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Response to S.908 (Helms Bill)

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

14 September 1995

MEMORANDUM FOR NANCY SODERBERG

FROM: JENNIFER O'CONNOR

SUBJECT: RESPONSE TO S.908 (THE HELMS' BILL)

Nancy - The attached was forwarded to Harold regarding our political positioning on the Helms bill. He asked me to forward it to you to see where some of these ideas might fit in.

MEMORANDUM

H = see
some thing
about position
for '90 -
specific
foreign policy.
This

RE: Responding to S.908 (the Helms Bill)

7/27 sent to
Jen

The coming confrontation with the Republican Congress over money and machinery to sustain U.S. foreign policy could become a defining moment for the Clinton Administration. It presents an opportunity to begin building a diverse coalition in support of an American foreign policy that continues to look outward, to the promise of the post-Cold War world.

But accomplishing this now may also require the Administration to make a significant change of course. At the moment, a veto would be seen as the result of disagreement over three main issues:

- 1) Foreign aid;
- 2) Resources and support for the U.N.; and
- 3) Presidential authority in foreign policy.

The politics of a conflict that is cast in these terms -- especially if it requires defending and sustaining a veto -- are not ideal. The Right will portray the President as a supporter of global welfare, a misguided devotee of Boutros-Ghali, and a man obsessed with the constitutional prerogatives of his office. So far the message coming from this Administration does not effectively repudiate this caricature.

Moreover, certain foreign aid constituencies have been especially vocal. This is admirable; there can be no flinching from a defense of the value of foreign assistance. But, if foreign aid becomes the salient issue in this conflict, foreign aid could suffer the gravest damage. Senator Helms seems to relish his assault on AID, and his allies turn the debate to foreign aid whenever challenged. There is also a charge that this given suggests to some that this Administration's foreign policy is shaped by special interest groups.

But, if such difficulties as these can be dealt with, the conflict over the Helms bill could turn to the President's advantage:

- * It presents a timely and dramatic opportunity for reaffirming this President's view of the world: rejecting isolationism, reminding Americans of promising trends in the world, and pointing out the opportunities these developments are opening for America and for Americans.
- * It offers a chance to explain the degree to which some in Congress have fallen under the sway of small-mindedness,

negativism and irresponsibility in foreign policy -- a radical but little-recognized shift on the Right away from the crusading internationalism of the Reagan era.

- * It reveals how much a near-anarchism has taken hold in these same nominally "conservative" circles: a fascination with abolishing something.
- * To those who say that this Administration is too disposed to compromise and conciliation, it poses the real alternative: a right-wing coterie, with little consultation, justification or time for debate, presents a sweeping plan for reorganizing the nation's foreign affairs apparatus, and threatens to bring it all to an abrupt standstill if the President refuses to stand aside.

There are in fact real fissures in conservative ranks over the approach to foreign affairs that has come to dominate the Republican Congressional committees. (See, for one example, the attached Freedom House statement.)

The opportunity is there to begin shaping a bipartisan resistance to right-wing disengagement.

II.

Mounting this resistance will require more than simply attacking the foreign-policy-by-committee ornaments that encumber the Helms bill. They are, to be sure, annoying intrusions upon Presidential authority in foreign affairs. But for the President to defend his authority effectively in the absence of a Cold War threat, he must first explain why he still deserves that authority. This requires a carefully constructed challenge to the underlying premises of the Helms bill: premises that, when drawn into the open, reveal a serious and unwelcome departure in American foreign policy.

- A. First, the Helms legislation imposes a vast re-organization of agencies -- our foreign policy tools -- that is not informed by any explicit foreign policy purpose. Today there is plenty of room for debate about how the United States should exercise its international leadership. But this legislation circumvents such debate by proposing structures and resource allocations that will profoundly influence the means by which we engage the world, without addressing the great issues of goals and strategy that these instruments serve. This is no small miscarriage of democracy. It is consistent with what the President has been criticizing in the policy-free assault on domestic government by Republican budgeteers.

But on close examination, it is possible to detect conceptual premises behind the consolidation proposal. One of these, noted earlier, is delight at the prospect of

abolishing federal agencies. The other, more interesting, is the re-emergence of the old "Fortress America" idea.

Instead of engagement with the diverse, fluid, fast-paced world that is emerging in the aftermath of the Cold War, the Helms legislation envisions a ponderous, centralized diplomacy, nostalgic for the 19th Century. A Fortress America approach is not, strictly speaking, isolationist. It is willing -- sometimes eager -- to employ military force and coercive diplomacy when dangers arise. But, by forcing this country drastically to cut back its presence in the world -- not only our embassies, but our broadcasting, exchanges and contact with civic and cultural forces -- it will, as General Shalikashvili has protested, make it harder for us to detect and respond to potential dangers before they reach the level of real military threat. It also will weaken our ability to exploit opportunities for trade, and for scientific and educational exchange.

The Helms bill gives us a foreign policy battleship, in a time of satellite communications and smart missiles. It thickens the walls of foreign affairs bureaucracy when our values, ideas and economic interests are -- or should be -- on the offensive, in pursuit of historic global opportunity. As with NAFTA, the Helms bill offers the President an opportunity to stand for dynamism, change and possibility, against the politics of stasis and anxiety.

Today many Republicans are dismayed by their party's tendencies toward retreat and reaction -- especially the young, the educated and the entrepreneurial. Senator Helms is no hero to this group. These are people that the President can reach, people who, though they may have voted Republican, did not vote to turn back the clock.

This forward-looking milieu understands that democracy and modern communications have brought large transnational publics into the arena of foreign affairs. They will understand that formal, ministry-to-ministry diplomacy -- while still important -- has diminishing significance today. They know from their own experience in the economy that nimbleness and the ability to customize products and services are important -- and are not achieved by dense, vertical structures. They can understand why different institutional cultures are required to carry out distinctive tasks. They want accessible government that can help facilitate private sector and NGO activities -- not a remote and priestly national security state.

One key audience for this line of argument is the Republican supply-siders: Steve Forbes, Teddy Forstmann, Jack Kemp, Larry Kudlow -- the "Empower America" circle, which is increasingly frustrated with what it sees as the revival of "root canal" Republicanism. The Helms bill is root canal

pessimism in foreign policy, reflecting the anxious provincialism of the world of Republican freshmen. The suburban, high tech, educated and more cosmopolitan elements of Republicanism bring a more confident and outgoing spirit that contrasts with the Helms outlook.

- B. There is another line of argument against the Helms bill that will appeal to a slightly different constituency of Republicans and Republican-leaning, as well as to centrist Democrats. Toward the end of the Cold War, Reagan conservatives and neo-conservatives joined "Scoop" Jackson Democrats in reviving an emphasis on values, ideas and information in foreign affairs. They saw that conventional power politics -- military pressure, economic aid, threats of sanctions or diplomatic isolation, and other measures directed toward foreign governments -- frequently was more expensive and less effective than intelligent appeals to the moral, political and material aspirations of foreign peoples.

This community feels that it made a signal contribution to ending the Cold War. It believes that cultural and intellectual engagement with foreign peoples can be strategically critical to our national security and economic interests. It understands that the emphasis on government-to-government relations that has prevailed at the Department of State creates an institutional sub-culture that does not give sufficient value to what is called "public diplomacy", and that a measure of separation between public diplomacy and formal diplomacy is beneficial to both.

The so-called neo-conservative internationalists were taken aback to hear younger Republicans assailing our foreign policy agencies on the House floor as "relics of the Cold War" -- a rhetoric they customarily associate with the Left. They believe that the Cold War was an honorable undertaking, and one we can learn from -- especially the lessons of engaging foreign peoples through international broadcasting and other forms of exchange. This group includes people such as Jeane Kirkpatrick, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Michael Novak, Albert Shanker and Senator Malcolm Wallop.

- C. There is still a third community of potential opposition to the Helms bill that we are not reaching with our current appeals. These are people with real stakes in current foreign affairs issues, who can appreciate that the abrupt and drastic transformation the Helms legislation demands will cause enormous personnel and organizational turmoil at a time of considerable volatility in international affairs.

Anyone working in a foreign affairs agency today can sense the distraction and demoralization that this legislation has created, not because it proposes change, but because it reveals an urge to abolish government entities without

offering plausible ideas on how their work will be done in new circumstances. (The suspicion is that those promoting this legislation have no intention that this work will indeed continue: as a Republican staffer reportedly said, "We're sending these programs to Auschwitz.")

Perhaps the U.S. business leadership can better appreciate this problem following the difficulties the U.S. encountered at the Halifax G-7. There should also be leaders in the defense community who can grasp how things can go wrong when the foreign affairs agencies are thrust into a desperate game of musical chairs.

III.

Possible action:

1. The President should invite a group that includes conservative and moderate foreign affairs leaders who have reservations about this legislation to the White House for a discussion before he vetoes it. Start by picking invitees from the list of signers of the Freedom House statement, then add to fill the group out.
2. A veto message should be accompanied by a serious speech to a foreign affairs audience on the fundamental issues of American leadership at stake here. The press should not be left to write this up in the present terms of debate.
3. The Administration should stress its own commitment to reducing foreign affairs spending by \$5 billion through carefully considered "reinvention" efforts, as the Vice President has promised. All efforts should be made to secure and publicize the elusive GAO study ordered by Senator Helms office, which reportedly demonstrates that in itself his plan produces negligible savings.
4. The President should offer the Republicans an opportunity to join in sponsoring a Blue Ribbon review of our foreign policy goals, resources and organizational structures. He should point out what is wrong with the Helms assumptions, and why it is reckless to lurch ahead without due study, and greater consensus. He should explain to the American people what is happening to us in the world as a consequence of this rushed and partisan maneuver for "reform."
5. The White House should reach out to non-traditional constituencies to build support for this effort, which could have important effects on the 1996 campaign. These should include state and city trade promotion officials, academic officials, groups such as the National Council for International Visitors and the Sisters Cities program, The Institute for International Education, etc.

6. Republican threats to hold appointments and appropriations hostage until the President signs their bill will, if the issues have been drawn correctly, further demonstrate their irresponsibility in foreign affairs and their inability to govern the country.

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