

The Political Forum

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

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IN SEARCH OF A CLINTON FOREIGN POLICY THEME Mark L. Melcher

The fall of the Berlin Wall made it mandatory for the United States to develop a new, comprehensive foreign policy to replace the old policy of "containment." I had thought that the process for developing such a policy would quickly center on two, or possibly three, well defined "camps," such as the "hawks" and "doves" of the cold war.

This hasn't happened. Five years after the fall of "The Wall," not a single foreign policy "camp" has emerged that commands sufficient intellectual clout to boast any meaningful following in the foreign policy community. Certainly none has become influential enough to be recognized as a foreign policy force by a significant cross section of the American public.

The foreign policy establishment itself has to shoulder most of the blame for this. But it has not helped that the Clinton administration's foreign policy team hasn't itself articulated a comprehensive, understandable worldview against which other ideological groups can contrast themselves.

The result is that, for the most part, the brouhaha over Clinton's much-discussed intervention into Haiti has not been centered on various foreign policy paradigms. It has instead focused almost exclusively on speculation over Bill Clinton's personality and political agenda.

For example, Dan Quayle said the other day that he thinks Clinton is involving himself in Haiti in order to "try to increase his standing in the public opinion." *The Wall Street Journal's* Paul Gigot acknowledged this theory, then argued sarcastically that "The truth is worse. He's doing it because he thinks it's the right thing to do."

Others have speculated that Clinton simply has a burning desire to act at least once as commander in chief during a military operation. Still others, say he is doing it to gain political support from the Congressional Black Caucus. Finally, there is the theory that he just talked himself into a corner, and finally had no choice but to see the venture through to a conclusion.

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To my knowledge, no one has tried to make the case that Clinton's involvement in Haitian politics is part of some broad foreign policy "plan." This is due, I think, to the fact that no one can discern that any such plan exists.

Yet, I would argue that there has to be a "plan." Even if Clinton himself doesn't acknowledge it, there has to be some framework within which his foreign policy decisions are formulated. His actions can't be entirely ad hoc, or random. If I am right, and some pattern can be found in his actions, some logic, no matter how illogical, it would help considerably in making projections about future U.S. foreign policy enterprises. So this week, I thought I would explore this thought a little.

My friend Daniel Pipes, who is editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, says he has identified at least one pattern in Clinton's foreign policy. That is that Clinton relies heavily on advice and direction from whatever special interest group is most vocal about a particular decision.

Pipes points out that Clinton's policy toward Israel has been largely directed by the American Jewish community, which he notes is decidedly happy so far with the outcome. He points out that Clinton has relied heavily on at least one faction of the Florida Cuban community for advice on how to deal with Castro, and on the Black Caucus for guidance on Haiti.

This theory makes sense to me. If any message comes through loud and clear from *The Agenda*, Bob Woodward's book about the Clinton White House, it is that Clinton himself is not an ideologue. He has opinions, and he has what I would call sentiments, but these would appear to be negotiable within a very wide ideological range. His overriding "philosophy" appears to be that he simply wants to be "liked."

Pipes' theory also helps explain Clinton's trade policy. For the most part, Clinton has sought advice about Japan from those who trade with Japan, about China from those who trade with China, and about NAFTA from those who trade with Mexico. Early glimmers of what appeared to be ideologically-based concerns over China's human rights policy and NAFTA's impact on U.S. labor were quickly abandoned in favor of more "practical" considerations, as articulated by affected members of the U.S. business community.

I think that Pipes' theory also helps explain Clinton's policy of extraordinary deference toward Russia. This deference can be seen, for example, in his opposition to NATO membership of Eastern European nations and his imprimatur for Yeltsin's insistence on keeping Russian "peace keeping" troops in the former Soviet Republics.

In this case, I would argue that the "special interest group" dictating policy is one man, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott. Talbott, a friend of Bill's from the anti-war days at Oxford, is a self-described Russophile, a friend of Yeltsin, and someone who believes the Russian threat "never was." The *Wall Street Journal* recently noted that "it is Russia that has been Mr. Talbott's passion, life's work and magnificent obsession."

Talbott is without question as important to U.S. policy toward Russia as the Black Caucus is to Haitian policy, the Cuban community is to Cuban policy, and the American Jewish lobby is to

U.S. policy toward Israel. In my opinion, the basis of his involvement is very much like those of the other special interest groups mentioned above, highly personal and emotional.

There are obvious political and strategic advantages to formulating foreign policy around the views of persons and groups with special axes to grind. Every president does this to some degree because it is good politics, and in many cases, possibly most cases, it results in both good sense and good policy.

But there are risks, especially if, as appears to be the case with the Clinton administration, there is no clear moral theme and policy framework that can act to override, or at least temper, the views of parties who have a direct emotional or economic stake in the outcome.

o First, there is the risk that the course taken under these circumstances will make no sense in a broader context. Many would argue that this is the case with Clinton's Haitian policy. Besides presenting domestic political problems, this confuses allies and enemies alike, and in the long run, can be dangerous.

o Morally dubious policy decisions can also result. In the case of Clinton's Cuban policy, for example, by following the lead and advice of certain Cuban interest groups in Florida, Clinton finds himself in the position of, in the words of former INS general counsel Grover Joseph Rees, "persuading a Communist dictatorship to get tough on refugees." Talbott's policy of favoring aggressive Russian involvement in its former Republics also raises serious moral questions, at least in the view of many observers who are less attached to the Yeltsin government and to Russian national interests than Talbott.

o Finally, in dealing with areas of the world where there is no directly-involved U.S. special interest group, an administration with no clear view of the world runs the risk of floundering endlessly in its search of a policy.

This, of course, brings up the question of what factors guide Clinton when there is no clear "special interest" group involved. As I said earlier, even if he himself doesn't recognize it, there must be some identifiable constants at work that can provide clues to future actions. I have identified three.

For starters, it appears that in many cases where no clear special interest group asserts itself voluntarily, Clinton will try to create or find one. In the case of Bosnia, for example, he eventually turned the decision making over to the Europeans. In North Korea, he turned to Jimmy Carter for leadership.

He appears also to still view the world in the old bi-polar, cold war context, as though Russian opinion about U.S. actions across the globe carry the same weight as did the views of the old U.S.S.R., when it was a genuine "superpower." Strobe Talbott's influence is probably partially in evidence here. But I think Clinton's seeming lack of curiosity and imagination, when it comes to foreign policy, would have led him in this direction without Talbott.

In any case, this attitude basically prevents Clinton from even considering certain options that might make sense today, but which would not have been feasible during the cold war because of

Soviet objections. This I think is responsible for Clinton's seeming inability to develop a comprehensive post-cold-war foreign policy theme. If Russia must be treated with the same deference and respect as the Soviet Union was, then what is there to change?

Small herds of cattle that have been surrounded by an electric fence for a long time will eventually honor the fence even after the electricity has been removed. The Soviet Union was the electric fence that restricted U.S. options during the cold war. U.S. options expanded significantly when the Soviet Union collapsed. Yet Bill continues to act as though the fence is still electrified.

This provides at least one clue when attempting to assess what he will do, or at least what he won't do, in the future. In Cuba, for example, it is clear that Clinton has never even considered the option of simply tearing down the fence around Guantanamo Bay to make room for more Cuban refugees. Yet it is clear that the United States no longer has to fear and respect Fidel as it did when he had the U.S.S.R. as a patron.

I think one would be hard pressed to argue that if Clinton's idol, Jack Kennedy, were in charge today he would treat Castro with the same degree of respect that Clinton has shown him, given the Castro regime's history of supporting political murder within Cuba and terrorism worldwide.

A final characteristic that appears to lie at the heart of Clinton's personal view of foreign policy is that he tends to favor what columnist Charles Krauthammer calls the "Anthony Lewis" school of foreign policy. Krauthammer describes this camp as being most aggressive in cases where no national interest is at stake.

This characteristic was described as follows by columnist George Will. "Just as in domestic policy the proof of liberal virtue is generosity with other peoples' money, the proof in foreign policy is willingness to spend the nation's blood, treasure and prestige for abstractions rather than concrete national gain."

As Will indicates, this gives the nation's foreign policy a "noble" quality, and theoretically makes Clinton and the United States "better liked" throughout the world. And what could be better than that?

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