

Obama was not putting his administration together in a vacuum. The president-elect was reflecting the influences and carrying the burdens of history. Over the previous four decades, the United States had been struggling to figure out its relationship with the rest of the world. And in domestic politics, the Democratic Party had been trying to iron out some sort of consensus on fundamental questions concerning American power and the use of force.

By appointing Clinton, Obama was seeking to reunify the Democrats. Yet the party's internal disagreements over foreign policy did not start with the two leaders' battle in the Democratic primaries of 2008. In dealing with the world, the Democrats had a long, tangled history of lessons learned and unlearned, of contradictions resolved or papered over, of issues pressed forward or discarded. Obama's foreign policy did not start from scratch. It was freighted with the legacy of the past and could best be understood against the context of the party's struggles over the previous four decades.

## 1

## "A Look I Recognized"

In the fall of 2009, John Kerry, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, visited Afghanistan, where American troops were enmeshed in a nettlesome war that President Barack Obama was in the process of expanding. Kerry not only met with Afghan president Hamid Karzai, but took the time to travel around the countryside. Upon coming back to Washington, he reflected on what he had witnessed. As he stared out from inside an armored personnel carrier in Afghanistan, Kerry said, he saw on the faces of ordinary people "a look I recognized from forty years ago." Afghanistan and its people reminded Kerry of Vietnam. He repeated a line from the congressional testimony he gave in 1971, as a leader of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" he had asked. Upon returning home from Afghanistan, Kerry remarked, "Thirty-eight years later, I keep that question very much in mind."<sup>1</sup>

For the Democratic Party, the war in Vietnam was not only tragic, but politically devastating. Between 1968 and 1988, the Democrats lost five out of six presidential elections. The only Democratic president of that era, Jimmy Carter, lasted only four years. The divisions caused by the war had caused core groups of Democrats to desert the party for the Republicans. It was not until Bill Clinton's election in 1992 that the party began to regain its footing.

And still the legacy of Vietnam lingered. When President Obama decided to send more troops to Afghanistan at the end of his first year in the White House, Obama and the younger members of his administration dismissed the comparison to the Vietnam War as irrelevant. "There are those

who suggest Afghanistan is another Vietnam,” said Obama in the speech at West Point announcing his decision; then he argued that it wasn’t. “There are things to learn from previous military engagements, but the touchstone isn’t always going to be Vietnam,” observed his young aide Ben Rhodes.<sup>2</sup> Yet many members of his own administration had been preparing for the Afghanistan decision by reading books about Vietnam.

Kerry’s flashback illustrates how Vietnam has endured as a starting point for older Americans in thinking about America’s role in the world. A generation of Americans now in their sixties came of age during that war, in which more than 58,000 Americans died. Afterward, that war and the intense controversy that it engendered helped to define America’s outlook and its assumptions about the world for decades. Whenever U.S. forces were sent into combat, American leaders talked about the importance of overcoming the “Vietnam syndrome”—meaning a fear of casualties and opposition to further U.S. military intervention overseas.

On college campuses, the war in Vietnam helped turn the children of conservative Republicans, like Hillary Rodham, into liberal Democrats. It also fostered a dark view of America’s role in the world. Vietnam taught the lesson that even a supposedly small and limited war could eventually consume the United States and divert it from all other objectives. It demonstrated that military force could lead to disastrous results. Opponents of the war argued that there should be new limits on American power and the defense and intelligence agencies that wield it. The main lesson was that if America resorts to force at all, it had better do so carefully.

---

Vietnam had social and political ramifications that were not foreseen at the time. The war gradually led to the abolition of the draft, and that in turn had sweeping consequences for many other aspects of American life.

In the fall of 1969, demonstrations against Vietnam spread from college campuses to the American heartland. President Richard Nixon tried in various ways to undercut the growing strength of the antiwar movement. The one that succeeded was to do away with the draft. In April 1970, Nixon announced that he was reducing draft calls to zero and was meanwhile increasing the pay for military service. These were the first steps toward ending the

draft. Three years later, the law authorizing conscription was allowed to lapse.

Liberal Democrats were divided about the draft. Senator George McGovern was in favor of abolition. For young men opposed to the Vietnam War, he said, “the draft is a source of torment that forces them to choose between participation in a war they sincerely oppose or a term in jail.” By contrast, Edward M. Kennedy was strongly in favor; he predicted that an all-volunteer force would result in “poor people fighting rich men’s wars.”<sup>3</sup>

Once the draft ended, the Vietnam protests began to taper off. Future American presidents would find it easier to wage war overseas without so much domestic opposition. The public reactions to war become more muted, because relatively poorer members of American society were doing the fighting; they had less ability to make their views felt than the draftees and their families. Sam Brown, one of the organizers of the demonstrations against the Vietnam War, was asked in 2009 why there was so little organized opposition to the war in Afghanistan. “There’s no draft,” he replied.<sup>4</sup>

In electoral politics, the end of conscription meant that there were groups, even entire cities and regions of the United States, with little connection to the military or the people who fought in America’s wars. For a short time after Vietnam, political candidates found that they could appeal to liberal audiences with a message that attacked the military and rejected the idea of patriotism. Writing of his Vietnam generation, the sociologist Todd Gitlin observed, “Indeed, it could be said that in the course of our political history, we lived through a very odd turnabout: the most powerful public emotion in our lives was *rejecting* patriotism.”<sup>5</sup> However, as Democratic candidates appealed to antiwar audiences, Republicans and conservatives found in response that they could often win a greater number of votes with a message of patriotism, support for the military and a resentment of liberal elites. It often worked.

---

In 1972, George McGovern won the Democratic nomination for the presidency with a campaign based on impassioned opposition to Vietnam. He was scathing in his attacks on American policy and, indeed, its role in the world. “What we now present to the world is the spectacle of a rich and powerful nation standing off at a safe distance and raining down a terrible

technology of death on helpless people below—the most incredible and murderous bombardment in all the history of mankind,” McGovern said.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, McGovern promised that on the first day of his presidency he would stop all acts of force by American troops in Vietnam, and that within ninety days he would withdraw U.S. forces from the country. In his speech accepting the Democratic nomination, he made a broader appeal, with a line that came to define his candidacy: “Come home, America.”

McGovern’s campaign included a number of ambitious young college graduates who went on to serve in later Democratic administrations, including Obama’s. Hillary Rodham worked for McGovern, registering voters in San Antonio while her future husband Bill Clinton served as McGovern’s Texas state cocoordinator.<sup>7</sup> Greg Craig, Obama’s first White House counsel, similarly served as state cocoordinator for McGovern, in Vermont. Dennis Ross, Obama’s adviser on Middle East policy, worked for McGovern as a young graduate student in California.

However, the lessons these workers took from the campaign were mostly cautionary ones. McGovern’s campaign never came close to winning the support of the American people. President Richard Nixon won 61 percent of the popular vote and 520 electoral votes to McGovern’s 17, including only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia. The defeat was so overwhelming that no one, including those who worked for him, wanted future Democratic candidates to imitate McGovern. “The coalition that McGovern was trying to put together, which was essentially a coalition of people that felt left out and left behind, was never going to be the kind of coalition that could command a majority of the American people,” reflected Craig many years later. “You really had to move to the center on some important issues to be credible.”<sup>8</sup>

The McGovern campaign left the Democrats in a quandary on foreign policy and national security issues. On the one hand, the Vietnam War created a strong base within the party for candidates who favored peace, a more limited role for the military and a willingness to question America’s role and actions abroad. On the other hand, these views usually represented a minority of voters, and as a result, the Republicans found that they could use foreign policy and defense issues to their own electoral advantage. The Democrats won the White House in years when domestic issues were

paramount (Jimmy Carter in 1976, Bill Clinton in 1992) or when national security issues worked against the Republicans (Obama in the midst of the war in Iraq).

After 1972, the Democrats “would repeatedly be thrown on the defensive by the charge that they were weak on national security,” writes Bruce Miroff, whose book *The Liberals’ Moment* sympathetically describes and analyzes the McGovern campaign. “However much the horrors of the war in Vietnam are now widely acknowledged, it has been the heirs of Nixon who have had the upper hand on national security issues in subsequent presidential campaigns, and it has been the heirs of McGovern who have been caught up in an identity crisis of American patriotism.”<sup>9</sup>

Antiwar forces had considerably greater success on Capitol Hill. Throughout the early and mid-1970s, Congress, where the Democrats held majorities in both houses, passed a series of legislative measures designed to prevent any future Vietnams. The broader goal was to restore the principle of constitutional limits on presidential power. The restrictions set down in the 1970s were far from airtight, but they would prove significant enough that even Barack Obama, nearly four decades later, would be obliged to grapple with them.

In 1973, overriding a veto by Nixon, the Democratic Congress passed the War Powers Resolution, which prohibited a president from deploying American troops overseas for more than sixty days without the authorization of Congress. In 1975, both houses of Congress launched investigations into the history of secret operations by the CIA agency, including attempted assassinations of foreign leaders such as Fidel Castro; in response, President Gerald Ford signed an executive order banning assassinations. Three years later, in the wake of revelations that the FBI and CIA had been wiretapping American citizens without warrants, the Democratic Congress passed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. It established special courts to review requests by the U.S. government for wiretaps.

In that era, the congressional Democrats were not only more numerous and powerful than the Democrats are today, but also more illustrious and, by today’s standards, unimaginably more liberal. Among the sixty Democratic senators in the Ninety-fourth Congress, which took office in 1975, were Ted Kennedy, Walter Mondale, Edmund Muskie, Mike Mansfield,

George McGovern, Philip Hart, Frank Church, Birch Bayh, Gary Hart, Adlai Stevenson III, John Tunney and Joe Biden, among others. In the House, Speaker Tip O'Neill had 291 Democrats and only 144 Republicans, a majority of more than two to one.

Presidents of both parties chafed at and sought to circumvent these post-Vietnam restrictions on their authority. When Obama decided to intervene in Libya in 2011, he rejected arguments in Congress that he needed to comply with the War Powers Resolution of 1973. Before Obama ordered the killing of the Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen, Justice Department lawyers wrote a memo to explain why it did not violate the ban on assassinations imposed in 1976. When the Obama administration went to court in defense of the National Security Agency program to conduct surveillance of phone calls and e-mails without warrants, the law at issue was the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978.

By the end of the 1970s, however, the mood in Congress had begun to shift and the reform era came to an end. One of the best examples was Joe Biden, the young senator from Delaware. Like other Democrats outside the South, he had opposed the Vietnam War. Yet Biden was never closely identified with the antiwar movement; graduating in 1965, he was a little too old and too interested in electoral politics. "You're looking at a middle-class guy. I am who I am," he once quipped. "I'm not big on flak jackets and tie-dye shirts and—you know, that's not me."<sup>10</sup>

In the mid-1970s Biden participated in the congressional efforts to investigate the CIA and get it under outside control. A few years later, however, as the country was shifting to the right, he served notice at a Senate hearing that it was time to lay off. "The momentum is moving the other way," Biden told representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union. Yes, he agreed with their views, Biden said, but the issue of writing rules for the CIA did not have the same sort of popular appeal as opposing the Vietnam War.

"Let me tell you something, fellas," Biden declared. "The folks don't care. The average American could care less right now about any of this. . . . You keep talking about public concern. There ain't none."<sup>11</sup>

Intellectually, the Democrats were in ferment after Vietnam. The question was what they should say about America's future role in the world. On the

political left, critics argued that liberalism was bankrupt, that America had become a national security state and that its economy depended on the continuing threat of war. Liberals were merely "the fig leaf for imperialism," wrote Marcus Raskin of the Institute for Policy Studies, the Washington organization that served as a home base for radical critiques of American foreign policy during and immediately after the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup>

In the summer of 1976, Richard Holbrooke attempted to respond in an article in the journal *Foreign Policy*, for which he was the managing editor. Holbrooke's piece was entitled "A Sense of Drift, a Time for Calm." Holbrooke summarily rejected many of the ideas set forth in George McGovern's 1972 campaign. He denounced what he called "the Vietnam-based, guilt-ridden anguish of the left." The left-wing critique of the United States "is a cul-de-sac, a dead end, which could lead to isolation from the rest of the nation," Holbrooke asserted. He was particularly troubled by the belief "that because America has done some evil things, America itself is an evil force in the world."<sup>13</sup>

Holbrooke similarly dismissed the idea that America was in decline. He emphasized America's underlying strengths. "We remain, by a considerable margin, the most powerful nation on earth militarily," he observed. Its economic importance to the international economy might be relatively less than it had been after the end of World War II, but the United States still remained the world's economic leader. As for the Soviet Union, its power was overestimated. "History does not favor the Russians," wrote Holbrooke, with considerable prescience at a time when conservatives were raising alarms about growing Soviet power. He also dismissed the notion that the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, were equally on the wane. "I suspect that the differences between the two systems are so vast that they will respond differently to future challenges," Holbrooke observed.<sup>14</sup>

Holbrooke was attempting to speak for a new generation of centrist Democrats. The war had tarnished the reputations of the party elders who had run foreign policy in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, such as Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and Walter Rostow, the central characters in David Halberstam's bestseller *The Best and the Brightest*.

*Foreign Policy*, launched in 1970, became a vehicle for views that differed

from those of the old foreign policy establishment. The leading writers included a group of men who would spend their careers switching between making government policy and writing about it: Anthony Lake, Leslie Gelb, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Joseph Nye, C. Fred Bergsten as well as Holbrooke, who began to run the magazine in 1972.<sup>15</sup>

Holbrooke's own role within the Democratic Party was a contradictory one: He was both a courtier to the old guard and careful challenger to it. He was intensely attracted to elites and the power they held, to fame and the journalists who could create it. As a young Foreign Service officer, Holbrooke had worked under Averell Harriman at the Paris peace talks aimed at ending the Vietnam War. He had grown up in Scarsdale, New York, next door to Dean Rusk, who eventually became the secretary of state for Kennedy and Johnson. Years later, when Clark Clifford, the Democratic elder from the Truman era, decided to write his memoir, he chose Holbrooke as his coauthor. Holbrooke did not seek to hide his ties to the old Democratic establishment; he boasted of them.

Yet Holbrooke had also served in Vietnam, saw the war go wrong there and forged close connections to other liberals disaffected with the war such as Lake, a former aide to Henry Kissinger, and Gelb, who had written the Pentagon Papers, the secret Defense Department study of the history of America's involvement in Vietnam. This group of Democrats accepted that American power still was, or at least could be, a force for good in the world. Lake dismissed the ideas of those on the left who believed that the United States was "inherently incapable of progressive action abroad."<sup>16</sup>

---

Quite a few of the ideas voiced by Obama, Hillary Clinton and other Democratic leaders today date back to this period of ferment in the 1970s. Today's leaders tend to believe their ideas are new and original, a response to events or trends of the twenty-first century, when in fact they were first aired by this group of liberal Democrats in the aftermath of Vietnam.

One was the idea of America's interdependence with other nations. This is often portrayed as a recent development. But in a 1976 book called *The Vietnam Legacy*, Anthony Lake—who would three decades later become Obama's first senior adviser on foreign policy—wrote: "Perhaps the greatest challenge to American foreign policy makers in the next generation will be

to find constructive ways in which to cooperate with other nations at 'managing interdependence'—not only interdependence on security issues, but interdependence on questions of economic and ecological survival."<sup>17</sup>

Another was the idea of America as the "indispensable nation." Hillary Clinton used this phrase as Obama's secretary of state, explicitly borrowing the words used in the 1990s by Bill Clinton and his secretary of state Madeleine Albright. But the words didn't originate with them, either. In a 1976 article in *Foreign Policy*, Brzezinski wrote of "America the indispensable." Despite its defeat in Vietnam, he argued, American power remains "central to global stability and progress."<sup>18</sup>

During that period, Brzezinski argued that the United States should start to give a much higher priority to its relationship with its allies. He proposed "trilateral cooperation" among the United States, Western Europe and Japan. David Rockefeller, the chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank, took up the idea, and Brzezinski became the first director of a new Trilateral Commission, which sponsored regular exchanges among American, European and Japanese officials. One of its early members was the new governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, who had been seeking to develop trade for his state with Western Europe and Japan. Brzezinski had been looking for a "forward-leaning Democratic governor" to join the Trilateral Commission. When Carter said he was interested, Brzezinski told associates, "He's obviously our man." When Carter began to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 1976, Brzezinski emerged as his leading adviser.<sup>19</sup>

That fall, after winning the Democratic nomination, Carter held a televised debate with President Gerald Ford. Holbrooke was in charge of preparing the briefing book for him. "Go back to domestic affairs time and again," the briefing book said. "We cannot be strong abroad if we are weak at home." That, too, became a frequent refrain for future Democratic leaders, especially Barack Obama.<sup>20</sup>

---

Carter was a one-term president who took over amid great hopes, but eventually became a symbol of American frustration. He did manage to achieve several noteworthy breakthroughs: He negotiated a Middle East peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, he established diplomatic relations with China and he won Senate approval of a Panama Canal treaty. Nevertheless,

Carter's final years in office saddled the Democrats with an image of ineffectiveness that would plague the party for years.

Inflation and interest rates in the United States shot up to 18 percent, largely as a result of increases in the cost of oil. Gas shortages forced Americans to wait in long lines to refuel their cars. In Tehran, the Shah fled the country. In November 1979, Iranian students and other radicals seized the U.S. embassy, where they captured and held more than fifty American hostages. Carter organized a rescue mission to try to free them, but it failed miserably.

Carter had managed to sound hawkish about the Cold War during his campaign, suggesting that the Ford administration was being naive. "We will not accept détente where the Soviets set the rules and define the priorities," he said.<sup>21</sup> With words like those, he had managed to win the support of more conservative Democrats. In the early years of his presidency, however, Carter pursued mostly conciliatory policies toward Moscow, in line with the views of his secretary of state Cyrus Vance, who made arms control his highest priority.

When the Soviets sent tens of thousands of troops into Afghanistan in December 1979, Carter adopted a far more confrontational Soviet policy, in line with the views of Brzezinski, his national security adviser. He approved new limits on technology sales to the Soviets, embargoed grain shipments, ordered covert action to support Afghan resistance groups, approved a new American military relationship with China, ordered a boycott of U.S. participation in the Moscow Olympics, asked for an increase in defense spending and declared the Persian Gulf a region of vital interest to the United States.

The result was a paradox: These retaliatory measures came too late in Carter's term to change perceptions of him as weak, but they also were strong enough to infuriate the Soviets. By the last year of Carter's term, recalled Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to Washington, "Moscow so mistrusted Carter that it could not bring itself to support him even against Ronald Reagan."<sup>22</sup>

One of Washington's most determined Cold Warriors of that era, Robert Gates, argued later that Carter's Soviet policies were tougher than they were perceived to be. In a memoir published in 1996, Gates wrote that historians

and political observers "have failed to appreciate the importance of Jimmy Carter's contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War." In fact, Gates said, Reagan's supposedly tough policies toward the Soviet Union merely built upon what Carter had started. "He [Carter] took the first steps to strip away the mask of Soviet ascendancy and exploit the reality of Soviet vulnerability," recalled Gates.<sup>23</sup>

Carter also left one other legacy that would have considerable impact on later presidents, particularly Democratic ones: his recognition of and intermittent emphasis on human rights as a legitimate element in American foreign policy. The idea didn't start with Carter, but with Democrats in Congress. During the Nixon and Ford administrations, Congressman Donald Fraser led the way in arguing that the U.S. government turned a blind eye to torture and intimidation of dissent by right-wing dictators like Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines or the Shah of Iran because these leaders were allied with the United States against the Soviet Union. At the same time, more conservative Democrats charged that the Nixon and Ford administrations were too tolerant of political repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Carter managed to win support from these disparate groups of Democrats by invoking the cause of human rights against both right-wing dictators and communist regimes.

The human rights policy was Carter's attempt to deal with some of the same problems that Obama would confront as president: the need to regain America's standing overseas in the wake of an unpopular war. Writing in 1978, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued that Carter's human rights policy "promised to restore America's international moral position, so sadly eroded by Vietnam, Watergate, support of dictatorships, CIA assassination plots, etc."<sup>24</sup> Carter sought to do so through his policies; Obama has relied more heavily on his own biography and his record of opposition to the war in Iraq.

Eventually, Carter's attempts to hold the Democratic Party together failed. The internal disagreements over Vietnam and the Cold War overwhelmed the party. Carter tried to come up with words, formulas and policies that would appeal both to liberals and to the more conservative Democrats who had supported Senators Hubert Humphrey and Henry "Scoop" Jackson, the most important leaders in the center and right wings of the party. (By this

time, most of those Democrats were clearly labeling themselves neoconservatives, thus differentiating themselves from the traditional conservatives in the Republican Party.)

In 1976, these neoconservative Democrats lined up behind Carter. "We didn't know what Jimmy Carter was going to be like," recalled Jeane Kirkpatrick, who had worked for both Humphrey and Jackson, in an interview many years later. "He was from the Naval Academy, a businessman, all these conservative symbols. So we couldn't say, 'Let's desert the party.'"<sup>25</sup> Once Carter was in office, however, the neoconservatives complained that he repeatedly sided with the liberals and slighted their own views. The Democratic hawks were upset when Carter, in one of his early speeches, spoke of an "inordinate fear of communism." Carter's appointments in foreign policy were mostly from the center-to-liberal wing of the party; Holbrooke, Lake and Gelb all went to work as senior aides to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. The neoconservatives gave the Carter team a list of names for possible appointments, but few of the suggestions were accepted.<sup>26</sup>

Over the course of the Carter administration, these Jackson-Humphrey neoconservatives gradually abandoned the Democratic Party on foreign policy issues and found common cause with the Republicans. The leader in this effort was Kirkpatrick. Writing in *Commentary*, the neoconservatives' counterpart to *Foreign Policy*, Kirkpatrick castigated Carter for undermining the Shah of Iran (so she argued) by pushing him too hard to open up and liberalize his regime. "A great weakness of liberal Democrats is that they don't learn enough about the societies in which they operate before they set about dismantling what is, and trying to encourage people to do something very different," wrote Kirkpatrick.<sup>27</sup> She maintained that the Carter administration had pushed too vigorously for democratic change in a country that wasn't ready for it. Ironically, this was essentially the same criticism that Democrats would make in reverse about George W. Bush a quarter century later.

One reader of Kirkpatrick's article was Ronald Reagan, then preparing to run for president again. He and his staff began to court her support, and in 1980 she became the first neoconservative to endorse Ronald Reagan. Other neoconservatives soon followed her. The Reagan campaign thus managed to bring together two groups of conservatives: the former supporters of

Barry Goldwater in the Republican Party and the former supporters of Humphrey and Jackson from the Democratic Party. The two groups often disagreed on what should happen at home, but shared similar visions of what America should do overseas, particularly during the Cold War.

The Carter administration also ran afoul of the military and intelligence communities in ways both substantive and symbolic. They were not accustomed to the reduced stature they were accorded in the years after Vietnam. General James Jones, who became Obama's first national security adviser, recalled with bitterness how he was required to wear civilian clothes when he worked as a lobbyist for the Marine Corps on Capitol Hill. In the Carter era, Jones reflected, "there was definitely a de-emphasis on wearing uniforms."<sup>28</sup> Both military and intelligence officials were rankled by Carter's efforts to cut their budgets and staff. The failure of the mission to free the hostages in Iran was viewed as a symbol of the low state to which the American armed forces had fallen after Vietnam. "On the whole, the vibrations coming out of the Carter White House were not comforting to the military profession," wrote Colin Powell, who served in the Pentagon under Carter. Although Powell considered himself nonpartisan, he admitted that he voted for Reagan, and he later became Reagan's national security adviser.<sup>29</sup>

This aspect of Carter's legacy meant that both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, his two Democratic successors, often found themselves on the defensive in dealing with the military and the intelligence communities. Both were more careful and deferential than Carter had been. Both of them sought to install military officers in senior foreign policy jobs. Clinton tried to recruit Powell as his secretary of state; Obama gave top positions to several former military leaders.

When Reagan defeated Carter, the Democrats left the White House hoping to return quickly. Instead, they stayed out of power for twelve years, their longest period out of office since the similar twelve-year hiatus between Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.

With the migration of the neoconservatives to Reagan, the Democratic Party was firmly in the control of the liberals. There was less intraparty skirmishing than in the 1970s; the real policy disputes were now between,

not within, America's two political parties. But the Democrats had to figure out how to win a presidential election again.

At one point in the middle of the decade, Joe Biden, who was then lining up to run for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination, aptly summarized the obstacles the party faced. Biden was courting the liberal wing of the party, but he also argued that the Democrats needed to shake off a sense of drift and paralysis in foreign policy caused by its reaction to Vietnam. "The American people have grave doubts about the Republicans' lack of diplomacy, but they have grave doubts about the Democrats' willingness to back diplomacy with power," Biden told a conference of Democratic officials in 1986. "People think the Republicans are too tough but not very smart, and the Democrats are not tough enough."<sup>30</sup>

More than any other Democrat, Gary Hart, who ran unsuccessfully for president in both 1984 and 1988, tried to show that liberal Democrats of the post-Vietnam era cared about military issues and strong national defense. Hart had served as George McGovern's campaign manager in 1972 and went on to win a Senate seat in Colorado. On the Senate Armed Services Committee, he espoused the cause of military reform. He put himself forward as someone who knew how to make the Pentagon run more efficiently and how to buy weapons systems more cheaply. With this message, Hart could criticize the defense budget as wasteful, thus appealing to traditional liberals, and yet not sound as though he was simply opposed to the military or to the use of force.

"Gary came out of the McGovern world, where there was this deep mistrust of American power," recalled Will Marshall, a Democratic specialist on national security who was himself more hawkish than Hart. "His campaign was the first sign that the old politics of Democratic liberalism was eroding, and that there needed to be a new challenge to the traditional thinking about national security."<sup>31</sup>

In the late 1980s, Marshall and other moderate-to-conservative Democrats posted a new challenge to the liberal wing of the party. Analyzing the party's continuing losses, they decided that voters perceived the Democrats as hostile to mainstream values, quick to question America's motives overseas and reflexively averse to the use of military force.

Seeking to reverse these perceptions, they formed the Democratic Leadership Council, a new centrist organization within the party. Its members included a number of elected political leaders—most of them moderate-to-conservative Democrats who came from areas outside the Northeast and the West Coast, the traditional homes of Democratic liberalism. Among the early participants were the ambitious young governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, and the then hawkish Democratic senator from Tennessee, Al Gore.

"These were people who felt the Democrats' weakness on national defense was a real albatross when they had to go run for governor or senator," Marshall explained.<sup>32</sup> The DLC advocated strong support for the U.S. armed forces and an active role for the United States overseas. The organization soon became the driving force for those who sought to pull the Democratic Party back toward a more assertive foreign policy.

Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, waged several foreign policy battles against Reagan and his successor, George H. W. Bush, though with only middling success. The first, in the early 1980s, was the nuclear freeze movement, a drive to require both the United States and the Soviet Union to stop producing, deploying or testing nuclear weapons.

The freeze movement attracted extraordinary support from the grass roots, particularly on college campuses. One sympathizer was a Columbia University student named Barack Obama. Writing for a campus publication called the *Sundial*, Obama praised the efforts of the freeze movement. "By organizing and educating the Columbia community, such activities lay the foundation for future mobilization against the relentless, often silent spread of militarism in the country," Obama asserted.<sup>33</sup>

It was his first expression of his views on any foreign policy subject, and years later, his aides felt it was deeply felt and lasting. "The nuclear issue is really important to his background," observed Michael McFaul, who served first on Obama's National Security Council and then as his ambassador to Russia. In dealing with Russia, Obama gave considerably higher priority to nuclear issues than to the regime's steady weakening of political opposition. "He thinks you need a new START [arms control] treaty, no matter whether the Russians are a democracy or an autocracy, because these are dangerous weapons and we've got to control them—and in a way, that's a legacy from this 1980s era," said McFaul.



For a time, the movement was so powerful that Reagan went to extraordinary lengths to combat it. (The speech in which Reagan condemned the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire” was delivered in 1983 as part of an attack on the idea of a nuclear freeze.) The results of this political skirmish were ironic and surprising. The antinuclear demonstrations eventually subsided, but the movement had a clear impact on Reagan himself. In 1984, Reagan began to change his rhetoric about the Soviet Union, and during his second term Reagan came out for dramatic reductions or even possible elimination of the Soviet and American stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Reagan’s diplomacy took the steam out of the antinuclear movement, but through it the proponents of the freeze succeeded in getting some of what they had wanted from the outset.

After the end of the Cold War, the Democrats posed a new challenge to the Bush administration over the size of the defense budget. Within weeks after the Berlin Wall came down, Democratic leaders began suggesting that there should be what they called a “peace dividend,” a transfer of money from the defense budget to pressing domestic problems.

“The choice of reducing our deficit, inoculating our children against disease and repairing our bridges and roads versus sending large sums to subsidize Japan and Europe should be an easy one,” said Congressman Barney Frank.<sup>34</sup> But the peace dividend was far less than the Democrats wanted. The Democratic challenge prompted the Pentagon’s top two leaders, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, who did not always see eye to eye, to unite in protecting the Pentagon from budget cuts.

One of the Democratic leaders in this search for a peace dividend was the chairman of the House Budget Committee, Leon Panetta of California. Ironically, two decades later, Panetta would emerge as defense secretary in the Obama administration, where he found himself warning regularly of the dangers of cutting the defense budget too much.

The Persian Gulf War, which most of the congressional Democrats determinedly opposed, became the last and, in some ways, the most significant foreign policy dispute between the two parties in the Reagan-Bush years. When Saddam Hussein sent Iraqi troops into Kuwait in August 1990, the

Bush administration sought authorization from Congress for the use of force to reverse the invasion. The request resulted in close votes that Bush won with mostly Republican support. In the Senate, only 10 out of 56 Democratic members voted to authorize the use of force; in the House, only 86 of 267 Democrats were in favor. The debate on Capitol Hill made clear that most Democrats still held to the core beliefs that had dominated the thinking of the liberal wing of the party since Vietnam. The Democrats exhibited a deep aversion to the use of force, even for the purpose of repelling one country’s invasion of another.

“Personally, and I can speak for many members of our caucus, we are products of the Vietnam experience,” said Representative Dick Durbin of Illinois. “We are really touched by the possibility that we may be repeating that experience.”<sup>35</sup>

“The president says he’s angry and impatient, but, God bless him, so are all of us. But is that a reason to send a whole generation to war?” asked Biden in the Senate debate. “The price is in body bags, in babies killed,” said Barbara Boxer, then a member of the House of Representatives.<sup>36</sup>

At the time, the Democrats underestimated America’s military capabilities and greatly overestimated the casualties that might result from a military campaign against Iraq. At one point, George Mitchell, the Senate majority leader, and House Speaker Tom Foley handed Bush a letter signed by eighty-one Democrats that contained a dire prediction: “We believe that the consequences [of military action against Iraq] would be catastrophic—resulting in the massive loss of lives, including 10,000–50,000 Americans.”

Senator Edward Kennedy spoke of the need to “save thousands of American soldiers in the Persian Gulf from dying in the desert.” More precisely, said Kennedy at another point, “we’re talking about the likelihood of at least 3,000 American casualties a week, with 700 dead, for as long as the war goes on.”<sup>37</sup> A handful of prominent Democrats decided to support the war, including Al Gore. But most of the party’s most prominent figures voted against authorizing the use of force: Kennedy, Mitchell, Biden, Kerry and even Sam Nunn, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, a more conservative Democrat known for his expertise on defense issues.

Bush proceeded to assemble a broad coalition of forces from more than thirty other countries: not just Britain and France, but Egypt and even Syria.

The military campaign was quick and decisive. After an initial air campaign that employed new American technology, ground troops moved against Iraqi forces on February 23, 1991. The ground war lasted only one hundred hours before the Iraqi forces were in hopeless disarray and U.S. officials declared a cease-fire. The casualty figures were a mere fraction of what the Democrats had predicted: About 150 Americans died in combat and approximately the same number in noncombat accidents.

For the Democrats, the legacy of the Gulf War was profound. Their votes against the war served to fix their image as a party instinctively opposed to the use of force, no matter what the reason might be. Their fears of heavy casualties turned out to be exaggerated. Many Democrats were determined not to repeat the same mistake. More than a decade later, in 2002, George W. Bush asked Congress to approve the use of force once again against Iraq. The second time, the Democrats would go along. Once again, they found themselves overly focused on the last war, not the one at hand. At the time of the Gulf War, they had been too influenced by Vietnam; at the time of George W. Bush's Iraq War, they were thinking too much about their votes on the Gulf War. It would take Barack Obama to set them straight.

The Gulf War marked the end of an era. After nearly two decades, the post-Vietnam era was drawing to a close. The Democrats gradually began to rethink their views about the use of force and about America's role in the world. They had some time to do so, because with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was the world's sole superpower. In the presidential election of 1992, national security was no longer the overriding issue it had been during the Cold War. Bill Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush and took office determined not to let foreign policy take up too much of his time.

## 2

### “I’m Running Out of Demons”

Bill Clinton set the stage for Barack Obama. Both men took office determined to revive the American economy and, meanwhile, to adopt a more modest role for the United States overseas. In both the Clinton and Obama administrations, the Democrats grappled with questions of whether, when and how to use military force. Obama followed Clinton's path in opting, after considerable hesitation, to send American troops into conflict for the purpose of preventing the slaughter of civilians.

There were, however, striking differences between the two men and their administrations, above all in the greatly different performance of the American economy during their time in office. Clinton governed in times that were increasingly prosperous. Not coincidentally, as time went on, his foreign policy became increasingly assertive until, by the time he left office, he seemed comfortable to have America take on a revised version of its old role as superpower—the “indispensable nation,” as he called it. Obama became president in the midst of a financial crisis and spent most of his term trying to restore the increasingly troubled American economy. As a result, Obama sought to carve out a less assertive role for the United States, one in which it occasionally demonstrated its continuing power and sought to preserve a leadership role in the world, but relied far more on the support of other countries. To understand the distinctive nature of the Obama administration, one has to understand how differently Clinton and the Democrats acted and viewed American power in the 1990s.

In the decade after the Persian Gulf War, a swaggering new verb gradually crept into the argot of American foreign policy: “to whack.” It was used to connote a quick, almost casual application of American military power,