

INTERVIEW

with William S. Cohen

S tanding on the Shoulders of Others

The International Affairs Review sat down with former Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen to discuss U.S. foreign policy. Secretary Cohen explained President Bill Clinton's foreign policy of engagement and the military's role in achieving foreign policy objectives. President George W. Bush has followed a similar path, especially while conducting the war on terrorism. Finally, Secretary Cohen offers his advice for how young people should prepare themselves for a career in international relations.

IAR: I would like to talk to you about international relations and U.S. foreign policy, starting with the Clinton administration and then looking at the Bush administration and the current war on terrorism. Your experience in government and especially your role as secretary of defense in the Clinton administration gives you important insights into President Clinton's foreign policy—a foreign policy that some people have criticized. As you understood them, what were President Clinton's foreign policy goals?

William S. Cohen: I think the Clinton foreign policy can be summed up in one word: engagement. President Clinton was of the opinion that the United States, as “the world's superpower,” had an obligation to engage with countries all over the world, and I think that he intensified our relationship with a number of different countries. Ironically, he campaigned on a theme back in 1992 that President George H. W. Bush was preoccupied with foreign affairs and not sufficiently concerned with domestic matters—“It's the economy, stupid.” However, once you assume a mantle of leader-

William S. Cohen entered federal public service as a congressman in 1975 before being elected to the Senate in 1978. He left the Senate in 1997 but then joined President Clinton's cabinet as secretary of defense—the first time in modern U.S. history that a president has chosen an elected official from the other party to be a member of his cabinet. After leaving public service in 2001, Secretary Cohen founded The Cohen Group, an international strategic business consulting firm.



Secretary Cohen visits NATO's Fiftieth Anniversary Summit, Washington, D.C., 23-25 April 1999. (Photo courtesy of The Cohen Group.)

ship, it becomes very apparent that everything is interrelated—that you cannot focus on the economy, stupid, without having a sound foreign policy. What takes place in distant lands will have an impact, either directly or indirectly, on you and your economy. So the interrelationship and the interconnectedness of the globe in this ever-diminishing world becomes all the more paramount.

His policy was to engage aggressively. He not only intensified our relationship in Europe with an expanded NATO, but he also started something called the Project for Peace Program, which frankly, I was skeptical of as a senator. When it was presented, I thought initially that it was a way to avoid some of the tougher political issues in expanding NATO, which I was very much for. I was very surprised, and pleasantly so, to find out it was one of the most successful programs we've ever had. To his credit, that was an initiative of his administration.

If you look to the south of the United States, we had had very little contact with South American countries. Many of them had been dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. All, with the exception of Cuba, became democracies, and we started to engage them very aggressively, including military-to-military relations and changing the policy of the arms sales to Latin American or South American countries. We are still reaping the benefit of some of that, even though my own fear is that we're allowing South America to slide into an economic abyss, which could prove a breeding ground for terrorism in the future. But if you look at our relationship with Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, I think we had a very progressive and active foreign policy. I can't speak for Secretary Madeleine Albright—I don't know how much time she spent there—but certainly on a military level, we spent a good deal of time there. That was a very positive development.

I think significant progress was also made in our relationship with China. Frankly, it was quite a transformation for the president, given the Tiananmen Square issue back in the early nineties, as President Clinton and others had condemned the Chinese government, and rightfully so, for what had taken place at Tiananmen. But, four years later, he's engaged with the Chinese leadership and they're toasting each other both in Washington and in downtown Beijing.

I think there are many other examples of Bill Clinton's active engagement: the effort in Northern Ireland with former Senator George Mitchell; certainly an effort with Ehud Barak in trying to bring about a Middle East peace settlement; and our relationship with the Persian Gulf nations and with Africa. I may have been the first secretary of defense in many years to visit South Africa on two separate occasions as well as Nigeria and other countries. The Clinton administration worked to have very strong relationships with virtually every country. There were some exceptions—Myanmar

was one that was off the charts—but overall, it was a very progressive internationalist relationship.

However, during President Bush's campaign in 2000, signals were being sent that (1) we were overcommitted militarily and (2) help is on the way. The campaign promised that we're not going to see that kind of engagement—we'll see a disengagement. I was told—although this might be apocryphal—that the word "engagement" was banned from the lexicon at the Pentagon. You could not use the Clinton word of engagement, and they were going to follow a different path. President Bush, as candidate Bush, took what was seen to be at that time a more isolationist policy or stance, which then transformed itself into "isolationist unilateralism." There was genuine concern that this was a shrinking back, that we had overextended; and therefore, we weren't going to deal with North Korea, have an active hand in the Middle East, or remain in Bosnia and in Kosovo. Our focus was going to shift more to Asia, and I think people at that time were concerned that we were in the process of making China into the new Soviet Union.

What I have found over the years is that every president as a candidate makes statements that ultimately they have to abandon. That was true of President Carter, who in the campaign said he was going to pull 5,000 troops unilaterally out of South Korea. It was true of President Clinton when he campaigned against the first President Bush. Even Ronald Reagan had to reverse some of the policies that he campaigned on. That's not unusual. Once you assume that position of leadership, you find that your predecessors, for all their faults, were acting and were standing on the shoulders of those who preceded them by adapting to and adopting those policies that were most beneficial to the United States. I think that President Clinton went through a transformation in terms of focusing on foreign policy and understanding its importance in promoting and supporting our domestic agenda.

I think President Bush is finding the same thing. There are currently very internationalist policies: going to the UN and getting it on board with respect to Saddam Hussein; building coalitions of the willing when going into Afghanistan; asking other countries to be supportive of our military efforts; having not one envoy to the Middle East but two; maintaining our position in Bosnia, Kosovo, now into Afghanistan and possibly into Iraq; and willing to talk to North Korea until most recently with its revelation of nuclear bombs. (Nonetheless there are no preconditions; the current administration is willing to discuss virtually anything but not under intimidation or the threat of blackmail.) So, we've got essentially a very aggressive internationalist policy being pursued. It's pretty much a reversal of the campaign. But it's been done in a way that no one really cares or objects because it's the right thing to do.

IAR: When you were secretary of defense, what did you see as your role and the role of the military in helping to encourage this engagement with other countries?

WSC: In addition to being great warriors, people in the military are also peacemakers, peacekeepers, humanitarians, and ultimately, great diplomats. The military fulfills a diplomatic function. When other countries see our military, they see its capabilities, how it conducts itself, its educational level, its technology, and its technological equipment and prowess. They make judgments about us as a country, and they make judgments how we act and conduct ourselves. They also make judgments about whether or not we are engaged with them, whether we are going to be there for them should they ever need that. Or, they make judgments that they don't want to be on the opposite side of us.

So, it's a very strong diplomatic mission that is being carried out. Our diplomats who wear the pinstripes are the ones who articulate foreign policy and deal with it on a day-to-day basis; however, they can only do so effectively with a military being forward deployed. You've got your forward-deployed diplomats and your forward-deployed military, and the two in combination send a very powerful signal to our friends and to our potential adversaries. In many cases, we carry out an even greater diplomatic mission than the State Department because we are in places the State Department wouldn't be that prominent in. A lot of that has to do with the fact that we have the big budget and we are forward deployed, and the State Department was on the downside of that particular curve. (Secretary Colin Powell, by being a military man, has tried to raise the State Department's profile and get more money, which it desperately needs.) We can't have good diplomacy without having great diplomats, and we can't have great diplomats without a strong military. It's the two that are married together that give us this engagement power.

It's also one of the reasons why the secretary of defense is given the highest reception from the heads of state because they recognize the ability and the power of the United States to protect them, to protect their interests as we protect our own.

IAR: You talked earlier about how candidate Bush's isolationism became a unilateralist policy and then transformed into internationalism. Do you think that the Bush administration still acts in a unilateral manner as compared with the Clinton administration? How do policymakers decide if it's preferable to act according to a unilateral or multilateral path?

WSC: Our rule always was multilateral if you can, unilateral if you must. That generally said, we always want to try to bring people with us so it's not simply the United States that is acting alone and unilaterally as the superpower or hyperpower (as the

French love to call us). Everyone knows that we have the power, but the most adroit use of power is to not be so obvious about it. There's a difference between Caesar and Caesar Augustus. When people see you acting in what appears to be a unilateral manner, then the natural reaction is negative. They think you're too strong, too arrogant, and too powerful, and they don't want to be pulled along like little tails on this big dog. They understand that the U.S. has the money, the economic power, and the military power that puts us at the top, but people don't want to be reminded constantly that the U.S. is number one.

Multilateral is always more beneficial. To bring the moral and military power of other countries behind you and with you creates a momentum of its own. Now, you always reserve the right to say, "Whenever my national security interest is threatened, I don't have to talk to anybody, other than the Congress and the American people. I don't have to get anyone else's permission to act in my own self-interest when it becomes imperative to do so."

The Clinton administration did act multilaterally, but we tried to go after Osama bin Laden unilaterally. It's interesting to see historical revisionism taking place now, with critics saying, "If only the Clinton administration had acted before, we wouldn't have this problem today." Well, it's sheer nonsense. Absent 9/11, the current administration wouldn't have had any greater ability to deal with terror than we did, because the rest of the world was not joining in that effort. We had to go after bin Laden from hundreds of miles away. We had no bases. Pakistan was supporting the Taliban. We had nothing in the region, and there was no international outcry. Yes, we got hit at the embassies and with the *Cole*, but most of our friends did not see that as a *causus belli*. We put about 68 or 69 Tomahawks into camp, missing bin Laden but killing a number of people. We also went after the so-called pharmaceutical plant in Sudan. So, we took unilateral action whenever we thought it was imperative to do so.

But we also recognized that we had to have other countries on board. When we went after Saddam Hussein, we had the Brits and our friends in the region with us. That was again a multilateral action because we couldn't carry out the action without the support of the Kuwaitis, the Bahrainis, the Omanis, or the Emirates.

The Bush administration criticized us for Kosovo, saying, "We don't want to see a repetition of that." However, Kosovo was successful. Even though it took 78 days, it was successful—the most successful air campaign in the history of world combat. Was it the ideal way to go? If we had acted alone—assuming we could have acted alone—we would've preferred to do that to carry out the military mission, because we wouldn't have had to get the consent of 15 other NATO countries. But could we carry out that mission acting only by ourselves? We had to have airspace and logistic sup-

port. It took a little bit longer, but we had everybody in the European theater involved. We had NATO acting as a cohesive unit.

There was also some criticism about the targeting in the initial phases. That criticism was well directed, but within a matter of a few weeks, it also got resolved. For example, we'd say to General Wesley Clark, "You don't have to come back to us for any authority on these types of areas. If you're talking about going into downtown Belgrade, if you're talking about taking out the whole power distribution, which could affect other countries in the region, you better check with the president. He is the commander-in-chief." So, we worked that out, and there were differences from time to time with some of the other countries, but the point to remember is it worked. It worked with everybody on board even though there were domestic pressures, such as in Greece, where 95 percent of the people were opposed to it. But the Greek leadership assisted us with the flow of equipment and material through its ports. That operation was a very major success story.

I think the Kosovo example has been misconstrued, and it led to the formulation that it's the mission that determines the coalition, not the coalition the mission. People say that we don't want coalition partners telling us how to run things. And that's true, we don't. But by the same token, we do want coalition members. We do want them to side with us, which takes communication and working together. Even now, as we're planning to go to war with Iraq, we're working very closely with the Brits, and we're lining up the Turks and the Gulf states. We're dealing with all the countries in the region with the understanding that we are going to be the heavyweight. We are going to be carrying out the major operation, but we cannot do it alone. Theoretically, we might be able to launch a strike from the sea, but that's not the ideal way to fight.

IAR: As you mentioned, the focus of U.S. foreign policy changed after 9/11, and the war on terrorism is President Bush's main current foreign policy objective. In your mind, what are the keys to winning the war on terrorism?

WSC: The key to winning the war is not going to be military action. The key is going to be good police work, intelligence, intelligence sharing, covert operations, and some limited special operations. We've got to have a global sharing of information from Singapore to Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Germany, and virtually every country in South America. So, it's going to be building a coalition and making sure that other countries don't see this as primarily America's problem. This requires diplomacy; it requires building coalitions of the willing; and it requires Secretary Powell, Secretary Don Rumsfeld, and everybody out there saying, "We are all in this together."

Today, given the spread of weapons of mass destruction and the ability to deliver

them, especially biological weapons, there are no secure areas. There is no safe place; there's no hiding place. If you think that if New York City gets hit with a contagious pathogen that you're going to be immune, think again. So everybody has to be on board, which includes sharing information, intelligence, police work, covert operations, and some special forces.

IAR: What is the role of the military then in combating terrorism?

WSC: Wining the war against terror is not *principally* the military, but the military will be important. For example, we're helping President Arroyo in the Philippines. We're going to be helping in Colombia. I'm sure that if other countries say, "We need support for our counter-terrorist operations," we will be there. But, I don't see, for example, military action being an issue against North Korea. I think there's going to be a real effort to contain North Korea and to build an international consensus to isolate it even more, rather than taking on North Korea when they are so forward deployed with a million men under arms not too far from downtown Seoul. If we have to, we will act, but I don't think that will be resolved militarily. I don't see a military operation in Iran on a "unilateral" basis either. I think that politically you try to capture the hearts and minds of the young people who are coming up saying, "We want to be like Mike." And let it play out, as we see the dynamic unfold.

IAR: Finally, many of our readers are students who are just beginning to practice international relations. What advice would you give us young people who are just starting out in our careers but who will also hopefully be making policy 30 years from now?

WSC: When studying international relations, you should read as much as you can. Absorb information on every topic from all over. Read the news dailies, the *Wall Street Journal*, which is an excellent paper for what is going on in the world, the *New York Times*, even the *Washington Times*. (The *Washington Times* has some very good articles and reporting although I don't always agree with their editorial page. I don't always agree with the *Journal* either.) So you absorb as much information as you can and then filter so that you can be as objective as possible.

For example, South Korea just had elections, and the new president won in part due to an anti-American stance. You can look at that event and compare it to what happened in Germany. Is it like Germany where Chancellor Gerard Schroeder won re-election with the help of an anti-American platform? Or, South Korea's election could turn out like Taiwan, where President Shui-bian Chen won and advocated a more independent role. However, events had a way of turning Taiwan and the leadership back toward a more centrist path.

And you need to know your history. Henry Kissinger does a really good job in his book *Diplomacy* of relating the history of international relations. That is an enormously helpful book to get you thinking. And he recently came out with another one, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* You should read these books; you don't have to agree with them, but these types of books inform you and get you thinking. Then you should filter this information so that you make good decisions while being as informed as possible.

That's on an intellectual level. Then you also need practical experience. You can work at the feet of a former secretary of defense or with others who have experience in this field. You can learn from people with a lot of experience and learn how it works. That is very important. So it's those two things—absorbing information and gaining practical experience—that I would recommend to students beginning a career in international relations.
