

The Revenge of Geopolitics

by Harvey Sicherman

When Bill Clinton is inaugurated in January 1997, he will preside over the second presidential term of the post-cold war era. He inherits certain titles, such as “leader of the free world” and “leader of the only superpower,” that already sound like relics of a bygone age. For unlike his cold war predecessors, he does not face an annihilating threat, no life-threatening dragon to slay.

Instead, he inherits a paradox. It is no accident, as the Soviets used to say, that the present time lacks a distinctive name. One speaks instead of the “post-cold war era,” which is to say that while the previous era was defined by a worldwide struggle, this one is not; that where the overarching geopolitical fact of the cold war was U.S.-Soviet rivalry, the overarching fact of the post-cold war era is simply its absence.

But therein lies a paradox. For despite the disappearance of that global rivalry, American military forces have been active, even hyperactive, as compared with any period of the cold war save the Korea and Vietnam wars. Between January 1993 and December 1995, Clinton used U.S. armed forces abroad on no less than twenty-five occasions, compared with seventeen times during the two Reagan terms and fourteen under President George Bush.¹

The paradox yields this truth: the post-cold war era may be distinguished by the absence of a cold war, but it hardly qualifies as “peace.” Rather, an overarching geopolitical struggle has merely given way to numerous “under-arching” struggles. The Kremlin may be emptied of ideologues plotting campaigns against America, her allies, and strategic points around the globe, but the world as a whole teems with as many geopoliticians as ever. One might call them the “meat-eaters,” those to whom power, territorial possession, military action,

¹ See Richard F. Grimmett, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-1995*, CRS Report 96-119F, Feb. 6, 1996, pp. 18-25.

Harvey Sicherman is president of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He served as aide to Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., and as a consultant to Secretaries of State George P. Shultz and James A. Baker 3d.

and pirated wealth matter far more than do the environmental issues, diplomatic niceties, human rights, and other hobbies of the social transformers who comprise the current U.S. foreign policy establishment.

The persistence of geopolitics, or *realpolitik*, has come as a rude and distressing shock to the neo-Wilsonians who took office under Clinton. Many were veterans of the only administration that genuinely attempted to transcend the geopolitical approach to world affairs—Jimmy Carter's. They believed that the collapse of Soviet power had made the "enlargement" of democracy and free markets possible and, indeed, inevitable. In their view, the era of the meat-eaters was over and that of the plant-eaters at hand. American power should therefore be harnessed to various projects the cold war had precluded, such as the enforcement of human rights, economic cooperation, arms control, and reinvigoration of the United Nations—with nation building a sideline to hurry along any Third Worlders too dim to recognize the dawning of the new day. This ambitious agenda swept over all of the historic cold war battlegrounds, from Moscow and Beijing to the killing fields of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. What is more, the neo-Wilsonians proclaimed this enthusiastic, if not always coherent, agenda at the very time that their nominal leader, Clinton, declared himself a domestic president and thereby discounted U.S. foreign policy's chief asset, the leadership of the presidency itself.

What has happened to U.S. foreign policy over the past several years, therefore, is this: the more the Clintonians pressed their plant-eater agenda, the more room they made for the meat-eaters, with the perverse result that geopolitics, far from becoming obsolete, returned with a vengeance.

Somalia's late, unlamented General Mohammed Farah Aidid defeated the nation builders and struck a heavy blow to the United Nations.

Human-rights supremacists lost out to the economic supremacists on U.S. policy toward China, and the latter in turn lost out over the Taiwan Straits crisis.

Human rightists lost on Haiti, then won, then surrendered to Florida politics, with the result that a "democracy-building" invasion ended the refugee crisis but left a Haitian government critically dependent on U.S. military intervention.²

Bosnia discredited the United Nations, Europe's alphabet organizations (OSCE, EU, et al.), the half-in/half-out U.S. policies, and all Western pretension to virtue, and was temporarily pacified only by a 60,000-strong, American-led NATO force.

² See Larry Rohter, "An Extended Stay in Haiti," *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1996.

Economic sanctions failed against the Serbs, Iraq, Iran, and the Haitian generals.

“Democratic partnership” with Russia lost ground to events in Russia itself, thereby encouraging a classic geopolitical reaction—the expansion of NATO.

In all these theaters, meant to showcase the new agenda, the plant-eaters yielded ground to the meat-eaters, as ironically demonstrated time and again when the marines, navy, army, and air force had to rush to the rescue of U.S. diplomacy.

All that sorely perplexed and distressed the Clintonians, whose high-minded excursions into the realm of strategy under such slogans as “enlargement” and “assertive multilateralism” had been routed by incorrigible events. Finally, in October 1995, Clinton announced American participation in the Bosnia adventure by invoking the shades and even the rhetoric of his cold war predecessors, including the reality of evil in human affairs, the redemptive quality of military force, and America’s historic geopolitical interests in Europe. Then, on March 6, 1996, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake pronounced when and how American military forces were to be used, replacing the earlier Weinberger-Powell doctrine with a post-cold war version that he touted as being less, not more, restrictive of such use.³

One can conclude from this record that the clash between the plant-eaters and the meat-eaters is over: even in Washington the geopoliticians have won. Thus, in his second term Clinton will have as his first burden the retooling of American foreign policy to deal with the world as it is. To put it more theatrically, makers of U.S. foreign policy must awake to the fact that the world remains a Jurassic Park, and that they had better equip themselves to keep monsters at bay.

The Presidency

The equipping process must begin with the presidency itself. From World War II until Vietnam, the American president functioned as commander in chief and diplomat in chief, and his performance in these roles was critical to his chances of reelection and, indeed, his place in history. From Harry Truman onward, foreign affairs was the fulcrum of presidential success or failure. The cold (and sometimes not-so-cold) war required unprecedented grants of authority and power to the White House, which the Congress often resented but rarely prevented.

Vietnam, of course, changed much of that. The wreck of the imperial presidency begat an imperial Congress. The War Powers Act, the Church

³ Anthony Lake, “Defining Missions, Setting Deadlines: Meeting New Security Challenges in the Post-Cold War World,” speech delivered at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., Mar. 6, 1996.

amendment regulating Central Intelligence Agency activity (notably to forbid operations that might lead to the death of foreign leaders), and incessant “earmarking” of foreign aid constrained presidential conduct. To be sure, the Reagan administration successfully reasserted the claims of the executive branch to take overt and covert action abroad in the name of national security, but as the cold war wound down, a president could no longer assume that the Congress and public would automatically rally to his support. Hence, the White House needed a bully pulpit all the more; the authority of the commander in chief had to be justified and not just invoked. Above all, presidents had to take special care to preserve an increasingly narrow congressional consensus on

foreign policy made up of Republicans and the so-called Scoop Jackson Democrats. Bush was the last beneficiary of this combination, carrying the Senate on the war in the Persian Gulf by a mere five votes, while the majority of the Democrats voted against him.

Clinton and his appointees seem not to have understood this narrowing margin for presidential leadership—or perhaps

they no longer thought a consensus necessary. But Somalia taught them a lesson, and Clinton was able to resist demands for immediate withdrawal thanks only to Republican support. When it came to the North American Free Trade Agreement, Clinton did work hard to revive the internationalist consensus, and he succeeded despite the opposition of his own party’s leaders. But it must be said that Clinton has not used his bully pulpit often or well. His attempt at establishing doctrine (democratic enlargement) was blunted by CNN in Somalia. Neither he nor his secretary of state waged any public campaign on behalf of foreign aid. His policies in Haiti, Bosnia, and elsewhere were launched without extensive prior explanation. And the often confusing pace of his administration’s forays in foreign policy encouraged the erroneous idea that Clinton was indecisive. In fact, as the history of Bosnia indicates, he was *too* decisive, visiting, revisiting, and revising his tactics at each step to the point where no one could be sure what his next decision might be. That understandably bred a caution in Congress (and the public) that some pundits mistook for “isolationism.” Instead, it reflected common sense: if the leader appears unsure of himself, it is better not to do anything.

The lesson of the past few years is that American foreign policy cannot be conducted coherently unless the president imposes leadership and order upon it. Otherwise it will be tugged hither and yon by special interests, congressional committees, and media coverage of this or that disaster. A president can no longer rely on the public’s apprehension of a general danger—that passed away with the cold war. Presidential leadership, to be effective, must instead draw from these wells:

First, the president himself must have a strong idea of what he wants the United States to achieve abroad. He need not be a philosopher-king, but he does require, as in domestic affairs, a sense of issues and direction such that he can be persuasive in private and public.

Secondly, public-opinion polls show that Americans are internationalists, not isolationists. They are simply cautious, do not want to spend money or risk

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lives gratuitously, and insist upon justifications for action. In short, they demand that the bully pulpit be used and are willing to respond to its sermons.

Thirdly, the United States is spending the smallest percentage of its GNP on defense since 1939, and its outlays on foreign aid are similarly modest. Despite public impressions that Washington spends 25 percent of its budget on foreign aid and public opinion that it should spend about 5 percent, the actual figure is 1 percent and dropping. The country is not spending too much.⁴

Lastly, the Congress, although increasingly populated by younger members inexperienced or ignorant of foreign affairs, remains leery of taking responsibility for the running of foreign policy. Untended, a congressional coalition must be re-created for each issue. Properly tended, a bipartisan coalition can be forged that will support the president.

In sum, whatever else his administration undertakes, Clinton must revive the presidency itself as the first and foremost instrument for effective foreign policy.

Alliances

The Clinton administration will also have to learn how to manage alliances and coalitions. The “assertive multilateralists” of 1993–94 placed more weight upon the United Nations than it could bear, while ignoring NATO and other regional coalitions. After Somalia and Bosnia discredited the United Nations as a peacemaker, Washington found itself in a nether world: unable to justify unilateral action on the one hand or, on the other hand, to use an obviously inept United Nations. Meanwhile, NATO had been shaken badly by Warren Christopher’s abortive mission concerning Bosnia and the subsequent U.N.-directed pinprickery against the Serbs. A rapidly escalating crisis in the alliance was averted only when French president Jacques Chirac and Senator Bob Dole combined to force the president to lead, eventually producing the Dayton agreement.

These experiences are worthy of study as a nearly unrelieved chronicle of error. Otherwise they offer no model of cooperation; indeed, no one wishes to repeat them. More recently, the other operating coalition bequeathed to Clinton—the anti-Saddam alliance—was hurled into a similar bout of doubt over U.S. management and wisdom. But Clinton will still find a reservoir upon which to draw because, as Churchill once observed, “There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting without them.”⁵ In NATO, the alliance of the Western democracies, there exists the happy coincidence of

⁴ American foreign aid has decreased from \$13.619 billion in 1988 to an estimated \$12.976 billion for 1996. Surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations found that the public viewed too much foreign aid being sent to other countries as the number two foreign policy problem confronting the United States. John E. Rielly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1995* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1995), p. 14.

⁵ James C. Humes, *The Wit and Wisdom of Winston Churchill* (N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 4.

both realism and idealism. This and other coalitions can be used to magnify U.S. influence so long as the following points are kept in mind.

The United States remains the only country capable of defining a common interest. In Europe and in Asia the major local powers are either too weak, too confused, or too cursed by history to do that job. No one wants the Germans or the Russians, the Chinese or the Japanese, to organize a “common interest.” If America does not do it, it will not be done. That is partly why, even in the absence of the cold war, the Europeans want the United States to remain a European power and the Asians want the United States to remain an Asian power.

Furthermore, U.S. allies and friends insist upon consultation but demand decision. The Clintonians belatedly discovered that, after fifty years of practice, NATO easily detects hesitation and detests hesitation disguised as consultation. An alliance is an instrument, not an excuse for inaction or evasion. It is also a living organism that must be tended, pruned occasionally, and fertilized often. Like public opinion or a congressional consensus, it can never be taken for granted.

There is simply no substitute for constant, sophisticated alliance management that always seeks common ground. The best common ground is to be found in overlapping interests. These, however, are not enough. Overlapping interests must be buttressed by the principle of shared risks and responsibility, and shaped by a sense of individual allies’ strengths and weaknesses. To be specific, Washington should not expect Britain and France to take casualties from Serb retaliations for U.S. bombing raids if it will not risk U.S. troops, nor should Washington look for Germany to send troops to the Balkans or for Turkey to support an independent Kurdistan.

Learning, or relearning, alliance and coalition diplomacy must be a top-priority task for the U.S. foreign policy team in the Clinton administration’s second term.

U.S. Military Power

Effective foreign policy also requires that the president redefine and reform the use of U.S. military power. It is no secret that the Pentagon did not wish to fight Desert Storm; then, having won, it did not want to fight anything but Desert Storms. The doctrine of overwhelming force for every contingency grew into elephantiasis: did the United States really need a carrier task force and 20,000 soldiers for the intervention in Haiti? Moreover, a serious conflict over roles and missions has developed since the end of the cold war. All the action now is in peacekeeping, with its ambiguous rules and passive behavior, pushing the real war-fighting qualities that guarantee U.S. security to the background. The result could be a U.S. military establishment that is both too expensive and overarmed for mere police work, but too stretched and under-equipped for a major conflict. This disaster-in-gestation can be prevented if certain realities are understood.

To begin with, the dubious piety of “force as the last resort”—which became sacred writ when force could escalate into nuclear war—is the worst idea of the post-cold war era. U.S. diplomacy must be shadowed by U.S. military power if the carnivores are to be controlled. A little force, judiciously applied early in the Balkan trouble, could have spared thousands of lives, two years of ethnic cleansing, and an irrevocably broken Bosnian state.

Next, disproportionate response, rather than massive deployment, is more useful in keeping little predators—the Milosevics and Saddams of this world—in their dens. “Tit for tat,” or gradual response, the old Vietnam sin, only squanders the advantage of being the sole superpower and gives a tactical advantage to the adversary.

And lastly, “high tech” works, but it works best when amplified by “low tech.” Just as air power alone could not have won the war in the Persian Gulf, so cruise missiles alone or bombers alone will not substitute for ground forces. The flight from the army for budgetary or other reasons is a flight from reality. The commitment of U.S. troops remains the ultimate sign that Americans are serious about a given conflict and willing to take decisive action.

Conclusion

President Bill Clinton will ring in the millennium. But he will not redeem mankind or transform all the states of this world into placid herbivores in a Garden of Eden. “Winning the peace” after the cold war requires a bracing dosage of geopolitical realism, and with it the refashioning of the institutions and tools that are the eyes, ears, and teeth of U.S. foreign policy. Above all, a presidency that educates public opinion, cultivates congressional consensus, manages international coalitions, and disposes of alert, decisive military power is not only compatible with a “domestic presidency,” it is essential. For the alternative—a Jurassic Park of meat-eaters run wild—will surely kill all dreams for a better America and a better world in the twenty-first century.

