

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

A National Security Strategy for a New Century:
A Blueprint for Indiscriminate and Ineffectual Meddling in the
Political Affairs of Other Nations

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The Clinton Administration's May 1997 monograph *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* was clearly the product of a committee. A good strategy should be broad and inclusive and should reflect a consensus among key constituencies. But the Clinton strategy pays such extravagant homage to these virtues that it sacrifices two more crucial qualities of a good national security strategy – coherence and prioritization. And nowhere are these critical lapses more apparent than in the realm of promoting democracy. And it is in the pursuit of the democracy goal that this strategy fails the most basic test of all: to provide a plan for applying resources to achieve clear objectives.

This Administration is acutely aware of the resource constraints it faces in the conduct of both domestic and international affairs. Indeed, the political survival of the Clinton presidency into its second term might be largely ascribed to the President's astute grab of the balanced budget issue (a traditional Republican domain) as his own in 1996. The strategy itself (page 15) prominently features deficit reduction and a balanced federal budget by 2002 as the foundations for promoting economic prosperity – one of the three critical national interests upon which the strategy is based.

Might one not then expect a strategy founded on such a responsible principle to show a clear set of priorities and at least some evidence that we must be very selective in choosing our engagements so as to balance costs, risks, and benefits? Apparently not in this Administration, at least not in a document developed for public consumption. There is something for everyone here and an active agenda for every corner of the world. Admittedly, the U.S. does have

interests all around the world, and some resources must be allocated to pursue many (even most) of them. But this strategy is no guide to the establishment of funding priorities, leaving that to the “earmarking” whims of a Congress that is even less likely than the White House to think and act strategically.

Promoting democracy is one of three critical U.S. national interests enunciated in the National Security Strategy. (The others are enhancing our physical security and promoting America's prosperity at home and abroad.) Presumably, because it is presented third, promoting democracy ranks as the third critical U.S. interest. This is appropriate, since projecting American values abroad has always been tricky, over the years we may have been more successful in leading by our example than we have been in exporting this fundamental value through diplomacy, foreign aid, or gunboat diplomacy. What the strategy does not, but should, acknowledge, is that the promotion of democracy is not something that the U.S. can effectively spend large sums of money on. But we can expend, and waste, huge sums of political capital and good will if we are not clear about what we ought to be able to achieve.

What can the U.S. do to promote democracy? The Clinton strategy doesn't offer much guidance here. The major elements (pages 19-20) appear to be

- strengthening democratic and free market institutions and norms in emerging democracies,
- pressing for basic human rights worldwide, and
- humanitarian assistance

Let's look at them in reverse order. Humanitarian assistance is, in fact, not an element of democracy building at all. The U.S. has provided and will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to needy people regardless of the state of their polity. Today we are providing food aid to hungry people suffering from brutal tribal conflicts in Tajikistan and encouraging our allies to provide concessional food aid to totalitarian North Korea. Neither is a developing democracy, although we are not without hope for their futures. It is consistent with America's historical sense of morality that this strategy proposes a continuation of our tradition of humanitarian assistance. But it is no more a tool of democracy promotion than it is a tool for promoting U.S. economic interests.

Adherence to universal human rights and democratic principles is indeed an important element of promoting democracy abroad. The Clinton strategy proposes doing this worldwide, which if practiced would be a waste of effort in some countries and counter-productive in others. Here the Administration would be well advised to focus on the countries that matter and that have a stake in listening. The Sudan will not listen and is not crucial to U.S. interests. Turkey, as a military ally and an emerging regional power, is reasonably important to the U.S. and probably would listen. (Yet we do not hold them to as high a standard as other countries.) China is critical to our interests and will not listen yet. So we might be wise to be less strident on Chinese human rights in the short term, let them grow more dependent on economic relations with the West, and then press them to move toward accepted world norms for human rights.

It is in the first area of building democratic institutions in the developing and transition countries that the Clinton strategy is the most vague and useless. The paper cites the importance of democracy in Ukraine, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia/Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa without a single prescription for strengthening democracies, except for one vague reference to "widening the rule of law" in the Asia Pacific region. What institutions can we help build and in what circumstances? In which countries should the U S engage actively in assisting the growth of democracy? On these important questions the strategy is silent.

First on the question of prioritizing countries, we should be guided by three criteria: (a) the importance of the country to U S strategic interests, (b) need for significant democratic development, and (c) evidence that our resources will be used effectively. Germany needs no prompting toward democracy from the U S. Neither does Botswana, although some of its democratic institutions need increased capacity. A democratic Russia or China would clearly be top priority for the U S. At present Russia is very receptive to building U S -style democratic institutions but China is not. Our public diplomacy and foreign aid resources should be concentrated in those countries that have shown a commitment to use them well. We could use the Freedom House index of political freedoms and civil liberties to ascertain which countries have begun to tolerate pluralism and allow the basic freedoms that are the necessary prerequisites for democratic deepening.

And what are the democratic institutions that the U S should be promoting abroad? Again the Clinton strategy is curiously silent But the following would be a useful list against which to judge the possibilities in a given country

- free and independent news media,
- independent political parties,
- a competent and independent judiciary,
- law enforcement capability coupled with police respect for civil liberties,
- transparent and accountable local government and decentralization of most service delivery (and significant revenue raising authority) to local jurisdictions most responsive to the people they serve,
- an environment in which nongovernmental advocacy groups are free to form and to petition government

The United States has the capacity to help people of other countries to develop these sorts of institutions But our resources will be wasted if they are not concentrated in the small number of countries where they will be best utilized The Clinton team should go back to the drawing board to establish those priorities