soviet and Cuban adventurism in the developing world) had begun “to ponder the continuing outward thrust of Soviet foreign policy.” This personal reorientation gave rise directly to the Carter Doctrine, announced in January 1980. The President, reported Brement, “believes that the Soviet rape of Afghanistan should not be viewed as an isolated event, but that it has to be seen in the context of what has happened
elsewhere in the world in such places as Angola, Ethiopia, Yemen and Cambodia” (734).

From late 1979, Soviet-American relations were strained to the breaking point across a huge range of issues. Crises began to appear almost at random. In November 1979, official Washington was briefly alarmed by mistaken technical systems reports that a nuclear missile attack had been launched on the U.S. (690). In March 1980, Cyrus Vance referred to U.S. intelligence to the effect that “numerous deaths” had occurred in “Sverdlovsk, USSR as a result of the accidental release of lethal biological agent,” probably anthrax, being developed in Russia in breach of international conventions (770). Internal Carter administration memos during early 1980 show detailed planning for a possible Soviet entry into Iran. Ambassador Dobrynin informed Brzezinski in March that U.S.-Soviet relations were “on a spiral” (772). Some of the internal U.S. administration discussion, both with respect to possible Soviet moves beyond Afghanistan and a possible invasion of Poland in December 1980, is indeed alarming. From the evidence here, however, a directly confrontational American military response to further Soviet invasions was certainly not inevitable. In January 1980, General William Odom, representing hawkish positions on the National Security Council staff, advised that a Soviet move against Iran could be met by three responses: immediate escalation and confrontation; an attempt to contain conflict within the region by “remaining on the western side of the Persian Gulf”, thus avoiding “an early direct engagement between US and Soviet ground forces in which we would be defeated”; and “a strategic retirement followed by a long-term US buildup” (742). With respect to Poland, Brezinski reported to Carter on 19 December 1980, following the election of Ronald Reagan as president, that a Soviet invasion had been “postponed for the ‘indefinite future’. The main reason for the postponement “was the effectiveness of the Western counter propaganda campaign which convinced the Kremlin that the West would retaliate ‘massively’ with political and economic sanctions” (921). The internal documents in this FRUS collection do not indicate any serious likelihood of a direct U.S. military response to a Soviet invasion of Poland (see also 920). In is also worth noting that the firmness of the American line towards Moscow in 1980 was undermined to some degree by the keen awareness shown by U.S. policymakers, contrary to Brzezinski’s analysis of the postponement of Soviet plans to invade Poland, of the unreliability of allies. Odom’s account of possible options in the event of Soviet flouting of the Carter Doctrine contained the following sentences: “The response of our allies in Europe and Japan would be crucial. They might abandon us” (742).

The existence of a close dialogue with Ambassador Dobrynin was another factor inhibiting direct confrontation in the months following the invasion of Afghanistan.
Not the least important effect of the resignation of Cyrus Vance (April, 1980) appears to have been a decline in the institutionalised closeness to Dobrynin. By this time, Brzezinski was clearly in the ascendancy. Marshall Brement looked forward in May 1980 to the end of criticisms of the administration based on “the well publicized Vance-Brzezinski differences on strategy and tactics as evidence of the gulf which divides the NSC and the State Department” (801). Vance’s successor, Edmund Muskie, defended the administration’s adoption of a revised nuclear doctrine (Presidential Directive 59), telling Andrei Gromyko in September 1980 that the “US does not believe that a limited nuclear war is conceivable” (890). Many readers of this FRUS volume will come to it in order to explore the various rifts within the Carter administration. Such readers will struggle to find evidence of strain before mid-1978, but will have little difficulty in charting Vance-Brzezinski differences thereafter. In June 1978, Odom bemoaned to Brzezinski the “fecklessness” of the Department of State’s approach to Soviet efforts to compromise security at the US Embassy in Moscow (412). In February 1980, Vance contacted Andrei Gromyko in terms which seemed light years away from the approach being advocated not only by Brzezinski but also by President Carter himself. For Vance, the main danger for U.S.-Soviet relations appeared to be “a high risk of miscalculation” (748). Referring to the Middle East and to the Persian Gulf, Vance told Gromyko: “It is essential that you understand that the United States has vital interests at stake in this region. We are prepared to defend those interests. But if there is restraint on both sides, as befits out two great nations, and respect for the independence and territorial integrity of the states in the region, our respective interests need not lead to confrontation” (748).

This collection of documents reveals an American administration which was frequently in disarray. Washington’s near-farcical ‘discovery’ of a Soviet brigade in Cuba in August 1979 represents a clear low point. Yet there were also positive aspects to Carter’s Soviet policy. The raising of human rights questions was, at least in the view of the current reviewer, brave and refreshingly uncynical, rather than merely naïve. From the evidence of these documents, it is possible to argue that the stance towards Poland in late 1980 was a positive achievement. Cyrus Vance in particular was continually and properly sensitive to the need to maintain an informed dialogue with Moscow. The gradual erosion of intra-superpower dialogue was indeed one key reason why Moscow declined to let Carter gently off the hook in regard to the episode of the Soviet brigade in Cuba (see 644). The abiding impression delivered by these documents relates to the intensity and sheer danger of the crisis in superpower relations which followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I can find nothing in this FRUS volume which undercuts the view,
expressed by Soviet diplomat Vladilen Vasev in January 1980, that Carter’s response was a surprising and dangerous overreaction (732).

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