

Clinton's foreign legacy in perspective

by Chibli Mallat

American domestic and foreign policy is studded with references to universal values. Even as they were shrugging off the shackles of British colonialism, a noted historian of revolutionary America wrote: "Americans believed they would create, as they announced on their great seal, *novus ordo seclorum*, a new order of the ages. The new government to be fashioned in the United States might become a model for the world."

A century-and-a-half later, when President Woodrow Wilson tried to reshape the planet out of the ashes of World War I, the staple reference for the proposed foreign policy was to make "the world secure once and for all." Some security in the 20th century!

Nor does the final paragraph of his famous 14 points of 1918 sound in 2000 any more fulfilled: "We feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end."

Wilson failed on both world security and partnership against imperialism, but the last 80 years are rightly dubbed "the American century."

Things, no doubt, could have been better. Many people on the planet, especially in those countries which were subjected to European colonialism, might have preferred governance by Wilson's philosophy of self-determination and his 14 points over the ills of the League of Nations.

Instead the victors of World War I in Europe—France and Britain—proceeded with a colonial division of the spoils, which wreaked havoc on most of the world population between the two world wars, subduing, mostly by force, any national leadership which questioned their domination.

The tragic sequels of colonial domination continue to haunt to the present day: societies were subjugated and disrupted from East Timor to Palestine and Kashmir, from Iraq to Rwanda and Ireland, in marked contrast to the Wilsonian inclination of America.

Compare that un-American pattern with the right of the people to dispose of their own destiny, which was at the heart of Wilson's principles, and which could have continued the founding legacy of America's anti-colonial history.

Still, the century, at least from a western perspective, deserves its American tag. In western terms—to include Japan, Europe and Oceania—the American people have made many sacrifices, notwithstanding occasional disasters as in Pearl Harbor, or in Indochina and the Middle East.

As *Realpolitik* became the name of the game, Wilson's idealism became the subject of scornful criticism by such realists as George Kennan, the American architect of aggressive containment and military build-up during the cold war, and Henry Kissinger, for whom there was never too high a price for power.

For them, only a confrontational, tunneled vision of communism could succeed in undoing the "Evil empire" created by the USSR and they set out to take on the world. Fifty years after the publication in the journal *Foreign Affairs* of the anonymous article which established the policy of containment (it was written by Kennan), the collapse of the Soviet Union appeared to vindicate the value of no less steely a

concept of rollback, which followed on the heels of containment policy and was masterminded in the Reagan years by Richard Perle, “the dark prince of the Pentagon.”

Hard realism in the shape of containment and rollback seems to have paid off. But there is another explanation, and this is a minority view toward which I am inclined. In this view, the Soviet Union was undermined from within by the human rights agenda of Jimmy Carter. This agenda was vigorously pursued by his short-lived administration, despite the occasional hiccup as in Carter’s ill-thought support for the shah of Iran at the very moment when the shah’s dictatorship crumbled. As a result, a world policy of human rights was institutionalised in the late 1970s in public forums like Helsinki.

The boost to freedom provoked by the Carter administration’s determined espousal of a foreign human-rights activist agenda gave, in that idealist view, the winning impulse to such grassroots human rights organizations as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

It is this policy which forced the destruction, from within, of socialist dictatorships, much more than the buildup of military forces by the Pentagon. Vaclav Havel and the dissidents of the East, Mikhail Gorbachev in his own way, are the living embodiment of the idealist doctrine’s success.

The opposition between realists (Kennan through Perle: contain the Soviets and roll them back) and idealists (Wilson through Carter: an active agenda of human rights and anti-Imperialism undermines dictatorships from within) is one way to account for the making of US foreign policy in the 20th century.

Another way is to adopt a view anchored in domestic American conditions.

The widening consensus among new American historians suggests that the making of foreign policy is to be primarily explained by domestic logic the logic of US domestic interests shaped by oil conglomerates, “the industrial-military complex,” other business alignments and by a special rhythm of the tugs-of-war between Congress and the White House.

The Clinton administration has suffered from Republican majorities in both houses (with the exception of a few leaders like John McCain in the early days of Kosovo), and it did not dare budge, partly for fear of being undermined in Congress.

The disastrous intervention in Somalia in 1992 added to those fears, and no American leadership was forthcoming in foreign affairs until all status quo options were exhausted. The case of the expulsion of UNSCOM from Iraq, and the inconsequential response of the Clinton administration, is another case in point.

In its most recent annual Strategic Survey, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) emphasised two of the negative characteristics of Clinton’s foreign policy: bogged down by domestic politics, mostly congressional opposition, and the Lewinsky distraction, “(President Bill) Clinton has shown no more grasp than his many critics of how to shape the international order,” the report rightly concluded. The domestic prism is crucial to understanding US foreign policy, and it has been argued by historians that US diplomacy in the 19th and 20th century constituted a faithful mirror to conflicts which were taking place on the domestic scene, and only subsequently became translated into foreign policy.

As “the amphibious animal,” operating on land and sea, pushed settlements west of the Mississippi and east of the Pacific, it also went south to establish the Monroe doctrine, and acquired a new, keen interest in Chinese markets and in European designs.

In a variation on this theme adjusted to the Cold War, which woke up Americans when Stalin and Khrushchev developed nuclear missiles which they pointed at them, foreign policy remained subservient to a domestic debate, where the subtext of isolationism vs interventionism is explained in the political alignments of the day, and not in the apparent justification offered by foreign-policy specialists.

In a simplified view of a subtle debate, the contest in US foreign affairs over the philosophy behind containment and rolling back of communism, or human rights, is a purely domestic one.

The Clinton policy remained prisoner to the mould of cold war thinking, despite the end of the Soviet Union, and much of the last decade was a continuation of tugs-of-war between idealism and realism, isolationism and interventionism.

Of particular concern in the wake of the Cold War is how much isolationism characterises the Clinton administration, which always seems to move on the international scene after-the-fact.

The killing fields in Rwanda represent that isolationist trait's most dramatic illustration, and was brought home in disturbing fashion by the public atonements of the US president when he visited the country three years after the 1994 genocide.

Similarly, domestic constraints and lack of leadership in Iraq and in Kosovo present other serious instances of lack of leadership, and can be measured in thousands of unnecessary casualties.

It will be hard to convince observers of US foreign policy that the hallmarks of the Clinton administration weren't governed by little-principled realism and an extreme reluctance to get involved. In the IISS report just quoted, precisely this conclusion is underlined: "Clinton's approach to foreign policy has been mostly reactive."

Beyond a lamenting lack of vision, the debate between isolationism and interventionism, and between idealism and realism, along with the constant appreciation of the domestic factor, must be acknowledged.

If a US president wishes to avoid ad hocism, if he wants to make sense of any intervention on an international scale, and if he seeks to offer a coherent foreign policy, then he must drive the scales of the balance to lean increasingly toward interventionism and against isolationism in the first set, and be moved by idealism more than by realism in the second.

After all, the definition of leadership is to move ahead, and to improve things with some sense of moral purpose.

America is better placed in terms of de facto leadership, and in terms of resources, than any other country in the world for a successful and principled foreign policy. If it be of comfort alike for over-cautious US policymakers and for convinced detractors of US imperialism, nature holds void in horror, and diplomacy is no different. In a global unipolar world, absence of US policy is always policy better not to be left construing the sounds of silence.

Chibli Mallat is a practising international lawyer and a law professor at St. Joseph's University. This is the ninth article in a series on the American presidential elections. A view from the edge, which sets the stage for the foreign policy of the next president. The next article will address US federalist values for the world.