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Democratizing Foreign Policy

Part IV of IV: Presidential Leadership after the Cold War

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Talk loudly, and put down the big stick. There was a time for presidential control of foreign policy—and that time has passed.

Full Recommendations, page 4.

Summary: In formulating a new international strategy for the post-Cold War world, there is no substitute for a vigorous domestic debate on foreign policy goals and instruments. While opinion polls traditionally show that Americans do not place a high priority on foreign policy matters, this should not be confused with apathy; the public reacts swiftly and adversely to foreign policy mistakes. In constructing the new

world order, presidential leadership should not take the form of executive policy initiatives. Foreign policy leadership should instead stimulate domestic debate prior to action, in order to find appropriate guides and ensure public support. The 1996 presidential campaign offers an opportune moment for national debate on our future foreign policy. We cannot afford to let the opportunity slip away.

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IGCC is a multicampus research unit of the University of California, established in 1983 to conduct original research and inform public policy debate on the means of attenuating conflict and establishing cooperation in international relations. Policy Briefs provide recommendations based on the work of UC faculty and participants in institute programs. Authors' views are their own.

Public debate is often fractious and unpleasant. Yet, in a world of uncertainty there is no substitute for domestic debate over the goals and instruments of American foreign policy. No one, government officials or think tank analysts alike, has all the answers—or even knows what the right questions are. Together, we have the best of all possible information. Exercising our collective wisdom and judgment, we can best expose the real costs and assess the potential benefits of the various policy alternatives before us. Following our individual interests and beliefs, we may not agree on the “optimal” course of action. Debate need not produce consensus. But at least we will know what we are getting into and our leaders will gain perspective into what the public will and will not support.

Cold War Decisions

During the Cold War there was a widespread belief in the need for centralized foreign policy decision-making. Public debate threatened to “tip our hand” to the Russians, to reveal too much of our capabilities, plans, and intentions. Locked in mortal combat, rapid decision-making was also deemed necessary. The pace of modern warfare had accelerated; Congress was unlikely to act effectively during a nuclear attack. As Commander-in-Chief, the president was the logical repository of the authority to conduct foreign policy on behalf of the nation. Real world events, along with a strong domestic consensus on the contours of policy, conspired together to close political debate on foreign policy issues and centralize decision-making authority in the executive branch.

Today, America’s international freedom provides renewed scope for foreign policy debate. The need for secrecy is reduced. The threat of imminent annihilation is, if not gone, at least greatly attenuated. Fewer plausible scenarios exist in which the need for rapid decision-making is so acute that Congressional leaders, Congress, or even the public cannot be consulted and involved in choosing our foreign policy future. The circumstances that previously foreclosed domestic debate have changed. The public can now be integrated into foreign policy-making in ways forgotten during the long years of the Cold War. The absence of a domestic consensus makes this integration even more essential.

Reactive Public Opinion

The public, of course, does not place a high priority on foreign affairs. Now, as in the past, the issues are typically diffuse and affect the daily lives of average Americans only marginally and indirectly. As the sign in Clinton’s 1992 campaign headquarters read, “Its the economy, stupid.” Present and future administrations will not be measured by Bosnians killed or Haitians liberated as much as by the unemployment rate. Nonetheless, the public’s domestic focus should not be mistaken for indifference toward foreign affairs. Despite a lack of agreement on many aspects of American policy in Somalia, public opinion was strongly and correctly united against the expanding mission epitomized in the unsuccessful hunt for Aidid. When President Clinton moved beyond what the public was willing to accept, public condemnation swiftly followed.

The problem, of course, is that public opinion, as in the case of Somalia, is largely reactive. In the absence of principles and effective cues, politicians find it difficult to anticipate public opinion on unprecedented issues. This is not new, but the problem is magnified in the present period of international flux. What does the public really want? How can this be known in advance? Public opinion is a poor guide for policy makers if it cannot be anticipated properly. How can leaders follow if they are not sure where the public is going to go? This is the central quandary of American foreign policy-making in the 1990s. It highlights the need for effective presidential leadership. Yet, leadership is best accomplished not by manipulating the public but by encouraging discussion of foreign policy alternatives prior to action.

Gulf War Decisions

Despite his apparent success in achieving his aims and his high approval ratings, President Bush failed miserably at foreign policy leadership during the Gulf War. That the public support generated by military victory did not carry over into the 1992 election is often regarded as a mystery—or perhaps as confirmation that the “rally-round-the-flag” is, indeed, a short-lived phenomenon. It can also be seen as evidence of Bush’s unwillingness to confront public opinion and ground foreign policy in the desires of voters.

Bush led by taking presidential initiatives that influenced the choices subsequently available to Congress and the

public. Throughout the Gulf conflict, he acted first and explained later. Bush led by shaping the agenda, not by engaging the voters. Having acted, he then sought to build domestic support by manipulating public cues. This was true in the initial decision to roll back Iraq's seizure of Kuwait, to expand U.S. troop levels in the Gulf region in October 1990, and to set January 15 as the deadline for Iraqi withdrawal. At each stage, Bush changed the choices before Congress and the public. By the end, it was no longer a choice between continued sanctions and the threat of military force. Rather, when Congress voted on January 12, the issue before the nation was America's commitment and credibility, and the choice was between backing down and fighting to expel Iraq from Kuwait. While Congress could have failed to authorize Bush's war, either by tabling the resolution or returning a negative vote, doing so would have precipitated a major foreign policy and, possibly, constitutional crisis. Whatever its merits, attempting to strangle the Iraqi economy and regime through continued sanctions was simply no longer a viable option because of the way in which the president had framed the agenda.

Bush did little to cultivate directly domestic support for the war. He concentrated his efforts abroad and focused on building a multinational coalition that conferred international and, in turn, domestic legitimacy on Desert Shield and Storm. Public debate followed rather than led his actions. Indeed, Congress was allowed to debate the question of war only after the deck was stacked and a positive vote was assured. High approval ratings reflect Bush's manipulation of public perceptions *during* the war, but his defeat in November, 1992 demonstrates how mercurial that support was absent strong domestic roots.

Encouraging Debate

Presidents lead best by encouraging debate, not by initiating action and manipulating agendas. In articulating what later came to be known as *his* doctrine, in a speech before a joint session of Congress in March, 1947, President Harry S. Truman, for example, did not announce a presidential decision or explain a *fait accompli*. He merely requested Congressional approval of a foreign aid package to Greece and Turkey. Truman later tested opinion on the possibility of a postwar alliance with Europe through a resolution introduced into the

Senate by Republican leader Arthur H. Vandenberg; the ensuing debate helped define the limits of an acceptable alliance and gave the president a green light to proceed with negotiations for the North Atlantic Treaty. In both cases, critics of the expanded American role in Europe were not won over to the cause, but their views were fully aired before irrevocable actions were taken. The debates provided clear guidelines for both Truman and future administrations on what the public was and was not willing to accept in the conduct of the Cold War. Together, these events are justly regarded as one of the turning points in American foreign relations.¹

Democracy At Home

The Clinton Administration needs to provoke its own debate on the goals and instruments of foreign policy. Clinton's address to the nation on the thankfully unnecessary invasion of Haiti is a case in point. While Secretary of State Warren Christopher and others had publicly discussed the possibility for months, the President was virtually mute on the crisis in Haiti until September 15, 1994. The President took to the airwaves and, thus, gave visibility to the issue only after assembling another multinational coalition and an invasion force off the coast of the beleaguered island state. With the clock ticking, he announced his intent to intervene and articulated his rationale, but he asked for neither public support nor discussion. By consistently seeking to sideline Congress on the invasion, Clinton also abridged debate and deprived himself of both a potentially useful check on executive enthusiasm and an important source of political support. As the historian Robert Dallek concludes, the president's conduct in "Haiti...is a demonstration of how not to win domestic support for a risky foreign policy."² Ironically, in supporting the restoration of democracy in Haiti, Clinton ignored the power of democracy at home.

Presidents lead best not through bold uses of force and executive actions but by encouraging public debate over the foreign policy challenges and opportunities confronting

¹ By 1950, Truman also appears to have fallen victim to the imperial presidency. In the Korean crisis, Truman also acted first and expected the public to follow later. Weak domestic support for the war reaffirms the need for prior debate.

² "Missing the Bully Pulpit: Clinton's Inability to Communicate," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1994, M6.

the United States. Leadership entails explicating for the public the costs and benefits of alternative strategies for navigating in uncharted waters, but it does not rest upon unilateral actions. Stimulating debate and providing the public with the information it needs to make informed judgments produces the most effective guidance and the greatest possible support for the president. Again, to call for public debate and engagement is not necessarily to seek consensus. The process of debate is itself important for it reveals the parameters of public opinion and areas of overlap and disagreement. As recognized by the founding fathers and built into our democratic constitution, the interests of the public and its elected representatives coincide. This is as it should be in a democracy. Debate is a necessary—and healthy—part of this relationship.

As we move into the twenty-first century, the 1996 presidential elections provide a fleeting opportunity for a renewed public debate over America's future foreign policy. The candidates should seek to precipitate such a debate. We, the public, should insist upon one. The imperial presidency must yield to a more democratic foreign policy.

David A. Lake is IGCC's research director for international relations and a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego. For related reading, see IGCC Policy Briefs 8-1, "A Little Help from Our Friends;" 8-2, "The Big Stick Makes Few Friends;" and 8-3, "The Perils of Principles" by the same author. This series of policy briefs addresses the implication for U.S. domestic policy of IGCC's ongoing research in Ethnic Conflict and Regional Relations, to be published as *Ethnic Fears and Global Engagement: The International Spread and Management of Ethnic Conflict*, under review, and *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, U. Penn Press, 1997.

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How to Democratize Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World:

1. To the President: Return to Truman-style leadership by stimulating public debate.
2. To Congress: Resume your rightful role in foreign policy-making.
3. To the Voters: Demand a voice in foreign policy.

p. 2: Today, few plausible scenarios exist in which the need for rapid decision-making is so acute that Congressional leaders, Congress, or even the public cannot be consulted and involved in choosing our foreign policy future.

p. 2: Presidents lead best by encouraging debate, not by initiating action and manipulating agendas.

p.3: Ironically, in supporting the restoration of democracy in Haiti, Clinton ignored the power of democracy at home.

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