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“Foreign Policy Is Not What I Came Here to Do”



Dissecting Clinton’s Foreign Policy-Making: A First Cut

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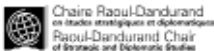
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“Foreign Policy Is Not What I Came Here to Do” Dissecting Clinton’s Foreign Policy-Making: A First Cut¹

By Charles-Philippe David²

Some presidents fit a pattern. But though Clinton does bear comparison with some of his predecessors, he combines elements of several types and defies (for now) definitive categorization.

At first, Clinton seemed to emulate the Warren Harding persona.³ His determination to focus “like a laser beam” on the economy made it clear that his administration would be all about domestic issues; foreign policy would not be the priority. In fact, Clinton worried that he would have to spend too much time on foreign policy, which he did not want. In this sense, Clinton began his presidency with the same mindset as Woodrow Wilson, who remarked before his inauguration in 1913 that “it would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs”,⁴ but in neither case could foreign policy be relegated to the periphery. In a sense, the

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1. This paper was presented at the Joint Central and East European / International Studies Association Conference in Budapest, Hungary, June 26-28, 2003, as well as at the International Political Science Association Convention in Durban, South Africa, June 29-July 4, 2003. It was written while the author was Visiting Senior Fulbright Fellow at Duke University (Fall 2002) and at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Winter 2003). This paper is part of a three-year research program on the development of and changes in foreign policy-making under the Clinton Administration, sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The author wishes to thank his assistant, Sebastien Barthe, for his invaluable help with research and with finding documentation.
 2. The author is Raoul Dandurand Chair of Strategic and Diplomatic Studies and Director of the Centre for United States Studies at the University of Quebec at Montreal.
 3. Thomas Langston, “Bill Clinton as Warren Harding”, in Anthony Eksterowicz and Glenn Hastedt (eds.), *The Post-Cold War Presidency*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1999, pp. 175-185.
 4. Quoted in Scott Webster, “President Bill Clinton’s Foreign Policy: A Critical Assessment”, The James Macgregor Burns Academy of Leadership, *Roundtable*, May 7, 1999, p. 6.

few ideals that Clinton espoused during his 1992 campaign (such as "assertive multilateralism") were Wilsonian but they proved to be short-lived. This president was reluctant to get involved, and as a result his foreign policy and his decision-making drifted.

Lack of leadership was in fact the dominant feature of the better part of the first term. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake were on the verge of despair when, in a memo written in October 1993, they "urged the president to give them one hour a week for the discussion of foreign affairs". Clinton agreed, with the qualification "when possible"....⁵ "Foreign policy is not what I came here to do," he stated.⁶ His administration was to be a sort of "return to normalcy" after the Cold War. In the view of many observers, the early Clinton was no better than Warren Harding, adopting a 'laissez faire' posture in foreign affairs.

Beginning in 1995, Clinton's foreign policy was turned around by circumstances and events, and better-defined goals, leadership and intervention quickly replaced incoherence, indecisiveness and inaction. The President finally began taking an interest in foreign policy and decided to get involved. Why the change? What were the differences between Clinton I (most of the first term) and Clinton II (the second term)? What explains the contrast between the beginning and the end of Clinton's presidency when it comes to foreign policy? What role did decision-making play in prompting the turnaround? This paper addresses these issues and argues that the context created by both domestic and international events was influential but not decisive, that Clinton's readiness to learn and evolve may have accounted for some of the change, but that ultimately it was a successful decision-making system combined with an astute choice of advisers that enabled Clinton's foreign policy to operate smoothly. In the end, a collegial form of decision-making which demanded the President's full attention explains Clinton's transformation from a pitiful Harding, if not a disappointing Wilson, to a more Trumanesque president in the realm of foreign affairs.

The Clinton I and Clinton II report cards

At the end of the winter of 1995, Clinton's track record on foreign policy was, to say the least, discouraging. The editors of *Foreign Policy* called it "mediocre." "The net result is a gentleman's 'C', which is passing," judged William Hyland.⁷ A number of other writers and commentators concurred.

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5. Quoted by Robert Lieber (ed.), *Eagle Adrift: American Foreign Policy at the End of the Century*, New York, Longman, 1997, p. 13.
 6. Quoted in William Berman, *From the Center to the Edge: The Politics and Policies of the Clinton Presidency*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, p. 35.
 7. William Hyland, "A Mediocre Record", *Foreign Policy*, 101, winter 1996, p. 70; See also James McCormick, "Assessing Clinton's Foreign Policy at Midterm", *Current History*, November 1995, pp. 370-374.

Three main themes emerged from the Clinton administration's foreign policy of the first two years. First, there seemed to be no clear foreign policy direction or objectives, except for candidate Clinton's announced intention to focus "like a laser beam" on the economy, which he did in fact do. "Assertive multilateralism" – which one writer termed "foreign policy as social work"⁸ – proved unworkable and led to failed interventions throughout the better part of the first term. The crises in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda and (until the fall of 1994) Haiti demonstrated the administration's flagrant inadequacies.⁹ Indecision became the trademark of the presidency. The approval of NAFTA, an economic achievement dear to Clinton and Vice President Gore, was perhaps the only clear success in the international arena – and it was quite restricted geographically. Otherwise, no doctrine or articulated framework replaced containment, and the administration's efforts proved vague and unpersuasive. No clear and consistent paradigm emerged until "democratic enlargement" started to take shape as a long-term vision in late 1994. Foreign policy was ineffectual and more ad hoc than it had been since the early Reagan years.

Secondly, and consequently, Clinton's foreign policy was a work-in-progress (which is true of most incoming administrations, including Kennedy, Reagan and George W. Bush before 9-11). "The conversion from idealism to trial and error became the story of [Clinton's] foreign policy", writes Hyland.¹⁰ According to Richard Haass, the administration's zigzagging, confused foreign policy encompassed "the full range of both means and ends"¹¹: internationalism, minimalism, Wilsonianism, economism, along with doses of realism and humanitarianism. Further tensions emerged between the preferred multilateralist strategy and occasional unilateralist impulses: "multilateralist when we can, unilateralist when we must" seemed to be the guiding principle. While the internationalist paradigm was applied to Somalia and the humanitarian approach to Bosnia (both ineffectually), the minimalist road was taken in Rwanda (which turned out to be the most abject failure of Clinton's eight years in office).¹² Lowest-common-denominator diplomacy prevented foreign policy from intruding

8. Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work", *Foreign Affairs*, 75, January-February 1996, pp. 16-32.

9. On Somalia and the failure of the peace operation see: John Goshko, "Bush, Clinton and Somalia", in David Abshire (ed.), *Triumphs and Tragedies of the Modern Presidency*, Westport, Praeger, 2001, pp. 226-232. On the Bosnia debacle, see Wayne Bert, *The Reluctant Superpower: United States Policy in Bosnia, 1991-1995*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997; Elizabeth Drew, *The Clinton Presidency*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp. 138-163; Samantha Powers, *"A Problem From Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*, New York, Basic Books, 2002, pp. 293-327; and David Gompert, "The United States and Yugoslavia's Wars", in Richard Ullman (ed.), *The World and Yugoslavia's Wars*, New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 1996, pp. 122-144. On Haiti, see Edward Drachman and Alan Shank, *Presidents and Foreign Policy: Countdown to 10 Controversial Decisions*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1997, pp. 315-357.

10. William Hyland, *Clinton's World: Remaking American Foreign Policy*, Westport, Praeger, 1999, p. 197.

11. Richard Haass, "Paradigm Lost", *Foreign Affairs*, 74, January-February 1995, p. 52. This argument was also voiced by Paul Wolfowitz (presumably for his own reasons) in "Clinton's First Year", *Foreign Affairs*, 73, January-February 1994, p. 37.

12. S. Powers, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-389.

upon and distracting from the administration's domestic agenda. Ironically, Clinton's foreign policy eventually turned around in 1994-1995 not in spite of but because of domestic politics.¹³ The boondoggles (as George Szamuely calls them¹⁴) in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti had made the administration look bad. But it would learn from its mistakes.

Thirdly, and not surprisingly, the National Security Council system was considered weak by contemporary standards and it took almost three years to improve on it, a lag that goes a long way towards explaining the lack of focus and direction in foreign affairs. According to Colin Powell, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, NSC meetings "meandered like graduate-student bull sessions".¹⁵ The fact that the NSC appeared to have been superseded by the newly created National Economic Council gave some measure of the administration's priorities.

All indications are that the administration's foreign policy fortunes began to rise in the summer of 1995, with the decision to use force to help extricate UN peacekeepers from Bosnia (which later turned into a full NATO intervention). "Clinton's comeback in foreign policy was particularly remarkable considering his early days as president", observed Thomas Omestad.¹⁶ Just in time for the presidential campaign of fall 1996, Clinton actually started to look strong on foreign affairs; his record no longer appeared so shabby and his opponents were unable to make international affairs an issue. The interventions in Haiti and then Bosnia did not lead to catastrophic results; in fact, they were rather successful. Clinton concentrated his attention on the Middle East peace process and Northern Ireland, appeared to be managing relations with Russia and China adequately, and was effectively containing rogue states such as North Korea and Iraq. "Return to normalcy", with minor adjustments, seemed to be bearing fruit at last: American public opinion trusted Clinton more than Dole, the Republican candidate, to maintain peace and security.

How was that achieved? The President and his administration had become more comfortable with foreign policy:¹⁷ they focused more effectively on ends and means, producing a unique mix of multilateralism and unilateralism – a sort of "realist multilateralist" approach which, at the end of the day, recalled the Truman administration's foreign policy.¹⁸ The realist component meant that Clinton came to understand, with time and experience, that leadership and decisiveness in foreign policy paid off not only

13. Points made by Linda Miller, "The Clinton Years: Reinventing US Foreign Policy?", *International Affairs*, 70, April 1994, p. 634.

14. George Szamuely, "Clinton's Clumsy Encounter with the World", *Orbis*, summer 1994, pp. 384f.

15. Quoted in Hyland, "A Mediocre Record", *op. cit.*, p. 74.

16. Thomas Omestad, "Foreign Policy and Campaign '96", *Foreign Policy*, 105, winter 1997, p. 41.

17. Charles William Maynes, "Bottom-Up Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, 104, fall 1996, pp. 35-53.

18. John Dumbrell, *American Foreign Policy from Carter to Clinton*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997, pp. 178-233.

in the international arena but also in domestic politics (always the paramount consideration for this administration). During his second term, foreign policy actually helped raise Clinton's standing and public approval ratings. By the end of his eight years in office, the situation had been completely reversed, justifying a reassessment of the administration's record.

Hence, at the end of 2000, Clinton II's report card was definitely more positive. Now, the editors of *Foreign Policy* spoke of "an impressive framework of foreign policy initiatives to promote global peace and prosperity".¹⁹ The President, wrote Stephen Walt (himself a realist critic of American diplomacy), "does not deserve the chorus of criticism he has received".²⁰ Notwithstanding the difficult context created by the "domestication" of foreign affairs (a point to which we shall return), the President had pursued, according to Walt, a very effective strategy, so much so that the public judged it to be "outstanding" by the end of his presidency. Clinton's record had improved from mediocre to remarkable.

Clinton's approach succeeded in two ways: first, the administration defined better and more realistic objectives, while at the same time developing a vision of "enlargement" of security engagements and of international trade which drew attention and obtained results.²¹ Clinton departed from *ideapolitik* and embraced *realpolitik* on a number of issues, achieving results.²² In the security arena, enlargement led to the expansion of NATO, arguably the single most important achievement of Clinton's foreign policy. Humanitarian interventions in the form of peace enforcement and peacebuilding, first in Bosnia (from 1995) and then in Kosovo (from 1999), worked, albeit imperfectly, and mediation attempts in Northern Ireland and the Middle East were well received. The threat of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was diminished in Russia and North Korea but increased in South Asia and as a result of the Senate's rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1999. Also in 1999, the administration decided to go ahead with plans for a missile defense, succumbing to partisan pressure at home. The administration relied on international institutions when they were useful for furthering US policies or ignored them, depending on opportunity and cost. This chameleon-like, *à la carte* foreign policy was regarded positively by Congress and the American public, a little less so by US partners abroad. By 2000, the President was probably more popular than his foreign policy. This result did not squelch all critics, some of whom believed that Clinton had underachieved by failing to develop consistent policies (notably on China, Russia, Iraq, humanitarian intervention,

19. The Editors, "Think Again: Clinton's Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, 121, November-December 2000, p. 28.

20. Stephen Walt, "Two Cheers for Clinton's Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, 79, March-April 2000, p. 63.

21. Aubrey Jewett and Marc Turetzy, "Stability and Change in President Clinton's Foreign Policy Beliefs, 1993-1996", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 28, summer 1998, pp. 638-665.

22. Stephen Schlesinger, "The End of Idealism: Foreign Policy in the Clinton Years", *World Policy Journal*, winter 1999, pp. 36-40.

the American military posture and national missile defense). "He gave the American people the foreign policy that polls suggested they wanted", argued Richard Haass in a rejoinder to Walt.²³ The success of Clinton's foreign policy was mitigated, according to Haass, by the fact that it would leave an "uninteresting" legacy.

Secondly, criticism of Clinton's achievements misses the strategic underpinnings of his foreign policy. Whether or not his approach lacked vision, coherence or interest, Clinton succeeded in that he took foreign policy off the radar screen and made risk-adverse decisions. In this sense, his administration's performance must be judged not on the merits but on the selling of its foreign policy. Application of rational choice theory to Clinton's foreign policy legacy leads Goldman and Berman to the conclusion that the administration muddled through most decisions.²⁴ Clinton's flexibility – in the sense that his pragmatic approach allowed for contradictory policies – led him to pick and choose issues and selectively focus on those that would yield the biggest domestic payoff.²⁵ Bosnia²⁶ and Kosovo²⁷ paid off, defining the legacy of a "Clinton doctrine" that promised to prevent future genocides, whereas Somalia and potentially Rwanda were considered great liabilities. The fight against terrorism was ill-sustained and only getting the attention of the administration in 1998, after the attack of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania by Al Qaida.²⁸ NATO enlargement proved to be beneficial before and during the elections of 1996; the ratification of the UN Chemical Weapons Convention won wide support whereas vociferous criticism was leveled at what were viewed as UN infringements on US sovereignty (for instance, the landmines treaty and the international criminal court). Dollar diplomacy often superseded human rights standards, as China's MFN status demonstrated. Ultimately, Clinton II's success rested less on greater coherence and vision than on choosing achievable objectives, incrementally and on a case-by-case basis, and then achieving those objectives with minimal domestic or international losses. Clinton II achieved no grandiose Wilsonian agenda but conducted a more creative and effective foreign policy than the Warren Harding-style Clinton I.

23. Richard Haass, "The Squandered Presidency", *Foreign Affairs*, 79, May-June 2000, p. 140; This argument is also made by Robert Kagan, "The Clinton Legacy Abroad: His Sins of Omission", *Weekly Standard*, January 15, 2001, pp. 7f.

24. Emily Goldman and Larry Berman, "Engaging the World: First Impressions of the Clinton Foreign Policy Legacy", in Colin Campbell and Bert Rockman (eds.), *The Clinton Legacy*, New York, Chatham House, 2000, pp. 226-253.

25. Cecil Crabb, Leila Sarieddine and Glenn Antizzo, *Charting a New Diplomatic Course*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2001, pp. 122-129.

26. David Halberstam, *War in Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals*, New York, Scribner, 2001, 543 pp.; Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*, New York, Random House, 432 pp.; Bob Woodward, *The Choice*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996, pp. 253-270; and S. Powers, *op. cit.*, pp. 391-441.

27. Wesley Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat*, New York, Public Affairs, 2001; Andrew Stigler, see also "A Clear Victory for Air Power", *International Security*, 27, winter 2002-2003, pp. 124-157, S. Powers, *op. cit.*, pp. 443-473.

28. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror*, New York, Random House, 2002, pp. 219-389.

The Houdini of American foreign policy

Foreign policy-making in the Clinton White House can be considered elastic: idealistic one day, in a Mother Teresa mould, realistic and hard-nosed the next, a sort of “Carterism with bullets”.²⁹ Maneuvering seemed to be the order of the day in foreign affairs. This approach reflected two forces that made Clinton an able and cautious practitioner of diplomacy: the “domestication” of foreign policy (which he mastered) and the President’s character (gradually adapting to changing circumstances). Analysis of these forces will help explain Clinton’s improved performance towards the end of his eight-year term of office.

A “domesticated” foreign policy

The linking of domestic politics and foreign policy was a constant thread running through the Clinton administration. In the post-Cold War environment, with no common threat or overarching international challenge, foreign policy turned minimalist under Clinton in the sense that it mainly responded to issues with domestic impact – which explains, for instance, the importance of the free trade debates.³⁰ The Clinton agenda of enlargement provides some evidence of that linkage, especially in the sphere of global economic expansion.³¹ Everything else was reduced to vital interests: hard-knuckled containment of Iraq to avoid being labeled a “wimp” (even at the risk of being accused of “wag the dog” tactics),³² arms control with Russia to curb proliferation,³³ NATO enlargement in part to satisfy Americans of East European descent,³⁴ intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo to maintain the credibility of American foreign policy, diplomacy in the Middle East so the President could play the peacemaker. In all these cases, Clinton had both eyes firmly fixed on his domestic standing and his image as an effective leader. He considered foreign policy central only to the extent that it affected domestic politics. In fact, particularly in 1995 in the case of Bosnia, “several actions he had taken helped him to recover his political balance and added to his stature as a president capable of making hard decisions and of providing much-needed leadership”.³⁵

29. In the words of Paul Starobin, “The Liberal Hawk Soars”, *National Journal*, 15 May, 1999.

30. James McCormick, “Clinton and Foreign Policy: Some Legacies for a New Century”, in Steven Schier (ed.), *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000, pp. 60-83; Michael Cox, *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War: Superpower Without a Mission?*, London, Pinter, 1995, pp. 8-20.

31. Douglas Brinkley, “Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine”, *Foreign Policy*, 106, spring 1997, pp. 110-127.

32. Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*, New York, Random House, 2002, pp. 55-108

33. Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, New York, Random House, 2002, 480 pp.

34. Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Atlantic Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.

35. W. Berman, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Two factors contributed to the "permanent campaign presidency"³⁶ stance on which Clinton's foreign policy was based. First, in an environment in which public apathy towards international affairs left narrow, partisan interest groups considerable influence, the foreign policy of the 1990s became "all politics". Lobbies as different as the trade unions, the Christian right, the Taiwan lobby, national security hawks, the Irish-American lobby and the Cuban American National Foundation wielded clout and pressured the Clinton administration to move in the directions they wanted; the administration chose not to resist such pressures.³⁷ Parochial and regional domestic interests were allowed greater sway in areas such as the environment, trade with China and policy towards Israel. That Clinton allowed domestic priorities to rise to the top again and did not resist their influence is evidence of his inclination towards political calculation. This certainly made foreign policy formation more difficult. By giving in to the lobbies on some points, the President kept the public from focusing for too long on international affairs and thus avoided paying the cost of implementing unpopular decisions. Clinton often refused to tackle issues until the last minute. This tendency was compounded by budget cuts for diplomacy, closer media scrutiny and more diffuse government. Under the circumstances, it is something of a miracle that, without a threat or a cause, American foreign policy did not disintegrate further.³⁸ Clinton's political and communication skills no doubt helped check the erosion of his basic foreign policy objectives.

Second, "domestication" was closely intertwined with rising disdain for foreign affairs in Congress, which led to tough battles with the Republican majority after 1994.³⁹ When he co-opted the Republican agenda (as in the case of NATO expansion), Clinton prevailed. However, when he was unable to do so, he suffered major setbacks, such as his failure to win Senate ratification of the CTBT in 1999.⁴⁰ There were clashes over the payment of dues to the UN and the restructuring of the State Department. But, overall, Clinton played the political game skillfully and he emerged on top more often than Congress. Domestic constraints were accommodated to an extent unmatched by previous presidents, leading to contradictory conduct that can only be explained by the influence of domestic priorities: pulling out of Somalia in 1993 for fear of a Congressional uproar over an ill-conceived mission; going into Haiti in 1994 for fear of African-American disapproval and a massive refugee problem; intervening in Bosnia in 1995 for fear of looking wimpy and losing the presidential election; refusing to

36. Stanley Renshon, *High Hopes: The Clinton Presidency and the Politics of Ambition*, New York, New York University Press, 1996, p. 272.

37. Douglas Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 218-256; Richard Haass, "Fatal Distraction: Bill Clinton's Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, 108, fall 1997, pp. 112-123.

38. Moises Naim, "Clinton's Foreign Policy: A Victim of Globalization?", *Foreign Policy*, 109, winter 1998, pp. 34-45.

39. Tim Hames, "Presidential Power and the Clinton Presidency", in Alan Grant (ed.), *American Politics: 2000 and Beyond*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, pp. 65-83.

40. Terry Deibel, "The Death of a Treaty", *Foreign Affairs*, 81, September-October 2002, pp. 142-161.

commit troops to Rwanda in 1994 and (to some extent) to Kosovo in 1999 for fear of turning public opinion against the administration; announcing his intention to expand NATO in 1996 for fear of Republican accusations of weakness on security commitments; and so forth. When it came to the politics of foreign policy, Clinton was indeed a chameleon.

Clinton's character and style

Clinton was undoubtedly one of the more “political” presidents: “guile, maneuver and wheedling are second nature”, wrote Fred Greenstein about Clinton, describing his personality as ambitious but undisciplined.⁴¹ The “comeback kid” with the ability to almost always rebound developed a talent for self-correction and adaptation that served him extraordinarily well. From near-repudiation midway through his first term, Clinton bounced back and, although diminished by the Lewinsky affair, managed to secure a strong majority of public opinion by the end of his second term. The President's political talents were clear: he was an outstanding public communicator possessed of impressive political skills, the ability to adapt policies, an understanding of complexity, and sheer intelligence. Those talents served his foreign policy well and overcame character flaws as significant as his qualities, such as poor organization, inconsistency, and, most importantly, astonishing lapses of judgment. Clinton's “active-positive” personality enabled him to project a sense of energy and exuberance reminiscent of Jimmy Carter, without the guilt and with better luck in the end. Clinton always stayed very optimistic and self-confident – on a par with Ronald Reagan – especially in the face of sustained criticism and adversity.

Two other features of Clinton's style explain the initial foreign policy difficulties and the subsequent corrective action. First, the lack of sustained attention to some issues (notably in foreign affairs) had a detrimental effect on Clinton's overall performance, especially during the first two years. A ‘laissez-faire’ approach towards policies as well as advisers, decision-making structures and management predominated. Clinton was so aloof that “creative chaos” was the presidency's leitmotif. Things changed when Clinton decided to become involved and to conduct a hands-on foreign policy, due in part to a more assertive role by National Security Adviser Lake in the fall of 1994. The President became more persistent in the pursuit of his policies and impatient for results, which actually may have helped focus his foreign policy-making system during the remaining six years.⁴²

41. Fred Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference. Leadership Style from Roosevelt to Clinton*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 174; see also by Greenstein, “The Presidential Leadership Style of Bill Clinton: An Early Appraisal”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 108, winter 1994, pp. 589-601.

42. Stanley Renshon, “After the Fall: The Clinton Presidency in Psychological Perspective”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 115, winter 2000, pp. 41-65.

Secondly, this President was no ideologue and avowed no doctrine.⁴³ In the context of “domesticated” American foreign policy, Clinton’s pragmatic style, sense of compromise and search for consensus were probably assets. Clinton avoided unnecessary conflict within his administration and with Congress by reconciling positions. “The President is quite skillful at discarding one identity for its opposite”, Republican Senator John McCain aptly observed, acknowledging “the astonishing ease with which [Clinton] appropriates the arguments of his critics”.⁴⁴ The downside to this approach was a certain lack of consistency and cogency in priorities, which were constantly shifting. For most of his presidency, “Clinton continued to wander between disparate objectives seeking a theme”.⁴⁵ However, that did not seem to affect his public standing. At other times, the President’s lack of focus dissipated and he immersed himself in the details of foreign policy, a shift most evident during the negotiations and intervention in Bosnia in the fall of 1995. When and where Clinton adopted a “policy wonk” stance, his foreign policy-making benefited. He was able to resolve differences, work on the issues and charm opponents into supporting his policies. By contrast, when he was neither interested nor involved, policy-making drifted or failed. In the end, the decisive factor was presidential motivation to lead, which Clinton possessed in abundance but used too intermittently.

From “creative chaos” to effective foreign policy

Clinton often said that his role model was John F. Kennedy and that he aspired to emulate the former president’s management system. That meant adopting a collegial approach to decision-making and surrounding himself with good team players. For some time, the problem was that Clinton, in contrast to Kennedy, did not allow the system to work. Two factors were at play. First, for much of the first term, the advisers were weak while the President, as we have seen, was not personally involved in the policy-making process. Secondly, the NSC process did not perform a significant role until the National Security Adviser started to exert more influence. At the end of the first term and during the second, the Clinton administration’s foreign policy-making system finally produced more consistent and effective policy.

A collegial approach to foreign policy-making

The main explanation for the “creative chaos” of 1993-1994 was Clinton’s deliberate decision not to become personally involved in the collegial system he had set up with his advisers.⁴⁶ “From Clinton’s standpoint, the foreign policy apparatus was there to keep him out of trouble, not to get him into it”, explains Bert Rockman.⁴⁷ Thus, the

43. Philip Henderson, “Technocratic Leadership: The Policy Wonk Presidencies of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton”, in Henderson (ed.), *The Presidency Then and Now*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 219-247.

44. John McCain, “Imagery or Purpose?”, *Foreign Policy*, 103, summer 1996, p. 20.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

46. Alexander George and Eric Stern, “Presidential Management Styles and Models”, in A. George, *Presidential Personality and Performance*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1998, pp. 241-261.

President did not attend many of the high-level interagency meetings on foreign policy, relying heavily upon his aides. Clinton, according to Thomas Preston, adopted a “delegator-observer” style, resulting in a ‘laissez-faire’ attitude⁴⁸ – much like Lyndon Johnson’s. This, coupled with his advisers’ inability to manage the system on their own, led to several problems. One was a painfully slow and drifting system in which decisions were postponed and closure was difficult – what Preston calls “paralysis by analysis”. Deliberations often dragged on, turning into the “bull sessions” to which Colin Powell referred. A groupthink atmosphere permeated the collegial system, sometimes yielding lowest-common-denominator policies. Another problem was that nobody was effectively communicating the administration’s message to the media and policies were therefore misunderstood (the best example of this was Somalia). On a number of other issues (such as Bosnia, Haiti, North Korea) the inclination was towards constant compromise and procrastination.

Part of the explanation for the poor performance was Clinton’s team of advisers in the first two years. Secretary of State Warren Christopher and the Secretary of Defense, first Les Aspin and then William Perry, were not considered strong enough to counteract the unintended harmful effects of the collegial approach (false consensus and ill-explained policies). There was no one with the stature, intellect and vision to provide the group with leadership. There were some debates within the administration but they mostly remained unresolved; divisions on issues such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia, China and the doctrine of “enlargement” dragged on.⁴⁹ In December 1996, Clinton overhauled his team of advisers with the nomination of Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State and Senator William Cohen as Secretary of Defense, while Lake stayed on until early 1997, when his deputy Sandy Berger replaced him. The new players in the collegial system would “help Clinton be Clinton”, in Preston’s words. He became a bit less of a Kennedy and more a Roosevelt or Truman, arbitrating among competing views to set his foreign policy course.⁵⁰

By involving himself in the process and changing his foreign policy team, Clinton changed the course of his presidency. The result was dramatic: a new pro-active stance on the part of the President, and better organized and coordinated management of the policy process. NSA Anthony Lake played a more assertive role and became more of a

47. Bert Rockman, “The Presidency and Bureaucratic Change After the Cold War”, in Randall Ripley and James Lindsay (eds.), *U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997, p. 37.

48. Thomas Preston, *The President and his Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 219-250.

49. Many debates pitted one department against another or a department against NSC staff. For a discussion, see the analysis of Clinton’s speeches in Alvin Rubinstein et al. (eds.), *The Clinton Foreign Policy Reader. Presidential Speeches with Commentary*, New York, M. E. Sharpe, 2000.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

policy advocate than just an honest broker.⁵¹ In addition, Vice President Gore exerted more influence than any previous vice president.⁵² He toughened the system, and Clinton's resolve, by being his closest adviser on a daily basis. Gore took charge of certain issues, chaired several foreign affairs committees and sat in on Cabinet meetings. "Gore sometimes filled the traditional operational roles of the president, the secretary of state, and the national security adviser", writes Paul Kengor.⁵³ Hence, debates were aired more openly, allowing Clinton to exercise leadership, decide on a course of action and defend his decisions in public. In the case of the Bosnian intervention in 1995, Albright argued for a tough line, Christopher and Aspin continued to argue for diplomacy, and the military was reluctant to use force, leading to quite a spat inside the administration. Lake got Clinton to resolve the matter by involving him in the debates and the details of the endgame strategy. The same scenario would be repeated with Kosovo in 1999, which saw another fierce debate between the Secretary of State and the military.⁵⁴ In the end, Clinton's new confidence in his foreign policy skills translated into a significant political asset.

The NSC system comes out on top in the end

The NSC system remained an important instrument of presidential policy coordination.⁵⁵ Originally, Clinton wanted to keep the system he had inherited from G.H. Bush intact. Continuity was anticipated, with minor adjustments such as the creation of the National Economic Council. The committees of principals would remain in place and NSA Lake would play the role formerly performed by Brent Scowcroft. The one major difference was, however, that Clinton was not Bush's equal (nor was Lake equal to Scowcroft) when it came to managing and conducting foreign policy. In addition, like some of his predecessors, it took Clinton time to see the benefits of using the NSC Adviser and staff to shape policy. When he did, the NSC became instrumental again in improving his administration's efficiency and getting the message across.

By the time Clinton left office, the NSC employed more than a hundred "substantive professionals" involved in policy-making. In fact, explains former staffer Ivo Daalder, the NSC had become an operating agency with a full mandate from the President to relate foreign policy to domestic politics. "Clinton broadened it in ways

51. On Anthony Lake's enhanced role, especially as it related to the doctrine of enlargement, see Brinkley, *op. cit.*, who describes how Lake shifted from a low profile to a more central and established role.

52. On Vice President Gore's role, see: Paul Kengor, "The Vice President, Secretary of State, and Foreign Policy", *Political Science Quarterly*, 115, spring 2000, pp. 175-199.

53. Paul Kengor, "The Foreign Policy Role of Vice President Al Gore", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 27, winter 1997, p. 26.

54. On Madeleine Albright's role see: Thomas Lippman, *Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2000; and Ann Blackman, *Seasons of Her Life: A Biography of Madeleine Albright*, New York, Scribner, 1998. On Kosovo decision-making and the role of the Secretary of State, see James Kitfield, "Kosovo, March 1999-June 1999", in Abshire, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-241.

that have made the NSC more like a government agency".⁵⁶ It had its own press, legislative, communication and speechmaking offices – a use of NSC staff for domestic purposes on an unprecedented scale. It was not surprising that by 2000 one observer would conclude: "presidents, the NSC system and the State Department, in that order still, make policy".⁵⁷ The NSC as a decision-making body was however disregarded by Clinton.⁵⁸ The NSC met formally only once, on March 2, 1993 (the Cabinet did not do much better, convening on average twice a year). The President preferred the more informal "ABC" – Albright, Berger and Cohen – for deciding among options and conducting foreign policy. In addition, the advisors met regularly for breakfast or lunch. A deputies committee helped the principals coordinate the interagency groups that defined the options and implemented the decisions. Although collegial in its orientation, the administration ultimately relied on a relatively centralized and formal NSC system. For instance, during the Kosovo crisis and intervention (in the spring of 1999), NSC staff actually took command of policy. In all, the two Clinton administrations produced 71 Presidential Decision Directives. This was quite a transformation for a presidency that had not been noted, at the outset, for consistency and discipline.

For a while, though, the NSC system did not seem to be working and was poorly managed. The staff was overloaded and had to confront multiple crises without a sense of direction. There was a lack of interest on the part of the NSA in organizing the system more effectively. During the first two years, policy-making was delegated to the point where the NSC was unable to provide coherent direction and was often circumvented (for instance during the nuclear crisis with North Korea in 1993-1994). The NSA and his staff did not arbitrate, much less confront, the interdepartmental infighting on issues ranging from Haiti to Bosnia (the more hawkish Gore, Albright and Lake constantly opposing the more dovish Christopher, Aspin and Powell). Finding consensus – any consensus – seemed all that mattered; the process was reminiscent of the Eisenhower system of "agreement by exhaustion". It seemed no decision could be taken in the face of open dissent. Lake finally put a stop to this chaotic foreign policy-making process some time in the summer of 1995. He abandoned his low profile and increasingly took a more public role, a stance that his successor Berger would assume to an even greater extent. The system became better organized and the lingering image of vacillation and ineptitude started to dissipate. Clinton's foreign policy would be on "auto-pilot" no more.

For a collegial approach to policy-making to work, the President has to provide more than sustained interest; he has to be deeply involved. This was the key to Clinton's

55. Vincent Auger, "The National Security Council After the Cold War", in Ripley and Lindsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-73.

56. Ivo Daalder, "A New NSC for a New Administration", *Policy Brief*, 68, November 2000, p. 4.

57. John Dumbrell, "Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Making", in Alan Grant (ed.), *American Politics: 2000 and Beyond*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, p. 98.

58. Personal conversation with Ivo Daalder, April 16, 2003.

foreign-policy turnaround and his eventual success in conducting an effective and focused policy. When the President decided to play an active role abroad, just as he was doing in domestic politics, clarity of direction improved significantly and so did the management of US diplomacy. Today, Clinton would probably admit to some satisfaction with having been able to achieve something in foreign policy. It helped him.