

The Influence of the Vietnam Legacy on American Electoral Politics

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George Santayana warned that those who forget the past are destined to repeat it. It was not a warning which fell on deaf ears. Historians cannot fail to realize the iron grip which the past holds on the present. Consensus about the past translates into consensus about the present. In the United States, disappointment with the post-World War I arrangements led to a consensus isolationism. Munich and the Holocaust delegitimized that isolationism both strategically and morally. It was replaced by an internationalist consensus that in intervening to block or contain aggressive forces such as pre-war Germany, the post-war Soviet Union and China, great powers such as Britain or the US were not only acting in their own self interest, but also in the long term interest of world peace.

Containment was a liberal policy devised by a Democratic administration. It was first challenged by the right. Republicans advocated replacing containment with "roll back." The Hungarian uprising discredited that option. It was then challenged from the left, which argued that the US, rather than the USSR or China, was the aggressive force in the world. As proof, revisionist historians cited what they considered the unnecessary dropping of nuclear bombs on Japan. Hiroshima, they argued, should take its place alongside Auschwitz as the twin sins which the human race should never again be permitted to repeat. Their case was significantly enhanced by the Cuban Missile

Crisis, the fracturing of the Communist camp, and Khrushchev's advocacy of peaceful coexistence.'

Limited war was the liberal strategy devised to save containment by allaying nuclear fears. It failed dismally in Vietnam. Did that failure mean that limited wars were inherently impractical, immoral, or both? And, if so, could and should American military power ever be used effectively to secure American interests or ideals? From 1967 to 1991, the answer to these questions split the liberal camp and the Democratic Party between those who argued that the Vietnam debacle proved that limited wars were inherently both impractical and immoral and those who argued that it was an aberration which should not be used to discredit containment in favor of renewed isolationism. The collapse of the Soviet Union changed things. Since 1991, a commitment to a New World Order is reuniting the liberal Democratic coalition and a wariness of it is splitting the conservative Republicans.

Indeed, the ebbs and flows of American electoral politics cannot be understood apart from this thirty-year-old debate. It began not with the 1975 fall of Saigon but with the 1967 Egyptian closure of the Straits of Tiran. In the aftermath of the 1956 Suez War, Washington had pledged both privately and publicly to keep the Straits open. But, in 1967, a Democratic administration mired in Vietnam was in no position to keep that pledge, in part because the military insisted that it did not have the resources needed to act simultaneously both in Vietnam and the Middle East.² Moscow's strong support of Egypt was widely viewed as an attempt to outflank NATO from the south. James Reston reported:

The vicious Middle East controversy has startled our old friends and allies in Western Europe. They have been saying the Cold War was over in this part of the World. . . but now they are not so sure. . . and the paradox of it is that many of the Europeans who have been most critical of his (Johnson's) use of force in Southeast Asia are now afraid he might not follow this line in the Middle East.³

1 Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor, The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: The Free Press), 1995, 327.

2 Memorandum for the President, May 19, 1967 and Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, June 2, 1967. JCSM-310-67, NSF, M.E. Crisis; Box 18, LBJL.

3 *New York Times*, May 31, 1967.

He did not and Israel was forced to go to war alone. To deflect accusations of "sell out," Lyndon Johnson and his men argued that opponents of the Vietnam War (many of them Jewish) reignited isolationism in America and that it was this new isolationism which prevented him from acting. His speech writer, John Roche, called advocates of American intervention in the Middle East "Doves for War."

However, for every Martin Luther King, Jean Paul Sartre or Michael Harrington who was willing to make distinctions between Vietnam and the Middle East, there was a John Kenneth Galbraith, a Robert Lowell and an Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who refused to appear inconsistent. Schlesinger, who in a private letter complained that being mired in Vietnam prevented the US from securing its more important interests in the Middle East, justified his refusal to call on the US to secure the reopening of the Straits on the ground that he could not oppose intervention in one country and support it in another."

The problem of "Neoisolationism," later known as the Vietnam syndrome, began to be hotly debated in the media. In August, 1967, *Encounter* magazine invited a cross section of intellectuals to reply to the following: "How, if at all, has the Israeli-Arab conflict affected your attitude towards war, to great-power commitments, to supporting or opposing just or unjust causes? How have intellectuals – and how should they have – reacted?" The editor, Anthony Hartly, noted: "What is striking about the replies . . . is not so much a change in intellectual attitudes towards world affairs . . . as the clash of opinions about the importance of holding such attitudes at all."⁵

It seems that, not wishing to admit unintended consequences of past anti-interventionist advocacy, some intellectuals, such as Max Beloff, withdrew from the political battlefield. Others, like historian Theodore Draper, conceded that "Vietnam Doves" had to learn to live with the charge that they fostered a new isolationism. Draper did not deny the problem, but tried to avoid taking responsibility for it by insisting that intellectuals had little influence. It was the failure of

4 *New York Times*, June 7 and 12 and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to Gus Tyler, June 13, 1967, Papers of Max Kampelman, Misc. 1967, 26E 10 10F, Minnesota State Library.

5 "Intellectuals & Just Causes," *Encounter*, Sept. 1967, 3-16 and Oct. 1967, 45-50.

the new interventionism and not the activity of anti-war intellectuals, which was responsible for the new national mood.⁶

Irving Kristol begged to differ: whatever the failure of America in Vietnam may have been, the US could not and should not resign as "Policeman of the World." Moreover, ideas mattered and intellectual support was essential to the continued ability of the American government to follow an internationalist line. Therefore, Kristol along with a group of liberal intellectuals, later known as Neoconservatives, took it upon themselves to provide the American government with the necessary backing to counter the Vietnam Syndrome and continue to fight the Cold War.⁷

They did not support the Vietnam War. Not until 1975 did Norman Podhoretz write a treatise justifying the war. In fact, they wished to see it ended as soon as possible. But they refused to see it as a crime perpetrated by evil men representative of an evil empire against a small virtuous Third World nation. The 1967 crisis had led them to reevaluate past assumptions. William Phillips, the editor of *Partisan Review*, wrote:

The naked power moves of the Soviet block in the Near East, together with stale ideology, succeeded in bringing back the old confrontations. So, too, the almost automatic ganging-up on Israel of the Asian and African countries, rationalized by a hodge-podge of racial, national and anti-colonial propaganda, buried another hope — and with it the myth that being dark skinned and poor and underdeveloped made a nation virtuous and progressive.⁸

Consequently, an end to Pax Americana would not be likely to usher in an era of international peace and harmony, nor bring about a more just diffusion of power as liberals had hoped. It was more likely to usher in an era of violent and dangerous upheavals in the name of world revolution and/or a Pax Sovietica.

That was fine with new left radicals who had little patience with liberals who had such "second thoughts." Alfredo Peña wrote in the *Militant*:

⁶ *New York Times*, June 12 and 15, 1967 and "Letters from Readers," *Commentary*, Dec. 1967, 14-20.

⁷ Irving Kristol, "We Can't Resign As 'Policeman of the World,'" *NYT Magazine*, May 12, 1968 and "American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1967, 395-409.

⁸ "Symposium: Liberal Anti-Communism Revisited," *Commentary*, Sept. 1967, 58. 64.

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As those prophetic words were so well expounded by Che Guevara, that we need many Vietnams, the scene of crisis fluctuates from Southeast Asia to the Middle East. One of the ironies of the situation . . . is the position of support for Israel that many members have taken.⁹

The liberal split found the Black power movement including SNCC on the anti-Israeli – leftist- isolationist side and Jews, as a whole, on the internationalist side. The Jewish-black fissure, especially after the death of Martin Luther King, helped rend the Democratic Party and damage its ideological basis.¹⁰

The Nixon doctrine was the Republican answer to the Vietnam debacle. It replaced direct American intervention in the Third World with diplomatic and military support for regional allies such as Israel and Iran. But the efficacy of the policy was severely tested by the Yom Kippur War and discredited by the Iranian revolution. In any case, neoconservatives considered detente just another name for appeasement. They bemoaned the American failure of nerve and blamed it on the Vietnam syndrome. "I think that far from having put Vietnam behind us," wrote Norman Podhoretz in 1977, "we are still living with it in a thousand different ways. It is there everywhere, a ubiquitous if often eerie invisible presence in our political culture."¹¹

For a decade isolationist McGovern liberals battled Jacksonian internationalist neoconservatives for control of the Democratic Party. In 1980, when a former Roosevelt Democrat by the name of Ronald Reagan took control of the Republican party, the Neoconservatives not only helped him formulate an ideological and strategic foreign policy offensive designed to "kick the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all" but organized a movement entitled "Democrats for Reagan" to help him get elected.¹²

Instead of concluding, as liberals had, that Vietnam proved the US could not and, indeed, should not, block the leftist revolutionary transformations of Third World countries, Reagan and his people

⁹ *The Militant*, June 26, 1967.

¹⁰ Jonathan Kaufman, *Broken Alliance, The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988). 80-81.

¹¹ Norman Podhoretz, "The Culture of Appeasement," *Harper's*, Oct. 1977, 25.

¹² Mark Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision, From the Cold War to the Cultural Wars* (New York: Madison Books), 1996. 73-143

concluded that it was possible to block such transformations by adopting the Russian-Chinese-Vietnamese strategy. They could recruit and help friendly local proxies create havoc in unfriendly territories such as Angola, Nicaragua or Afghanistan. Washington could also buttress rather than help overthrow "friendly tyrants" like Pinochet or Mobutu.

Future American ambassador to the UN, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, even provided an ideological justification to these new strategies by pointing out that unsavory as pro-Western dictators may be, their regimes have never been as oppressive as the totalitarian ones seeking to replace them because authoritarian regimes do not have jurisdiction "over the whole of society." In fact, their partial jurisdiction makes them more amenable to reform.¹³ Liberals, warning of new Vietnams bitterly opposed these policies and the Democratic Congress tried its best to thwart them, especially in Latin America.

Republicans, led by Neoconservatives, were determined not to concede the moral high ground in the reheated Cold War as they had during the Vietnam War. They adopted the much maligned Jimmy Carter's post-Helsinki human rights battle cry. By denying its citizens individual and group rights, the Soviet Union had demonstrated that it was an "evil empire." Note that the "American empire" was the derogatory term used by US opponents of American interventions in the Third World. The term "empire" also served to focus attention on Moscow's minorities problem.¹⁴

Human rights, it was argued, can only be maintained in a democratic capitalist system which insures the diffusion of power needed to protect individuals and both religious and ethnic minorities from the state. A capitalist system which keeps economic power in private hands is a necessary pre-condition to liberty. Thus, the private ownership of the means of production acquires the moral dimension which used to belong to public ownership.

Liberals, who by and large refused to condemn or highlight human rights abuses by the Soviet Union or by revolutionary regimes such as

13 Jeanne Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, Nov. 1979, 34-45.

14 For the best discussion of the role played by the Helsinki agreement in the collapse of the Soviet Union see Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows, The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 85-89.

post-1975 Vietnam and Cambodia, stood exposed as hypocrites. Increasing numbers of sixties radicals from Richard Neuhaus to Barry Rubin to Julius Lester began to have second thoughts and many joined the Neoconservative Republican cadre. Thus, since the eighties, it has become possible to be a young, idealistic, intellectual, anti-Communist Republican.¹⁵

The military drew its own lessons from Vietnam. The Six Day War discredited the gradualism which typified the Southeast Asian war. Hence, the military made civilian acquiescence to the application of overwhelming force in pursuit of precisely defined attainable goals a prerequisite to military intervention. That was the so called "Powell doctrine" so aptly detailed by Bob Woodward in his book *The Commanders*. It was tested in Grenada, Panama and, most convincingly, in the Gulf War. As Vice President Dan Quayle told reporters, Desert Storm would not be "another Vietnam" because American soldiers would "not be asked to fight with one arm tied behind their back."¹⁶

The Gulf War also seemed to prove that in the post Cold-War, at least, a limited war against a Third World nation could be won not only militarily and ideologically but also politically by receiving UN and Congressional sanctions (in that order). Lyndon Johnson avoided vilifying the Vietnamese enemy for fear of precipitating a nuclear confrontation. Lacking such worries, George Bush dared compare Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler. More over, public support of Desert Storm discredited the idea that the American people would refuse to fight and die in faraway places "merely" for economic gain, and scuttled the liberal myth that just as the peace movement had forced the US government to withdraw from Vietnam, this support would be able to prevent it from embarking on a similar venture.¹⁷

However, when Pat Buchanan said during the pre-war debate that only "the Israeli Defense Ministry and its amen corner in the United States" supported a Gulf War, he revealed that new cracks were developing in the

15 Their story is best told in *Second Thoughts, Former Radicals Look Back At The Sixties*, edited by Peter Collier and David Horowitz, (New York: Madison Books), 1989.

16 *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 1991.

17 For a concise summary of the effect of the Vietnam legacy on the Gulf War see Adam Garfinkle's *Telltale Hearts, The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press); 1995. 237-65.

Reagan coalition. As columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote, "with Communism defeated, Buchanan emerges, like a woolly mammoth frozen in the Siberian ice, as a perfectly preserved specimen of the 1930s isolationism and nativism."¹⁸

At first it seemed that George Bush meant to pick up his predecessor's internationalist mantle and lead a worldwide democratic crusade. To the delight of neoconservatives he waxed lyrical about a "New World Order." They were quickly disappointed. Bush failed to evict his "Hitler" from Iraq, to support the pro-democracy demonstrations in China, or to encourage national self-determination in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Moreover, he exhibited open hostility towards Israel.

Consequently, by 1992, many Reagan Democrats felt just as uncomfortable in the post-Cold War Republican Party as they had felt in the post-Vietnam Democratic one. Bill Clinton was determined to bring them home. He worked hard to assure them that he was heading a new Democratic Party which welcomed not only their support, but also their ideas. He invited men such as Richard Schifter, a former Democrat and Assistant Secretary of state for Human Rights in the Reagan administration who had quit the Bush administration, to join his foreign policy team.

His task was made easier by the fact that in the post-Soviet era, Neoconservative ideas were no longer anathema to the party's liberal wing. After all, the New World disorders offered just the type of challenges liberals have always advocated. If the US pursued her narrow self-interest in Vietnam, as liberals had argued, it had no discernible interest to pursue in Somalia, Liberia, Bosnia or Haiti. Indeed, Cold War motivated interventions were to be replaced by peacemaking or peacekeeping on behalf of a UN/US led international community.

Thus, in public speeches and private meetings, Clinton promised Neoconservatives not to engage in drastic defense budget cuts, to stand by Israel, and to use American power to advance American interests and ideals. He promised to end the arms embargo against Bosnia, use air power to frustrate Serbia, link most favored nation trading status for

¹⁸ Joshua Muravchik, "Patrick J. Buchanan and the Jews," *Commentary*, January 1991. 31 and *Washington Post*, March 1, 1991.

China to an improvement in Beijing's human rights record, restore democracy to Haiti, and act to end starvation in Somalia.¹⁹ These positions turned many Reagan Democrats into "Conservatives for Clinton." Joshua Muravchik of the American Enterprise Institute, wrote:

When postwar liberal internationalism cracked under the strains of Vietnam, I made a simple rule for myself: I would vote for no dove for federal office. . . . Although the cold war is over, I remain a foreign policy voter because peace and freedom remain the paramount questions. To some, the importance of foreign policy stands as the strongest argument for George Bush. To me, it settles the case for Clinton.²⁰

Thus, it was not just "the economy. stupid!" which won Bill Clinton the presidency, but the foreign policy based support of a few thousand opinion makers, academicians, writers and public policy entrepreneurs. For just as they had made voting Republican socially and politically respectable in the 1980, 1984 and 1988 elections, they made voting Democratic socially and politically respectable in 1992. Of course, to hold on to this specialized constituency, the new Democratic president had to prove that he not only knew how "to talk the talk" but also "to walk the walk."

His defeated opponent put him to an early test. After a year of steadfastly refusing to intervene in the New World disorders, George Bush changed his mind. At a Nov. 25 NSC meeting, he disregarded his own experts' advice and sent 28,000 American ground troops to end hunger in Somalia. So anxious was Bush for Security Council approval of the mission that he even agreed to a much greater degree of UN supervision of the operation than he had accepted during the Gulf War. Stunned participants murmured apprehensively, "another Vietnam," but Bush retorted that he, unlike Lyndon Johnson, would avoid a quagmire by taking "strong and decisive" rather than "incremental action." To counter accusations of political mischief, he promised to have the vast majority of the American troops out by inauguration day, explaining, "I don't want to leave an unfulfilled commitment to the next president." However,

19 Fred Barnes. "Neocons for Clinton, They're Back!" *The New Republic*, August 3, 1993, 12-14, Norman Podhoretz, "The Conservative Crack-up," *Commentary*, May 1993 and Stephen John Stedman, "The New Interventionists," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, no. 1

20 Joshua Muravchik, "Conservatives for Clinton," *The New Republic*, Nov. 2, 1992, 22.

Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Colin Powell and defense secretary Dick Cheney immediately countered that no "artificial deadlines" were to be set, and that the mission was bound to take longer than the White House had suggested."

Stunned, Bill Clinton and his liberal supporters had little choice but to "welcome" the purely altruistic intervention. Privately, they worried. Not only did the operation detract attention from Clinton's inauguration and set a new precedent for military relief operations elsewhere, but it also threatened to undermine Clinton's ability to keep his campaign promise and "focus on the economy like a laser." As an irate correspondent wrote, "if the incursion fails, Mr. Bush will have left Bill Clinton in a quagmire that will stymie his domestic efforts just as Republican cries in the 60's that Lyndon Johnson was soft on Communism kept him preoccupied in Vietnam, undercutting his Great Society programs."²²

The new president came to office determined to keep foreign policy on the back burner without undermining Neoconservative support. So he provided unparalleled backing for Israel, maintained the pressure on Iraq, and refrained from seriously cutting the defense budget. Aware that the slow humiliating disengagement from Vietnam had begun because the nation's foreign policy establishment, the so called *Wise Men*, had concluded that the Southeast Asian war was preventing the US from safeguarding its interests in more important regions such as Europe and the Middle East, the military had developed a two-front strategy. Those longing for a peace dividend hoped to see it discarded. Clinton disappointed them. The Pentagon's 1993 Bottom-Up Review of post-Cold War defense needs postulated an armed force capable of fighting and winning two regional conflicts simultaneously.²³

Indeed, a *New York Times* editorial suggesting that with the Cold War over the time had come to do away with the expensive strategy based on "the two war fantasy" drew a sharp response from Secretary of Defense William Perry. He insisted that having to fight two wars almost simultaneously will remain "entirely implausible" only as long as the US retains the capability to do so: "If we only have the capability for one

²¹ *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 2, 4 and 7, 1992 and *The New Republic*, Dec. 28, 1996, p. 12.

²² *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 1992.

²³ Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President, A Memoir*, New York: Random House, 1991, 519 and Lawrence J. Korb, "Our Over stuffed Armed Forces," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1995, 24.

major conflict, our weakness could invite a second conflict, thereby malting plausible what could otherwise be an implausible scenario." Indubitably, Perry was describing the 1967 scenario. Thereafter, even experts who wished to see the American "overstuffed armed forces" trimmed, emphasized that such trimming could be undertaken without undermining the two-front strategy.²⁴

But on October 3, 1993 Bush's time bomb finally exploded. Eighteen American soldiers lost their lives, and Soinalis dragged one soldier's body through the streets of Mogadishu. Acting instinctively, Clinton and his advisors, Richard Holbrooke, Peter Tarnoff and Anthony Lake (all aids to Henry Cabot Lodge in Vietnam), became determined not to repeat Lyndon Johnson's mistake. They ignored the jeers and set an early date for a US exit from Somalia. To their chagrin, they discovered that there was more to the much maligned notion of credibility than had previously been granted by most pundits. Within days, Haitian mobs prevented an American ship carrying military trainers from docking in Port-au-Prince. American proposals for a more aggressive NATO policy in Bosnia were summarily dismissed by the European allies, and the liberal media were just as critical of Clinton as they had been of Johnson. National Book Award winning author Tina Rosenberg wrote:

Many American and European reporters began to feel that their governments were conspirators in a monstrous criminal act and that, no matter how much they described the horrors they saw, nothing changed. The difference was only that Vietnam was immoral because the great powers were involved, Bosnia because they weren't.²⁵

Disclaiming responsibility Republicans blamed the Somalia debacle on the UN and "mission creep," and steadfastly opposed getting involved in Haiti or Bosnia. In short, it seemed as if "America has passed through the looking glass into an upside-down world where (some) liberal Democrats were calling for U.S. military action abroad while conservative Republicans warned of swamps, sand traps, Neo-colonialism and 'another Vietnam.'"²⁶ Senator John McCain indeed claimed that Bosnia was bound to turn into another Vietnam, and Congressman Newt Gingrich

²⁴ *New York Times*, Feb. 5 and 7 1995 and Korb. "Our Overstuffed Armed Forces," 22-34.

²⁵ *International Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1996.

²⁶ Robert Kagan, "A Retreat from Power?" *Commentary*, July 1995, 19-23.

warned that once again "the US was overextended around the world." Permitting internationalism to "run amok" in Somalia, lamented one political scientist, has revived "the isolationist impulse."²⁷

Clinton responded by issuing the May 1994 Presidential Decision Directive 25 which was designed to make US and UN peace-keeping more *selective* and more *effective*. The then American ambassador to the UN (and in 1997 new Secretary of State), Madeleine Albright, explained that all American undertaking of a military operation or agreeing to support a UN operation will depend on a positive answer to the following: Are US interests involved? Is international peace and security involved? Are the resources available? Is there an exit strategy?²⁸ PDD 25 implied that the US would no longer initiate or participate in purely humanitarian rescue operations. Indeed, the US acted to limit severely US and UN intervention in Rwanda.

So it was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s turn to bemoan the resurgence of the Neo-isolationist impulse in the US. He called PDD 25 "ill-judged," though he conceded that "dying for world order when there is no concrete threat to one's own nation is a hard argument to make." That is the reason that Congress and the public refuse to sacrifice for that order their professional army despite the fact that it is "made up of men and women who volunteered for the job; and the job, alas, may include fighting, killing and dying."²⁹ The culprit, bemoaned another pundit is "the demographic character of modern, postindustrial societies" which causes parents of professional soldiers to view their child's "wounding or death as an outrageous scandal rather than an occupational hazard."³⁰

Be that as it may, by the 1994 midterm election there was a general consensus that in foreign policy Clinton like Carter was not ready "to walk the walk." But unlike Carter, not only did he have two years to mend his way but the Republicans failed to take advantage of Clinton's meandering by picking up the internationalist banner. Instead their presidential candidates "were acting as if the world did not exist."

27 David C. Hendrickson, "The Recovery of Internationalism," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct., 1994, p. 26.

28 Madeleine K. Albright, "The Clinton Administration's Policy on Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, May 16, 1994, 315.

29 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Back to the Womb?" *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 1995. 6-7.

30 Edward N. Luttwak, "Is Intervention A Thing of the Past;" *Harper's*, Oct. 1994. 15-17.

Without "a foreign policy component," *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman observed, Republicanism had lost the "sense of largess" it had possessed during the Cold War.³¹

But before Clinton could coopt that sense of largess, he had to develop the "Clinton doctrine," a low-risk strategy designed to avoid the pitfalls of Vietnam and Somalia. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake explains: "You do not merely have an exit strategy, you actually set a deadline when you go in that says you are not there to let the local political forces evade responsibility, become dependent or resentful."³² The new strategy was tested in Haiti. It seemed to work.

But the big Democratic-Republican (Clinton-Dole) battle raged around Bosnia, and it contained unmistakable echoes of the past. Dole called on Clinton to arm the Bosnians in order "to demonstrate American commitment to support the right of self-defense against aggression," i.e., to apply the Nixon doctrine. "The Bosnians are not asking for U.S. troops," Dole asserted, "only for arms to defend their families, their homes and their country."³³

Clinton retorted that Dole's strategy would not only alienate allies who opposed such an action but also "Americanize" the war because with weapons would come "advisors" and so on, à la Vietnam. Moreover, the intensified fighting might lead to a "wider conflict in the Balkans, with far-reaching implications for Europe and the world" (an updated domino theory). Instead, Clinton wanted to use air power as "NATO air power will not end the fighting in Bosnia, it can deter aggression or at least increase its price and in the process, it will enhance the chances of a diplomatic settlement."³⁴

Robert McNamara could not have said it better. It was a small wonder that fear of Vietnam redux caused the former defense secretary to overcome his past reluctance to participate in the post-Vietnam debate and publish *In Retrospect*. The hostile reception he received was at least in part due to his opposition to intervention in Bosnia which former doves supported.

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31 *New York Times*: Feb. 10 and 12, 1996.

32 *The International Herald Tribune*, Feb. 1, 1996.

33 "Let Bosnia Control its Own Future," by Senator Bob Dole: *Newsweek*, Nov. 15, 1995, 25

34 "The Risk of Americanizing the War," by President Clinton, *Newsweek*, Nov. 15, 1995, 24.

Clinton stuck to his guns, though he tried to relieve interventionist pressure by indirectly strengthening the Bosnian Muslims.³⁵ Only when the Bosnian Serb defiance pushed NATO to the verge of collapse did the administration step in and force the parties to make the concessions necessary to permit a Haitian-like operation. Not an American intervention, the President insisted, but a single year international commitment to "give peace a chalice." And it was liberal Strobe Talbott's turn to argue, *à la* Kristol, that "if the US does not lead, no one will lead."³⁶ To secure Bob Dole's if not Pat Buchanan's support, Clinton promised to strengthen the Bosnian Muslim army though he distanced his administration from the operation by privatizing the training and getting Turkey to supply the weaponry. A cartoonist noted that the retired US military officers hired to train the Muslims were veterans of Cold War battles including Vietnam.³⁷

When queried about the problem of isolationism in America, Clinton magnanimously replied that both parties are divided between isolationists and internationalists. Actually, the reunited internationalist center seems to be holding. Thus, when columnist Jim Hoagland reminded his readers of the McGovernite slogan "Come Home America," a letter to the editor accused him of misconstruing the meaning of the slogan. "Far from being a literal demand to withdraw from the world, it was a call for America to turn away from particular policies in Vietnam, Chile and Greece, which were regarded as evil Many of us who opposed those policies were internationalist in outlook then and remain so today, supporting the current US efforts in Bosnia."³⁸ Similarly, a *Newsweek* article in which a US colonel complained about the climactic conditions drew a barrage of letters deriding media editorializing, military bellyaching (soldiers are well-paid volunteers doing their job), and immoral willingness of opponents to countenance another Holocaust.³⁹

This support helped Clinton to overcome the handicap of his past. As

35 The US stopped enforcing the UN arms embargo, agreed to Iranian arms sales to Bosnian Muslim and encouraged Muslim-Croat cooperation. "A Call to Open Arms," *Newsweek*, June 3, 1996, 10-12.

36 U.S. Department of State Dispatch, Oct. 31, 1995, 8.

37 "Generals for Hire," *Time*, Jan. 15, 1996 and IHT, Jan. 25, 1996.

38 IHT, Jan. 8, and 31, 1996.

39 *Newsweek*, Dec. 18, 1995 and Jan. 22, 1996.

could have been expected, when Clinton granted "Sixty Minutes" an interview to explain his sending of American troops to Bosnia, Leslie Stahl asked the dreaded question: How can you, who avoided military service, sent soldiers to die? His answer heralded the final transformation of young Bill Clinton: "Because I am the *Commander in Chief* and it is my prerogative under the American constitution." Bill Clinton turned foreign policy into an electoral positive, and emerged as a leader. After all, polls taken from October 1993, a week after the killing of 18 American soldiers in Somalia, through April 1995 showed that the majority of Americans even supported contributing US troops to UN peace keeping missions. Americans, as the *Economist* (which printed Clinton's picture alongside those of Lincoln, Churchill and Patton) points out, in addition to being the only ones with the clout to lead, are also the only ones eager to do so.⁴⁰

True, but they would rather not have to lead Europe so much. When the US military imagines a two-front war, it has the Gulf and Korea, West Asia and East Asia, in mind. After all, the question of the containment of China has resurfaced, and it was the need to contain China, no less than the wish to make money, that was the root cause of the American decision to establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Richard Holbrooke, the architect of the Dayton agreement, did not mince words:

We all understand that the U.S. role was the decisive factor in the (Bosnia) breakthrough. . . . Europeans have to ask themselves why it is that America remains as important as it was in the Cold War era to the solutions of problems on the European mainland. This is not true of Asia. America is a Pacific power with vast economic and strategic interest there, but we are no longer essential to political balance in Asia as we were during the Korean and Vietnam wars. In Europe we still are. This is one of the great conundrums of the post-Cold War world.⁴¹

Holbrooke may be too optimistic about Asia. In any case, it seems as if the Atlanticist – Pacificist debate which undergirded the foreign policy establishments's disagreements during the Vietnam War has resurfaced. Nor has the American solution for Bosnia escaped the much criticized US tendency to try to remake the world in its own image. For as Strobe

40 IHT, May 15, 1966 and *The Economist*. Dec. 9, 1995. 53.

41 IHT, Jan 31. 1996.

Talbott explained, the US is no longer satisfied with malting the world safe for democracy, but is also determined to make it safe for multicultural states. "The US is a multicultural country," Talbott averred, "and it is interested in the well-being of other multicultural countries."⁴² Hence, the insistence on a multicultural solution for Bosnia in the form of a Bosnian-Croat federation which neither participant much wants and few believe will last.

Of course, without an ideological component, the "Clinton doctrine" is just another term for gunboat diplomacy. The problem is that malting the world safe for democracy, and for multiculturalism, demands a thorough overhaul of the judicial and the executive systems of other countries, i.e., the much dreaded Vietnam era nation building. Indeed, since the signing of the Dayton agreement, much of the liberal criticism of American policy in Bosnia focused on NATO reluctance to engage in what critics label, "social work" i.e. securing a free press, guaranteeing the right to travel and capturing war criminals.⁴³

Nor has the Janus-faced European response to American intervention been altered. In 1966, on his way to examine the battlefields of Vietnam, Moshe Dayan sought out French expert advice; he discovered that their condemnation of that war did not mean that the French seriously wished the US to leave Vietnam. It only meant that, secure in the knowledge that the US would stay the course, they felt free to benefit from criticizing it.⁴⁴ Similarly, before the US placed ground troops in Bosnia, Europeans complained about American isolationism and Pacificism. Once US troops joined the allies in Bosnia, the French press became enamored by the theory that Washington was intent on building a new "empire" from Muslim Bosnia to the Gulf in order to secure access to Mideast oil and to counter Moslem fundamentalism. Well, there are internationalists in the US, especially in the business circles (the villainous military-industrial complex?), retorts Los Angeles syndicated columnist William Pfaff but their influence is countered by "the force of popular opinion, which since Vietnam has largely been turned inward."⁴⁵

42 IHT, Oct. 31. 1995.

43 Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 1966 16-32.

44 Moshe Dayan, *Yoman Vietnam* (Vietnam Diary), Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1979. 24.

45 IHT, Feb. 26. 1996.

So, here we go again. It seems that Santayana was right, those who do not learn from the past, are destined to relive it. But to Bob Dole's frustration, Bill Clinton is not one of them. After a shaky start, he has succeeded in making a moderately interventionist policy an electoral positive. Bob Dole did his best. The World War II veteran fumed at the Vietnam War protester, called him and his advisors, "a corps of the elite who never grew up, never did anything real, never sacrificed and never learned," and "would-be statesmen still suffering from a post-Vietnam syndrome." But the accusations lacked bite. In fact, Clinton's successful foreign sojourns made it possible for the Democratic party to return to Chicago, reclaim the mainstream image they had lost in 1968, and win decisively in 1996.⁴⁶

46 *IHT*, May 15, 1996 and *NYT*, July 7, Aug. 16 and 25, 1996.