

Beware of Hillary Clinton

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, AUG 10 2014

Hillary Clinton has all but thrown her hat into the race to succeed Barack Obama. And, it looks certain that if she were to run that she would stand in the pole position for the Democratic presidential ticket. However, she would make an absolutely awful president.

The reasons for this opinion have got nothing to do with her domestic record that shows her lagging far behind in important social issues such as gay marriage, marijuana legalisation, and a raft of other progressive movements that have come to be very important for the electorate in the US. I also have nothing against her personally, or her husband the former president Bill Clinton, who was an able president.

Foreign policy is, then, the point of this post. In a recent interview with the Atlantic Clinton noted that “America needs a leader who believes that the country, despite its various missteps, is an indispensable force for good”. This notion fills me with absolute dread. It harks back to the ridiculous ideology of the neoconservatives who dominated the Bush presidency and led the US into invading Iraq and Afghanistan in an effort to remake the Middle East and start a wave of secular democratization – a total disaster that’s after-effects are still dramatically playing out in Iraq and the wider Middle East today.

Clinton’s foreign policy mentality shares several key facets with neocon doctrine. Most notably, the belief that the US is the shining city on the hill and possesses the ability, and the right, to remake the world in its own image so that it may maximise its own security and prosperity. Or, in Clinton’s more ‘liberal’ interpretation – to build an international liberal order with the US at the heart of affairs.

Clinton’s foreign policy philosophy is dangerous, and a departure from that of current president Barack Obama who she is now speaking out against despite serving as his Secretary of State for four years. Like Clinton, I am no fan of Obama’s foreign policy as it often lacks coherence, but I do admire his restraint. He reminds me of Jimmy Carter – a president who was academically minded, and fiercely intelligent. Carter came into office in 1977 with some basic ideals in mind, but quickly fell into a pattern of taking each event as a distinct challenge that he would shape policy for on an ad hoc basis. As things worsened internationally during his tenure he shifted into reactionary policymaking – such as in his development of the Carter doctrine – which left him in a position where he became wildly detached from the policy positions he entered office with. And, it made him a mystery to the American public who threw him out of office in 1980 in a landslide.

Like Carter, Obama seems to study issues carefully and operate with a desire to avoid blunt doctrinal thinking or ideological approaches. His policy approach is based on the phrase he often utters privately: ‘don’t do stupid shit’. To translate, avoid making foreign policy without thinking through the consequences and understanding the situation you are intervening in.

Obama’s mindset led to him rejecting plans to intervene in the Syrian civil war as the situation on the ground was wildly unpredictable. Even though it is alleged that Obama has begun to arm certain moderate forces in Syria, his approach remains one driven by moderation and restraint. By the same measure, his response to Putin’s manoeuvres in Ukraine have been very cautious. In the parlance of International Relations, Obama is (at least in basic terms) a realist. And, unlike Jimmy Carter, he has been able to remain cool-headed and not fall prey to

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reactionary policy-making. The current case of US air strikes on Iraq, rather than a more dramatic course of action, is the latest example of Obama's cool headedness. While this is frustrating for many observers who would prefer a more decisive foreign policy persona from the world's most powerful nation – it does have its merits when juxtaposed against the approaches of George W. Bush and Hilary Clinton.

If Clinton were elected president, she has clearly set out that her approach to foreign policy will be a form of muscular, interventionist, liberalism. At a time when the Middle East is, frankly, a mess – a mess caused in large part by US interventions – it is vitally important that the US remains cool headed and devoted to not repeating the mistakes of the Bush administration. It is clear that elements of the brand of politics that characterises al Qaeda, the Islamic State, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood – and of course revolutionary Iran – is built on an opposition to the interventionist liberal mindset embodied by the US. To put it bluntly, large swathes of the world's most unstable geopolitical region are infected with an anti-US fervour.

The US should not retreat from the world. It plays an important role in international politics, and should remain engaged. However, it should retreat from the idea of solving problems in the Middle East with guns, fighter jets, drones and tanks. All the signs point to Clinton favouring such a folly – the idea that you can use the big American military stick and failed liberal ideals to fix the problems of the world. In the case of the Middle East, should Clinton become president, the international community should beware.

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