

INTRODUCTION

OVER THE YEARS, presidential commitments have come in different shapes and sizes, suggesting honor and integrity, strength and determination, the word of a president backed by the military power of the United States. No trifling matter, in diplomatic affairs. And yet . . .

Some commitments, such as America's to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, have been successful and durable, in part because they have been based on solemn treaties ratified by Congress. Another example is America's commitment to South Korea, also based on a mutual defense treaty, supported by the presence of 28,500 American troops armed with nuclear weapons until December 1991.

South Vietnam represented a very different challenge. It was war by presidential commitment, the United States sliding mindlessly, one administration after another, into a guerrilla war in Indochina, which cost more than 58,000 American lives. Few in Congress or the media questioned the war's provenance or legitimacy, until it was too late.

Finally, in this book, which focuses on American commitments to South Korea, South Vietnam, and Israel, the one to Israel is perhaps the most fascinating. Here we have an unusually close relationship, culturally, religiously, politically in alignment, more or less, yet one without any basis in a formal treaty linking the interests of one nation to the other. It is based primarily on private presidential letters to Israeli prime ministers, rich with American promises and pledges to Israeli security. Over the years many of the promises have been honored, but some were betrayed, leaving feelings of anxiety among Israeli leaders about the ultimate reliability of an American commitment.

No doubt, presidential commitments are seen as serious, almost sacred, promises to act made by a chief executive on behalf of his administration. And other nations may view these commitments as binding nation-to-nation promises that succeeding administrations will honor, too. But there is a problem. Will they?

In 1982, for example, President Ronald Reagan pledged America's "iron-clad commitment to the defense of Israel." The commitment made sense to Reagan at the time, and it has been echoed by one president after another ever since. But does Reagan's pledge have the same resonance now that it did then? Does it mean that if Israel feels it must bomb Iran to stop its nuclear program that America must join in the attack? Much has to do with trust between leaders and countries. Do Israeli leaders trust President Barack Obama as much as they did Bill Clinton and George W. Bush? These are questions that cut to the heart—and viability—of a presidential commitment.

Since World War II, presidents have relied more on commitments, public and private, than they have on declarations of war, even though the U.S. Constitution declares rather unambiguously that Congress has the responsibility to "declare war." Interestingly, only five times in American history has a president asked Congress for a declaration of war: the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War of 1846, the Spanish-American War of 1898, World War I in 1917, and World War II in 1941. During and since the cold war, no president has asked Congress for a declaration of war, although presidents have gotten different degrees of congressional support for wars, both through formal resolutions and through the appropriations process. War declarations now seem so old-fashioned, relics of an earlier era in world affairs, when, by the gentlemanly etiquette of the time, nations felt obliged to inform an enemy of an impending attack, when opposing armies stood on hilltops awaiting dawn's early light for the start of battle. Think no further than Shakespeare's classic rendition of the battle at Agincourt.

Now wars follow a new calculus—they operate in a new technological and strategic environment, forcing presidents to confront not only the possibility of surprise attack but modern challenges, such as cyber warfare. During the cold war, presidents explained their motivation by pointing to communist aggression; now, after 9/11, they point to the dangers of global terrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen, and always, with genuine concern, they point to an expanding nuclear threat, which may in a short time be used to justify American military action against Iran if negotiations fail to reach

agreement. Even though, since World War II, presidents have ordered American troops into wars all over the world—from Korea to Vietnam, Panama to Grenada, Lebanon to Bosnia, and, more recently, as America's focus has turned to the turbulent Middle East, from Kuwait to Afghanistan, then to Iraq, and then back again to Afghanistan before treading lightly in Libya and Syria—they have not requested a declaration of war, and no one has been storming the White House demanding one.

Only once, in 1973, has Congress acted broadly to reassert its right to a major role in an American decision to go to war. That was when Congress, frustrated by the never-ending war in Vietnam, passed the War Powers Act over President Nixon's strenuous objection. It limited American military action abroad to sixty or ninety days unless specifically extended and approved by Congress. But the legislation had little bite, in large part because Congress never wanted, or never had the political will, to challenge the president on matters of national security. When President Obama in 2011 used military power against the Qaddafi regime in Libya, he did not even notify Congress. A few in Congress mumbled, but did nothing.

The Korean War and the Vietnam War were the bastard children of the cold war, which provided the dramatic backdrop for most confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union. President Harry Truman was understandably concerned about Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's expanding empire. Truman believed in the domino theory—that the fall of one country to communism would lead almost automatically to the fall of others in the same region.

When the North Koreans, with Stalin's blessing, attacked South Korea in June 1950, Truman felt he had no option but to send American troops to stop them. He did not check with Congress, which later proved to be a serious political problem. He got his authority, he claimed, from the United Nations. In this way, Truman attracted more international support, diplomatic and military. He called the war a "police action" and thought it would end quickly. It lasted for three years, cost more than 54,000 American lives, and finally whimpered to an embarrassing stalemate (reporters called it "die for a tie"), largely because Truman feared the escalation then being pushed by his commanding general, Douglas MacArthur, might lead to a nuclear war with Russia or China or both. An armistice agreement between the two sides was finally negotiated in 1953, leaving Korea, like Germany, a country split in two.

In the embers of this war, Truman and his immediate successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, figuring that half a loaf or country was better than none,

negotiated a mutual defense treaty with South Korea, pledging the United States to rush to South Korea's defense if it were again attacked. As the best bona fides of America's commitment, the United States left tens of thousands of American troops in South Korea, numbering as many as 60,000 at one point, as a kind of trip-wire defense against another possible communist assault. Years later, nuclear weapons were added to the trip-wire defense, and North and South Korea went their separate ways. The North, allied with Russia and China, became an economic basket case, though armed ironically with nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. The South, protected by the United States, became an economic powerhouse—the eighth most productive trading nation on earth.

Over the years, the United States has tried to midwife a live-and-let-live arrangement between the two Koreas but has met with only limited success. Disappointment has almost always followed the effort. Now there is new leadership in both Koreas, modest blips of hope, too—Park Geun-hye in the south, a tough-minded conservative, whose foreign policy has been officially labeled “Trust-Politik,” suggesting she is ready to deal with the North under certain conditions; and Kim Jong-un in the north, a young, comparatively dynamic and dedicated communist, who claims he wants to reunify Korea through negotiations. “An important issue in putting an end to the division of the country and achieving its reunification is to remove confrontation between the north and the south,” he said shortly after taking power in 2011. “The past records of inter-Korean relations show that confrontation between fellow countrymen leads to nothing but war.”¹ Kim's rhetoric has, on occasion, been promising; his actions much less so. He continues to produce long-range rockets, to test nuclear warheads, and, most recently, to threaten the United States with a nuclear attack and to abandon the 1953 armistice agreement.

For the foreseeable future, the U.S. commitment to South Korea remains strong. American diplomats see little prospect of change. They stress, in convincing fashion, that if South Korea were attacked, it would be defended by the United States. But, as always, there are questions. If, for compelling economic reasons, the United States had to pull its troops out of South Korea, would the alliance survive? As strong as it was? And what then would America do to protect its interests in north Asia? Can the United States trust China to play a helpful role in North-South reconciliation talks? What if South Korea chooses to go its own way?

THE OTHER BASTARD child of the cold war was the long, costly struggle in South Vietnam. From Truman to Nixon, one president after another pledged the United States to a course of action that led to a disastrous war and a humiliating defeat. There was no surprise attack on the United States, such as Pearl Harbor, no terrorist strike, such as 9/11, to justify their decisions. The presidents feared the spread of communism—to them, an unacceptable prospect, especially during the cold war.

The American descent into Vietnam started in the late 1940s, when the French were trying to re-impose their colonial rule over Indochina. Truman strongly opposed European colonialism in Asia, but he opposed even more strongly the spread of Soviet totalitarianism in Europe. He struck a hard-headed bargain with his conscience: to secure France's help in Europe, he started to help France in Indochina—at the beginning, with limited military support. With each shipment of aid, though, he and Eisenhower deepened the American involvement in Indochina, until finally, in 1955, the French withdrew, having been defeated at Dien Bien Phu, and the Americans were left to pick up their tattered banner.

In the mid-1950s, the United States justified its Vietnam policy by citing the anti-communist rhetoric of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, which tended to satisfy Congress. But in the 1960s, when the United States committed combat troops to the war, Lyndon Johnson felt he needed direct congressional support. With little effort, he persuaded Congress in August 1964 to pass the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave him unlimited authority to fight the communist insurgency in Indochina.

By then, the war had become America's war. More than any other president, Eisenhower, who should have known better, made the key decisions that tied the uncertain future of South Vietnam to the national interests of the United States. In 1954, after the Geneva Convention, he supported the division of Vietnam into two parts: the north controlled by the communists, and the south by a rickety, unpopular monarch. In 1959, in a speech often ignored by scholars, Eisenhower took the next crucial step: He officially linked the national security interests of the United States to the continued existence of an independent, non-communist South Vietnam. The upshot was that when South Vietnam said it needed help, the United States provided it—military aid, money, trainers, and ultimately hundreds of thousands of American troops. Did anyone criticize, or challenge, Eisenhower's judgment on the reputedly central importance of South Vietnam to the United States? No one,

as it turned out. Was there any debate in Congress or in the media? No. The questionable policy of linking South Vietnam's future to America's national interest was adopted in unanimous silence.

John F. Kennedy, against his better instincts, sent thousands of military advisers to South Vietnam and, several weeks before his own assassination in 1963, approved an ugly coup against its authoritarian president, Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy worried about Diem's ability to hold off the communists.

Johnson, not wanting to be the first president to lose a war, sent hundreds of thousands of *combat* troops, explaining that his decision was the latest in a succession of presidential "commitments" to defend South Vietnam against communist aggression. He based his decisions, he explained, on Eisenhower's commitments. By January 1968 Johnson had sent 548,000 troops to South Vietnam. By war's end in 1975, more than 58,000 of them were killed. And for what? Within twenty years, the United States and a united Vietnam were courting each other in a new defensive alliance against China.

Even when Nixon, changing strategy, began to withdraw American troops from Vietnam, he explained his policy by citing America's commitment to South Vietnam, a commitment that finally expired with the communist conquest in late April 1975. For Nixon, the commitment represented a sacred American promise; to South Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, it represented a shameful betrayal.

AS AN EXAMPLE of presidential commitment, Israel's is different from the twin examples of South Korea and South Vietnam. Israel was born in the ashes of the Holocaust, but it has, almost miraculously, flourished as an economic and military powerhouse in a turbulent Middle East. Time and again, Israel has fought for its very survival, and won, increasingly with American diplomatic, economic, and military support. But although the bilateral relationship has been remarkably close, it has never been based on a treaty. It has been based on the word of the president-in-power, conveyed in letters to Israeli prime ministers.

Words have consequence. Spoken by a president, they can often become American policy, with or without congressional approval. When a president "commits" the United States to a controversial course of action, he may be setting the nation on the road to war or on a road to reconciliation. In matters of national security, his powers have become awesome—his word decisive. Who decides when we go to war? The president decides. As former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski told me, it "all depends" on the president. "It's

his call.” Likewise, it is his decision when and whether, and under what conditions, to support a friendly nation.

A president, such as Barack Obama, for example, pledges that the United States has “an ironclad commitment” to Israel’s security—meaning, one would imagine, that if Israel were attacked, the United States would come to Israel’s defense. Is there anything more to this commitment than a presidential promise? Obviously, yes. Israel enjoys broad-based support from Congress and the American people. For the most part, both nations share common values and common aims. But the president is the key to determining the flow and texture of this delicate relationship.

A question often asked by political leaders in Israel is whether Obama will live up to his word. Will his commitment be honored or betrayed by him or by a successor? The answer to this question can mean war or peace. Might it not be better for both nations to negotiate a formal defense treaty—and, in this way, try to reduce or even eliminate areas of doubt in their relationship? Those who question the value or relevance of a U.S.-Israeli defense treaty point out that in recent years Obama has tried to organize Israeli-Palestinian peace talks only to fail abysmally because of Palestinian objections to Israeli settlements and Israeli insistence on building such settlements in the name of security. How would a treaty resolve these problems, they ask? Indeed, even the effort to negotiate a defense treaty would likely kick up fresh tumult and anxiety among Arab states, which are apt to see a U.S. treaty with Israel as proof that the United States can no longer be counted on as an impartial negotiator.

Another question: Obama has warned, more than once: “Let there be no doubt—America is determined to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons.” Though the world has heard this warning, there are still many, especially in the Middle East, who question whether Obama would really use American military power to stop Iran from “getting nuclear weapons,” however that phrase might be defined. It is said in Washington and Jerusalem that never before have Israel and the United States been in closer alignment on stopping Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. True, and yet not quite true. In the final analysis, for reasons both political and military, Israel may, on its own, strike Iran. Would it then expect American diplomatic and military support? Obama has strongly implied yes. But, without a mutual defense treaty, there may always be a question about the durability and reliability of a presidential commitment.

As we learned in Vietnam and in the broader Middle East, a presidential commitment could lead to war, based on miscalculation, misjudgment, or mistrust. It could also lead to reconciliation. We live in a world of uncertainty,

where even the word of a president is now questioned in wider circles of critical commentary. On domestic policy, Washington often resembles a political circus detached from reason and responsibility. But on foreign policy, when an international crisis erupts and some degree of global leadership is required, the word or commitment of an American president still represents the gold standard, even if the gold does not glitter as once it did.