

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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THE NEGOTIATORS

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In my opinion, the biggest mistake made during the past week or so by critics of the administration's recent foreign policy efforts is to describe the Clinton team as a bunch of "amateurs." Such thinking leads to the assumption that there is some sort of learning curve at work; that there is a possibility of improvement. It also can lead to the conclusion that forecasting is impossible; that the administration's actions are random, since there appears to be no underlying philosophy at work, or as some critics put it, that "we have no foreign policy."

The fact is that the Clinton foreign policy team is not made up of amateurs. They may perform amateurishly, in the opinion of some people. But those setting policy are not amateurs. Indeed, most have spent their entire professional lives studying, critiquing and participating in American foreign policy. Their actions are logical, when seen from their perspective, and more often than not, predictable. And like it or not, they are linked to a policy format, to a foreign policy philosophy, if you will.

As Hoover Institution Fellow, Angelo Codevilla, pointed out in the Spring issue of *The National Interest*, individuals such as Anthony Lake (head of the National Security Council), Morton Halperin (the NSC's Senior Director of Democracy), Madeleine Albright (U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations), Strobe Talbott (Deputy Secretary of State), Peter Tarnoff (Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs) and Dennis Ross (Special Middle East Coordinator at State) are not foreign policy outsiders "who stormed the ramparts of the U.S. government."

Rather, Codevilla says, "they came through the government's front door from Hotchkiss, Harvard, and Yale, and enjoyed the best patronage government can give, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike."

These individuals have an enormous amount in common with each other, both practically and ideologically. In Codevilla's words, "it would be easier for the proverbial camel to pass through the needle's eye than for someone to enter the senior ranks at State, Defense, or NSC who

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avored a U.S. victory in Vietnam, who had cheered Ronald Reagan's call in 1982 to cast communism on the scrap heap of history, or who had favored building an antimissile defense for the United States."

As is common among professional participants (from both the right and the left) in the raucous, ever continuing debate over U.S. foreign policy, Codevilla uses strong language when describing those with whom he disagrees. But the idea he conveys is valid enough, and I think, highly useful for anyone who would attempt to make some sense out of recent administration actions abroad.

Members of today's foreign policy establishment, Codevilla maintains, "did not spend their formative years worrying about how to maximize their country's power or studying the principles of international statecraft. After opposing the United States in Vietnam, they made their careers restraining, diminishing, denigrating American power, and arguing that power is not fundamental to world affairs."

"While they championed arms control agreements, they never got excited when the Soviet Union violated them. With few exceptions, they did not serve in the armed forces, and have scarce social contact and sympathy with those Americans who do. Hence neither in mind nor heart nor habit are they comfortable managing America's power for the sake of its interests, or calling forth the nation's martial instincts to defend its sacred values."

Their rise, Codevilla says, "is best understood as a gradual change in the collective mentality of the establishment, a change that is now complete." Codevilla points out that during the recent losing battle in the Senate over the confirmation of Morton Halperin as Assistant Secretary of Defense, Halperin's opponents charged that he had been on the wrong side of the cold war, while his supporters said that he was a mainstream foreign policy expert. According to Codevilla, both sides had a point.

In short, Clinton's actions abroad are not random; they faithfully follow a pattern that those who today make up the U.S. foreign policy establishment have been advocating since the Vietnam war ended. Two principle components of this pattern are the belief that negotiation should be the centerpiece of foreign policy and that all actions should have approval of multinational organizations, such as the U.N. or NATO.

This is blueprint that eschews any unilateral display of American might. In fact, this policy rejects out of hand the classical view that the use of military force is an integral part of the negotiating process. One of the principle purposes of negotiating, under this blueprint, is to avoid the use of force. Indeed, the use of military power is seen as de facto evidence of a failure in the negotiating process. Under this blueprint, the use of military force is primarily a means of exhibiting pique.

Space does not permit a comprehensive examination of the views of each of the individuals involved in the Clinton foreign policy team. But statements by a few of them are illustrative.

I'll begin with Secretary of State Christopher's assertion before the Stanford University Class of 1981 that "talking receives less attention than it deserves." Christopher was Jimmy Carter's chief

negotiator with Iran during the hostage debacle there. In his 1985 book, "The Hostages of Iran," he argued that "we should take the crisis as a clear vindication of talking as a means to resolve international disputes." Christopher was once described by *The New Republic* as a "pragmatist mainstream realist liberal conservative moderate centrist."

Strobe Talbott, Christopher's number two man at State, is a very close friend and ideological soul mate of Bill Clinton's. He first came to the public's attention in 1967, as the subject of a James Reston piece in the *New York Times* about antiwar protestors at Yale. In the intervening years, he is most noted for his books and articles arguing against the U.S. military buildup during the cold war, on the theory that this would just antagonize the Soviet Union and make the situation worse. Talbott is a self-described Russian expert. The *Wall Street Journal* recently noted that "it is Russia that has been Mr. Talbott's passion, life's work and magnificent obsession."

In 1981 when President Reagan told Notre Dame graduates that the West should dismiss Communism "as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written," Talbott wrote that he agreed with "other administration officials, especially professional diplomats and intelligence analysis with long experience in Soviet affairs [who] . . . expressed confidence that the Soviets recognized such theorizing for what it was: idiosyncratic, extremist, and very much confined to the fringes of government."

In 1982, when Reagan told the British parliament that "this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals" and argued that "the Soviet Union itself is not immune to this reality," Talbott insisted that "very few in the West took it seriously as a statement of policy."

In 1983, Talbott criticized Reagan's view that the Soviet Union must build down its missile inventory "to a position that the United States would recognize as equality." Talbott called this "a transparently one-sided set of objectives." In January 1990, he wrote *Time* magazine's essay crowning Gorbachev "Man of the Decade," in which he argued that "the doves in the great debate of the past 40 years were right all along." The Soviet threat, he said, "never was."

Throughout the cold war, Talbott was also a harsh and unrelenting critic of Israel, for the most part echoing the Soviet Union's charges against the Jewish state. He once accused Menachem Begin of being "obsessed with the Holocaust." In 1981, when Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor, Talbott wrote an essay in *Time* calling Israel "a nasty, and bitter nation." During his recent confirmation hearing, Talbott asserted that his views on Israel have changed.

Talbott's long affinity for Russia is important to remember today because he is generally credited with assuring that Clinton regularly checks out his policies with Boris Yeltsin. Clinton did this last week prior to his press conference on the situation in Bosnia. In fact, he had spoken with Yeltsin but not with Germany's Helmut Kohl or England's John Major. Yeltsin, of course, is strongly against any use of military force by the United States and greatly in favor of U.S. diplomats spending a lot of time "talking," most especially when it comes to Russia's traditional friends, the Serbs.

Relative to Anthony Lake, it is enough to know that he wrote the famous Jimmy Carter line blaming Vietnam on "our inordinate fear of communism," and that he asserted in that same speech that "through failure we have found our way back to our own values."

Now I don't intend to rehash old Vietnam arguments here. But as I remember it, there were two principal, and for the most part mutually exclusive, camps of opposition to the war. The first believed that U.S. actions in Vietnam were morally reprehensible; that the United States was, in fact, the "bad guy."

The other crowd, which came late to the party, and in my opinion tipped the balance against the hawks, believed that the basic intention of the United States (to halt communist expansion, in line with our post WWII policy of containment) was correct, but that the cost of accomplishing that goal in Vietnam, both in dollar terms and in damage to the nation's social fabric, was much too dear. After the war, the latter group generally returned to their pro-military, hawkish views toward communism.

Lake's position, that failure in Vietnam restored U.S. values, represented the post-Vietnam feelings of many of the first group, including Bill Clinton and most of his current foreign policy team. This crowd's Vietnam-inspired disillusionment with the moral authority of the United States, or with what Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow has called the "legitimizing myths" of American national purpose and destiny, continued after the war, and manifested itself in the view that there was moral equivalence between the United States and the Soviet Union. As I indicated earlier, Strobe Talbott was a champion of this opinion.

Today, this decades-long ambivalence toward the idea that United States occupies moral high ground manifests itself in a determined unwillingness to impose U.S. solutions on anyone, anywhere, under any circumstances. The clearest evidence of this attitude can be seen in Clinton's oft-repeated assertion that the United States is "not taking sides" in Bosnia, even though he has regularly charged that "genocide" is occurring there. But who are we to judge?

Thus, Clinton and his foreign policy team are ever reluctant to directly seek victory for U.S. interests in such places as Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia or Korea, for this would require the assertion that our ideas and ideals are superior, which is somehow embarrassing to them. For these people, the question "What about Vietnam?" makes such assertions difficult for them. The idea, as expressed recently by none other than Mother Teresa that "no one in the world who prizes liberty and human rights can feel anything but a strong kinship with America," is appreciated, but does not appear to be fully believed.

O According to Clinton, our stated goal in Bosnia is to stop genocide. Our practical goal, our expectation if you will, is to negotiate a compromise that limits the gains of the murderers.

O Our stated goal in North Korea is to prevent that nation from having a nuclear bomb. Our expectation now appears to be to make Korea's acquisition of such a weapon expensive to them.

O Our stated goal in Haiti is to restore the freely elected president to power. Our expectation appears to be to make it not so much fun for the existing dictator.

In the near term, the negative consequences of this unwillingness-to-win approach are not great. We are an enormously powerful nation. Neither we nor our allies are directly threatened by anyone. If our vacant threats of the use of force or trade sanctions make us look like buffoons to tin-pot tyrants in Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia and North Korea, it makes little difference in the foreseeable future.

Over the long term, this approach to foreign policy is extremely dangerous. It emboldens our enemies (and like it or not, we do have enemies) and thus increases the chance one or more will someday do something that demands a military response. This response, when it comes, will most certainly be more costly than it would have been had it been taken earlier.

In the meantime, don't fall into the trap of believing that the United States has no foreign policy. We definitely have one. And, as we used to say when I was a kid, it's a dilly.

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