

The Political Forum

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

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ONWARD SECULAR SOLDIERS

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This week I'd like to recant on a critical comment I made several weeks ago about Bill Clinton's choice of Warren Christopher as Secretary of State. The criticism wasn't mine exactly, but I'd like to recant anyway. You see, I cited a *New Republic* comment that Christopher was "a truly disastrous choice, emblematic both of the scant regard that the United States still pays to the conduct of foreign affairs and of Clinton's complete misreading of the foreign policy traps he'll face in the next few years."

Why do I now think the *New Republic* was wrong, and I too for quoting it? Well, the more I see of Clinton the more I am convinced that Christopher might be the right man for this president at this time. I will cite three reasons.

O The first relates to a TV interview with Bill and Hillary conducted just before the inaugural during which Bill became highly animated over "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, eventually working himself up to a pledge to definitely "do something" about the situation when he became president. This was, in effect, an affirmation of several allusions Clinton made during the campaign to the possibility of "air strikes" against Serbian positions.

O The second was a recent *Washington Post* story implying that Christopher is responsible for the heavy emphasis on diplomacy contained in Clinton's Bosnia initiative, which the *Post* noted is "somewhat at variance" with his more bellicose campaign rhetoric.

O Finally, I would cite a recent piece in the February 21, 1993 *New York Times* discussing 48 separate places in the world where there are ongoing "ethnic wars," many assuredly as brutal as the conflict in Bosnia and all, it would appear, having the potential to arouse in Bill an apparent eagerness to use, or at least threaten to use, U.S. military strength so long as the cause is "just."

Thus I would argue that it is, on balance, perhaps not a bad thing to have a super dove as head of State Department today. I sympathize with the *New Republic's* distaste for Christopher. And

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like many other observers, I am disturbed by the fact that he has filled virtually every top post with Carter retreads, who were, one might say, a bit off the mark the first time around.

But there is no external threat to the United States on the horizon, and as the *New York Times* pointed out, there are scores of conflicts going on around the world. And the nation has a president who has limited foreign policy experience, who shows signs of being a bit trigger happy, and who is not held in high regard by the military. Indeed, as Fred Barnes put it in the *New Republic* on February 15, Clinton is "loathed . . . by officers young and old, more than any president in modern times."

So I think one could argue that it is better to have a flock of doves running State right now, than to have an eyrie of young, baby-boomer hawks who, like Bill, opposed Vietnam because they thought it was "immoral," but who might welcome a "moral" war today, so long as they didn't have to attend it in person.

Given Clinton's very limited knowledge of foreign policy and the large number of hotspots around the world, I think he has the potential to make some very big foreign policy mistakes. So I would prefer that if he is to err, he err on the side of caution. And Christopher, who is nothing if he is not cautious, will most certainly counsel him in this direction.

Lest anyone doubt this, I would refer them to an article in the February issue of the *American Spectator*, which cites a statement that Colonel Charlie Beckwith, former commander of the U.S. Army's elite counter terrorist unit Delta Force, says Christopher made following Beckwith's presentation to Carter and his top national security advisors just prior to the failed attempt to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran. According to author Daniel Wattenberg, Beckwith said he had just explained how he and his men intended to shoot anyone holding a hostage "right between the eyes . . . twice," when Christopher asked "would you consider shooting them in the leg, or in the ankle or the shoulder?"

Wattenberg says Christopher had a reputation as being "Cy Vance without the charisma," and quotes Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski as saying that Christopher "preferred to litigate issues endlessly, to shy away from the unavoidable ingredient of force . . . and to have an excessive faith that all issues can be resolved by compromise."

All of this raises an issue I think could dominate the post cold war U.S. foreign policy debate for the foreseeable future. I am speaking of the degree to which the government should use the nation's economic and military power to proselytize "democratic values" around the world now that the cold war is over.

Forcing this issue is an odd mixture of neo-conservatives (both from the left and the right) and so-called neo-liberals. At the heart of this latter group are the older baby boom Democrats, who have been "morally outraged" over something for their entire adult lives. It was Vietnam in the 1960s. Today it is anything that falls under their definition of racism, sexism, classism, unfair distribution of wealth, public religious observation, offensive speech, and a myriad of actions by governments all over the world that violate their particular sense of right and wrong.

In his book *The New Jacobins*, political theorist and scholar Claes Ryn compares the mind set of this "politically correct" crowd to that of the French Jacobins, whose post revolutionary government abhorred religious beliefs, but which nevertheless sought to impose "virtue" on everyone. Like their predecessors, these new Jacobins, Ryn notes, combine a "belief in abstract principles with moralistic righteousness in an effort to bestow their noble insights on all humanity."

Ryn points out, however, that the virtues extolled by these new Jacobins are unlike traditional "virtues of character," whereby people are judged by "demonstrated integrity, modesty and strength of will." Instead, the "virtue" of these citizens, he says, does not aim at controlling self, but at controlling others, and it extends not only to domestic matters (such as enforcement of politically correct speech at the nation's universities), but to international affairs as well.

Ryn offers the following ideas from neo-conservative darlings of the left, authors Allan Bloom and Ben Wattenberg, as examples of the international flavor of this rhetoric. According to Bloom, "When we Americans speak seriously about politics, we mean that our principles of freedom and equality and the rights based on them are rational and everywhere applicable."

Wattenberg carries this theme to its natural conclusion. "It's pretty clear," he says, "what the global community needs: probably a top cop, but surely a powerful global organizer. Somebody's got to do it. We're the only ones who can . . . the idea of spreading democratic and American values around the world is visionary. It's the right thing to do."

Another example of such rhetoric appears in a November 6, 1989, *New Republic* article, "The Democracy Gang," by Morton Kondracke. This "democracy gang" to which Kondracke refers is comprised of American neocons, the National Endowment for Democracy, selected members of the liberal Left, South African revolutionaries, and Eastern European and Chinese dissenters.

Kondracke says this group is at the vanguard of the internationalization of the political struggle for global democracy, all of which is in keeping with his view that a primary purpose of U.S. foreign policy is to "aid others with money, political support, technical advice, diplomatic intervention, military assistance . . . and on rare occasions direct or covert use of force."

Ryn notes that such high minded, moralistic language contains "a pleasant ingredient of self-applause" for the speaker. And he adds, it "invariably masks strong political ambitions." On a practical level, the danger is that such rhetoric could lead to hasty and emotional decisions to use troops to impose U.S. "ideals" in any one of the 48 "ethnic" hotspots cited by the *New York Times*.

An op-ed piece in the February 18, *Wall Street Journal* contained the following relative to Bosnia: "We should try to get the U.N. or NATO to approve intervention, but if they won't we must form an ad hoc coalition around American leadership, including allies outside Europe. Our strategic goals should be simple: Roll back Serbian forces in Bosnia and Croatia; recognize Macedonia and provide economic and security assistance; and be prepared to contain Serbian aggression indefinitely, while pressing strongly for democracy and human rights in Kosovo."

"To do this we should arm the Bosnians, use air strikes against Serbian positions in Bosnia, give Croatia support to oust Serbian occupiers, and send limited Western forces (no more than 50,000) for missions such as lifting the siege of Sarajevo . . ."

From where did this call to arms emanate, you ask? From some cold war hawk, from a former General, perhaps? No, it came from one George Kenney, the former State Department desk officer for Yugoslavia, who quit last August to protest what he considered to be President Bush's cautious response to the conflict there.

Today Kenney is a "consultant" to, of all places, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. This institution sponsored some of the strongest critics of the use of U.S. armed forces during the long, cold war against international communism. So at first glance, it would seem to be the least likely of all of America's intellectual think tanks to sponsor Kenney's call for armed conflict. But, of course, times change.

This apparent new militancy on the left is a crucial part of a trend described by Paul Edward Gottfried as "American ideological imperialism." In his 1990 book, *Carl Schmitt, Politics and Theory*, published by Greenwood Press, Gottfried notes that Schmitt, a German political theorist who died in 1985, foresaw that as traditional religious-based behavioral and moral standards decayed in United States, intellectuals of the left would substitute their own secular ones, and attempt to impose these "values" both on U.S. society and on other nations as well.

Schmitt argued that "values" are different from traditional Western moral beliefs. "Values," he said, arise from a culture of individual self-assertion and therefore must be asserted against competing ones. This, he noted, was not a mere academic exercise but a deadly confrontation, which could, if internationalized, easily lead to "just wars." These wars would be of unspeakable brutality, he said, "for any consideration of the enemy must vanish, must become a nonvalue, when the struggle against this enemy is concerned with the highest 'value'. . . for the highest value no price is too high to be paid."

In keeping with this line of thought, Gottfried quotes Ryn as observing that there is a disturbing tendency in the present secular age to confuse "things of Caesar and things of God." Ryn says that while most older Christian traditions never pointed to the "collective, political redemption of mankind" as a feasible or even a desirable goal, modern Christians and secularists alike are guilty of "exaggerating the moral potential of politics."

Besides Ryn, Gottfried cites Robert Nisbet as someone whose ideas are compatible with those of Schmitt. Nisbet is author of the *The Quest for Community, A Study In the Ethics of Order & Freedom*. Senator Patrick Moynihan described this book as "masterful." I referenced it at some length in a September 2, article called, "Family Values: A Potentially Great Campaign Theme, Botched Completely by Bush & Co."

Gottfried points out that in his 1988 book entitled *The Present Age*, Nisbet warned against an American foreign policy "framed in dangerous grandiose concepts," and lamented the fact that ideological imperialism had increased in proportion to the nation's declining capacity to maintain domestic order. "Unable to control crime in our own streets or the growth and cost of our

bureaucratic administration, we now go forth to bring our progressivist creed to the rest of mankind."

At the conclusion of the book, Gottfried turns to the words of Edmund Burke, one of history's great statesmen. Burke, who one cannot help but wish Bill and Hillary would take some time to read, believed that government was "a practical thing, made for the happiness of mankind, and not to furnish out a spectacle of uniformity to gratify the schemes of visionary politicians."

In a letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol, Burke noted that he "never was wild enough to conceive that one method would serve for the whole, that the natives of Hindostan and those of Virginia could be ordered in the same manner."

There are, of course, practical impediments to the kind of moral imperialism described by Burke, and feared by Gottfried, Ryn, and Nisbet. Among these are the budget deficit and the desire on the part of Clinton to make large cutbacks in defense spending.

And, as I indicated above, some resistance, at least to the use of military force, could possibly come from old line liberals like Christopher, who are viscerally dovish, in large part, I would guess, due to having watched the U.S. fail miserably to "democratize" Vietnam, and later to muster the will to control the extraordinary bloodshed that followed our venture there in the killing fields of Kampuchea.

Thus, it is with no small irony that I find myself wondering if perhaps, given the practical choices available under the Clinton administration, a dyed-in-the-wool dove as head of the State Department and a weakened military might not be, for the time being, best for both the United States and for a good part of the rest of the world as well. A pretty scary thought, huh?

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