

## **Presidential Involvement in Foreign Policy Decision Making: Drift and Innovation in the Clinton White House**

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One of the crucial issues in the study of foreign policy decision making is the question of how presidents manage the policy process. Incoming presidents learn that this is not merely an academic subject – their greatest administrative challenge may be to find a method to design and implement policy reflecting the president’s agenda rather than the interests of organizations or individual advisers. Scholars and policy makers have realized that presidential involvement in decision making is the key. When presidential involvement is low the result is potentially problematic. Bureaucratic and organizational rivalry can cripple decision making and/or spill out into the media undercutting presidential prestige and power. Policy can drift as a lack of consensus prevents real movement toward decision. An administration can neglect growing international problems and opportunities, and/or fail to develop innovative solutions to the problems and opportunities that it does recognize.

The Clinton administration provides excellent case studies to research this issue. The conventional description of President Clinton’s involvement in foreign policy decision making is a portrait of a disinterested and inattentive president who allows policy to drift. However, in several cases President Clinton’s deep involvement rapidly focused the energy of the administration and led to swift and innovative changes in policy. This essay will examine three such cases: Bosnia 1993-1995; China 1993-1998; and terrorism 1993-1998. Using a structured-focused comparison methodology, this research focuses on four questions for each case study: 1) what were the process and policy results of presidential inattention or disinterest; 2) why did the president make a decision to become involved in the policy; 3) through what methods did the president involve himself in the policy; and 4) what were the process and policy outcomes of presidential involvement. Preliminary results of the study suggest that President Clinton’s ability to focus on an issue and redirect government policy has few parallels. When motivated, President Clinton became the driving force behind his administration’s policies and the prime mover of policy innovation and/or redirection.

To Form a More Perfect Union:  
Bill Clinton at the 2004 Democratic National Convention

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The cartoon appeared to say it all. Resplendently clad as Elvis, complete with sequins, guitar, and pompadour, an adoring crowd visible over his shoulder, an exuberant Bill Clinton faced a somber John Kerry, arrayed in tuxedo, carrying a violin. "You're on, baby," Clinton growled. Few visual images so captured the Democratic Party's feeling in 2004 about their past and present champions. Clinton's health troubles, Kerry's eventual loss, and the ceremonies and rhetoric attendant to the opening of Clinton's presidential library only heightened nostalgia for his vibrance. Yet the 42nd president had more to offer the Democratic Party and the nation than memories of Fleetwood Mac and Arsenio Hall, Republican Revolution and triangulation. In his speech at the 2004 national convention, Clinton crafted a model of rhetorical deliberation. In doing so, he shaped a collective agency for his audience in the face of a political culture that had too often denied it such influence. In other words, he again put people first.

In order to reveal the ways in which Clinton found and formed the materials for the audience to undertake appropriate political judgments in a divisive time, I turn first to the three levels of context in which we need to situate this speech, the institutional, political and cultural. Initially, Clinton needed to bear the burden provided by institutional needs. As an elder speech, a recognizable genre at political conventions epitomized in the past by such figures as Edward Kennedy (1988), Ronald Reagan (1988 and 1992), Barry Goldwater (1976), and Clinton himself (2000), the former president's address needed to shape the ideological heritage of the party and assure possibly dubious partisans of the fealty of the nominee to that tradition. As a campaign speech, Clinton's address needed to contest the Republican view of the world and provide an alternative to the current Administration's policies. Most important, in my view, as a cultural document, Clinton's address needed to invent a political language suitable for appropriate deliberation. Although I do not share the widespread doom and gloom concerning the decline of political rhetoric, it is important to note the feelings of helplessness that plagued Democratic activists throughout much of the Bush Administration, the larger concerns of many that the black and white, good and bad language the President employed seemed to end reasoned consideration of his policies, and, perhaps most significant, the concern that the techniques (*techne*?) of politics had grown so powerful that masters such as Karl Rove could push the right buttons of a targeted voter such that this consumer would do his will. Technique had so reified political disputes, it seemed, that we were forever to be divided into red states and blue. Deliberation had fallen prey to technique. Whether he explicitly understood this concern or not, it fell to the former president to craft the collective agency of an audience in a difficult time.

In the second portion of the essay, I turn to a close reading of the text to tease out the model for political judgment that Clinton offers. Even a cursory examination reveals Clinton's emphasis on choice--the choice to be made by the audience, the choices made by the current administration, the life choices made by the Democratic nominees and so forth. The symbolic charge of this speech, I argue, rests in his ability to weave those choices into a political narrative that extends back in time (through his allusive structure) and out through space (through his movement metaphors). That story situates the people as the key actors in the American story. As an agency of collective action, the people deliberate about the choices we face and the relational goods available through the practice of public argument. I conclude that evaluations of Clinton's legacy should focus less on his policy choices and more on the linguistic alternative he offers to the simplistic nostrums of the present Administration.