

FOREIGN POLICY AND THE REPUBLICAN FUTURE

Bill Clinton's foreign policy is in tatters. Republicans are pointing this out, and they're right to. But can they go beyond criticizing Clinton? Can they articulate a coherent alternative to his policies? It so happens that their political interests coincide with the interests of the nation. Foreign policy represents a huge opportunity for Republicans over the next two years, if they have the wit to seize it. They will have to realize, though, that taking advantage of this opportunity requires rethinking some of their own presumptions and prejudices.

The meltdown of administration foreign policy is undeniable. In Iraq, whose regime President Clinton once rightly declared the most serious danger confronting the world, the American policy of denying Saddam Hussein the ability to build weapons of mass destruction has collapsed. In the Balkans, Milosevic is once again engaged in ethnic cleansing, while Washington, having threatened military action, does nothing. North Korea promised in 1994 not to build nuclear weapons and was rewarded with U.S. aid; now it's building them. India and Pakistan have exploded nuclear weapons, punching a huge hole in the administration's non-proliferation policy. In China, Clinton's appeasement has produced no results except alarm among our Asian allies and demoralization among the advocates of democracy.

As for President Clinton's new "war" on terrorism, it is becoming less and less clear that the cruise-missile strikes against Afghanistan and Sudan made a dent in the terrorist networks, or that the administration really has the stomach for such a "war." Meanwhile, even the mainstream press now acknowledges that American military capabilities have been allowed to erode to a level that should prompt serious concern. Our forces are stretched desperately thin and are probably incapable of meeting even one major crisis, let alone two.

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In addition, after years of trumpeting its success in managing the global economy, the administration seems unable to contain the Asian economic crisis. And in Russia, where U.S. policy had aimed to nurture a democratic, pro-Western society, past successes are in jeopardy.

For the last six years, Republicans have occasionally supported and frequently sniped at Clinton in each of these areas. It is obviously important to point out the particular errors and deficiencies of the administration's policies in different parts of the world. But now it is time to go beyond that critique and explain to the American people what would be the underpinnings of a Republican foreign policy. After all, it was a Republican president, Ronald Reagan, who (over the opposition of much of the Democratic party) carried out the most successful foreign policy of any administration in the last half-century. Republicans ought to

remind Americans of that—as well as of the fact that Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter, whose foreign policy Bill Clinton's increasingly resembles.

Republicans should articulate the broad principles of a Reaganite foreign policy. Let's keep them simple. The three M's of American foreign policy should be: Military strength, Morality, and Mastery.

Military strength. We need to spend much more on our armed forces. We need more money for readiness, more for R&D, more for procurement, more for troops, more for missile defense, more for everything. Republicans can't and shouldn't run for the presidency in 2000 promising to increase defense spending by only a few billion a year. To present a real alternative to Clinton-Gore and to build the kind of military we will need in the years to come, Republicans must advocate a reversal of the cuts that have been made in defense

since the end of the Cold War. To his credit, Senate majority leader Trent Lott has called for hearings in September to reexamine defense spending. The rest of the Republican party should follow Lott's lead, shun the dodge of claiming to be "cheap hawks," and honestly tell the American people that a lot more spending is going to be needed. Let Clinton be the "cheap hawk." Republicans should be real hawks.

Morality. With the exception of the Reagan years, recent Republican administrations have tended to pat themselves on the back for how "hard-headed" and "realistic" they are about the moral complexity of the world in which we live and the limited possibility of grounding our foreign policy on moral principles. Ironically, Bill Clinton has followed the same course, especially in his dealings with the Chinese dictatorship: He's managed to combine the strategic vision of Jimmy Carter with the moral vision of Richard Nixon.

But the American people have always differed from the elite in their insistence that our foreign policy reflect our principles. And the American people are right. Our principles are fundamental to our national strength. It is no accident that the most serious threats to American interests today come from dictatorships, in China, Iraq, Iran, Serbia, and North Korea. Under Reagan, democracy bloomed in Latin America, in the Philippines and South Korea, and eventually in Central and Eastern Europe. No one today can doubt that support for democracy was profoundly in our strategic interest, as well as consistent with our principles. Morality at home will be an issue over the next two years. Morality in foreign policy should be, as well.

Mastery. When Bill Clinton took office, the United States was the world's preeminent power. Reagan and

Bush had rallied our allies to victory in the Cold War and the Gulf War. The world looked to the United States for leadership, and the United States had both the strength and the will to provide it. In six years, Clinton has squandered this inheritance. We are now at a tipping point. Either we are going to be endlessly trying to "cope" with problems that are increasingly difficult to cope with—to "manage" situations that become inherently less manageable—or we are going to move aggressively to shape the international environment.

There is no middle ground between a decline in U.S. power, a rise in world chaos, and a dangerous 21st century, on the one hand, and a Reaganite reassertion of American power and moral leadership, on the other. Some Republicans think that what is needed is merely better "management" of foreign policy, a more "adult" approach to the world. But they are wrong. What is needed, now as in 1980, is a complete reversal of the current failed foreign policy and a restoration of a foreign policy of American leadership and, yes, mastery.

We wish there were already a conservative and Republican consensus on this agenda. But there isn't, any more than there was a consensus in support of Reagan's agenda in the late 1970s. Republicans in Congress and elsewhere need to criticize and attempt to correct Clinton's foreign policy over the next months wherever possible. But the most significant intellectual and political battles in the next two years won't be between Republicans and Clinton. They will be for the mind of the Republican party. And it is not too much to say that on the outcome of these battles will hinge the possibility of successful American leadership for the 21st century. ♦