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OR, BILL CLINTON:
BETWEEN THE BUSHES**

By John Dumbrell

THE ECCLES CENTRE FOR AMERICAN STUDIES
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The Second Eccles Centre for
American Studies Plenary Lecture
given at the British Association
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His books include *The Making of US Foreign Policy (1990 and 1997)*; *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation (1993 and 1995)*; *American Foreign Policy: Carter to Clinton (1997)*; *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After (2001)*; and *President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Communism (2004)*. His book, *A Special Relationship*, was co-winner of the University of Cambridge Donner Book Prize in 2002. He is currently researching the foreign policies of the Administration of Bill Clinton.

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EVALUATING THE FOREIGN POLICY OF PRESIDENT CLINTON – OR, BILL CLINTON: BETWEEN THE BUSHES

I wish to begin by thanking Professor Phil Davies for giving me this opportunity to speak at this 50th anniversary conference of the British Association for American Studies. In an uncertain wider environment, both BAAS and, under Professor Davies' direction, the Eccles Centre at the British Library are at the forefront of all our efforts to sustain and encourage in this country the serious study of matters American. I am delighted to deliver the 2005 Eccles Centre lecture.

My purpose today is to offer a modest defence of President Bill Clinton's foreign policy: a defence of US foreign policy as it was conceived and conducted 'between the Bushes'. My perspective, as befits a lecture delivered on the occasion of BAAS's 50th anniversary, is self-consciously European, indeed British.

Three or four years ago, the defence of Clinton's foreign policy would perhaps have been a more difficult and a more unlikely task than it is today. Around the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the consensus on Bill Clinton's foreign policy was very negative. Adapting the titles of various academic articles written about Clinton in the 1990s, the 42nd President was a leader who presided over 'foreign policy as social work' and the 'end of idealism'. He was a 'new moralist on a road to hell', a President distinguished by 'fatal distraction', the purveyor of 'mindless muscle' the 'bully of the free world'.¹

At present, of course, Clinton's reputation has, at least in Europe, improved. His – or at least Al Gore's – nemesis, George W. Bush, sometimes seems to

Notes

¹ Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work", *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (January-February, 1996), 16-32; Stephen Schlesinger, 'The End of Idealism', *World Policy Journal*, 24 (1998-99), 36-40; A. Z. Rubinstein, 'The New Moralists on a Road to Hell', *Orbis*, 40 (1996), 31-41; Richard N Haass, "Fatal Distraction: Bill Clinton's Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, 107 (1997), 112-23; "American Foreign Policy: Mindless Muscle", editorial, *Times Change* (Winter 1998-99); Garry Wills, "Bully of the Free World", *Foreign Affairs*, 79 (March-April, 1999), 50-59.

be the most unpopular political figure in Western Europe since Attila the Hun; the most unpopular US President in Britain since George Washington. By contrast to the Texan swaggerer, Clinton appears to many in Europe as urbane, diplomatic, attractive – someone who, in the well-worn phrase, ‘talked European’. Memories, of course, are short. Ten or so years ago, Clinton was seen by many Europeans as a clueless provincial, accused both of neglecting foreign policy altogether and of presiding over a new, Pacific-oriented US foreign relations posture. Ten or so years ago he was seen by much of official London as the President whose Irish activism was destroying the US-UK ‘Special Relationship’. Despite the generally upbeat tone of my lecture today, I do not wish entirely to subscribe to this new, rather breathless, enthusiasm for Clinton. It partakes too much of a *faux naïf* nostalgia for the 1990s, for the post-Cold War era before 9/11. Like the hatred of, and condescension towards, George W. Bush, the new Clintonite enthusiasm tends to confuse style with substance.

I do wish, however, to address some of the more considered, generally negative, academic judgements on Clinton’s foreign policy. Clinton is widely seen as squandering the inheritance from Bush Senior, and as bequeathing to Bush Junior an America that was exceedingly vulnerable to ‘borderless threats’. He is frequently judged to have been reactive, subordinating foreign policy coherence to the perceived needs of domestic agendas. For Henry Kissinger, Clinton’s foreign policy was ‘a series of seemingly unrelated decisions in response to specific crises’.² For W. G. Hyland: ‘In the absence of an overall perspective, most issues were bound to degenerate into tactical manipulations, some successful some not’.³

The 2004 publication of Bill Clinton’s *My Life*,⁴ actually more an autobiography than a political memoir, stimulated debate about the putative directionlessness of his foreign policy. As seems almost inevitable with Clinton, links were frequently made between policy performance and the Presidential character. A much quoted review in the *New York Times* saw *My Life* as ‘a mirror of Mr Clinton’s presidency: lack of discipline leading to squandered opportunities; high expectations,

² Quoted in *The Economist*, 19 Feb. 2000 (“It’s the World, Stupid”).

³ William G. Hyland, *Clinton’s World: Remaking American Foreign Policy* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), p. 203.

⁴ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (London: Hutchinson, 2004).

undermined by self-indulgence and scattered concentration’.⁵ The book was like the man: undisciplined, sentimental, superficial. British journalist Tim Hames recalled Theodore Roosevelt’s dismissal of President McKinley as a man with ‘the backbone of a chocolate éclair’. According to Hames, ‘Mr Clinton’s foreign policy had the spine of a raspberry pavlova’.⁶

Further discussion of Clinton’s foreign policy requires at least a nod in the direction of three threshold, or framing, issues.

The first such issue involves the whole question of judging and ranking Presidents. Presidential ranking has itself generated a whole specialist sub-literature.⁷ Particular problems, of course, attach themselves to the evaluation of a President whose documentary record has scarcely even started to enter the public domain.⁸ The Presidential ranking debate centres on problems of subjectivism and the difficulty of finding objective tests to determine Presidential success or failure; it also involves a widely perceived bias in favour of liberal, activist leaders. On foreign policy specifically, Presidents are urged to promote ‘multiple advocacy’ among advisers, avoiding a narrow ‘groupthink’. They should set clear priorities, explaining and selling internationalism to the American public in a clear and culturally appropriate manner. They must energise the bureaucracy, avoiding public rifts between natural enemies: notably between the State and Defence departments, and between the White House and State Department foreign policy advisory structures. When framing problems, it is inevitable that leaders will draw on prior experience, formulated in the form of analogies. What is vital is that these analogies are appropriate, consciously understood and capable of being changed, discarded or even put into reverse.⁹

⁵ *The New York Times*, 19 June 2004 (Michiko Kakutani).

⁶ Tim Hames, “Clinton: Egotist and Wrecker”, *The Times*, 21 June 2004.

⁷ See, e.g., A. M. Schlesinger Jr., “Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton”, *Political Science Quarterly*, (1997), 178-91; special issue of *White House Studies*, 3 (Spring, 2003).

⁸ The Clinton Presidential Library opened in Little Rock, Arkansas, in November 2004. Foreign policy documents are not to date available for research.

⁹ See Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

My second nod is in the direction of the structure and agency problem in international relations. In judging Presidential foreign policy leadership and performance, we have to appreciate the constraints under which Chief Executives operate. Clinton, in fact, came to power in an era relatively devoid of inherited international doctrine. State Department policy planners in the immediate post-Cold War years consciously saw themselves, with containment of the USSR removed as the basis of US international engagement, as painting on a blank canvas: these were the famous ‘Kennan sweepstakes’.¹⁰ However, there is no such thing as complete freedom. As Mick Cox has put it, US foreign policy has long had one clear objective: ‘to create an environment in which democratic capitalism can flourish in a world in which the US still remains the dominant actor’.¹¹ Presidents operate within constraints imposed by the US democratic process, the structure of the international system, and a host of other factors. US foreign policy is ‘made’ just as much by shifting strategic and global interests as by any President.

My last framing point relates to Clinton’s political context. Using Stephen Skowronek’s terminology, Clinton’s was a ‘pre-emptive’ Presidency, running against the grain of the times.¹² Like many other holders of the office, Bill Clinton was an accidental President – in his case, impelled into office by Ross Perot’s splitting of rightist votes in 1992. He operated against a background – partly his own fault, no doubt, but also a feature of the times – of the conservative upsurge, which found expression in the Republican Congressional election victories of 1994 and subsequent years.

In a piece written for *Foreign Affairs* in 2000, Stephen Walt, echoing E. M. Forster’s verdict on democracy, offered ‘two cheers’ for Clinton’s foreign policy. Walt emphasised the strategic uncertainty of Clinton’s era and pointed to what he termed the ‘paradox of unipolarity’. In the early 1990s, the US was in a position of ‘unprecedented preponderance’. The US economy was around 40 per cent larger than that of its nearest rival. US defence spending

¹⁰ See Douglas Brinkley, “Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine”, *Foreign Policy*, 106 (1997), 111-27.

¹¹ Michael Cox, *US Foreign Policy After the Cold War: Superpower Without A Mission?* (London: Pinter (RIIA)), p. 5.

¹² Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 409-29.

was greater than that of its next six rivals combined; (in 2005, of course, with War on Terror spending, the US defence budget is greater than that of its next 15 to 20 rivals). According to Walt, the paradox was that the 'US enjoys enormous influence but has little idea what to do with its power or even how much effort it should expend'. The public in 1992 'elected a president who promised to spend less time on the phone with foreign leaders and more time on domestic issues, and they elected a Congress whose disdain for foreign affairs is almost gleeful'. Some Republican Members actually boasted about their insularity. Press reports, of two-thirds of new Republicans elected to Congress in 1994 not possessing a passport, may be unreliable, but they reflected the aggressive neo-isolationism of at least some members of the cohort. Majority Leader Richard Armey declared that he had no need or desire to visit Europe since he had 'already been there once'.¹³

Against this background – a disengaged public and a narrowly nationalist Congress (at least after 1994) – Clinton (according to the line of analysis offered by Walt) kept America internationally engaged: not only in Europe, but also in East Asia. It might be added that his Administration achieved a near-breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock in 2000. Its Middle East engagement certainly contrasted with the sorry 2001 record of the new Bush Administration. Under Clinton, NATO expanded and found new purpose. Progress was made on Weapons of Mass Destruction, notably in the former Soviet Union (though not, of course, in India and Pakistan, both of whom tested nuclear weapons in 1998). Above all, as Douglas Brinkley has argued, the Administration had a clear central strategy, and one which was unambiguously and successfully advanced under Clinton's watch: the promotion of liberal international free markets.¹⁴ Abroad as well as at home, the 'Clinton boom' set the context for a Presidency which, no less than Eisenhower's and more than Reagan's, was one of peace and prosperity. For good or ill, Clinton deserves to be remembered as 'the globalisation President'.

Let me move directly to the central charge against Clinton: that his foreign policy lacked any central focus, that it consisted merely of aimless channel

¹³ Stephen M. Walt, "Two Cheers for Clinton's Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, 79 (March-April, 2000), 63-79.

¹⁴ Brinkley, "Democratic Enlargement".

surfing. To the degree that, especially early in his first Administration, Clinton was distracted, and preoccupied with the domestic agenda, there is substance to the charge. Especially when on the election trail, Clinton, as have many candidates before and since, tailored his message (notably in terms of the balance between protection and free trade) to suit particular audiences. Against these charges of aimlessness, distraction and scatter-shot policymaking, one or two objections may be entered.

Unquestionably, the longer Clinton remained in office, the more intense his concentration on foreign policy in general, and in particular foreign policy areas, became. The dynamics of executive-legislative relations, with Republican majorities in Congress destroying hopes of much progress in domestic reform agendas, played an important role here. Clinton's concentration on the 2000 Israeli-Palestinian peace agenda was intense. It is also worth pointing out that, certainly in Europe, US Presidential Administrations are more often criticised for obsessional over-simplification, whether on anti-communism or on terrorism, than for many-sided randomness. The end of the Cold War arguably created the conditions for a foreign policy which was bound to cast its prioritising net rather widely.

As already hinted, central to this charge of lack of direction is the issue of analogies. What were Clinton's analogies? Were they appropriate?

Broadly speaking, the later Cold War was fought by American leaders in the name of what might be called 'Munich analogy tempered by Cuban missile crisis':¹⁵ in other words, stand up to bullies, but remember that, in a nuclear age, foreign policy leaders are playing for the highest possible stakes. After 1989, the Administration of George Bush Senior attempted to develop a new, post-containment, basis for American internationalism. Though regularly criticised (not least by himself) as a 'vision-less' President, Bush Senior did offer the 'New World Order': essentially, a version of American internationalism which stressed American global responsibilities and opportunities, but recognised limits and the need for burden-sharing. For American voters in 1992 (Perot supporters,

¹⁵ See John Dumbrell, *President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Communism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 19-20, 182.

as well as Democrats), the ‘New World Order’ was too grandiose, too remote from domestic economic realities. Clinton’s analogy – his successor to ‘Munich analogy tempered by Cuban missile crisis’, as well as to the ‘New World Order’ – may be termed ‘Kennan sweepstakes tempered by Vietnam and globalisation’. The new outlook involved an awareness of the historic opportunities for recasting American internationalism in a new era. It invoked the memory of the mid-1940s. It embraced a strategy for situating the US at the heart of global free trade networks (even if the US continued to subsidise its own agriculture and sometimes its industries), as well as sustaining global military potential. Yet it also encompassed a strong awareness of limits, of problems relating to over-extension, and of the need to acknowledge and foster a wide range of domestic constituencies. From various perspectives, ‘Kennan sweepstakes tempered by Vietnam and globalisation’ may seem naïve, imperialist or even reckless. It is my contention that it actually was an appropriate analogy, or even vision, for the 1990s.

On several occasions, Clinton did try rhetorically to deliver a foreign policy vision, usually, especially in the earlier years, in terms of ‘engagement and enlargement’. As a rhetorical successor to containment, of course, ‘enlargement’ was a flop. Few appreciated its implicit commitment to the identification of free markets and political democracy – a crucial aspect of the Clinton Administration’s belief system – and the concept also becomes hopelessly confused with NATO enlargement. Clinton’s rhetorical commitment to democracy-promotion was frequently weak and confused: not only in its often glib identification of economic and political freedom, but also in its tendency to exalt often superficial democratic features (regular elections, the existence of some kind of legitimate opposition) over genuine societal pluralism.¹⁶ However, it is going too far to suggest that there was no vision at all. Clinton’s vision was, for all its faults and inconsistencies, a vision of ‘democratic enlargement’, remaking American internationalism in the light of the ‘lessons of Vietnam’, of the failure of Bush’s ‘New World Order’ to inspire domestic support, and of (a favourite Clinton phrase) ‘the inexorable logic of globalisation’.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Michael Cox, G. J. Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi, eds., *American Democracy-Promotion: Impulses, Strategies and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1999* (vol. 1), p.305.

This ‘vision’, such as it was, clearly did involve a close attention to domestic constituencies. What must be emphasised here is that, in these post-Cold War conditions, domestic pressures and the ‘homeward bound’ thrust of public opinion had to be taken extremely seriously. No less than Bush Senior, Clinton took the dangers of neo-isolationism very seriously.¹⁸ More successfully than his predecessor, he sought to integrate and re-channel them.

Many criticisms of Clinton, more than those directed towards his predecessor and even (at least in the US) towards his successor, were really very extreme, and reflected the bitter partisanship of US politics in the 1990s. Not all of these criticisms emanated from the right. One strand of criticism, coming from the left, argued, with more than a degree of naivety, that President Clinton – by embracing free markets, by compromising with military/industrial America, perhaps simply by being President at all – somehow betrayed his own, ‘Vietnam’ generation. At the other extreme, Clinton’s own conduct during the Vietnam War provoked disdain, and led to significant difficulties in relations between the White House and the US military. On the narrower question of excessive preoccupation with domestic pressures, the most extreme accusation emanated from opposing parts of the political spectrum: the charge was that Clinton took military action in 1998-99 to divert attention from the Lewinsky affair, and/or to influence House of Representatives voting on impeachment. In one of his most purple of passages, Christopher Hitchens linked the Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq attacks to the film, ‘Wag the Dog’, a Hollywood movie, which depicted a fictional US President acting in the manner ascribed to Clinton:

Did then a dirtied blue dress from the Gap cause widows and orphans to set up grieving howls in the passes of Afghanistan, the outer precincts of Khartoum, and the wastes of Mesopotamia? Is there only a Hollywood link between Clinton’s carnality and Clinton’s carnage?¹⁹

¹⁸ For recent debates about neo-isolationism in the 1990s, see David H. Dunn, “Isolationism Revisited: Seven Persistent Myths in the Contemporary American Foreign Policy Debate”, *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), 237-62 (also, J. Dumbrell, ‘Response’, *RIS*, October 2005).

¹⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *No One Left to Lie To: The Triangulation of William Jefferson Clinton* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 89.

(Hitchens' answer was 'yes' to the first, and 'no' to the second question). Senator, and Republican Majority Leader, Trent Lott attacked Clinton for timing the 1991 Iraq bombing to coincide with House impeachment voting.²⁰ Such charges are both very serious, and utterly unprovable. Their varied provenance – could anyone imagine two more different people than Trent Lott and Christopher Hitchens? – again emphasises the extraordinary variety of extreme responses to Clinton himself and to his protean foreign policy.

One important and serious thread in the many attacks on Clinton's putative foreign policy randomness concerns the central issue, vital in any effort objectively to rank Presidents, of foreign policy procedure and process. Here, there is no gainsaying the fact that, in some fairly celebrated instances – especially in Bosnia around 1994 – policy was procedurally in chaos. In more general terms, however, we must recognise that procedural chaos is not unknown in other Administrations. Key personnel (notably Secretaries of State Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright; and National Security Advisers Tony Lake and Sandy Berger) had key disagreements, notably over the proper scope for US post-Cold War military interventionism. Clinton's first and second Defence Secretaries, Les Aspin and William Perry, had distinct interpretations of what constituted the military 'lessons of Vietnam'.²¹ Richard Holbrooke (Assistant Secretary of State and, subsequently, US Ambassador to the UN) recorded many intra-Administration disagreements and rows in his Bosnian memoir, *To End A War*.²² Procedural cohesion under Clinton was emphatically inferior to the record of Bush Senior. By the same token, tensions between the White House and State Department were held in check, partly because of Lake and Berger's conscious determination to avoid repeating the experience of the Carter and early Reagan years. Rivalry between the State Department and Pentagon, despite the rifts revealed by Holbrooke, never approached that level of conspicuous intensity which was to become so defining a feature of

²⁰ See John Dumbrell, "Was There a Clinton Doctrine President Clinton's Foreign Policy Reconsidered", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 13 (2002), 43-56, pp. 46-7.

²¹ See Wayne Bert, *The Reluctant Superpower: United States Policy in Bosnia, 1991-95* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 18.

²² Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1998).

George W. Bush's first Administration. If foreign policy advisory systems are classified as hierarchical, competitive or collegial,²³ perhaps the best designation for the Clinton years would be 'collegial-occasionally-descending-into-chaotic'.

Looking at the development of Clinton's foreign policy, clear, and logically developing, priorities do become apparent.²⁴ All is not confusion. The first Administration had a clear priority in its 'economics first'/free trade agenda. This encompassed bureaucratic changes to build geoeconomics into general foreign policy. It had clear successes in North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) ratification, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) approval, as well as various bilateral free trade agreements. The 'economics first' agenda also drew on a version of neo-Kantian 'democratic peace' theory, with the President frequently asserting that a combination of trade and democracy constituted the road to international peace. Other first term priorities included multilateral 'enlargement' and democracy-promotion (from Mozambique to Russia); 'selective engagement' (involving, especially after the Haitian invasion and the setback in Somalia, the attempt to devise practical, often domestic-oriented criteria for assertive US engagement); and military retrenchment (following the Bush Senior cutbacks, Defence Secretary Aspin looked to 1998 defence spending levels being cut, as a percentage of GDP, to about half the level for 1970). The dynamic of the first term ran generally in the direction of pragmatism (notably over China) and the recognition of limits, leavened by a strong dose of neo-Carterist human rights, 'assertive multilateralism/humanitarianism' and commitment to 'democratic peace'.

As with most eight year Presidencies, the second Clinton Administration witnessed an audible change of gear. The most important focus for change was the conflict in the former Yugoslavia – a region which generally fell outside the first Administration's 'selective engagement' criteria. Activist diplomatic engagement was embarked upon in 1995 in an abrupt switch of policy. Republican Congressional threats to assume leadership of policy

²³ See Patrick J. Haney, *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

²⁴ See Dumbrell, "Was There a Clinton Doctrine?"

towards Bosnia; the patent inability of the European Union to take realistic steps to end slaughter and disorder on its own doorstep; growing US acceptance that the region – uncomfortably close to the Russian sphere of influence, and also with implications for the Moslem Middle East – had significance for American security: all those factors were important in provoking Clinton's about-face, the Dayton Agreement and the subsequent commitment of US troops to the Balkans.

Besides the acute and complex crisis in the former Yugoslavia, at least two other broad developments affected second term re-prioritisation. Most obviously, the new Republican Congressional majority provoked a real change in the entire development of Clinton's Presidency. Primarily domestically, but also in foreign policy (and not only in respect of policy towards Bosnia), from 1995 onwards the President had to take due account of GOP Congressional preferences and pressures. Secondly, from about 1994/95 – ironically at the very time that the Republicans were securing control of Congress – the Administration actually exuded a new aura of international confidence. The computer revolution, the boom in consumer spending and the inroads made into the Reagan deficit all contributed to a new confidence in American international power. Washington chatter was no longer about imperial decline, but about unipolarity.

Clinton's second term priorities grew logically from, and reflected the tensions surrounding, renewed Republican sway in Congress, and renewed international confidence in an age of strategic uncertainty. Two first term themes – 'assertive humanitarianism' and democratic free marketism – were reinforced. The 1999 Kosovo bombing campaign reflected the 'lessons of Bosnia', exemplified the Administration's new international confidence and indicated its willingness to treat Russian amour propre with more than a degree of contempt. Free market democratisation ran into trouble, notably at the 1999 World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle, in the shape of anti-globalisation protest. Globoscepticism assumed various rightist, leftist and protectionist forms at various levels of the American polity, including the US Congress. The forces of neo-isolationist nationalism even found a rather dishevelled and uninspiring figurehead in the shape of Pat Buchanan, Republican victor in the 1996 New Hampshire Presidential primary. Yet the free trade, globalising agenda ran on; by 2000, US exports, as a percentage of GDP, had grown to 12.1, compared to 9.9 in 1993.

Two other key second term developments embodied a deflection from, rather than a reinforcement of, first term priorities. Reflecting both Republican pressure and the new international confidence, the Administration began to move in an unmistakeably unilateralist direction. On some issues, such as the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty and the Kyoto protocols on global pollution, the Congressional stance was quite clear. The Administration had little choice but to accept (and covertly sabotage) the extraterritoriality of the Helms-Burton legislation on Cuba. The new willingness (notably in the actions taken against Sudan, Afghanistan and Kosovo) to act without UN Security Council sanction was, however, as much a product of Administration confidence as of legislative hostility to the United Nations. In the case of the International Criminal Court, Clinton actually exploited the freedom of the condemned man's cell – he reversed his opposition in his last days in the White House – to signal his personal commitment to multilateralism.

The second term also saw a significant move towards remilitarisation. Aspin's defence projections were now manifestly forgotten. The recommitment to National Missile Defence was a Republican triumph. Presidential acceptance that more money was needed to fund America's global commitments was also an acceptance that, in this new era of confidence, restrictionism and narrowly-defined 'selective engagement' were things of the past.

Clinton Administration foreign policy prioritisation did, then, exhibit logical development. Detailed evaluation of particular successes and failures is beyond the scope of this lecture. Most commentators would, I imagine, list NAFTA ratification and the Dayton Agreement under 'successes'. The worsening condition of US-Russian relations might go into the 'failure' section. Unquestionably, future generations will regard American and European failure effectively to influence the massive slaughter in Rwanda (1993-4) as a disastrous collapse of responsibility.

Though stepping aside from detailed policy evaluation, I do wish to take a few minutes to discuss a policy area of unique significance for a primarily British audience: Clinton's policy towards Northern Ireland.

During the Clinton years, the world's only remaining superpower paid an unprecedented degree of attention to a small part of the United Kingdom, a province of no clear economic or strategic importance to the US. The result, or at least one result, was the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement of 1998.

It perhaps goes without saying that I regard the Clinton policy, and indeed the Agreement itself, as major achievements, with massively positive implications for both Northern Ireland and for the rest of the UK. We must, however, immediately recognise obvious limitations to this tale of success. The Agreement itself, and the governmental institutions deriving from it, are currently in a state of indefinite suspension. We must also recognise that, as recent events have so vividly illustrated, the 1990s peace process merely trapped paramilitary violence in certain districts of Northern Ireland, rather than eradicating it. It must also be acknowledged that Clinton's Irish initiatives were accompanied by huge internal (primarily White House versus State Department) bureaucratic rifts, as well as by bitter transatlantic rows. In addition, without question, the Clinton policies contributed to the political polarisation (primarily Sinn Féin versus the Democratic Unionist Party) which is still in process in Northern Ireland.²⁵ What should also be made clear is that the key breakthroughs – notably the 1994 IRA ceasefire and the 1998 Agreement – had complex causes. They were products of factors, ranging from new coordination of effort between London and Dublin to the end of the Cold War itself. Clinton could not 'impose' peace; he and his Northern Irish team rather made an assessment – an inspired and accurate assessment – that local conditions were now conducive to peace.

The outlines of Clinton's Irish strategy – bringing Sinn Féin in from the cold by granting the visa to Gerry Adams in 1994; the opening of a dialogue with moderate, and even at times with paramilitary, loyalism; the intense Presidential engagement (the Belfast visits, in particular, and Clinton's 30 hour telephone marathon during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations) – will be familiar to this audience.

US Presidential commitment in Ireland seems to have been a necessary, though certainly not a sufficient, condition for progress. Why did Clinton bother, especially in the years of Conservative government in London, when his interventions were regarded with icy hostility by America's 'Special Relationship' ally? As both Bill and Hillary Clinton attest, the President did have a particular emotional investment in the affairs of the province deriving

²⁵ Polarisation was, of course, a major feature of the May 2005 General Election results in Northern Ireland. On the bureaucratic rifts, see Timothy J. Lynch, *Turf War: The Clinton Administration and Northern Ireland* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

from his days as a student at Oxford.²⁶ Irish activism also fitted into the general peace-promotion/democracy-promotion agenda. It set down a marker for peace-promotion internationalism, in a region where the objective conditions for peace appeared promising. Worries about offending London had diminished with the end of the Cold War and the reduced strategic importance of US air bases in the UK. The policy also combined limited liability with domestic resonance. US activism in Ireland was never going to degenerate into ‘another Vietnam’: there was no possibility of US troop commitments. Domestic critics of the policy did emerge – whether in the form of Members of Congress who questioned the propriety of interfering in the internal politics of an ally; of State Department and CIA personnel who objected to negotiating with terrorists; or of people who simply doubted the wisdom of expending so much energy in attempting to resolve an obscure dispute in an obscure part of the world. However, in this pre-9/11 era, most American voters were either indifferent to, or actually supported, the opening of a process which included IRA leaders, and which was committed to a devolved, power-sharing solution. What should be emphasised is that the degree of energy and commitment associated with the policy far outweighed any possible gain in terms of attracting the votes of Irish America. The idea of a cohesive ‘Irish vote’ in the US is little more than a, sometimes convenient, British myth.

Before moving to a conclusion, I will touch briefly, and a little more directly than previously, on the matter of Clinton's relationship to 9/11 and the War on Terror. As already noted, President George W. Bush's unpopularity in Europe has contributed to a resurgence of positive interest in Clinton; a similar dynamic operated in the early 1980s in relation to Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter. In the weeks of the 2003 Iraq invasion, and the failure to uncover Weapons of Mass Destruction, the point was frequently made in Europe that Clinton's policy of containment and deterrence actually seemed to have been vindicated. To many Americans, however, Clinton probably is remembered as the President who left the US dangerously exposed to a terror attack. To consider this question a little further, let us take a look at the conclusions of the 9/11 Commission.

²⁶ Clinton, *My Life*, p. 341; Hillary R. Clinton, *Living History* (London: Headline, 2003), p. 321.

The Commission was, of course, very critical of both Clinton and George W. Bush in terms of their handling of the international terrorist threat before September 2001. For the Clinton years, the Commission traced a rather sorry record of bureaucratic confusion and a damaging reluctance to sound publicly alarmist. The Sudan and Afghanistan raids, whatever their motivation, were near-farcical. On Clinton's response to the terrorist threat, the following represents the Commission's mature judgement:

Before 9/11, al Qaeda and its affiliates had killed fewer than 50 Americans, including the East Africa embassy bombings and the (2000 USS) *Cole* attack. The U.S. government took the threat seriously, but not in the sense of mustering anything like the kind of effort that would be gathered to confront an enemy of the first, second, or even third rank. The modest national effort exerted to contain Serbia and its depredations in the Balkans between 1995 and 1999, for example, was orders of magnitude larger than that devoted to al Qaeda.²⁷

Following the *Cole* attack the issue of 'bin Ladenism' did work its way up the bureaucratic tree. Though details are disputed, Sandy Berger and the Clinton national security team seem genuinely to have conveyed the seriousness of the threat to Bush's incoming Administration in 2000-2001. That mistakes were made, that bureaucratic tangles were left to assume damaging proportions, that (especially in the hectic Middle East negotiating effort of 2000) difficult problems were side-stepped: none of this is in question.

Let me move to my final points. Bill Clinton was the President 'between the Bushes'. He inherited one set of problems from President George Bush Senior. These revolved around the maintenance of American internationalism in an era of apparent continued US decline, in a world made safer (but in several respects less predictable) by the end of the Soviet threat. Clinton handed on to George the Second – will America ever be ruled again by a George the Third? – another set of problems: those associated with new security threats, in an era of unquestioned US global primacy. He also handed on a foreign policy which was already pointing in a unilateralist direction. Clinton's years in office will come

²⁷ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on the Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 340.

to be seen as the era of US-sponsored economic globalisation and (along with the final two years of the elder and first nine months of the junior Bush Presidencies) as the ‘post-Cold War era’. The period of international history, beginning with the collapse of the Soviet Union and ending with the 9/11 attacks, may now be seen as a distinct division of time, with several defining characteristics: a continued American preoccupation with the affairs of Russia and, increasingly, with China; the continuation of American ‘Vietnam syndrome’ inhibitions on the use of military power; various internal challenges to US Presidential domination of foreign policy-making; the apparent replacement of geopolitics by geoeconomics as the driving force behind US foreign policy; a conscious and complex public debate about the purposes of American alliance structures, and of US internationalism generally; and, finally, the slow, but clear, emergence of the new, ‘borderless threat’, security agenda. Clinton’s foreign policy was an appropriate foreign policy for this era.

One or two final, final reflections. The cricket commentator John Arlott – I did warn that I was going to offer a British perspective on Clinton – was once asked to name the most important players in cricket history. He avoided obvious names and concentrated on those people who had actually transformed, or indeed safeguarded, the game itself: its form, structure and integrity. My point is that, in judging US Presidents, perhaps we should assess their impact on the actual office of President. Here I wish to raise the unlikely prospect of seeing Bill Clinton as, despite all the affronts to Presidential dignity and integrity which occurred as a result of his own behaviour, the protector of the Presidential office. By way of explanation, I refer you to the literature on Presidential foreign policy-making which was current in the early 1990s. To writers of this period, the end of the Cold War, especially with the rise of the trade and ‘intermestic’ agendas, seemed likely to usher in an era of strong foreign policy Congresses, revived interest group power, and even significant decentralised ‘foreign policy’ activity at the state governmental level. It became almost a commonplace to maintain that Aaron Wildavsky’s ‘two Presidencies’ thesis (with Presidents weak at home, but strong abroad) was outdated.²⁸ Even before the era of the War on Terror, these

²⁸ See, e.g., D. A. Deese, ed., *The New Politics of American Foreign Policy* (New York: St Martin’s, 1994); D. Yankelovich and I. M. Destler, eds., *Beyond the Beltway* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); D. M. Oldfield and Aaron Wildavsky, “Remembering the Two Presidencies”, in S. A. Shull, ed., *The Two Presidencies: A Quarter Century Appraisal* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1991), 181-90.

prophecies proved inaccurate. Clinton did make major concessions to the Republican Congress after 1994, but he also handed over to George W. Bush a strong foreign policy Presidency. We might also recall Clinton as the President who defeated the efforts of Newt Gingrich to smuggle into US government the unconstitutional office of 'Prime Minister'. It may be that future generations remember Clinton not only as America's leader 'between the Bushes'; not simply as only the second US President in history to undergo a Senate impeachment trial; but also as the President who, in real and unexpected ways, actually protected the Presidential office.

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