

## **President Clinton and the Rebirth of the Democratic Party's Internationalism**

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A Précis

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Bill Clinton brought to his presidential campaign of 1992, and eventually to his presidency, an approach to world affairs that clarified him as a Democrat more in tune with the internationalist tradition of Franklin Roosevelt than were many of his contemporary Democratic colleagues. This assertion, only generally true as most historically comparative assertions are, requires explication.

In 1972 the Democratic nominee for President, Senator George McGovern, heralded a perceived shift in the Democratic Party's earlier internationalism. Accepting his nomination, McGovern famously urged America to "come home." In the aftermath of McGovern's crushing defeat at the hands of Richard Nixon, the Democratic Party came to represent in the public mind a party with weak, almost pacifist and defeatist policies in the challenging environment of international affairs. At the same time, a party that had traditionally supported lubricated world trade, gravitated slowly but certainly toward more protectionist patterns of behavior. By 1992, Republicans had succeeded in presenting themselves as the party of internationalism, while painting the Democrats as innocent and untrustworthy in the field of world politics. Moreover, when Clinton entered the Presidency, most commentators saw him as aspiring to be a "domestic" President seeking to address "the economy, stupid." That he had avoided service in Vietnam seemed to compromise further his fitness for world challenges.

Yet, instead of bringing the United States "home" from foreign adventure, Mr. Clinton set out to engage the world. That engagement, in fact, was consistent with his views on economics and world affairs. In the event, his approach could be likened to FDR's acknowledged internationalism that surfaced during the darkest days of the 1930s. Like Roosevelt, who introduced the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934—reversing the high tariff policy of previous Republican administrations—and who helped aggression's resisters (despite resilient domestic isolationism), aided and fought alongside our beleaguered allies, and finally organized a postwar world with a leading America at the heart of a complex web of international organizations (the United Nations, The International Court of Justice, The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and more), so too Bill Clinton was as much a "foreign policy" as a "domestic" president. Examples of Clinton's internationalism were 1) his strong backing for NAFTA, 2) his leadership in transforming the GATT into the World Trade Organization, 3) his surprising normalization of relations with Vietnam, 4) his willingness to use force in the Balkans, even without UN sanction, 5) his extraordinary involvement with the struggles of northern Ireland, and 6) his energetic, if ultimately failed, efforts to effect a settlement of the intractable Palestinian-Israeli standoff.

Taking into account Clinton's deliberate educational journey (particularly his attending the Foreign Service School at Georgetown and the Rhodes stint at Oxford) as well as discrete policy aims, this paper (using available primary sources alongside secondary materials) will argue that Clinton was at the same time both a throwback and a "new" Democrat when it came to foreign policy. It remains uncertain whether his impact on the future of the party's diplomatic posture will continue. Nonetheless, the specific policy areas highlighted in this paper suggest, from a certain perspective, long-term continuity and at the least short-term success.