

# THE PRESIDENT AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

By James A. Barnes

On May 7, towards the end of a brief press conference on the South Lawn of the White House, President Clinton was asked why he thought his job approval rating, particularly on his handling of the economy, was falling. "One is that I've been forced to deal with a lot of other issues," said Clinton, who had just finished a meeting with the Danish prime minister and the president of the European Community which had focused on the crisis in Bosnia. "Most voters in this country don't like it when you spend any time on foreign policy because of the economic problems of the country," Clinton said.

For a president to respond to a reporter's question with a non sequitur isn't unusual, although given the turbulence that his economic proposals have encountered in the polls and on Capitol Hill, Clinton's diagnosis of his declining popularity may be wishful thinking.

The public thinks that Clinton's budget proposal is light on spending cuts and heavy on tax increases. At the same time, he receives relatively high marks for his management of foreign policy. The June 12-14 *Los Angeles Times* poll, for instance, found that by 44 to 36%, those surveyed approved of the way Clinton was handling foreign affairs, but by 52 to 36%, they disapproved of his management of the economy.

Indeed, cause for concern should not be that this president is spending too much time on foreign policy, but rather, the sense of detachment from world events that Clinton, his administration, and the Democratic political community, betray. For a party that has seen its last two presidents broken by foreign policy failures, the lack of a positive tone in international affairs, one that Clinton incorpo-

rated in his bid for the White House in 1992, is unsettling.

"Would (Dwight D.) Eisenhower or (John F.) Kennedy have said the public doesn't like it when the president spends time on foreign policy?", wondered presidential historian Michael R. Beschloss. "It was a comment that no other president of the post World War II era would have made."

## Determined To Focus on Domestic Issues

Even after the President saw his approval rating bump up in the polls following the successful US cruise missile attack on the Iraqi intelligence headquarters in Baghdad on June 26, Clinton steadfastly maintained that the rise was due to an increased public understanding of the economic plan. His advisers displayed a similar determination not to link Clinton to national security issues.

"Presidents do get a foreign policy bug," White House political affairs director, Joan Baggett, told the *New York Times*. "We'll just have to make sure he doesn't succumb to it," she said, as though ordering military forces into action overseas is akin to catching the flu. That's consistent with Clinton's references to foreign affairs in the past, which at times have carried almost a grudging acknowledgment that his responsibilities include the management of foreign policy. In a televised town-hall style meeting in the Rose Garden on May 27, the president felt compelled to reassure people that he was indeed concentrating on problems at home. Citing an internal audit of his White House workload during his first hundred days in office, Clinton noted that 55% of his time was devoted to dealing with the economy and health care and another 20% to other

domestic issues. Only 25% was spent on "all foreign policy, including going to Canada to see Mr. Yeltsin," said Clinton, a bit defensively. "I have to. That's my job," he said. "No one else can do that."

Even on a symbolic level, Clinton seems removed from foreign policy. State dinners, a president's ceremonial instrument of diplomacy, have been all but abandoned, reports the *Washington Post*. Instead, visiting heads of state are treated to low-key "working luncheons" which "keep everybody happy and public attention focused on matters close to home," wrote *Post* reporter Donnie Radcliffe recently.

## No More Glory?

With the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union, many Democratic strategists, and some Republicans, believe that the political lift a president can get from foreign policy accomplishments has been diminished significantly. Conducted on an international chess board where the United States faced an imperial and nuclear-armed superpower, "foreign policy had more glory," said presidential pollster Stanley B. Greenberg.

"In the past, foreign policy crises were situations in the context of the Cold War," explained Greenberg. "There were good guys and bad guys," he said. The stakes of these confrontations were potentially high. The Soviets posed a very real security threat to the United States, and they often posed a test of values, democracy versus communism. "Now each foreign policy event has its own circumstances where Americans can't determine the good guys from the bad guys nor the values that are at stake," Greenberg said.

Greenberg, like most other Democrats, also points to the results of the 1992 presidential election to back up his contention that potential political benefits from being able to conduct world events are short lived. "Had foreign policy had any real staying power it would have helped George Bush survive his first term," said Greenberg. After the US victory in the Persian Gulf War, which had followed the successful invasion of Panama and his skillful management of the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, Bush's job approval rating soared above 80% in the Spring of 1991. But it steadily declined over the next year and a half, bottoming out at around 30% the following summer.

"None of that had any impact on his fortunes," claimed Greenberg. He added that Clinton's own successful summit meeting in April with Russian leader Boris Yeltsin produced no real bounce in the president's overall ratings, despite the fact that the public gave Clinton high marks for how he was handling US-Russian affairs. "America is much more insular now," said Greenberg. "The primary job qualification for the president is whether he can restore America's prosperity in a very difficult world." The political consequences for a president in dealing with foreign policy matters in this changed environment, Greenberg said, are that "the apparent gains from success today are much less clear" than they were during the Cold War. "But the downsides are still there."

### **Democrats: Foreign Policy Activism is Bad Politics**

Many Democrats believe that for Clinton—with his young presidency in such a weakened condition at the end of May—the risk involved in deploying US military forces in the Balkans would have been considerable. "I think that the domestic agenda would have been set back very substantially if the United States got bogged down in Bosnia," said Democratic political consultant Robert Shrum. "Foreign policy successes will strengthen Clinton only if he is a generally successful president domestically," said Shrum.

In the view of one veteran Democratic presidential strategist, a reinvigorated economy is so critical to Clinton's success as president—and to the prospects for the party—that he should have explicitly distanced himself from the Balkans conflict. "He should have used Bosnia to declare a new commitment to bringing change to the United States," said the consultant who requested anonymity. "He would have gotten a lot of East Coast columnists writing terrible things about him, but that is probably the best thing he could do in terms of real voters."

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"When the voters said in 1992 that they wanted a president to pay attention to the home front, they were perfectly serious about it," said Democratic pollster Geoffrey Garin. If Clinton wants to bring American influence to bear overseas, "it will require some expenditure of his political capital to bring public opinion along," Garin said. "I wouldn't take it for granted that public opinion can't be brought along on questions of American intervention overseas," he said, "but it is clearly a skeptical electorate out there on these questions."

### **Contrary Evidence**

While Americans are not inclined to insert US troops into the Bosnian conflict, there are plenty of indications that they expect the country to remain involved in international affairs. A CNN/USA Today poll from late March, found that 41% of those surveyed believed that "the United States plays a more important and powerful role as a world leader today compared to ten years ago," while only 19% said it was less important, and 37% thought the role was "as important." Nor is there a

sense that America will draw inward in the future. Asked whether the country will play a more important role in the world ten years from now, 36% agreed, 21% predicted that it would be less important, and 39% thought it would be as important as America's role in the world is today.

When the House of Representatives approved a new \$13 billion foreign aid bill on June 17 that included \$2.5 billion in assistance for Russia and the other independent states of the former Soviet Union, many observers were surprised that the legislation was supported by a healthy bipartisan majority. Moreover, the bill was approved without the contentious debate that might have been expected given the current fiscal climate and the public's traditional lack of enthusiasm for foreign aid. If the public mood really was calling for US retrenchment in foreign affairs, it's unlikely that 309 members would have felt comfortable voting for the bill, with only 111 opposing it.

Furthermore, at a time when the public's support for deficit reduction is forcing the Administration and Congress to choose between raising taxes and scaling back the growth of politically popular entitlement programs like Medicare, it's hard to understand why Americans seem reluctant to make significant cuts in defense spending. Perhaps they perceive a need for the US to be able to project its military strength around the world.

In an April survey conducted for the Americans Talk Issues Foundation (ATIF) by Clinton pollster Greenberg and Frederick T. Steeper, George Bush's 1992 campaign pollster, respondents were almost evenly divided on whether to cut defense spending, 43%, or keep it the same, 47%. Nine percent actually favored a hike in outlays. "The public has become somewhat cautious about proceeding with discussion of restructuring our defenses," said Greenberg, who noted that in a November 1991 ATIF survey, proponents of defense cuts outnumbered those who favored maintaining spending by 63 to 33%.

If Americans didn't see the country's role in the international community in expansive terms and anticipate unexpected challenges that will need to be dealt with, it's unlikely that they would favor keeping up current spending on foreign aid and the armed forces.

### Trapped by Success

When the contenders for the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination began to lay the groundwork for their candidacies in the summer of 1991, their task seemed daunting, with Bush still basking the glow of his Gulf War success. His defeat last November sealed the view of many political observers that foreign policy plays at best a secondary role in the success of post Cold War presidents.

To Democrats in particular, it was a vindication of their efforts to redefine national security issues in a way that would relieve them of the need to develop an assertive voice in foreign affairs. Yet while it's true that only 8% of those surveyed by the Voter Research & Surveys (VRS) national exit poll said that foreign policy was one of two issues that mattered most in casting their vote for president in 1992, this may be a perilous misreading of the election returns.

Lacking a coherent policy of international engagement at the outset of the race, most Democratic contenders fell back on characterizing the Bush presidency as being too concerned with events overseas and indifferent towards problems at home. Iowa Senator Tom Harkin delighted Democratic crowds in 1991 when he would hold up a suitcase emblazoned with travel stickers of foreign capitals in the middle of a speech to mock Bush's trips abroad. Waving the luggage from the podium, Harkin would say, "George Herbert Walker Bush, unpack your bags and stay here in America a little bit longer."

Other Democrats, those running and not running for president, criticized Bush for abandoning America's democratic values in foreign policy by coddling dictators like the repressive Communist re-

gime in China. Even the centrist candidate in the Democratic primary field, Paul E. Tsongas, dismissed Bush's interna-

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tionalism. "George Bush thinks he's a foreign minister. We don't need a foreign minister," said Tsongas in one debate.

### A Misreading of Special Circumstances?

The eventual nominee, Bill Clinton, embraced the Democratic view that the ability of America to play a role in the world is contingent on getting its own economic house in order. "If you are not strong at home, you don't have the power to be involved abroad," said candidate Clinton last August to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council. "My first foreign policy priority will be to restore America's economic vitality," he said. Clinton has clung to that notion after the campaign as well. Two days before he was inaugurated he told a gathering of the diplomatic corps in Washington, DC that he would "make the economic security of our own nation a primary goal of our foreign policy."

Democrats have been redefining the foreign policy question to focus on economic power since the 1988 presidential campaign. At that time, party strategists advanced the argument that the nation was exhausted fiscally after eight years of Reaganomics and defense build-ups and that the real danger to America's security was not the military might of the Soviet Union, but rather the economic clout of Japan, and to a lesser extent, West Germany.

This was certainly an improvement for the party which just a few years earlier was in the thrall of the nuclear freeze movement and trade protectionism. But the new position was undercut by the fact that the Democrat's own nominee that year, then Massachusetts Governor Michael S. Dukakis, was not prepared to say that the Cold War was over. His legalistic mien and fondness for collective action through international organizations also led some voters to believe that he might not assert American interests abroad.

Clinton and his campaign advisers understood that ever since Vietnam, the party's leaders had been vulnerable to charges that they shrink from involvement overseas. Rhetorically at least, he staked out foreign policy stands which called for a higher degree of American engagement than even Bush prescribed: Clinton criticized Bush for his reluctance to use military force in the former Yugoslavia to prevent "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnian Muslims; for not doing more to promote democracy in Haiti, and turning back refugees from that country; and for not threatening trade sanctions to force China's leaders to ease human rights abuses there.

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With voters clearly concerned about the state of the economy, it didn't make sense for Clinton to divert their attention to national security issues, where he was somewhat uncomfortable, given his lack of training in this area and his record of avoiding military service during the Vietnam war.

### The American Presidency and World Leadership

"Normally when you have a presidential candidate with virtually no for-

eign policy experience, the campaign compels him to master those issues as (Jimmy) Carter did in 1976," said presidential scholar Beschloss. Carter articulated a human rights policy in that campaign which he implemented consistently during his term in office, Beschloss noted, and it stood out as one of his few enduring foreign policy accomplishments.

"Clinton's discussion of foreign policy was rather at the margins in 1992," Beschloss said, and it is at some of those margins that he has had the most trouble. The president has been forced to backtrack on his criticism of Bush on Haiti and China, and basically adopt the pragmatic policies of the previous administration on those issues. Bosnia has been an even bigger problem, where Clinton has appeared uncertain and indecisive after first trying to rally the European allies to take

the hard line against the Serbian aggression in the Balkans that he advocated during the campaign, then distancing himself from the conflict when the British and French failed to follow his uncertain lead.

Compounding that image of retreat were the subsequent statements by Undersecretary of State for political affairs, Peter Tarnoff, to an audience of Washington reporters that with limited resources the United States may need to limit its commitments abroad. Referring to conflicts like Bosnia, Tarnoff said, "we simply don't have the leverage, we don't have the influence, (or) the inclination to use military force. We don't have the money to bring positive results any time soon."

Tarnoff's remarks were quickly disavowed by his boss, Warren M. Christopher, but many observers believe that at

the very least they reflect the Administration's drift in foreign policy. "I think there is a growing consensus that there is some conceptual work needed here to articulate to the American people a cogent set of principles for US engagement in the world," said Will Marshall, a Clinton campaign adviser and president of the Progressive Policy Institute, a Washington, DC think tank.

"An historian 50 years from now looking back at 1993 may conclude that the important decisions Clinton was facing were foreign policy ones," said Beschloss. "In the first years of the post-Cold War world, especially when America is not absorbed by a political campaign, that is when America sets precedents," he said. "As a president, you cannot simply put the world on hold and expect to have the same opportunities in January 1994, that you had in January 1993."

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