

# No room for Rough Riders

**M**aybe Bill Clinton, no past master of statecraft, deserves General Gingrich. But do the nation and the world? For if Newt and his troops get their way, U.S. national security policy will come down to the Pat Garrett Principle: "Ride in, clean 'em out, ride home," as Billy the Kid's killer might have said.

It is wrong, as the administration has done, to bad-mouth Newt Gingrich's National Security Revitalization Act (already passed in the House) as a "return to isolationism." First of all, America has *never* been isolationist. America was merely lucky as it expanded and conquered with the best of them. Where others had to fight, the young republic could buy—look at the Louisiana Purchase or the Alaska fire sale. By the time the two Roosevelts (Teddy and Franklin) had finished, America was the No. 1 power in the world.

Second, Gingrich does not want to climb back into the isolationist womb that never was. The motto of the Revitalization Act is: Let's go it alone. It is Thomas Jefferson chasing down the Barbary pirates and Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders charging up San Juan Hill. If there is peacekeeping to be done, we will do it, and we'll subtract the bill from our dues to the United Nations' blue-helmet brigades. We won't take orders from Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and we won't let wimpish Europeans and assorted Third Worlders call the tune.

This is not isolationism but unilateralism—the oldest tradition in American foreign policy. It is also a revolt against the messy world inherited from the cold war, when interests were clear, when the nasties were known, when allies rarely refused a call from Washington.

**America Firsters.** What are U.S. interests now? Hearts may break over the carnage in Bosnia or Rwanda, but cold reason tells us that there is no compelling interest to warrant the risks and costs. Who are the black hats? Moscow was one, but Yeltsin's Russia is now our "strategic partner." Why do allies like the ornery French thumb their nose at Clinton? Because they can do without Big Brother as long as Big Bear remains in his cave. It is a frustrating world out there—like the world of the 1920s and 1930s when Americans realized that Woodrow Wilson's dreams ("make the world safe for democracy") had come to grief. Thus America Firsters chimed: So why lend a hand to

an alien band/Whose dreams we can never change?

But precisely because the New World Disorder is so messy, the Pat Garrett Principle won't work. Take a heavyweight American interest like stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. To block the technology transfer, the United States has to convince the major export powers. How about securing free-trade for the largest export nation in the world? There is only so much the United States can do through bluster, bluff and punitive tariffs. It is better to slug it out in global trade forums—or better yet, harness like-minded nations in a free-trade coalition.

How about peacekeeping? Yes, it is frustrating for

NATO to ask a U.N. bureaucrat for permission to bomb a few obsolete Serb tanks. That is bad strategy, as well as humiliating for NATO. But what is the alternative? Will Gingrich personally lead a squad of American F-16s into Bosnian airspace to teach the Serbs manners? He won't, and he knows it. That would trigger diplomatic warfare with Britain and France, who have their U.N. troops in harm's way, and perhaps real warfare with the Russians, who have bigger interests in the Balkans than the Americans.

The moral of the story: America is Gulliver, but this giant is tied to the rest of the world by myriad strings. He can always tear

himself loose, but then what? Gingrich and his cohorts are confusing brute strength with real power. Real power is rooted in leadership, which implies the consent of followers. These are sovereign nations that need persuasion.

There is no other nation to provide leadership in the New World Disorder. Unless the United States acts, nothing much will happen. The model is the gulf war, when Washington took a stance, patiently but decisively harnessed an enduring coalition and then stayed the course without flip-flops and zigzags.

Foreign policy in the year 6 A.C. (After the Cold War) has to do with dilemmas, risks and shades of evil. There is no Rough Rider country out there. Teddy Roosevelt would have understood this. And the Senate *should* understand it when its version of the Revitalization Act comes up for a vote. For the sake of America's role in the world, Messrs. Dole and Lugar should spare Bill Clinton the necessity of a veto. ■



Going it alone. Teddy Roosevelt campaigning for president

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