

Somalia, the Balkans, and the Maturing of President Clinton's UN Policy A Précis

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Submitted for the 11th Presidential Conference: "William Jefferson Clinton: The 'New Democrat' from Hope"
Hofstra University, November 10-12, 2005

In March 1994, UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali reported to the General Assembly that the new sense of promise in the world body's ability to address security crises, which had prevailed since the close of the Cold War, was in jeopardy. He opined, "I am conscious that the optimism which prevailed one year ago has been diminished as a result of the difficulties encountered in the field, especially in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia." The loss of optimism was just as palpable along the Potomac as it was at UN headquarters.

The Clinton Administration, which had come to office supporting robust UN peacekeeping and even nation-building, tempered its commitment when faced with what secretary of state William Christopher called "the problem from hell" in the Balkans, and the loss of US military lives to warlord anarchy in Somalia. Within a month of Boutros-Ghali's remarks, president Clinton issued *Presidential Decision Directive 25* (PDD-25), curtailing US participation in peacekeeping operations and changing American policy in the Security Council. Subsequently, the United States, through NATO, used military force in Bosnia and Kosovo without UN endorsement. And it withdrew from Somalia. The fallout from events in Somalia and the Balkans undermined the Administration's confidence in Boutros-Ghali, leading to unalterable opposition by the United States to his reappointment in 1996. It also marked a recurring moment in the history of US-UN relations, when America's "idealist" hope in the constructive possibilities of the United Nations turned to "realist" disillusionment.

President Clinton once remarked that the United States has always played a twin role to the United Nations: "first friend and first critic." Both were on display during the Clinton years. A self-styled "pragmatic Wilsonian," Clinton picked up in January 1993 where his predecessor had left off. He encouraged an expansive role for the United Nations, arguing to the American people that multilateralism through the UN held the best opportunity for burden-sharing and global security. In his first address to the General Assembly he said, "I hope the United States will always be willing to do its part" in support of UN peacekeeping operations. The events in Somalia and the Balkans, coupled with the new conservative Republican control of both houses of Congress in 1994, tested, and ultimately undermined that commitment. In the wake of these events the Administration was not only more cautious in its use of the UN, but more demanding of fundamental reform of the institution.

This paper discusses the evolving character of president Clinton's foreign policy toward the United Nations, and the transformative role the Yugoslav conflict and the upheaval in Somalia played in that evolution. Using UN documentation, presidential papers, original and secondary sources, the paper assesses the impact changed American policy had on UN efforts, and on what political scientists call "authority migration," then apparently underway, toward the United Nations. It looks at the critical importance of US policy for the UN's effectiveness and its emerging role as the "legitimizing" of world attempts to restore stability in disintegrating states, or to act against rogue nations. As such, the paper's analysis of Clinton's UN policy holds lessons for the current US policy in Iraq and for America's meaningful use of the United Nations.