

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.