
The Clinton Legacy Abroad

His sins of omission in foreign and defense policy leave us unprepared for the dangers of the next decade.

BY ROBERT KAGAN

To watch Bill Clinton flit around the world these past few months, desperately and in some cases dangerously seeking some final “accomplishment” to add to his legacy, has been to see with stunning clarity a fundamental truth about this president’s foreign policy: It has been mostly about him.

Over the past year especially, Clinton has been preoccupied with his lasting fame. There was the signing, on the last day of 2000, of the agreement establishing an International Criminal Court, a vain and cynical gesture given the serious flaws of the agreement, which even Clinton acknowledges, and the certainty that the treaty will never be ratified. There was the meaningless trip to Ireland this fall, a visit the president’s aides admitted had no substantive value but which provided a lovely and, for Clinton, much-needed spectacle of cheering throngs celebrating the great almost-peacemaker. There was the meaningless visit to Vietnam, with still more cheering crowds, and old Communist bosses offering their thanks for Clinton’s long-ago opposition to his own country’s effort to protect millions of innocent South Vietnamese from a Communist takeover. And then there was Clinton’s evident eagerness to visit an even more brutal Communist thug in North Korea, a visit he called off at the last minute. What stopped him cannot have been the lack of progress toward a meaningful agreement on Pyongyang’s ballistic missile program, since Clinton’s other lame-duck voyages were entirely futile. Perhaps Clinton reviewed the tapes of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s trip to North Korea in October and decided he did not want the last, lingering image of him to be anything like the shots of her smiling idiotically while starving, terrified children ate their first hearty meal in weeks.

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Instead, last week’s meeting with Yasser Arafat will probably offer the final image of President Bill Clinton as world leader: the tireless statesman striving for Middle East peace right up until the last second of his presidency, as the dutiful Washington press corps portrayed him. Yet even senior administration officials admit their boss is now just putting on a show for the home audience, since, as one top adviser put it, “talking about a peace deal is increasingly artificial” amidst the escalating Palestinian violence condoned and perhaps even instigated by Arafat himself.

But in this case, unlike that of Ireland, Clinton’s last-minute grandstanding has caused real damage. His stubborn search for a final Middle East settlement in the last year of his presidency, his refusal to heed the signs that such an agreement was impossible, his deliberate raising of hopes that inevitably turned to anger when they were disappointed—all this will be recorded as one of the great foreign policy blunders of recent times. In the blind pursuit of an unattainable peace, Clinton managed to harm American interests, endanger the security of an ally, and bring unnecessary suffering to Israelis and Palestinians alike. And for what? Even as the American-brokered negotiations crumbled and violence erupted earlier this year, Clinton had his people lobbying the Nobel committee for his peace prize. In the end, it was all about Bill Clinton.

Of course, it wasn’t always just about fame. In years past it was also about money, money to keep Clinton, and now his wife, in office. Maybe it was inevitable after the Cold War that American business interests would once again trump national security and moral interests, but the Clinton political machine was exceptionally quick and adept in figuring out how foreign policy could be turned into a cash cow. Clinton’s first commerce secretary, Ron Brown, died tragically in a plane

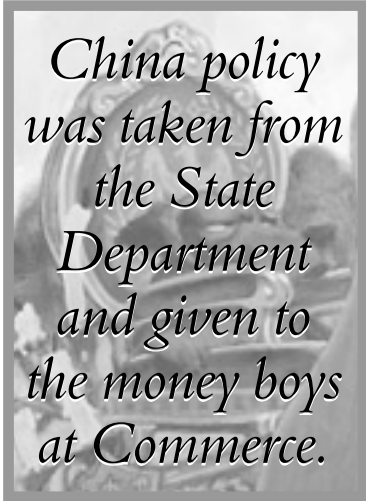
crash. But “Ron Brown diplomacy,” the placing of the American foreign policy apparatus at the service of big business and big donors, survived and flourished. And nowhere was the operation more profitable than in China, where the Clinton administration set up a three-way back-scratching arrangement unparalleled in American history. The Chinese wanted access to American high technology so they could modernize their military. American satellite makers, aircraft builders, cell-phone manufacturers, computer makers—not to mention insurance and financial services providers—wanted in on the rich Chinese market. The Clinton machine wanted huge amounts of cash for its campaign war chest. Let’s make a deal!

After a brief, shaky start—Clinton, after all, had campaigned against the “butchers of Beijing”—the money machine was put in place. China policy was taken away from the State Department and the Pentagon and given to the money boys at Commerce, at Treasury, at the U.S. Trade Representative’s office—all overseen by that once and probably future trade lawyer, Sandy Berger. Controls on military and dual-use technology were eased; responsibility for approving export licenses was shifted from the State Department to the Commerce Department; security lapses by American companies were soft-pedaled. And the campaign contributions poured in.

The whole scheme was epitomized in the person of Bernard Schwartz, head of Loral Corporation and a manufacturer of satellites, eager to launch his products atop less costly, if less reliable, Chinese missiles. It just so happened that Schwartz was also the Democratic party’s top donor, reliably pumping millions of dollars in “soft” money into party coffers. Loral was caught handing over sensitive American know-how on missile technology to the Chinese, has been indicted by a grand jury, and remains under investigation. But that didn’t stop Clinton from approving a new license for Schwartz to launch more satellites on Chinese rockets, over the Justice Department’s objection but with Berger’s full concurrence.

That was the China scam at the retail level. At the wholesale level, it was grandiloquently defended as part of the Clinton administration’s policy of “engagement.” As China’s human rights record deteriorated, as democracy activists, Falun Gong members, Christians, and Tibetan Buddhists were rounded up, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered; as China modernized its military, fired missiles off the coast of Taiwan, bullied neighbors in the South

China Sea, threatened Los Angeles, and stole American nuclear weapons secrets; as China provided missile and nuclear weapons material and technologies to Pakistan and Iran—the Clinton administration never wavered, never admitted a setback, never hesitated in its drive to win permanent most-favored-nation status for a country that Clinton insisted on describing as America’s “strategic partner.” This was the big payoff for corporate America. And here, fame and fortune mingled in the Clintonian calculation, for pushing permanent MFN through Congress this past summer was to be another part of Clinton’s legacy. Never mind that the Chinese, as many predicted, have since shown no intention of abiding by the terms they negotiated for their entry into the World Trade Organization.



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When it wasn’t about personal fame and campaign cash, Bill Clinton’s foreign policy was often about politics, the politics of staying in office. Even what Clinton did right he often did for the wrong reasons. For two years he refused to intervene in Bosnia, despite the slaughter of untold thousands of innocents, because he didn’t want to pay the political price for sending U.S. troops into a “quagmire.” When he finally did summon the courage to act, after Serb troops

started overrunning U.N. peacekeeping positions, it was only because Richard Holbrooke reminded Clinton that he had promised to send American troops to extract the forces of U.S. allies under siege. If he was going to have to send our armed forces into harm’s way anyhow, Clinton figured he might as well send them in to win. This was the right call but hardly a visionary act.

Domestic politics drove Clinton’s Haiti policy, too, in all directions. First he sent troops to Haiti, in part to solve a politically difficult refugee problem in Florida. But then, after a successful intervention, Clinton bowed to other domestic political pressures to get U.S. troops out as soon as possible. Instead of designing a strategy for keeping Haiti from going off track again, the Clinton administration abdicated the responsibility it assumed when it intervened. In Haiti, in Somalia, and elsewhere, Clinton and his advisers had the stomach only to be halfway imperialists. When the heat was on, they tended to look for the exits.

As it was, because Clinton was afraid of the political consequences of using force, he frequently acted only when backed into a corner. In Kosovo, he avoided military

action against the Serbs until it was too late to prevent the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians. Then, bowing to political pressure from the neo-isolationist Republican Congress, Clinton ruled out using ground forces. The effect was to prolong the war and the suffering. Slobodan Milosevic caved in only when, more than two months into the air war, Clinton finally started to realize that ground troops might be necessary after all.

At least Bosnia and Kosovo were relative successes. Elsewhere, Clinton's propensity to back into a course of action and then do too little, too late had a higher cost. In Iraq, Clinton walked right up to the edge of using force in February 1998, only to panic and let U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan give Saddam Hussein a reprieve. Once again, it was fear of employing ground troops that undid Clinton's strategy, for as the confrontation with Saddam drew near, administration officials realized that bombing alone—the casualty-minimizing and therefore politically safer option—would accomplish nothing. And, indeed, that was precisely what Clinton accomplished a year later, when he ordered a futile four-day air attack on Iraq. That bombing, known as Operation Desert Fox, was ostensibly aimed at retarding Saddam's missile and weapons programs: Sandy Berger's "whack-a-mole" strategy. But its real purpose, as usual, was to solve political problems at home. In fact, it accomplished less than nothing in Iraq. It gave Saddam the excuse to kick out U.N. arms inspectors, and it destroyed what little international will was left to maintain sanctions against Iraq. As Clinton's Iraq policy has collapsed, his strategy has been purely political and entirely cynical: to keep Iraq off the front pages, to pretend that Saddam is still in his "box," and to let the next president deal with the threat of this rearmed Middle East predator.

On a couple of prominent issues, Clinton showed a bit more gumption. He played his part in pushing NATO expansion through Congress, albeit with plenty of help from leading Republicans. Probably the enlargement of the alliance to include the former Soviet bloc nations of central and Eastern Europe will go down as Clinton's most significant foreign policy accomplishment (though Clinton himself appears relatively indifferent to it: There have been no celebratory trips to Warsaw or Prague this year). And with regard to Russia, notwithstanding the Monday-morning quarterbacking of many critics (including members of the incoming Bush administration), Clinton was basically right to stick with Boris Yeltsin. For all Yeltsin's flaws, the real alternatives to him—Communists and right-wing crazies like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy—were always much worse. Clinton's policy toward the former Yugoslavia, despite all the hesitations and miscalculations,

ultimately produced Milosevic's downfall. Overall, one must say that Clinton's efforts to solidify a Europe "whole and free" have been a success.

But these successes are overshadowed by Clinton's four grand failures: his failure to contain China, to remove Saddam, to maintain adequate American military strength, and to even begin to deploy a missile defense system adequate to protect the United States and our closest allies.

These four failures are intimately related and may well converge most unpleasantly for the next administration. In the next four years, either Iraq or China is likely to provoke a major crisis that will require George W. Bush to make some very hard choices. Indeed, it is possible to imagine crises occurring simultaneously in the Persian Gulf and in the Taiwan Straits, since both Beijing and Baghdad know that the American military will have difficulty meeting two challenges at once. It is likely that both crises will involve the threat of ballistic missile attacks on the United States, its troops, or its allies. China already has the capability to execute such attacks; for Iraq, it is just a matter of time. And when the crisis occurs, it will suddenly become bracingly clear that we have no way of defending ourselves, no way of avoiding the blackmail that will be employed to constrain our response, whether to an Iraqi attack on Kuwait, a Chinese attack on Taiwan, or both.

America's unreadiness to handle these two entirely predictable threats, not to mention others that are less predictable: *That* is Bill Clinton's real legacy. And, in truth, it can only partly be attributed to Clinton's egoism and political caution. To be sure, it would have been unpopular to spend more money to keep the American military strong enough to handle its global responsibilities. And it would have run afoul of the Democrats' mindless opposition to missile defense and their equally mindless devotion to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to go ahead and build the most effective form of missile shield. But it was probably not mere political cowardice that led Clinton to underfund the military and kill the most promising missile defense technologies. In both cases, let us give Clinton credit: He did it out of conviction.

The truth is, Bill Clinton wanted to make deep cuts in the Pentagon budget, far deeper than those already made by the first Bush administration at the end of the Cold War. In 1992 candidate Clinton campaigned on a promise to cut an additional \$60 billion in defense spending over five years. When he took office, the first budget he submitted called for cuts of over \$100 billion. Through the first six years alone, Clinton had cut more than \$160 billion in

defense spending. Only as the state of the U.S. armed forces looked to become an issue in the 2000 election campaign did Clinton offer miniscule increases, and even most of these were to come after he left office. This was a man with a mission.

Every year Clinton and his top officials denied that the Pentagon budget was too small. Every year they denied that the active engagement of American forces overseas in the post-Cold War era required investments not much below what had been required to contain the Soviet Union. When aircraft carrier battle groups had to be shuttled back and forth between the Persian Gulf and East Asia to meet the crisis du jour, when the air campaign over Kosovo used up the lion's share of the Air Force's available resources, leaving too little to cover the no-fly zones over Iraq, the Clinton administration insisted there was nothing to worry about.

So now the chickens come home to roost—but not on Bill Clinton's watch. As the Clinton team heads off into the sunset, we begin to learn that the defense budget is, indeed, dangerously depleted. Top officials in the Clinton Pentagon now talk about a gap between defense strategy and defense resources of as much as \$60 billion *per year*. Just a couple of weeks ago, James Schlesinger and Harold Brown, defense secretaries in the Ford and Carter administrations, recommended increases in defense spending of 20 percent, a more than \$50 billion increase over the current budget. These are among the more moderate estimates. Air Force Secretary F. Whitten Peters recently expressed his view that the defense shortfall is probably \$100 billion annually. All of which makes a mockery of Al Gore's now irrelevant campaign pledge to spend \$100 billion more on defense over the next ten years. Unfortunately, it also casts in an unfavorable light the even paltrier defense numbers cited by the Bush campaign.

Clinton's willful evisceration of the defense budget during his two terms in office is all the more appalling when one considers that he cut while the American economy was soaring and the federal deficit was shrinking and turning into a surplus. Bush, if he is so inclined, will probably have to fight for bigger defense budgets in a time of economic stagnation if not outright recession. In fact, Clinton may have left too little time to turn the ship around before the next major international crisis.

The same goes for missile defense. Clinton came to office determined to kill the programs begun by Ronald

Reagan and continued during the Bush years. And he managed to kill the most promising of them, partly out of partisan conviction born of years of Democratic opposition to Reagan's "Star Wars," partly out of a desire to save more money, and partly out of the theological belief that the ABM Treaty remained, as Clinton officials liked to say, the "cornerstone" of strategic stability. This despite the fact that bilateral strategic arms control agreements between the United States and Russia have become less and less relevant to American security requirements in an age of Saddam Husseins and Kim Jong IIs.

Little wonder that when Clinton was forced by political pressures to come up with some kind of missile defense program—forced, that is, by the Rumsfeld commission's finding that the missile threat from North Korea and others was advancing more rapidly than the CIA had wanted to admit—the program his team designed proved to be inadequate. Little wonder that American allies in Europe, who were informed only belatedly of the Clinton administration's hastily devised plan, were unpersuaded. Little wonder that, after promising to begin building a missile defense system to be in place by 2005 to meet emerging threats, Clinton at the end of the day punted. Given how he had mucked things up,

Clinton was right to put off a deployment decision. But what he is leaving Bush is a diplomatic, political, and technological mess, and it will take a mighty effort by the new administration to get an effective missile defense system in place by the time it might actually be needed.

The world was kind to America in the 1990s. The country got rich, and the inertial momentum from the great successes achieved in the 1980s, when the Cold War was won, and in 1991, when Saddam Hussein was driven from Kuwait, allowed the nation to coast forward with little presidential leadership. It is unlikely, however, that the next decade will be so accommodating. Some of the challenges we will face are already discernible; others lie out of sight just over the horizon. The great danger today is that we will be unprepared to meet both the known and the unknown dangers. It was not the job of average American citizens to worry about such things this past decade, to make sure the government was preparing the nation for a more dangerous future. That was the president's job. But Bill Clinton was President Feel-good during a fat and happy decade. And sooner or later, his carelessness will exact a price. ♦

