Detached Idealism and Endless Debates
The foreign policy of the Clinton administration
Ruud Janssens

When the American people elected Clinton as president in 1992, it was because he promised to devote himself principally to the economy and social policy. In the 1992 election campaign Clinton had labeled President Bush the “foreign policy president.” Clinton promised to be different and to “focus like a laser beam on this economy.” The reason that Clinton directed himself to domestic policy lay not only in his analysis of the problems and of public opinion in the United States, but also because he saw no foreign policy objectives with which he could score. Clinton said he “didn’t see a winner in the whole lot.” He charged his staff with keeping him informed on matters, but they were also cautioned “don’t take too much of his time.”

By the time that Clinton began his second term the situation had dramatically changed. On the domestic policy front Clinton had had few victories. Since the 1994 elections the Republicans held a majority in both houses of Congress, and Newt Gingrich and his colleagues had blocked Clinton’s policy in any way possible. Foreign policy is the area where Congress traditionally has less power than the president. This gave Clinton the opportunity to portray himself as a leader. Therefore foreign policy occupied a completely different position in the president’s thinking than it had four years earlier. Clinton and his administration now set themselves in opposition to supposed American isolationism and emphasized the importance of an active role in the world for the United States. Clinton said in 1994: “Whether the problem is nuclear proliferation, regional instability, the reversal of reform in the former Soviet empire, or unfair trade practices, the threats and challenges we face demand cooperative, multinational solutions. Therefore the only responsible US strategy is one that seeks to ensure US influence over and participation in collective decisionmaking in a wide and growing range of circumstances.”

Policy advisers and idealism

Given that Clinton had initially wanted to involve himself as little as possible in foreign policy, his foreign policy advisers had a relatively prominent role. The team that Clinton chose for his first term represented, above all, experience from the Jimmy Carter administration. Although former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, former Defense Secretary Harold Brown and former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski were still active, Clinton chose from those who had served in secondary-level positions under Carter; perhaps he did not want to be overshadowed by more experienced experts. Clinton chose Warren Christopher as Secretary of State, Vance’s deputy and former Vice-Chairman of the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR). Christopher selected Peter Tarnoff as his deputy, the Chairman of the CFR and also a former member of the Vance’s State Department team. Madeleine Albright, the new ambassador to the United Nations, had also worked for Vance, but was mostly known as a Professor of International Relations at Georgetown University and as a protégé of Brzezinski. The new National Security Adviser was Anthony Lake. He was Professor of International Relations at Mount Holyoke College and had worked for Vance as head of the Policy Planning staff.

The nominations of Strobe Talbott and Les Aspin were more surprising because they had had less executive branch experience. Talbott had been a close friend of Clinton since their student years at Oxford, and was a leading journalist at Time magazine. He became special ambassador to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. Aspin, Clinton’s pick for Defense Secretary, had been for many years Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. It was feared that because of his political and less bureaucratic attitude
he would not last long in the administration. Within a year William Perry had replaced Aspin, following the failed American intervention in Somalia and a wavering involvement in Haiti in 1993. Perry had also served in the Carter administration.3

Even among Clinton supporters there was some disappointment over the foreign policy team. Left-leaning Democrats found that “new Democrats” looked a lot like “old Democrats.” Neo-conservatives feared an obsession with negotiations, angst over using military force, and, from their point of view, too low an intellectual level.4 The fear that Clinton would hold back from military intervention arose because Clinton had himself not served in the military and had demonstrated against American involvement in Vietnam. These worries appear to have been exaggerated. In the 2000 presidential election campaign the Republicans accused Clinton and Gore of overusing military force.

Because Carter administration veterans set Clinton’s foreign policy, it was expected that idealism would play a prominent role in the policy, the use of force would get less attention and humanitarian intervention more. Unilateral intervention would not be the rule. Allied intervention, often through the United Nations, would be the policy of choice. This approach was possible because of the situation at the end of the Cold War.

Clinton was not completely satisfied with the functioning of his foreign policy team. Shortly after his re-election he replaced a number of appointees: Madeleine Albright replaced Warren Christopher as Secretary of State; William Cohen, a Republican, replaced William Perry as Defense Secretary; and Sandy Berger became the new National Security Adviser. From this group of advisers Clinton wanted fewer ideas and more results, and he expected to become more successful in both public opinion and in relations with Congress. Henry Kissinger, former National Security Adviser under Nixon and Ford, opined that Sandy Berger was not a strategic thinker. Kissinger saw this as an indication of the Clinton policy: “But you can’t blame a trade lawyer for not being a global strategist. The Security Adviser reflects what the president wants, and I don’t think the president asks him to come up with a global strategy.” 5

The Bush legacy

Bush had done his best to create a “New World Order” after the end of the Cold War. This had not really succeeded, in part because Bush had not clearly defined what he meant by the term. In place of a new order Clinton found himself confronted with a number of unresolved issues.

Bush had sent troops to Somalia to support a humanitarian intervention. It soon became apparent that the problems in Somalia were difficult to solve. Clinton withdrew American troops after eighteen American and hundreds of Somali soldiers were killed in a failed attempt to arrest the warlord Aideed. Peacekeeping operations turned out to be more difficult than expected, and Americans were not prepared to put their own soldiers at risk in “mere” humanitarian missions without a clear national interest at stake.

In the election campaign Clinton had specifically attacked Bush on the grounds that his foreign policy failed on humanitarian issues. Clinton wanted firm intervention in Bosnia, China and Haiti. As president, Clinton was more cautious than as candidate. To avoid confrontation with China’s rulers, Clinton softened his criticism of human rights in China in order to put more emphasis on economic relations (as Bush had also done). Just like Bush, Clinton was not inclined to send troops to Bosnia. Participation in the Bosnia conflict came about more by accident than by design. In 1994 the American government had promised that American troops would help in the withdrawal of UNPROFOR (the United Nation troops in Bosnia) if the situation got out of hand. When things became worse in 1995 Clinton had little choice other than to agree to American involvement. Clinton not only provided troops, but
also Richard Holbrooke as negotiator, who delivered the Dayton Accords as a Clinton success.\textsuperscript{6}

During the election campaign Clinton had said that he would restore to power Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had been democratically elected but driven from Haiti. Bush was sending Haitian refugees escaping by boat back to the island. But when Clinton became president he did not really change that policy. The American government did increase international pressure on the Haitian government. A United Nations embargo and other means would in the long term bring Aristide back to power. Armed supporters of General Cedras prevented the \textit{U.S.S. Harlan County} from delivering to Port-au-Prince a group of Americans and Canadians who were to train Haitian police. This occurred just after the debacle in Somalia, and the American government wanted no more casualties. The ship turned back, and supporters of the causes of human rights and the United Nations within the American government, including the backers of Anthony Lake, regarded this incident as a defeat. Ultimately, Clinton decided to employ armed intervention. In the short term, this proved a success, which the Clinton administration long brandished.\textsuperscript{7} At the end of 1999 troops were withdrawn from Haiti even though the goals had not been attained. There was too little money for the operation, and there was no longer interest in American public opinion for the situation in Haiti.\textsuperscript{8}

A continuing problem from the Bush years was Iraq. Since Saddam Hussein had been allowed to remain in power after the Gulf War while at the same time promises were made to the Kurds among others and international weapons inspections were taking place, conflict was to be expected. The Americans entered into action many times, through the UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, through air attacks (because Iraq violated the no-fly zone in Iraq), and through Operation Provide Comfort to help the Kurds attacked by Iraqi ground troops. Clinton was not prepared to intervene more forcefully. The possibility was also perhaps no longer available, because the Gulf War coalition had slowly disappeared. Bush’s military success was a limited political success, and Clinton could not improve it.

Another part of the Bush legacy and a “limited” success for Clinton was NAFTA. There was much opposition to the free trade agreement among the United States, Canada and Mexico. It was feared that many businesses and jobs would relocate to Mexico because of the lower wages there. Bush and Clinton, however, saw more advantages. They expected that through the increased demand for American products in Canada and Mexico, stimulated by the removal of import tariffs, the US economy would grow. In the end all the expectations turned out to be exaggerated. A report issued by the Clinton administration showed that NAFTA had limited results.\textsuperscript{9} An important consequence of the political battle over NAFTA was that Clinton lost much political support: the trade unions strongly opposed the free trade treaty and three-fifths of the Democrats in Congress voted against Clinton. Clinton’s relations with the Republicans in Congress were already poor, and those with the Democrats would never be very good again.

\textbf{The Cold War is over, what now?}

During the Cold War each president had had a clear policy, his own “Doctrine.” Both Bush and Clinton found it difficult to create a clear foreign policy without a single great enemy. Clinton did have some ideas about foreign policy. In his thinking, domestic policy and the economy continued to play a major role. From the beginning, he told Anthony Lake, “foreign policy is domestic policy.” Clinton, above all, emphasized economic policy. At the beginning of his administration he gave a speech in which he referred to the poor economic situation in the United States and to the increasing importance of the international economy. Through linking these two developments he arrived at a view that encompassed domestic and foreign policy.
For Clinton the most important goal was “to get our own economic house in order.” After that, trade must become a priority in American security policy. This approach quickly led to a conflict with Japan that almost became a trade war. At the last moment a treaty was agreed upon, which in fact meant that the United States backed down.

Clinton promoted further development of an international economic community. The role of international economic bodies from NAFTA to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to the G-7 became important, as did the promotion of development in developing countries and in the former Eastern Bloc. Clinton was a strong supporter of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO conference in Seattle at the end of 1999 was, however, a failure because of the activism of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Clinton gave in to public opinion.

After the midterm elections of 1994 the newly elected Republican majority in Congress forced Clinton and his foreign policy team to defend international cooperation. The Clinton advisers were concerned that the Republicans would bring the United States back to isolationism as in the years immediately preceding the Second World War. There were reasons for such concerns, including the speech of Jesse Helms, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. For example, Helms said that he would end foreign development aid because, according to him, Americans should stop “pouring hard-earned money down those ratholes.” Helms also withheld US financial contribution to the United Nations for many years.

This last act of Helms was actually more representative of the discussion about American international involvement. It was less a question of isolationism than that the Republicans wanted to act unilaterally and not through the United Nations or other international organizations. For these Republicans, the sovereignty of the United States was paramount, and they felt that participation in international organizations would undermine US independence. Another major discussion point was under what circumstances should the United States enter into international military actions. Somalia came to be viewed as a warning. The Vietnam syndrome as an example of a lengthy and costly involvement without positive results had not completely disappeared.

Almost at the end of his second term, Clinton arrived at his own policy principle for his administration, which was quickly labeled the Clinton Doctrine by the media. At the beginning of 1999 Clinton made a foreign policy speech in which the questions about US involvement in a new world came up. Clinton attempted to explain when and why the United States should become involved:

“It’s easy, for example, to say that we really have no interests in who lives in this or that valley in Bosnia or who owns a strip of brushland in the Horn of Africa or some place of parched earth by the Jordan River. But the true measure of our interest lies not in how small or distant these places are or in whether we have trouble in pronouncing their names. The question we must ask is, what are the consequences to our security of letting conflicts fester and spread? We cannot, indeed, we should not, do everything or be everywhere. But where our values and our interests are at stake and where we can make a difference, we must be prepared to do so. And we must remember that the real challenge of foreign policy is to deal with problems before they harm our national interests.”

Critics found this a typical Clinton speech. He did not give any firm overall policy, but instead produced a long list of conditions. We must not intervene everywhere, “but where our values and our interests are at stake and where we can make a difference, we must be prepared to do so.” It is difficult to see how such a pronouncement can lead to a clearer policy.
Personal leadership and international problems

Clinton’s leadership style also did not make it easy to conduct a clear foreign policy. Clinton wanted to listen to lots of different opinions and had difficulty in reaching a decision. Often, as in the case of Bosnia, circumstances – rather than the implementation of a well-thought-out strategy – forced him to choose. Lloyd Bentsen, Clinton’s first Treasury Secretary, called him “the meeting-est fellow I know.” David Gergen, a Republican policy adviser hired by Clinton to improve his image, was unpleasantly surprised by the meeting style, but also saw advantages in it:

“I found Clinton’s style of leadership very distressing at first. The Republican Presidents I’d served - Nixon, Ford and Reagan - had a clear vision of where they were going, and their staffs reflected that. Clinton had all sorts of people at the table, all sorts of opinions he had to hear from: new Democrats and old Democrats, and feminists, and the union folks, and it offended my old-school sort of style. But I eventually realized that this was a new, postmodern style of leadership that was inevitable. In fact, I believe it’s a reflection of the country’s diversity. It’s possible that all future Presidents will make their decisions in this way.”

Clinton’s leadership style was not always a disadvantage. In long-running conflicts like Northern Ireland and the Middle East it could even be an advantage to speak at length with all the parties and consider all the standpoints. In the case of Northern Ireland Clinton took the initiative to issue a visa to Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Fein (the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, IRA), for a visit to the United States. On his next visit Adams was invited to the White House. Although the British government was angry at Clinton (Prime Minister John Major even refused for a week to take phone calls from Clinton) Clinton’s approach met with success. The IRA announced a cease-fire for the first time since 1969. Clinton organized an economic summit to create more employment opportunities and sent the former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell to Ireland to lead the disarmament discussions. An agreement was finally signed and a Northern Ireland Assembly created, which in the long run would replace British authority.

The negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians mostly took place in Oslo with little US involvement. That changed when both parties reached an agreement. Clinton brought Rabin and Arafat to Washington for the ceremony. Later Israel and Jordan ended their state of war. After this development, there was some backsliding, and relations between the diverse parties did not always run smoothly. Clinton brought the parties again to the table to sign a new treaty, the Wye Memorandum. The PLO promised to refrain from calling for the destruction of Israel and to combat weapons smuggling, while Israel released 750 Palestinians from jail and gave fourteen percent of the West Bank to the Palestinians.

Although it later became apparent that in both Northern Ireland and the Middle East permanent solutions to the problems were still some distance away, both of these diplomatic undertakings can be considered successes. In both cases Clinton forced a breakthrough and created a vision of a better society. It would be asking too much for such long-running conflicts to be solved in a single stroke.

Clinton had more success with the expansion of NATO. He had decided on this early in his presidency. There was considerable opposition to the idea, especially on the part of Russia (where the question was posed as to why NATO should still exist after the end of the Cold War), but also in the United States and in Europe (where it was asked whether it was reasonable to provoke the Russians in this way now that relations had improved.) After a half-hearted attempt through the Partnership for Peace program, Clinton received the
necessary support for the expansion of NATO from the US Senate (from 35 Democrats and 45 Republicans) and from the NATO allies.

Relations with Russia did not suffer appreciably with the expansion of NATO. Disarmament, including nuclear weapons, continued as scheduled. But the world did not become necessarily safer. Other countries, including North Korea, built nuclear weapons. In 1993 North Korea withdrew from the nuclear non-proliferation agreement it had signed in 1985. Clinton asked former President Jimmy Carter to undertake a diplomatic mission to Pyongyang. Carter did so, but he exceeded his mandate by making various promises of which the Clinton administration was unaware. Clinton had no choice but to confirm Carter’s agreements with Kim Il Sung. In the end, after many complications, the negotiation policy toward North Korea appeared to go the right way, and there seemed to be a chance that the nuclear program would not be continued, especially after the recent visit of Secretary of State Albright.17

The nuclear explosions in India closely followed by nuclear tests in Pakistan were a greater surprise for Clinton. The intelligence services had not foreseen these tests. The intelligence services had already been severely criticized for failing to foresee the end of the Cold War and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Once again it proved difficult to predict military and political developments. It remains a question of how much Clinton can be blamed for not taking preventive measures. But these incidents strengthened the image of an ad hoc foreign policy under Clinton.

Under the heading “leadership” we also have to consider Clinton’s personal behavior and in particular the political consequences of his (real and assumed) extramarital relations. In particular, the consequences of his relations with a White House intern and his lies about the relationship caused political and diplomatic problems.

Although foreign leaders did not alter their behavior toward Clinton, many diplomats were concerned about Clinton’s weakened position vis-à-vis the United States Congress.18 This concern, however, they should have had in any case. Relations between Clinton and the Congress were so poor in general that it might be asked whether these new complications could make much difference. The only time that he could exert some influence was after he was acquitted in the impeachment trial. Shortly afterwards, at the end of 1999, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty was ratified. Clinton had badly wanted this treaty to be approved. Although there were a number of genuine drawbacks in the treaty, the voting followed party lines as if the Republicans in Congress wanted to make it evident that although Clinton remained president, they still had a lot of power.19

**Conclusion**

It had been expected that Clinton would offer an articulated long-term vision. This expectation was based on presidential experience in both World Wars and in the Cold War. However, we must ask whether we could fairly expect Clinton to continue this strategy. It is easy to create a policy when there is a clear enemy or challenge. Today there is less clarity. As political scientist Stephen M. Walt wrote: “The foreign policy of the Clinton administration has been well suited to an era when there is little to gain in foreign policy and much to lose.”

Even a president with exceptional vision would have had to have a different approach. Clinton, with his preference for domestic policy and consensus politics, gave himself no chance of being an exceptional president. We must also ask whether Congress would have given him the space to bring such a vision to reality.
There is still one more criticism directed at Clinton. Precisely because he paid so little attention to foreign policy, there was also limited attention to the consequences of certain actions. John McCain, the Republican Senator from Arizona and presidential candidate in 2000, summarized the criticism as follows:

“There haven’t been any major disasters, but you wonder if the seeds of future problems have been sown. He butterflies from issue to issue, and foreign policy just doesn’t work that way. It has to be steady, concentrated, precise. He goes to Beijing and calls the Chinese our ‘strategic’ partner. Well, you wonder what the Japanese, who are our strategic partners in Asia, think about that. He ‘wins ugly’ in Kosovo by bombing from fifteen thousand feet, a policy considered immoral, and then the Russians feel free to use the exact same policy in Chechnya.”

This issue of the unintended consequences of Clinton’s policy presents a challenge to the next president of the United States, just as President Bush’s actions for a good deal determined Clinton’s policy.

Dr R.V.A. Janssens is a historian and American Studies scholar. He lectures on International Relations at the Royal Netherlands Naval College.

Notes

13. Another attempt to bring order to Clinton’s policy can be found in a recent piece by his National Security Adviser, Samuel R. Berger, “A foreign policy for the global age,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 6 (November/December 2000), p. 2239.
19. Some critics claimed that Clinton used military force to shift attention away from his political scandals, as when the bombing of Iraq was ordered just before the vote on impeachment in Congress. See Bill Gertz, *Betrayal: How the Clinton administration undermined American security* (Washington DC: Regner Publishing, 1999), p. 208.


Classical idealism concluded that reality consists of constructs in the mind, there is no reality outside of the mind. Sense experiences such as space and time are relationships between ideals in the mind. “To be is to be perceived.” - George Berkeley (again). To perceive is to be. Idealism was and is able to avoid solipsism only by concluding ontologically that God exists to perceive reality when we do not. This entry discusses philosophical idealism as a movement chiefly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although anticipated by certain aspects of seventeenth century philosophy. It examines the relationship between epistemological idealism (the view that the contents of human knowledge are ineluctably determined by the structure of human thought) and ontological idealism (the view that epistemological idealism delivers truth because reality itself is a form of thought and human thought participates in it). After discussing precursors, the entry focuses on the eighteenth-century versions.