

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #16

Toward the end of his first term as President of the United States, Richard Nixon, a Republican from California, managed to diagnose and improve American relations with the major powers of the Communist world – China and the Soviet Union. He pursued a strategy to achieve “peace with honor” in the world. This alteration in American foreign policy fundamentally shifted the pattern of the Cold War. In July, 1971 Henry Kissinger, a former professor of international relations at Harvard, who had become Nixon’s special assistant for national security affairs, made a secret trip to Peking (now Beijing) to explore the possibility of American recognition of the People’s Republic of China.

Since 1949, when Mao Tse-tung’s revolutionary movement established control in China, the United States had refused to recognize Communist China, preferring to regard Chiang Kai-shek’s exiled regime on Taiwan as the legitimate government of China. In one simple, but stunning, stroke, Nixon and Kissinger ended two decades of diplomatic isolation for the People’s Republic of China and drove a wedge between the two bastions of communism in the world – China and the Soviet Union.

On February 21, 1972, President Nixon visited China, becoming the first sitting U.S. president to do so. In a televised week-long trip Nixon visited famous Chinese landmarks, which had been invisible to Americans for over two decades. Nixon pledged better relations with China and declared that the two nations – one capitalist, the other communist – could peacefully coexist. Americans watched their president, who had risen to prominence in the 1950s by railing against the Democrats for “losing” China and by hounding Communists and fellow travelers within the United States, now sitting, dining, and drinking toasts with Mao Tse-tung, chairman of the Communist party in China, and Premier Chou-En-lai.

Nixon’s impeccable anti-Communist credentials gave him the political cover to travel to Peking. He remarked genially to Mao: “Those on the right can do what those on the left only talk about.” The United States and China agreed to scientific and cultural exchanges, steps toward the resumption of trade, and the eventual reunification of Taiwan with mainland China.

A year after the Nixon visit, “liaison offices” were established in Washington, D.C., and Peking that served as unofficial embassies. Praised for his efforts to lessen Cold War tensions, Nixon also had tactical objectives in mind. He hoped that, by befriending both China and the Soviet Union, he could play one off against the other and strike a better deal over Vietnam at the ongoing peace talks in Paris. China, indeed, welcomed the breakthrough in relations with the United States, because its rivalry with the Soviet Union had become more bitter than its rivalry with the West. China shared a long border with the Soviet Union and was concerned that conflict could arise at anytime with its neighbor.

**A few months later in May, 1972 Nixon once again surprised the world by traveling to Moscow for a summit meeting with Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet premier. The high theatre of the China visit was repeated in Moscow, with toasts and elegant dinners between world leaders who had previously regarded each other as incarnations of evil. The Soviets, troubled by the agreements between China and the Americans, were also anxious for an easing of the tensions now that they had achieved virtual parity with the United States in nuclear weapons.**

**In 1979 diplomatic recognition between China and the United States was formalized during the Carter administration. Both Mao and Chou En-lai had already died in 1976. Nixon had been forced to resign the presidency in 1974. But Richard Nixon, the former anti-Communist, had accomplished a diplomatic feat in China that his more liberal predecessors could not do.**