A new hierarchy of values and interests

David Rieff

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Abstract:

Effective policymaking needs to have as clear a sense of what involvements and commitments cannot or should not be made, as about what must be done even when sacrifices are required. Hopefully the next administration will do a better job that the Clinton administration.

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Centuries rarely end on schedule. Neither does the sway of a great power. And while the collapse of the Soviet Union should have taught us that those who try to predict the future too often contribute little more than extrapolations from their understanding of the present, we are close enough both to the new millennium and to the next U.S. administration to be confident about a few things at least. At 12:01 on January 1, 2000, a millennium will have ended, but not the American Century. Whoever succeeds Bill Clinton will assume the leadership of a nation that, on the face of things, does indeed appear to be the sole remaining superpower.

Such, at any rate, is the triumphalist account that will almost certainly see the new president into office. None of the major candidates have shown any interest in dissenting from it, or are likely to during the campaign. And, at least in the absence of some immense crisis-a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, say, or civil war in Russia-whichever candidate is elected is unlikely to stray far from the path that the Clinton administration has followed. That policy, which can be described as an approach in which geoeconomic questions were dealt with seriously, while geopolitical questions and questions of international governance (the role of international institutions, the degree to which the United States was willing to act alone or to cede authority to other states) were either avoided or dealt with on an ad hoc basis.

Whatever the failures and long-term risks of this policy, even its severest critics must concede that it succeeded in the sense that none of the international crises that have arisen over the course of the Clinton administration's tenure ever seemed to threaten American vital interests seriously enough to galvanize any important constituency in calling for a significant change in approach. By the

same token, no U.S. failure to act in accordance with America's self-proclaimed values seemed to resonate enduringly with the public either, not even the failure to prevent or halt the Rwandan genocide.

To be sure, there has been an extraordinarily heated policy debate throughout the life of the Clinton administration by pundits, foreign affairs specialists, and former officials, Republican and Democrat alike, who have bemoaned the often incoherent and dilatory quality of U.S. policy and denounced its shortcomings. Even at its best, they argue, the administration has too often fallen victim to a propensity for following intense bouts of engagement with long periods of neglect. And, above all, they have pointed to the fact that, unlike his immediate predecessors, President Clinton's preferred focus has been on domestic rather than foreign policy.

These critics have enjoyed a certain influence, but largely in the limited sense of getting a wide public hearing. They were rarely influential in the sense of radically altering the political calculus in Washington. In this, they exhibit a striking parallel to the experience human rights activists have had during the same period. No administration has paid greater lip service to human rights. But then, the Clinton administration has paid eloquent lip service to all sorts of ideas about the U.S. role in the world.

The problem with the Clinton administration's approach has been less what it stood for than its apparent goal of standing for everything either beneficial for America or morally decent. It voraciously embraced new agendas, at least rhetorically, from human rights to the environment, while simultaneously insisting that these agendas were in no way inconsistent with the traditional exercise of hegemony or of a world order constructed along the lines the United States has insisted upon.

But effective policymaking needs to have as clear a sense of what involvements and commitments cannot or should not be made, as about what must be done even when sacrifices are required. And when all was said and done, the administration did little except when doing something was either safe (what, after all, is the political risk of stigmatizing the Burmese junta?) or, as in Kosovo, when it believed action was unavoidable.

In Search of Coherence

If advocates of greater U.S. involvement in global affairs have not fared particularly well during the Clinton era, that gamut of views ranging from "soft" realism to hard isolationism has fared even worse. As traditional American conservatives like Pat Buchanan have discovered, it is difficult if not impossible to reconcile an isolationist approach to foreign policy with a belief in free-market capitalism in this era of globalization. This helps explain the increasingly frequent convergence between his views and those of people on the left like Ralph Nader. Indeed, there have been times, most recently over Kosovo, where the left- and right-wing denunciations of American power have been largely indistinguishable.

The realist critique of neo-Wilsonian rhetoric, either in its realpolitik or its Kennanite form, is far worthier of being taken seriously intellectually. There are real questions about the feasibility of the United States making such wide-ranging international commitments on matters that are not in America's immediate vital national interests. And clearly, even if a national consensus existed for the country to reassume the burden of being the world's policeman (and it does not), the task is simply too grea in this era of failed states and humanitarian emergencies. It may well be, to quote George Kennan quoting John Quincy Adams, that the United States should "lead by force of example."

The reality of the American temperament and of the American experience, however, suggests that other imperatives remain more compelling. Obviously, realism is intellectually defensible. But in a country as steeped in the idea of American exceptionalism and habituated, after the war against Nazism and then the Cold War, in viewing foreign policy as a crusade (think of how deeply President Kennedy's "bear any burden, pay any price" speech still resonates in the American imagination), it is, well, unrealistic to expect the public ever to accept the idea of a politics without moral overtones. These are cultural and historical trump cards; and the internationalists hold them.

That said, it increasingly appears that the Clinton administration -played the superb foreign policy hand it was dealt remarkably poorly. Given the fact that, for most of the past eight years, the United States really was the last remaining superpower, it had an extraordinary opportunity to impose its foreign policy agenda on allies and adversaries alike. Instead, having refused to lay out this agenda, it was mainly either complacent or forced to engage in exercises in damage control. In crisis after crisis, from Bosnia to the Asian financial meltdown and from Kosovo to Taiwan, it was caught unawares.

In principle, there was nothing wrong when Madeleine Albright, then U.S. representative to the United Nations, set the tone for the administration's account of itself by declaring that the United States was "the indispensable nation." Such assertions are good for national pride, and, as Henry Kissinger used to say, may even have the added advantage of being true. But delivering blasts of triumphalist rhetoric is not the same thing as crafting a coherent approach to foreign policy. From Bosnia, to Russia, to Iraq, to China, the United States spoke often, in loud and imperious tones. But time after time, as the rhetoric receded, the realization would dawn that Washington rarely wished to wield any stick at all to help impose its will. In other words, too often there was no follow-up.

This is a recipe for failure in all but the best of times. In fairness, there have been occasions where the United States has proved that it is indispensable. The relatively successful resolution in Kosovo would have been impossible without U.S. leadership. So too, to take an instance of an event that had far graver implications for U.S. national interests, would the economic bailout in Asia in 1998. But by the same token, when America opposed a response to a crisis, even if it did so only because it did not wish to get involved itself, or else did not wish to accept that other nations would take a lead role, crises were often allowed to fester and indeed worsen. The most infamous example of this was

Washington's decision to block a timely intervention to halt the Rwandan genocide, for reasons that were never clearly enunciated. That probably led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. And the American failure to act sensibly with regard to Russia, denying the Yeltsin government the loans that would have been required to ease the transition to a market economy, and that might have forestalled the rise of the mafias and the oligarchs, has probably delayed any decent outcome there for a considerable period.

To claim to be indispensable is, implicitly anyway, to accept responsibility for the way things are in the world. If the United States does not want this responsibility, if it is no longer prepared to behave as a superpower intent not just on protecting its own vital interests but on imposing its world view and defending the world order it has instituted, then it must not make such a claim. The greatest failure of the Clinton administration may turn out to have been its inability to refrain from trying to have things both ways.

Fed Up with the Cold War

Bill Clinton understood from the first that he owed his election to an electorate fed up, after 50 years of the Cold War, with putting foreign policy first. He has not just been, as the writer Martin Walker so shrewdly and ambiguously remarked, "the president we deserve," but, however unwilling conservatives have been to face this, a president who reflected the desires, priorities, anxieties, and sentiments of the vast majority of the suburban American middle class, including a suspicion of any foreign policy initiative without a domestic angle, a financial stake, or the prospect of a cost-free victory.

It is all very well to talk about leadership or the lack thereof, and to bemoan the fact that Clinton did not accomplish more. The failure to capitalize on eight years when America reigned supreme will almost certainly make the task for Clinton's successor more difficult. And, obviously, it would have been better for the United States had Bill Clinton had some vision of the U.S. role in the world that he was as willing to expend political capital to promote as he was on certain domestic issues. But this is not what occurred. If the next president is not to repeat this pattern, he (presumably, this time it will still be a he) will have to begin from a very different analysis both of the international challenges facing the United States and of the political feasibility of taking a more consistent and determined approach to them.

In reality, while difficult, the political challenge was never as daunting as both Clinton's defenders, and, in their very different ways, his critics so often alleged. The president's defenders tended to argue (Kosovo was a perfect illustration of this) that the best decision was politically impossible, and the worst decision morally unacceptable, and that therefore, having done what was politically possible they had done the right thing. This was certainly one way to "triangulate," to borrow Dick Morris's famous phrase, interests and values. But too often, this splitting of the difference produced a policy that neither fully served values nor interests.

A good example of this was Bosnia. The United States could not bear to see an unfair peace agreement imposed on the Sarajevo government. In that way, it was faithful to its values. But Washington could not summon the will to intervene on the Bosnian government's behalf until it was, at least arguably, too late to preserve the multiethnic and unitary character of that state. And in part, this was because the Clinton administration could not find an interests-based argument for doing so.

It has been said, particularly by Republicans, but also by Democrats anxious to claim that either Al Gore or Bill Bradley will put foreign affairs back at the center of the president's agenda, that there is no systemic problem. All that is necessary, they insist, is to replace Bill Clinton with a president more oriented toward foreign affairs. And doubtless it is true that Clinton is genuinely interested in and committed to certain domestic issues in a way he has not been to the broad range of international issues. Too many times, he has behaved like the governor of the United States, not its president. In foreign policy, Clinton was and has to some extent remained an inattentive steward, despite the fact that, particularly in the second term, and doubtless in some measure owing to his friendship with British prime minister Tony Blair and his sincere engagement with Kosovo, he became more adept and more committed to pursuing certain foreign policy goals.

But this engagement was largely limited to Europe. Clinton tended to delegate responsibility on all other questions except the Middle East and Northern Ireland-two aspects of foreign affairs universally understood as domestic policy matters-either to his economic or foreign policy teams.

Clinton has been, like the country he served, very interested in business. And thanks largely to Robert Rubin and Alan Greenspan, two extremely competent officials, the geo-economic core of his foreign policy was handled well, if too often on an ad hoc or reactive basis. Unfortunately, Clinton has not been as interested in geopolitics, and his appointees have been under no great pressure to articulate what the United States stands for in the world beyond the triumphalist bromides of the secretary of state.

But only in the most superficial sense have the foreign policy failures of Clinton's administration been a function of his particular worldview and temperament. In retrospect, they are far more likely to be seen as having reflected the deep wishes and assumptions of the American people on the cusp of the millennium. And these will certainly not have changed when the new president takes office in January 2001.

Complacency at the Water's Edge

Nowadays, it seems as if it is less that politics stops at the water's edge than-to turn the old Capitol Hill adage on its ear-that complacency begins there. The mood is common to both political parties. Americans argue about domestic

issues; on at least some of them-abortion, health care, the role of religion, the role of such public institutions as schools-there are genuine disagreements. Where foreign policy is concerned, though, there is far more of a consensus than there at first appears to be. Griping about Kosovo, or worrying about whether or not to fund a population program that does not take a firmly anti-abortion stance does not represent a competing vision of how the United States should act as a world power.

Moreover, the gaps between the Clinton administration's foreign policy rhetoric and the Republican critique of that rhetoric have been far wider than the substantive disagreements between the White House and the congressional majority. Take the United Nations, a "hot button" issue for many Republicans in Congress. It is true that the Clinton administration supports paying America's back dues and many Republicans in Congress do not. And yet, through two terms, the administration expended almost no political capital to see that the arrears were paid. In other words, American commitments were verbal, and little more. The same could be said of the Clinton administration's support for multilateralism, debt reduction, and human rights (except in powerless and economically uninteresting countries such as Serbia, Burma, or Kenya). Commitments were made, but, at the slightest hint of opposition from Capitol Hill, almost always quickly abandoned.

A Goldilocks Hegemony

As a result, too often, neither America's allies nor its adversaries have had a very clear idea of what the United States would do next, which is a ludicrous state of affairs for a superpower. It has been the Clinton administration's great good fortune that none of this has mattered. It came into office at a moment when the United States was militarily without competitors, diplomatically largely able to have its way, economically (at worst) the first among equals. Just as, on Wall Street in the late 1990s, it has been commonplace to hear talk about a "Goldilocks economy"-one that, being neither too hot nor too cold, is nothing less than nearly perfect-it is at least understandable that the first post-Cold War American administration governed as if its leaders believed that the situation they confronted was one of a Goldilocks hegemony.

In a sense, they were right. Just as it is difficult to imagine another period when it was so easy and seemingly so effortless for people invested in the markets to make money, so it is hard to imagine another period when it was so easy, comparatively at least, to manage a great power's foreign policy. But these extraordinary times not only will not last, they may very well not last through Bill Clinton's successor's term in office.

Just as, sooner or later, the stock market, even without an apocalyptic and lasting downturn, must return to historic levels of appreciation, so too must the world return to historic norms in which cost-free hegemony is no longer an option. Whether the next administration will be disposed to think along these lines is an open question. It is only human nature to assume, when things are going

one's way, that they will always go one's way. As the Roman satirist Juvenal wrote in the first century, A.D.,"Luxury is more ruthless than war." On the eve of the twenty-first century, that insight is as relevant as ever. Not only is it a foregone conclusion that things will eventually become more difficult, but the reality is that-couched in terms of U.S. interests-the world at the end of the Clinton administration is neither safer, nor more orderly, than it was at its beginning. There have been notable successes, where the United States has imposed an arrangement that seems lasting. In their very different and by no means unmixed ways, Kosovo and the Asian bailout are both examples of this.

But there have been notable failures as well. To take only the most obvious example, securing the retargeting and partial decommissioning of the former Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal has been offset by the steady "Weimarization" of Russia, with the collapse in the legitimacy of the state, the hollowing-out of social cohesion, and the rise of extremist groups. These trends can only make that country's remaining nuclear capabilities more dangerous, particularly if the possible collapse of Moscow's central authority actually occurs. The U.S. failure to anticipate that India and Pakistan were on the brink of testing and, presumably, deploying nuclear weapons, or to pay the kind of attention to Southwest Asia that its new nuclear capacities alone should have compelled, is an astonishing and dangerous dereliction. These developments, particularly when combined with the fact that the Chinese government is now clearly committed to further modernizing its nuclear forces, means that the world is in many ways a more dangerous place than it was in the era of MAD, the apt acronym for the military doctrine of mutually assured destruction.

A Truly Democratic Debate

Ideally, the next administration would address in a serious way the central issues of what kind of world the United States wants (and, presumably, wants to preside over), and what it is willing to sacrifice and what resources, human and material, it is prepared to commit in order to achieve its goals. This would inevitably involve a reconsideration of the relationship between American interests and American values, which have become hopelessly confused during the stewardship of the Clinton administration. America's friends, enemies, and competitors all yearn for some coherence and consistency from Washington. Indeed, the question of whether the next administration will tilt toward Kennanite realism or Wilsonian internationalism is almost secondary so long as Clinton's successor stakes out one position and sticks to it. An international order in which the most powerful nation has an unpredictable foreign policy is unlikely to survive over the long term. And when that country seems consistently unable to distinguish between vital and tangential interests, or to blend power and principle in a dependably intelligible way, the dangers of mounting disorder become more and more acute.

If the next administration has the courage to face these facts, rather than to go on with business as usual, it must work hard to establish a new hierarchy of values and interests. This will not be easy. The tension between the two has

existed in U.S. foreign policy since the founding of the Republic. And the fragmentation of the country-by interest group, region, age cohort, and ethnicity-makes any consensus all the more difficult to attain. But it is no use waxing nostalgic over the days when foreign policy was the private preserve of career diplomats, academic specialists, and the financial elite. That period in American history is over, both for better and for worse.

The lasting consequences of these changed realities are difficult to predict. Surely, the best outcome would be for the country to emerge from the current confusion largely persuaded by some new synthesis of values and interests, one that attempts to serve without bluff or overreach. But such a paradigm cannot be conjured up in a think tank or on the pages of a policy review. It may turn out that the American public is unwilling to make sacrifices to ensure that its values prevail in other countries. Conversely, realists may discover that the public is not content to support a foreign policy based principally on a calculation of interests and economic or political and military advantage. There are current trends in the country that would seem to lend credence to either prediction.

What should be clear, after Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo (if it was not already clear after Vietnam), is that the United States is no longer a place where its foreign policy can be engineered by its "best and brightest." If the goal is to produce a foreign policy that will have real credibility and command the consent of the public at large, there is no alternative to a truly democratic debate.

Once that debate is over, the next administration will have to relearn the art of defining its policies, and then sticking to them, whatever the pressures that are brought to bear, including those emanating from the media or special interest groups. We have seen the alternative. The last thing the United States, or the world, needs is another American president who, Bill Clinton-style, will feel the pain of the next Bosnia or Rwanda; it needs a leader who will either intervene in the next Bosnia or Rwanda or get out of the way of those genuinely endeavoring to resolve the conflict. It needs a president who will either commit the country to multilateralism or make the nation's resources-military, political, cultural, and financial-available to support a reinvigorated unilateralism. There is no third way, however much the Clinton administration may have imagined otherwise.

Defining the National Interest

Just as there are few wars that do not entail great sacrifices (the Gulf War and the air war over Kosovo, however successful, should be seen as anomalies, not a new norm), no foreign policy worthy of the name can avoid both setting and remaining faithful to an ordered set of specific priorities. Complaining that CNN has redefined the national interest, or that to try to adjudicate the sometimes competing claims of values and interests is a difficult and, at times, impossible project, is to miss the point. The interregnum of the immediate post-Cold War period is over. That means that the old certainties have to be reexamined, and that a debate-over the relation of values and interests in U.S. foreign policy, and over what the American people want the American role in the world to be-needs

to begin. Indeed, it is long overdue. Realistically, it is unlikely that the next administration will come into office with a formula for reconciling or harmonizing values and interests or the determination to launch that national debate. The odds are that its approach will not be so very different from that of the Clinton administration. But sooner or later, it will become apparent that the silly season of American hegemony has ended, and that sterner challenges are on the way. At that point, a U.S. president will have to face up to the different realities the United States will be forced to confront in the early twenty-first century. But it is already late, and for the country's sake it would be best if the job began with Bill Clinton's successor.

[Author note]
David Rieff is deputy editor of World Policy Journal. He is the author of Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West and the co-editor of Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know.