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Foreign Policy as Social Work

Michael Mandelbaum

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# Foreign Policy as Social Work

*Michael Mandelbaum*

## THE CLINTON RECORD

THE SEMINAL events of the foreign policy of the Clinton administration were three failed military interventions in its first nine months in office: the announced intention, then failure, to lift the arms embargo against Bosnia's Muslims and bomb the Bosnian Serbs in May 1993; the deaths of 18 U.S. Army rangers at the hands of a mob in Mogadishu, Somalia, on October 3; and the turning back of a ship carrying military trainers in response to demonstrations in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on October 12. Together they set the tone and established much of the agenda of the foreign policy of the United States from 1993 through 1995.

These failed interventions expressed the view of the worldwide role of the United States that the members of the Clinton foreign policy team brought to office. Their distinctive vision of post-Cold War American foreign policy failed because it did not command public support. Much of the administration's first year was given over to making that painful discovery. Much of the next two years was devoted to coping with the consequences of the failures of that first year.

Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti were not, as the administration claimed, problems it had inherited. The Bush administration had sent troops to Somalia for the limited purpose of distributing food

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MICHAEL MANDELBAUM is Christian A. Herter Professor of American Foreign Policy at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University, and Director of the Project on East-West Relations at the Council on Foreign Relations.

and not, as the Clinton administration's ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, put it, "for the restoration of an entire country."<sup>1</sup> As for Bosnia and Haiti, during the 1992 presidential campaign Clinton promised to change the Bush policies by using air power to stop ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and by discontinuing the repatriation of Haitian refugees fleeing to the United States.

The Clinton campaign promises, however, cannot be properly understood merely as tactical maneuvers designed to secure electoral advantage. Although they certainly were that, they also reflected the convictions of W. Anthony Lake, the campaign's foreign policy coordinator who became President Clinton's national security adviser. The campaign commitments may have been expedient, but they were not cynical. Nor were they challenged by Warren Christopher, who became the secretary of state, the office from which American foreign policy has generally been directed.

The abortive interventions shared several features. Each involved small, poor, weak countries far from the crucial centers that had dominated American foreign policy during the Cold War. Whereas previous administrations had been concerned with the powerful and potentially dangerous members of the international community, which constitute its core, the Clinton administration turned its attention to the international periphery.

In these peripheral areas the administration was preoccupied not with relations with neighboring countries, the usual subject of foreign policy, but rather with the social, political, and economic conditions within borders. It aimed to relieve the suffering caused by ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, starvation in Somalia, and oppression in Haiti. Historically the foreign policy of the United States has centered on American interests, defined as developments that could affect the lives of American citizens. Nothing that occurred in these three countries fit that criterion. Instead, the Clinton interventions were intended to promote American values.

Lake characterized this approach, incorrectly, as "pragmatic neo-Wilsonianism." While Woodrow Wilson, like Bill Clinton, favored

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lewis, "U.N. Will Increase Troops in Somalia," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1993, p. 3.

the spread of democracy, so has every other president since the founding of the republic. While Wilson sought to promote democracy in Europe to prevent a repetition of World War I, the absence of democracy in Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti was not going to lead to World War III. And while Wilson had a formula for spreading democracy—the establishment of sovereign states on the basis of national self-determination—that principle was precisely what the Clinton administration was determined to prevent the Serbs from applying in the Balkans.

Lake himself supplied a better analogy. “I think Mother Teresa and Ronald Reagan were both trying to do the same thing,” he said in suggesting that the Clinton foreign policy encompassed both, “one helping the helpless, one fighting the Evil Empire.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, they

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Applying the standards  
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expensive proposition.

were trying to do different things. Reagan conducted a traditional foreign policy with a strong ideological overlay. He was in the business of pursuing the national interest of the United States as he understood it. Mother Teresa, by contrast, is in the business of saving lives, which is what Lake and his colleagues tried in 1993 to make the cornerstone of American foreign policy. They tried, and failed, to turn American foreign policy into a branch of social work.

While Mother Teresa is an admirable person and social work a noble profession, conducting American foreign policy by her example is an expensive proposition. The world is a big place filled with distressed people, all of whom, by these lights, have a claim to American attention. Putting an end to the suffering in Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti would have involved addressing its causes, which would have meant deep, protracted, and costly engagement in the tangled political life of each country.

When the time came to carry out the commitment to do so at the risk of American lives, the president balked. He refused to bomb in Bosnia, withdrew U.S. troops from Somalia, and recalled the ship from Haiti, thereby earning a reputation for inconstancy that haunts his presidency. In each case, however, he did not have, nor was he

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<sup>2</sup> Jason DeParle, “The Man Inside Bill Clinton’s Foreign Policy,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 20, 1995, p. 35.

likely to get, the political support in the United States necessary to rearrange the political and economic lives of the three countries so as to end their misery and uphold American values.

THE COLD WAR DIFFERENCE

THE NEW American foreign policy that surfaced and sank in the first nine months of 1993 was the product of an unusual set of circumstances that created a void: a public and a president less interested in international affairs than at any time in the previous six decades combined with the disappearance of the familiar foreign policy guideposts of the Cold War. Into that void stepped a group of people who, during the Carter administration, had been uncomfortable with and unsuccessful at waging the global conflict with the Soviet Union but who believed they could take the political capital the public had furnished for 40 years to oppose the Soviets and put it to uses they deemed more virtuous.

In this they were wrong. The American public had supported intervention in poor, distant reaches of the Third World during the Cold War, and would no doubt do so again, but only on behalf of traditional American national interests.

This was the great lesson to emerge from the fiascoes of Clinton's first year. It can be illustrated by comparing two Caribbean invasions, ten years apart, in which the United States sought to remove an unfriendly government: the Reagan administration's dispatch of forces to Grenada in 1983 and the Clinton administration's efforts to intervene in Haiti in 1993 and 1994. By most criteria Haiti is the more important of the two: larger, closer, a source of refugees, and a country that the United States had occupied from 1915 to 1934. Yet the invasion of Grenada was less controversial.

The reason was that the first invasion was part of the Cold War. The radical Grenadan government was aligned with Cuba, an ally of the Soviet Union, with which the United States was locked in a mortal struggle. The intervention in Grenada could thus be portrayed as an act of self-defense, albeit at several removes, and self-defense is a cause for which Americans have always been willing to sacrifice. The invasion of Haiti could not be presented in that light. Grenada could be seen as affecting American interests. With the end of the Cold War,

Haiti could not. It was the conflict with the Soviet Union that connected the international periphery to American interests.

In the wake of their initial failures, administration officials lamented that the conduct of foreign policy had been easier for their predecessors. This is not true. There has never been a formula for deciding on military intervention, and Cold War presidents had to make that decision with the specter of nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union hovering in the background, an experience the Clinton administration was spared.

But if the decision to intervene was not easier during the Cold War, it was simpler: U.S. presidents did not necessarily know when to use force, but they always knew why—to combat the Soviet Union, its allies, and its clients, and thus defend American interests. The argument for intervention was not always universally persuasive, but it was always plausible. In Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti in 1993 it was not even plausible.

Lake provided an epitaph for the foreign policy of Mother Teresa, one that captured the motive for its rise and the reason for its demise: “When I wake up every morning and look at the headlines and the stories and the images on television of these conflicts, I want to work to end every conflict, I want to work to save every child out there,” he said. “But neither we nor the international community have the resources nor the mandate to do so.”<sup>3</sup>

#### COMEDY, TRAGEDY, AND HAITI

WHILE THE administration withdrew from Somalia, the problems of Haiti and Bosnia lingered on, pieces of unfinished business, reminders of the humiliations of 1993.

In both, the administration followed the same pattern. First it adopted policies that made things worse. Then, in 1994 in Haiti and in 1995 in Bosnia, it finally used force. But the motivation was not, as in 1993, to “help the helpless,” in Lake’s words. Rather it was to bolster the administration’s political standing, which was suffering from the failure

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<sup>3</sup> Elaine Sciolino, “New U.S. Peacekeeping Policy Deemphasizes Role of the U.N.,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 1994, p. A1.

to resolve these problems. Both interventions achieved a measure of success, but in each case the success was provisional, fragile, and reversible.

In Haiti, the Clinton administration first tried to dislodge the junta led by Brig. Gen. Raoul Cédras by imposing an ever-tighter trade embargo, ultimately cutting off almost all Haitian contact with other countries. The embargo devastated Haiti, destroying its small manufacturing sector and leading to predictions of starvation by the end of 1994. That prospect, combined with the continuing exodus of refugees, the insistence of the Congressional Black Caucus that the elected Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide be restored to power, and a hunger strike protesting the failure to do this by American political activist Randall Robinson, persuaded the administration to use force. Finally, in October 1994, troops from the United States landed in Haiti, the junta's leaders departed, and Aristide returned.

The triumph, however, was conditional. For the administration had promised not simply to return Aristide but to restore (or, to put it more accurately, create) democracy and help the country lift itself out of destitution, which required the establishment of a stable political system, the rule of law, and a freely functioning market economy.

Because Haiti lacked all three, the administration's goals could not be accomplished overnight. To give Haiti a chance to reach them required a substantial American commitment. This the Clinton administration was not able to give. The stay of the American and U.N. troops was to be short, ending in February 1996. Their mission was limited; they did not make a serious effort to disarm the country. Financial aid would not be long-term.

All this reduced the capacity of the United States to help ensure that Aristide would leave office, as he promised, in February 1996, that an orderly democratic succession would take place, and that economic reforms would be carried out. At the end of 1995, therefore, Haiti's long-term prospects for democracy and prosperity were uncertain.

The administration lacked leverage in Haiti because it lacked political support in the United States. The American public was opposed to the dispatch of troops. The president did not ask for congressional

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bolster Clinton's  
political standing.

approval of the operation because he would not have received it. Economic assistance to the country was unpopular with the Republican congressional majority.

The weakness of the administration's political position was demonstrated by the unusual role accorded former President Jimmy Carter. Along with retired General Colin Powell and Senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), he negotiated an agreement with the Haitian junta for U.S. troops to enter the country peacefully and for the junta to leave. Carter's function was to negotiate terms and make concessions that the Clinton administration, because of its political weakness, found it impolitic to make publicly.

The Clinton administration tried to make a case for invading Haiti, falling back on the kinds of arguments that had justified the use of force during the Cold War. J. Brian Atwood, the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, attempted to connect autocratic rule in Haiti with American interests by asserting that it was "an assault on the progress toward democracy that has been made throughout the hemisphere."<sup>4</sup>

The argument was inappropriate in a way that was both comic and tragic: comic because it was ludicrous to contend that the fate of a small, impoverished half of a Caribbean island would affect Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil, tragic in that it was precisely because Haiti was so isolated that its political and economic conditions had become—had been allowed to become—so miserable.

That appeal to national interest failed because the United States had no interest in Haiti. Haiti was, however, one place where an appeal to values might have generated support. Because it was nearby, poor, weak, had once been occupied by the United States, and was populated by descendants of African slaves, the United States had reason to be concerned about its fate. A serious effort to put Haiti on a path toward decent politics and rational economics could have been presented as a good deed in the neighborhood at manageable cost and justified by the fact that America is a rich, powerful, and generous country. The Clinton administration, however, did not try to make that case.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Brian Atwood, "On the Right Path in Haiti," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1994, p. A27.

THE EXIT IS THE STRATEGY

BOSNIA WAS more complicated than Haiti because it involved relations with America's European allies, Britain and France, with whom for 30 months the Clinton administration was at odds. The Europeans deemed the conflict a civil war, to be ended as soon as possible even at the cost of a settlement unfavorable to Bosnia's Muslim government in Sarajevo. They supported the three proposed peace accords of the period: the Vance-Owen Plan of 1993, the Owen-Stoltenberg Plan of 1993, and the Contact Group Plan of 1994. The Clinton administration, in contrast, viewed the war as Serbian aggression against Bosnia. Its goal was justice for the Bosnian government even at the price of prolonging the war. It favored air strikes against the Serbs.

The Americans and the Europeans were each able to veto the policy the other wanted. The United States prevented the implementation of the peace plans; the Europeans blocked all but token bombing. The war dragged on. More and more people were killed or displaced, transatlantic acrimony mounted, and the gap between bellicose pronouncements and timid actions made the Western powers look increasingly inept.

In the summer of 1995 the United States launched a diplomatic initiative in the Balkans. The motive, as it had been with Haiti the previous year, was concern about the damage the war was doing to President Clinton's domestic political standing. The House and Senate voted, against the president's wishes, to end the arms embargo against the former Yugoslavia, but delayed a vote to override the president's veto to give diplomacy a chance. The president would have suffered embarrassment if, as seemed likely, his veto had been overridden. Moreover, the end of the embargo would likely have provoked the withdrawal of the British and French peacekeepers in Bosnia, triggering the dispatch of U.S. troops to the war zone to help extricate them and risking American casualties.

The course of the war turned out to favor American diplomacy. Bosnian Serb ethnic cleansing in eastern Bosnia and military victories by the Croatian army in the west removed the U.N. peacekeepers from easy reach of the Bosnian Serbs—who on occasion had held U.N. troops hostage—paving the way for a compromise between the Amer-

icans and the Europeans. With their peacekeepers no longer at risk, the Europeans consented to a vigorous campaign of bombardment against the Bosnian Serbs in late August and early September of 1995. At the same time, the United States accepted the European preferences on the division of territory between the three contending groups in Bosnia—ethnic cleansing had made different parts of the country more homo-

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The Dayton peace settlement all but abandoned principles Clinton had touted.

geneous ethnically—and agreed to the Bosnian Serbs' demand that they be permitted to federate with Serbia, just as the Bosnian Croats had been allowed to federate with Croatia under the terms of the American-brokered Croat-Muslim alliance of the year before. Perhaps because of the American bombing, certainly because of the American

concessions, a cease-fire was achieved, and a conference convened in Dayton, Ohio, in November 1995 that produced a peace settlement.

Where flimsy political support had forced the Clinton administration to compromise on the implementation of its goals in Haiti in 1994, in Bosnia in 1995 political weakness compelled compromise on the goals themselves. Indeed, the principles that the administration had said were at stake in Bosnia were all but abandoned: the settlement rewarded what the administration had termed Serb aggression and ratified the results of ethnic cleansing. The United States negotiated directly with Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, whom the administration had initially considered a war criminal. Bosnia was partitioned along ethnic lines, subverting the principles of undiluted sovereignty and ethnic pluralism that members of the Clinton administration had insisted, in 1993 and 1994, were inviolable.

The single indisputable American accomplishment in the Balkans between 1993 and 1995 was to assist Croatia in gaining control of some additional territory in Bosnia and all the territory it had included as a Yugoslav republic. This, however, was hardly a victory for American values. The Croats had practiced ethnic cleansing on a scale comparable to the Bosnian Serbs and were just as ardent about ethnic homogeneity and intolerance of Muslims. The federation between Croats and Muslims in Bosnia that the United States had brokered in 1994 was a partition between the two groups in all but name.

Prior to the Dayton negotiations, the administration had promised to send as many as 25,000 American troops to Bosnia as part of a peace settlement, and, as it had with the invasion of Haiti, struggled to find a rationale for this. As with Haiti, interests were said to be at stake, specifically the interest in avoiding a larger conflict. "If war reignites in Bosnia," President Clinton said, "it could spark a much wider conflagration. In 1914, a gunshot in Sarajevo launched the first of two world wars."<sup>5</sup>

The conditions that had led to World War I, however, were absent eight decades later. The assassination of the heir to the Hapsburg throne in 1914 was the occasion for rival great powers to settle their differences by war. There is no such rivalry for the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s to ignite. Indeed, post-Cold War Europe lacks great European military powers to prosecute such a rivalry: Russia is not great, Germany is not military, and the United States is not European. The people of the former Yugoslavia were allowed to fight over its territory precisely because their wars did not pose a threat to the rest of Europe.

The United States, its European allies, and the Soviet Union would not have allowed Yugoslavia to disintegrate during the Cold War, the end of which had made Europe safe for war in the Balkans. Because Bosnia could not plausibly be connected to interests the American public would consider worthy of sacrificing blood and treasure to defend, the support for dispatching American troops to enforce the Dayton accords was bound to be weak. As in Haiti, therefore, the chief purpose of an American expeditionary force in Bosnia would be to leave as soon as possible, with as few casualties as possible, rather than to do whatever was necessary, for as long as necessary, to keep (or make) peace.

At the end of the Cold War, General Powell proposed a set of precepts for the use of force abroad that included the need for both a clear mission and a clear exit strategy. The Clinton interventions in Haiti in 1994 and prospectively in Bosnia in 1996 modified the Powell doctrine by conflating the two: the exit strategy became the mission.

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Clinton, "Why Bosnia Matters to America," *Newsweek*, November 13, 1995, p. 55.

WARD POLITICS, WORLD STAKES

BOSNIA AND Haiti were the centerpieces of American foreign policy in 1994 and 1995, but there were other issues to be addressed. With the rejection in 1993 of the vision it had brought to office, the administration needed some basis for dealing with them. It found such a basis in domestic politics. Clinton administration policy toward much of the world beyond Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti was made by responding to the concerns and wishes of particular groups in American society.

The pattern is a familiar one for American politicians. With its close attention to Ireland and Israel (Italy was unaccountably omitted), the Clinton administration was pursuing the foreign policy of many a big-city mayor. With its emphasis on securing contracts abroad for American firms, it was conducting the international economic policy common to governors. Such an approach to foreign policy is normal: all presidents have catered to important domestic constituencies. It is natural: foreign policy is a branch of politics, and the president is a professional politician. In the post-Cold War era, without an overarching principle to guide the nation's foreign relations, it is all but inevitable: the promotion of domestic interests is the default strategy of American foreign policy.

Nor is the primacy of domestic considerations in foreign policy necessarily a mistake. Profits for American corporations, jobs for American workers, and a settlement of the long-running conflict in Northern Ireland are all desirable. In its immersion in the Middle East peace process, moreover, the administration was pursuing a goal that transcends the preferences of particular segments of American society and that has thus been central to American diplomacy for two decades.

Making American foreign policy by attending to the wishes of American interest groups did, however, interfere with the pursuit of larger American interests in the cases of Japan, North Korea, and Russia.

The administration placed the reduction of Japan's trade surplus at the center of its policy toward America's most important Asian ally, for a time seeking to establish quotas for Japanese-American trade. Opening Japanese markets is important, and not only for the United States. But the way the administration went about it had unfortunate side effects. It ran counter to the principles of free trade, of which the

United States had long been the global champion and on which the world's trading system is based. It contributed to the false impression in the United States that the American trade deficit was due mainly to Japanese protectionism rather than to imbalances in the domestic American economy. And it left the related misimpression that the object of trade policy must be a trade surplus, a proposition dubious in theory and, as a universal principle, impossible to achieve.

Putting relations with Japan on this basis also hampered the administration in dealing with North Korea's nuclear program. This was a genuine threat to American interests and a problem that actually was inherited from the Bush administration. In 1994 the administration put together, again with the participation of former President Carter, what amounted to a standstill agreement with the communist government in Pyongyang. The accord was flawed, providing no way to determine whether North Korea had already diverted spent fuel to bomb-making. It was, however, defensible, freezing the most dangerous parts of the North Korean nuclear program and avoiding, or at least postponing, a military confrontation.

The optimal approach, however, would have been to assemble a coalition of the United States and North Korea's two most important neighbors, Japan and China, to exert pressure on the communist regime to give up its nuclear program. That would have involved intensive consultations with Tokyo and Beijing, which Secretary of State Christopher never undertook, and giving priority in America's East Asian policy to opposing nuclear proliferation rather than to the aims that the Clinton administration, responding to domestic constituencies, chose to emphasize: the trade imbalance with Japan and human rights violations in China.

Finally, the administration's cultivation of domestic groups distorted its policy toward the nation's most important international commitment, NATO, and toward Russia. In the first weeks of 1994, having earlier rejected the idea, President Clinton declared that NATO would extend membership to the nations of Central Europe. A principal reason, according to press accounts, was to win favor

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In policy toward Japan, North Korea, and Russia, special interest groups prevailed.

with American voters of Central European descent.<sup>6</sup>

The sudden announcement annoyed the Western European members of NATO, who had just agreed to a more modest change known as the Partnership for Peace. It infuriated the Russians, especially Russian democrats, who believed that it was based on the assumption—which was indeed widely shared among its proponents in Central Europe and the West—that its democratic experiment would inevitably fail and Russia would revert to threatening its neighbors. The Clinton administration, however, had adopted policies based on the opposite view, committing itself to the success of Russian democracy. NATO expansion, therefore, not only jeopardized the American interest in the peaceful integration of Russia into Europe and the international community, it also contradicted Clinton's own Russia policy.

#### NATIONAL INTERESTS

IN JAPAN, Korea, and Russia, the American stakes were larger than, and different from, the preferences of particular American interest groups. The United States continues to have national interests, although they can no longer be expressed simply as opposition to the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most important task the Clinton administration faced as it entered office was to state these interests in a way that would guide the foreign policy bureaucracy, inform the international community, and persuade the American public. Although senior officials gave occasional speeches, and some of the policies the administration carried out were compatible with the nation's central purposes in the post-Cold War world, it never offered a clear, persuasive account of just what those purposes are, sometimes even denying that such an account is possible.

It is possible, and it begins with the maintenance of an American military presence in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region. The goal has changed. During the Cold War the mission of American forces abroad was to deter the Soviet Union. Today it is to reassure all countries in both regions that there will be no sudden change in the military balance. This is especially important for Germany and Japan.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Rick Atkinson and John Pomfret, "East Looks to NATO to Forge Links to West," *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1995, p. A1.

Without the assurance of American protection, they might feel the need for stronger military forces, ultimately including nuclear weapons. The suspicion that the two might adopt such policies would alarm their neighbors, who would feel the need to adopt military policies that would, in turn, alarm Germany and Japan. American forces serve as a barrier to such dangerous chain reactions. It is therefore important to keep some of them in place.

The United States does have a major security interest on the periphery of the international system: preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. A North Korean nuclear arsenal would upset the balance of power in East Asia; a bomb in the hands of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein would jeopardize American interests in the Middle East and Europe. A campaign against nuclear proliferation is a complicated, open-ended task that requires extensive international cooperation. The United States is the indispensable leader of that campaign.

A third principal post-Cold War purpose of American foreign policy, the one the administration best promoted and explained despite its neomercantilist initiatives toward Japan, is trade. It engineered the passage of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the North American Free Trade Agreement, both of which expanded the international trading system that has contributed mightily to global economic growth for five decades.

Trade was related to another policy the Clinton administration intermittently practiced, one that lent coherence to a seemingly disparate set of initiatives and provided a justification for the most controversial of them. American economic engagement for the promotion of liberal economic policies that would create wealth and expand freedom was a common feature of the Clinton administration's decision to grant normal trading status to China, economic assistance to Russia, and diplomatic recognition to Vietnam.

During the Cold War, each of these countries posed a threat to American interests. Reducing their power through economic isolation was then the proper policy. With the end of the Cold War, American policy could safely and appropriately be reoriented toward promoting freer domestic politics. Market reforms in China, Russia, and Vietnam have had that effect. This rationale justifies a policy of economic engagement with them and with Cuba in the event of real

market reforms there, but not with Iran or Iraq, whose governments continue to threaten American interests.

THE FOREIGN POLICY PRESIDENT

AFTER THREE years the Clinton administration had not articulated a clear foreign policy doctrine for the post-Cold War world, but it had compiled a foreign policy record. How good was it?

During the Cold War, the yardstick was straightforward: how well the nation was doing in the worldwide struggle against the Soviet Union. In the wake of the Cold War, three different criteria for judgment are available: the one important to the Clinton foreign policy team, the one important to the country, and the one of most immediate importance to President Clinton himself.

By the standards of Mother Teresa, the Clinton foreign policy could claim modest success. At the end of 1995 Haitians and Bosnians were better off, or at least less likely to be killed, than had been the case 15 months earlier. (Of the administration's three abortive interventions in 1993, the one in which the United States may have accomplished the most was Somalia, where, by some estimates, American intervention saved half a million lives. That had been the aim and was thus partly the achievement of the Bush administration.)

On the other hand, the Clinton team did not succeed in establishing Lake's commitment to "helping the helpless" as the dominant principle of American foreign policy. Meanwhile, political support for the organization it had hoped would be an instrument of its new foreign policy, the United Nations, fell sharply, in part because the administration sought to deflect responsibility for its own failures in Bosnia and Somalia onto the international organization.

The more traditional standard by which the foreign policy of a great power is evaluated is its relations with the most important members of the international system. Here the Clinton performance could not be judged a success. The real legacy of the Bush administration was not Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti. It was, instead, unprecedentedly good American relations with all the other major centers of power: Western Europe, Japan, China, and Russia. Three years later, those relations were worse in every case.

This is not, in and of itself, an indictment. The purpose of foreign policy is not to cultivate good relations with other countries under any circumstances. It is, rather, to maintain the best possible relations consistent with the nation's interests. Sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice goodwill for the sake of more important goals. But the Clinton administration alienated others to no good effect. The political capital it expended brought nothing in return.

The acrimony with the Western Europeans over Bosnia made no contribution to the defense of the values the administration had said were at stake there. The friction with Japan did not have an appreciable effect on the trade balance between the two countries. The offense given to Beijing by the inconsistent approach to linking trade to human rights and by the decision to admit Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui to the United States after assuring China's foreign minister that this would not occur, did nothing for the cause of human rights in China or Taiwan's security.

The relationship with Russia deserves special mention. Much of what the administration did turned out well, or at least not badly. American economic assistance gave a boost to extensive privatization in Russia. While tacit support for Boris Yeltsin during his confrontation with members of the Russian parliament in October 1993 cost the United States some goodwill among the Russian public, had Yeltsin's adversaries prevailed the damage to American interests would have been worse. Belatedly, the administration recognized the importance of preserving an independent Ukraine and protecting and implementing the arms treaties negotiated by its predecessors: the two Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties and the accord on Conventional Forces in Europe.

Between the beginning of 1993 and the end of 1995, relations with Russia deteriorated sharply, but this was largely unavoidable, the result of Russians' delayed anger at their reduced international status and economic disintegration. However, the clumsy exclusion of Moscow from much of the diplomacy surrounding Bosnia and the commitment to expand NATO made the inevitable deterioration unnecessarily worse.

NATO expansion had the potential to alienate Russia from the post-Cold War settlement in Europe and make the goal of overturning

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Clinton's foreign policy alienated countries to no good effect.

that settlement central to Russian foreign policy, even as the infamous Clause 231 of the Versailles Treaty, assigning guilt for World War I to Germany, helped set the Germans on the course that led to World War II. In that worst case, the Clinton policy would rank with America's two greatest twentieth-century foreign policy blunders: the failure to remain politically engaged in Europe after World War I and the Vietnam war.

Still, at the end of 1995, while relations with the major centers of power were worse than they had been when the Clinton administration took office, they were not catastrophically or irretrievably worse. That meant that in 1996, for the president and the country, the immediate test of the Clinton foreign policy would be its impact on his prospects for reelection.

Polls consistently showed that the administration's foreign policy performance was held in low esteem by the American public. The same polls showed that, in the public's ranking of issues important to the country, those having to do with foreign policy were consistently at the bottom. Nonetheless, foreign policy was likely to be part of the 1996 election in a way unhelpful to the president.

Clinton's political difficulties, as he entered the election season, could be divided into two parts. On the ideological spectrum he had drifted too far to the left for many voters during his first two years. A gifted, energetic politician, he subsequently devoted himself to moving nearer to the center. But another problem afflicted him: doubt about whether he measured up to the job of chief executive and commander in chief. The conduct of foreign policy was only one part of this problem, but it was likely to prove more convenient as a metaphor for issues of character and leadership than the details of his personal life.

In this sector of the political battlefield, therefore, his early vacillation on military intervention, his dispatch of troops abroad without political support at home, his failure to spell out a clear set of priorities for post-Cold War American foreign policy, his visible discomfort in dealing with international issues, and his choice of senior foreign policy officials who proved unable to establish their authority either at home or abroad, were likely to come back to haunt him. As election day approached, his political opponents would have every reason to portray Bill Clinton as what he had never wanted to be and had gone to great lengths to avoid becoming: a foreign policy president. 🌐