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CHARTING A NEW  
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ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO  
 AMERICA'S POST-COLD WAR  
 FOREIGN POLICY



CECIL V. CRABB, JR.  
 LEILA E. SARIEDDINE  
 AND  
 GLENN J. ANTIZZO

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see it, Washington cannot insist upon greater "burden-sharing" on the part of its friends abroad without concurrently admitting other governments to a larger voice in decisionmaking involving interventionist conduct. The kind of interventionist diplomacy advocated by those in the liberal political tradition is examined at greater length in Chapter 5.

The last approach to the post-Cold War foreign policy of the United States to be examined here is what has been called pragmatic interventionism. While the diplomacy of nearly every incumbent administration since World War II has from time to time exemplified this approach, it is prominently identified with the foreign policy activities of President Bill Clinton, especially in his second term.

The pragmatic approach to problem-solving is a noteworthy characteristic of the American way of life. While antecedents of the phenomenon can be found in the intellectual traditions of other countries, pragmatism is uniquely associated with the American society's philosophical heritage. The movement's two most influential proponents—William James and John Dewey—were leading American philosophers; and their ideas took deep root in the American psyche.

Space is not available at this stage to attempt a definition of "pragmatism" as a coherent philosophical or ideological mode of thought. (The subject is analyzed in considerable detail in Chapter 6.) Suffice it to say here that the central precept of the pragmatic perspective is the belief that to be accepted as true, ideas must be validated or confirmed by experience. For the pragmatist, human experience—not logical reasoning or conformity with a pre-existing ideological code—serves as the only really reliable test of ideas. In the foreign policy sphere, therefore, pragmatists shun what they view as arid and usually inconclusive ideological debates and attempts to respond to challenges abroad by relying upon a priori and inflexible ideological codes. The pragmatic mind insists that the first requirement in successful problem-solving is to "face facts" or to examine fully and objectively all the factors and circumstances bearing upon the solution of a given problem. (This requirement in turn of course presupposes that policymakers have access to relevant information bearing upon their decisions, which further demands the existence of a skilled diplomatic corps and an intelligence network that are capable of providing accurate and objective information to decisionmakers for course analysis.)

In formulating a response to problems at home and abroad, the watchwords of the pragmatist are flexibility and adaptability, creativity, realism in weighing the likely consequences of proposed actions and policies, and objectivity in judging the gains and losses for the USA to be anticipated from following a particular course of action. In the process of policy formulation, the pragmatist

routinely relies upon the concept of "cost/benefit analysis," long used by economists. For possible alternative responses, the salient questions are: What are the gains and losses to be expected from each proposed response? And on that basis, what is the most beneficial course of action open to the United States under existing circumstances? In other words, in any individual case the "national interest" of the USA is determined pragmatically, following a careful examination of the circumstances of the case and an objective assessment of the policy alternatives available to policymakers in responding to them.

This means that, in a phrase widely used by pragmatists, in the foreign policy field each case should be examined and decided "on its merits," without what might be called ideological commitments or preconceptions that distort the judgments of policymakers. In a given case, the precise challenge facing the USA abroad is identified clearly; possible responses by the USA are delineated and the anticipated consequences of each response are weighed; and a course of action is finally decided upon and promulgated. After the policy has been put into effect, its consequences are evaluated; and in the light of findings made, the policy is continued largely unchanged, modified to improve its effectiveness, or abandoned as no longer in the national interest.

The epitome of this mode of diplomatic problem-solving since World War II perhaps was the decisionmaking process relied upon by the Kennedy administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The administration's ultimate response to Moscow's overt challenge to the security of the Western Hemisphere serves as a textbook example of policymaking according to pragmatic guidelines.

Once the threat posed by the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba was discovered by agencies of the U.S. government, the formulation of Washington's policy basically followed the process specified above. For example, several possible policy alternatives were carefully and fully examined; President Kennedy and his advisers were realistically mindful of the nature and scope of the power available to them for responding to the Soviet threat; and they were no less aware that the policy ultimately adopted entailed serious risks, with its advantages viewed as somewhat greater than its disadvantages. (Pragmatists, in other words, are always mindful of something that often escapes the notice of those who approach foreign affairs with strong ideological preconceptions: in most instances, any course of action open to the USA is likely to involve a risk, with its positive features often only slightly outweighing its drawbacks. This is another way of saying that in the vast majority of cases, almost any policy that might be adopted entails serious liabilities.)

As it turned out, the diplomacy of the Kennedy White House throughout the course of the Cuban Missile Crisis resulted in a spectacular victory for the

United States—in some respects, the most outstanding example of diplomatic skill exhibited by American officials since World War II. Although it was not apparent at the time, Moscow's defeat in this episode was unquestionably a contributing factor to its ultimate loss of the Cold War.

The pragmatic mind-set was also poignantly illustrated over a generation later by the diplomacy of the Clinton administration, especially during the president's second term in the White House. In responding to a wide variety of developments and challenges confronting the United States abroad, the Clinton White House followed a policy of what we have called "pragmatic interventionism" or what some commentators described as "pragmatic engagement." By definition of the term *pragmatism*, this meant that the administration deliberately avoided the formulation of some kind of overall global strategy to replace the now obsolete containment policy. Critics of Clinton's diplomacy widely complained, and correctly so, that they were unable to discover any diplomatic grand strategy or consistent set of overall principles that integrated Washington's separate diplomatic moves from the Western Hemisphere to East Asia. To the mind of many critics, the diplomacy of the Clinton administration often amounted to little more than a series of unrelated and ad hoc responses to events abroad. Other governments were often mystified and surprised by the "unpredictable" moves of the Clinton White House. And, on balance, for Clinton's detractors the diplomatic behavior of his administration appeared to be erratic, devoid of predictability and consistency, lacking in moral and ethical content, and nearly always without positive results for the United States. was: shrewdly principled pragmatism

Needless to say, President Clinton's supporters took a totally different view of his policy of "pragmatic engagement." To their minds, the concept served as the diplomatic compass that was needed to chart America's course abroad in the post-Cold War era. For example, Clinton's approach quite clearly acknowledged that fundamental changes had occurred (and were still taking place) in the nature of the international system. The old "bipolar" structure (which as it operated *did* provide considerable stability to the global system) no longer existed. Accordingly, ideological guidelines and precepts derived from earlier periods often had little relevance for the kinds of challenges facing the United States in the contemporary period and in the future. (Throughout the world, rigidly ideological modes of thought, and political systems based upon fixed ideological principles, were being widely abandoned.) As often as not, the United States confronted novel and rapidly changing conditions and problems abroad, and these called for novel and creative responses if America's diplomatic efforts were to be constructive.

In the post-Cold War period, officials in Washington were required to take

account of a wide variety of often diverse forces and influences affecting the foreign policy process. A major one, for example, was the necessity to take more fully into consideration the viewpoints and desires of America's friends and allies abroad. (And as was clearly illustrated from time to time by the opinions and positions of the members of the European Community, the opinions and diplomatic positions of allied governments were often far from monolithic.) On another front, if American foreign policy at times seemed unpredictable, the basic reason was easily explained: officials in Washington confronted unpredictable and rapidly unfolding developments in settings like the Russian society, the African continent, the Persian Gulf area, and a number of societies in East Asia.

As explained more fully in Chapter 6, a particularly striking example illustrating the pragmatic orientation of the Clinton administration in foreign affairs was the president's policy of "engagement" or "dialogue" with the People's Republic of China. This approach was highlighted by Clinton's visit to the Chinese mainland in July 1998. The policy of the Clinton White House reflected awareness of the reality that ongoing and fundamental changes were occurring within the Chinese political system. (Incidentally, it also represented a complete reversal of the position that Bill Clinton took in criticizing the policy of the Bush administration toward Beijing during the 1992 presidential campaign.)

If the political regime existing within the PRC by no means conformed to the standards of Western democracy, nevertheless, qualified observers agreed that considerable liberalization had occurred in recent years, and the evidence offered realistic hope that other beneficial changes could be expected in the years ahead. Economically and financially, mainland China was making impressive progress, and in some aspects of the economic system, Chinese authorities had permitted the market economy to operate more freely. By the late 1990s, China had amassed a sizable credit in its balance-of-payments account with the USA. (In other words, the PRC was selling more to the American society than it was buying.) Thus far, Beijing had not made radical changes in its administration of Hong Kong.

Moreover, it was clear that after many decades of diplomatic passivity, the Chinese government was becoming more assertive, both regionally and globally. For example, in solving a number of regional problems—such as escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, and preventing a possible nuclear threat by North Korea—the PRC had an essential role to play. As President Clinton discovered on his trip to the mainland, Beijing had in no sense abandoned its long-standing claim to jurisdiction over Taiwan. At the same time, China's leaders did not appear inclined to pursue their objective to the point of precipi-



ment in Africa's deep-seated crises and problems, or having the USA play a leading role in certain peacekeeping ventures around the world). Yet in some instances, devotion to a pragmatic foreign policy may also dictate selective interventionism (as in the Balkans, the Persian Gulf region, or the Caribbean area).

Fourth, in popular usage, a pragmatic approach to problem-solving requires decisionmakers to "face facts" realistically; to be responsive to circumstances and events as they exist; to avoid Utopian schemes and expectations; and to adapt the nation's foreign policy flexibly and creatively to what are often rapidly changing and unanticipated events and conditions confronting the United States abroad.<sup>21</sup> The old military maxim—"Expect the unexpected"—comes to mind as an applicable pragmatic guideline for diplomatic action.

This conception of pragmatic diplomacy means that officials must make a concerted effort to be well and accurately informed about conditions and events abroad. In turn, this requirement necessarily demands the existence and effective operation of a well-informed and experienced diplomatic corps.

Another essential element is the existence and effective operation of an intelligence system designed to provide policymakers with pertinent, current, and accurate information about conditions and problems beyond America's borders, and to present officials with a range of policy options for responding to them. For their part, in arriving at decisions, the president and the members of his advisory circle must avoid ideological rigidity and fixed *a priori* positions when they formulate and implement external policy. Policymakers must be receptive to the information and advice provided them by the intelligence community, by area specialists, and by others who are in a position to contribute insights into a particular set of conditions or events overseas.

A fifth connotation of pragmatic decisionmaking is that it requires the formulation and careful weighing of possible alternatives, often referred to as "policy options." In effect, pragmatically based decisionmaking employs the concept of cost-benefit analysis so familiar to economists. More often than not, perhaps, the policy that emerges from the process of pragmatic decisionmaking may be the "least of evils," or the course of action that has the fewest defects and negative consequences relative to all other alternatives.<sup>22</sup>

The model from post-World War II diplomatic experience that stands out in this regard is the one employed by the Kennedy administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.<sup>23</sup> After the president was given irrefutable evidence by the intelligence community of an ongoing buildup of Soviet missiles in Cuba, he and the members of his foreign policy team formulated and carefully considered several possible responses to what was viewed as an extremely ominous development close to America's own shores. Possible alternatives

ranged from doing nothing (in effect, overlooking the escalation of Soviet military power in Cuba), to launching a full-scale air attack designed to wipe out Russian missile bases on the island.

In the end, and after the most careful and objective evaluation of the pros and cons of each possible course of action, the Kennedy White House chose a response that fell between these extremes. Washington imposed a naval blockade against Cuba, and it warned both Moscow and Havana in the strongest possible terms about the possible consequences of a continuing threat to hemispheric peace and security. As all students of American diplomatic history are aware, the strategy worked: the Cuban Missile Crisis resulted in a dramatic diplomatic victory for the Kennedy White House.

A sixth characteristic of pragmatic decisionmaking relates to perhaps the core meaning of "pragmatism" as an influential school of thought in the modern philosophical tradition. Above all, the pragmatist is interested in the results achieved by a particular policy or course of action at home and abroad.<sup>24</sup> A foundationstone of pragmatic thinking has always been the idea that the lessons derived from experience provided the only reliable guide for testing the validity of truth of an idea or proposition. Irrespective of its ideological or logical merits, pragmatists believe that to be accepted as true, an idea must pass the test of experience in the realm of human affairs. That is to say, its value or usefulness or "truth" is ultimately determined by its observable results or effects.

This means, of course, that the pragmatist is interested above all in how a given policy actually works. In practice, how does it promote the national interests of the United States? What are the demonstrable effects associated with it? What are its most significant positive and negative consequences? In turn, answering such question requires periodic review and re-evaluation of existing policies, accompanied by a willingness to make changes in those that no longer serve the nation's interests at home and abroad.

Another important tenet of pragmatic thought (one especially prominent in the teachings of William James) is that the members of society must constantly be engaged or involved in efforts to solve human problems.<sup>25</sup> In the pragmatic view, a stance of isolationism or non-involvement or immobilism in the face of foreign and domestic challenges and threats to human well-being is not permissible. The diplomatic activism of the Clinton White House—its "engagement" with a long list of global and regional problems—is clearly in keeping with this key pragmatic axiom.

A related pragmatic tenet is the concept of meliorism. This means that, in the pragmatic perspective, very few human problems can be "solved" in any definitive sense.<sup>26</sup> If most human problems cannot be eliminated, however, they can and should be ameliorated, lessened, improved, and made endurable.