

By the slimmest of margins, the US system has worked again



by Conrad Black

All of Europe that is not dominated by the Kremlin should rejoice in the passage of the long-delayed bill of assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan in Washington on April 24.

Traditionally, the US has been unified in the face of a serious external enemy. There was no such enemy between the end of the US-UK war of 1812 and the latter stages of the First World War a century later.

At that point then-president Woodrow Wilson inspired the masses of the world with the vision of enduring peace, joining what he claimed to be a “war to end war and make the world safe for democracy”.

The post-war world would be based on the League of Nations and a solid defensive alliance linking the US, UK and France. He

completely lost control of the political apparatus and public opinion of his own country and it lapsed back into frivolous isolationism.

President Franklin D Roosevelt, who had served in a prominent role in the Wilson administration, knew Europe well and was the only American president who spoke German and French.

As UK prime minister Winston Churchill said in his parliamentary eulogy of Roosevelt in 1945: "President Roosevelt foresaw the great dangers closing in upon the pre-war world with far more prescience than most well-informed people on either side of the Atlantic."

Roosevelt was careful to maintain national unity through the Second World War and to associate the opposition party equally and completely in the post-war institutions, in particular the founding of the United Nations.

His successor, president Truman, carefully recruited bipartisan support for the containment strategy that the US conducted throughout and to ultimate success in the Cold War that ran from 1947 to 1991.

The eminent Republican senator and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Arthur Vandenberg, who died in 1951, once famously said: "Politics ends at the water's edge."

So it did until the terrible domestic crisis of Vietnam. Through the Reagan years and the de-escalation of the Cold War with Mikhail Gorbachev, a bipartisan foreign policy was reassembled and confirmed in the highly successful first Gulf War in which Iraq was forced to disgorge Kuwait.

This was seriously shaken by the shambles that followed the second Gulf War, in consequence of which Iran became the principal influence in Iraq.

The disgrace of the US bunk in Afghanistan in 2021 under the

current administration of President Joe Biden appalled most Americans and all of America's allies while delighting the enemies of the West.

After a very shaky beginning in which the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, who retired in September last year, in a singular triumph of military intelligence informed a committee of the US Senate that Russia would successfully occupy all of Ukraine within a few weeks, America responded well to help the country. It joined up with Europe and Canada and led the Western Alliance in a commendably generous response for Ukraine, even if the timing of the approval of transfers of steadily more sophisticated weaponry should have been much more rapid than it was.

In the inimitable complexity and occasional purblindness of American foreign-policy formation, Republicans justly outraged at the administration's attempt to admit unlimited unidentified foreigners across the Southern border – with the presumed intention creating a durable Democratic majority – sought to trade the resumption of a genuine frontier in the South with approval of proposed aid packages for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

This may have been a useful tactic briefly and the administration did produce, with the co-operation of the Republican Senate leadership, a ludicrous compromise that would supposedly limit illegal migrants to two million a year, although no confidence could possibly be placed in its ability to achieve even that.

This shabby endeavour collapsed as it deserved to do but in the process, the renegade, Palaeolithic isolationist detritus of the old pre-war Republicans raised its hoary head and threatened to sack the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives if he broke ranks and facilitated the passage of the foreign assistance measures without profound reform of the porous southern border.

There is some miraculous quality in the three-dimensional maze of the American constitutional system that ensures that in serious crises something sensible ultimately happens.

A significant minority of Republicans did not grasp the fact that failure to support Ukraine would lead to the effective Russian re-occupation of that vast country at the centre of Europe and would thus substantially undo the principal geopolitical effect of the West's great bloodless strategic victory in the Cold War.

The passage of a country of almost 40 million people and a serious source of agricultural and industrial production back to the control of the Kremlin after an heroic effort to accomplish its permanent independence – and after abandonment by the leader of the Western alliance – would have been an embossed invitation to Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea to do as they wished. They could do so secure in their most cherished fantasy that the Western Alliance had atrophied into a spavined paper tiger.

The avoidance of this horrible fate is down partly to former president Donald Trump strongly endorsing assistance to the three recipient countries in April and supporting the new Republican speaker Mike Johnson and more particularly the courage of the speaker himself.

Johnson gambled continuity in his position in furtherance of the vital interests of the US, the Western Alliance and the gallant populations of Ukraine and Israel fighting in outright wars aggressively inflicted upon them for their continued existence as independent states – and dire attempts at intimidation of Taiwan.

He is an authentic American hero: he and his country have done the right thing and there is good reason to believe that a satisfactory compromise will be achieved in Ukraine.

There is also good reason to believe the deserved and

necessary Israeli victory will be achieved in Gaza and that the People's Republic of China will think better of attempted coerced reunification with Taiwan, contrary to the late Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung's commitment with former US president Richard Nixon in 1972.

By the narrowest of margins and in harrowing circumstances, the tenebrous American system has worked again.

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