

Clinton's Second Term

Radovan Vukadinović

American presidential elections are an important event, not just for the US but for all the parts of the world in which the impact of America is felt. This is particularly true today, with the US as the only country which can independently assume the role of a superpower and act on the international political scene in accordance with its national interests.

The great pre-election show is over, and Clinton is one of the very few Democrat Presidents to be given a second term in the White House. Now is the time for political analysts, in the United States and elsewhere, to get busy showing why and how America has re-elected Clinton.

When, in 1994, the Democratic Party suffered a heavy defeat in the elections for the Congress, this seemed to be a revenge by the voters, who would no doubt soon get rid of Clinton as well. Today, however, it seems that this actually marked the beginning of the victorious offensive

by Clinton and his team and that the defeat had actually served as a serious and timely warning. During the first two years, the American voters seemed to have seen in Clinton's policies too many unknown factors, surprises, and even shocks, but their main objection was what they regarded as a shift to the left. This shift was reflected in the constant tendency by the Administration to seek remedy for every problem that befell American society in a new government programme or in a new tax. In voting against Democrat candidates, the American electorate wanted to put an end to such government and to give a chance to the Republicans to realize their much-vaunted "Contract with America".

THE CHAMPION OF PUBLIC INTEREST

This major defeat of the Democratic Party was probably also the source of Clinton's success in winning the Presidency for a second time. The

Republicans had, namely, taken steps in both Houses of Congress to reverse Clinton's policies, but the American voters soon realized that what was promoted under the guise of a balanced budget were in fact drastic cutbacks of public spending, and that the reduction of bureaucracy only implied the closing down of some ministries. Thus, when the Republicans came out with a budget proposal which called for reduced spending on social programmes, on education and on environmental protection, it was easy for Clinton to choose the right response. By using his Presidential veto, he emerged as the champion of the citizens and, in the ensuing protracted crisis period, he scored positive points almost every day.

It would seem that it was this battle between the Republicans and the White House, which lasted several weeks, that paved the way to Clinton's second term of office. By appearing as the champion of the public interest, Clinton prevented a shift to the right initiated by the Republicans, and thus struck a certain governmental balance which suited the majority of Americans. This also evened out the situation regarding leftist and rightist policies and, more importantly, created the image of a President who was reasonable and who knew what he wanted.

At the domestic level, Clinton was also able to boast some successes. Whether these were exclusively due to his policies, to inherited conditions or to the cyclic character of American industrial growth - to the American voter this did not matter much. What definitely mattered was that during Clinton's presidency 10 million new jobs had been opened, with unemployment lower than anywhere else in the industrialized world. Gross domestic product grew at the rate of 4.8 percent in the last quarter of this year and inflation is not in sight. Although there is more unemployment in some states than in others, and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, this does not seem to have been decisive. The economy is doing well on the whole, and the gap between different social segments goes back to the seventies.

With such results in the political and economic fields, Clinton was perceived as the representative of the moderate conservative wing, interested in middle-of-the-road reforms and at the same time determined to defend the minimum social rights of American citizens.

Unencumbered by ideology, it was relatively easy for Clinton to confront Bob Dole, who had to carry out a dramatic turnabout in his programme in order to meet Clinton's challenge.

As an experienced politician, Dole had to change his strategy, demanding tax reductions by as much as 15% and promising the voters that this was the way for America to solve its problems. Clinton's team had no great difficulty in proving that such a proposal was unrealistic, and even some of Dole's own supporters shared this view. The Republican platform was based on an ideological matrix which combined a direct request for the reduction of governmental powers with a call to reduce welfare benefits to the sick and the unemployed. In addition, the attempt to win over American voters of African descent gave no result.

The majority of Americans, satisfied with their living standard and status in society, opted for the familiar policies of the incumbent President, believing them to be clearer and safer than the large-scale overhauls offered by the Republicans.

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN POLICY

As for foreign policy, the programmes of the two presidential candidates did not differ in any substantive respect. Dole continued criticizing Clinton's decision to place American troops under UN command, only to condemn unilateral American action in the Middle East a short time later. On the Bosnian crisis, Dole upheld the view that there had been no need to send American troops there and that arms shipments would have been enough to establish a balance in the field and thus to resolve the conflict. On the other hand, however, he claimed American policy must prevent the spreading of the conflict at all costs.

Most American voters, though, showed little interest, both in the electoral campaign and in the elections themselves. They took it for granted that Clinton would be re-elected, which partly explains the low turnout. This was definitely not a reflection of the crisis of the American system of democracy, as some commentators hastened to proclaim, but simply a manifestation of the independence of the civil from the political sphere and an expression of the approval of most Americans of President Clinton's policies.

Numerous analysts claimed on the eve of the election that this would be a contest between a President with an imperfect moral character and a candidate who was both moral and ethical. Still, the incumbent President, who had been elected four years before even though it was revealed that he had avoided the draft, that he had consumed drugs and had committed adultery, was re-elected despite these apparently aggravating circum-

stances. Dole, on the other hand, although recognized as a person of high moral integrity, had his advanced age and his inadequate media appeal going against him and thus had no chance against Clinton. And so, the contest between a pragmatic President whose morals are not above reproach and a candidate who is both moral and ethical was decided by the voters in Clinton's favour. To be true, asked after the election whether they trusted Clinton, the majority gave a negative answer, but, asked if they trusted him to act as a satisfactory President, they answered in the affirmative. It could therefore be said that Clinton was viewed as a kind of immoral "lesser evil", leaving the first place on the unpopularity scale to one of the Republican leaders, Newt Gingrich.

Regardless of all statistics and public opinion polls, Clinton was re-elected and is the 56th American President, facing numerous new tasks to be accomplished during the next four years, which will usher the USA into the new millennium.

On the other hand, Democrats have lost the majority in both Houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years, creating thus a new environment for President Clinton to act in. Obviously, he will have to continue tackling certain domestic issues with a great deal of caution, knowing that the Republicans were closely watching every move he makes. No rash decisions or radical solutions can be expected in this sphere, but largely policies that will keep somewhere in between the those of the previous term and those the Republicans would like to implement. However, the fact that the Democrats lack a majority both in the Senate and in the House may not only result in difficulties whenever an important decision is at stake but can also make the President's life difficult. Some critics of President Clinton even state that the President may have to spend half of his time at various hearings - which would not only undermine his authority but also hamper him in the exercise of his office. With their majority, if any hard evidence should be found, the Republicans could make Clinton's life very difficult indeed - and perhaps more than that.

Similarly, in the field of foreign affairs, no presidential move can be expected to go unchallenged. The central issue: whether to maintain the present level of American involvement abroad or to begin a gradual withdrawal, will remain in the focus of the contest between the Republicans and the Democrats. Even though the dividing line between them does not always follow affilia-

tion, but depends more on personal views and backgrounds of Senators and Congressmen, or on various vested interests, it seems that, at the end of this century, a more clear-cut explication of American policy and of American long-term national interests will have to be provided.

President Clinton will most probably seek to maintain the present level of American involvement, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Middle East. He is also likely to try to extend NATO membership by the year 1999, and be prepared to conduct an active policy towards the European Union, Russia, China and Japan. He will, furthermore, strive to keep American position in the UN, even though his Administration has no great illusions as to the actual strength of that global organization.

The Republicans, for their part, are not expected to offer decisive resistance to the main strategic lines of American policy, but to focus on small details in order to find fault with the President's decisions.

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

For his part, President Clinton will seek to demonstrate the viability of his decisions and to explain to the public at large American activities on the world scene. The presence of American forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be symbolically interpreted as the start of this new involvement, whose aim is to confront the emerging crises and the challenges these imply. In performing this global leadership role, American policy will strive to resolve some concrete problems on the ground (Bosnia, Somalia), and at the same time to send messages to its own allies. In effect, it was precisely NATO's action in Bosnia and Herzegovina that helped this military alliance to emerge strengthened at a time when it seemed to be losing its former importance and to prove that it was not expendable. On the other hand, Russia was offered a chance to take part in NATO actions, but was also sent the message that precisely because of its relevance NATO had to be expanded.

If one tried to extrapolate the moves that were made to date, it would appear that in his second term Clinton will do all he can in order to assert fully the so-called Clinton doctrine. This will presume, above all, the need for American policy, but also American forces, to become involved in all those situations when peace is threatened on a regional scale. Be it a European or another region, such a threat has to be eliminated, and it is within this context that the American role

in the new world order should be regarded.

This doctrine leaves sufficient room for relations with allies (the European Union, Japan, Latin America), with the new countries created after the disintegration of socialism, such as Russia. Here is, likewise, the large area of relations with China, which Clinton has addressed with a mixture of energetic approach (criticism of human rights violations) and an offer of friendship.

Last but not least comes the American policy with respect to Southeast Europe as a whole, where the first objectives seem to have been defined, objectives that go beyond mere as-

sistance in the settlement of the crisis in Bosnia. If Clinton is determined to continue with this policy, he may be expected in this second term to elaborate a consistent set of objectives and interests and to define the means wherewith to attain them. And in this context, the nomination of the main regional centres in that area can be expected, which might prove to be consistent with past American actions, but - since we are dealing with a superpower, the possibility of a reassessment cannot be dismissed, including the emergence of new centres for American policy to rely on. ■