

History Shows Us That Open Diplomacy Is Best

Written by Walter C. Clemens Jr.

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WALTER C. CLEMENS JR., APR 27 2011

The rise of social media and the power of WikiLeaks to reveal state secrets raise major questions for the conduct of diplomacy in a world where a secret is not what it once was. But more than ever in this changed and more porous world, Woodrow Wilson's call for "open covenants, openly arrived at" remains a superior guide to foreign policy to Machiavelli's recommendation that governments be strong like a lion but also clever like a fox.

The most successful US foreign policy of all time, the European Recovery Program, better known as the Marshall Plan, was proposed, jointly planned, and implemented in full public view. So were other policy successes such as the Truman Doctrine, which checked the spread of Soviet influence in southern Europe, the Fulbright student exchanges, which became a cornerstone of "soft power" for the United States, and the Peace Corps.

America's greatest debacles — the Vietnam and Iraq wars — were conducted on the basis of deception. Escalation in Vietnam began by misrepresenting the Gulf of Tonkin incident, while the Iraq War commenced in 2003 on the basis of false claims and misrepresented intelligence. Secretary of State Colin Powell squandered his own reputation by feeding the United Nations a pile of bogus information about Iraq's nuclear weapons. He did not reveal that the October 2002 National Intelligence report stated that Saddam sought but probably did not possess weapons of mass destruction.

Many accomplishments of America's most renowned diplomat, Henry Kissinger, were undermined by his penchant for deception. For example, he used his famous "back channel" to negotiate arms control with the Brezhnev regime in 1971-1972, but got a worse deal than if he had left the deliberations to State Department experts. Many of Kissinger's crowd-pleasers were castles built on sand that soon collapsed.

Of course, historians can interpret events differently. Paul Schroeder at the University of Illinois asserts that open diplomacy is often fatally flawed. He lauds the deceptions by which Bismarck provoked the Franco-Prussian War and the secret deals behind the Versailles Peace Treaty. My reading is that Prussia's victory over France in 1870 bolstered the passions and forces that brought on World War I, while the 1919 Versailles Treaty helped trigger World War II. President Woodrow Wilson excluded Senate Republicans from the deliberations that produced the League of Nations Covenant. Angered by Wilson's tactics as well as his willingness to risk US sovereignty, Republicans refused to approve the League of Nations, on which collective security depended. Germans, like Senate Republicans, received the treaty as a *fait accompli*. Believing it unfair, some Germans strove to overthrow the new order. The consequences were tragic.

Secrecy often accords with the zero-sum logic that foreign policy should exploit the other side's vulnerability for unilateral gain. The Marshall Plan proceeded from the opposite assumption. It presumed that cooperation for mutual advantage is feasible and that, if all parties contribute what they can, all will gain. Instead of treating Germany as a defeated enemy, as in 1919, Washington in the late 1940s helped Germany rebuild and join an alliance for peace and prosperity.

Two axioms underlie policy achievements such as the Marshall Plan. First, players on the world stage are more likely to enhance their objectives if they can frame and implement strategies for mutual benefit. Exploitation of others' weaknesses tends to boomerang. Creating values for all parties, in turn, requires informed discussion by all

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concerned — at home and abroad. The more that all players communicate, the greater the likelihood they can find lasting solutions useful to all sides. The more that intelligence estimates are shared publicly, the fuller will be the public discussion preceding and accompanying each foreign policy thrust, and the higher the probability it will succeed. If our aims are honorable, openness trumps secrecy. As Robert D. Schulzinger at the University of Colorado wrote in 1998: “If it were possible to use a single word to characterize the single American value most esteemed worldwide in the post-Cold War era, that word would be ‘transparency.’”[1] Citing Senator Daniel Moynihan’s Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy, Schulzinger concluded that “more information leads to better public decisions and, eventually, greater public respect for decision-makers.”

The United States has long been the world leader in transparency. The State Department’s publication, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), sets the world standard for documentary collections. Filling many a library shelf, it has sought to publish key government documents within 25 or 30 years. When the CIA and other agencies held back documents on their activities, President Bill Clinton issued an executive order requiring government agencies to make public documents more than 25 years old by April 1, 2000 unless they could show cause why they should remain secret. Nonetheless, FRUS is now more than 40 years behind the events of the late 1970s. The private group National Security Archive based at George Washington University has helped pierce this log jam, but huge gaps remain in the public record.

The relative advantages of open diplomacy over secret diplomacy can be seen from comparing the results of the Marshall Plan with those of the Versailles Peace Treaty. Ditto the importance of including all stakeholders in the deliberations — including former and present adversaries. These conclusions are reinforced by a series of experimental studies carried out under Dr. Alex Pentland at the MIT Media Lab. Pentland and his associates study what kinds of information flows make for effective decision-making and innovation in various settings.[2] They find that sharing facts — not arguing about them — makes for productive decision-making. Informal communication patterns account for roughly half the performance in corporations, according to his studies.

It follows that prepared texts read to the UN General Assembly by visiting heads of state are not likely to foster collective problem-solving. Neither are policy platforms drawn up by rival parties in the US Congress and then read out to nearly empty chambers. Nor are solutions drawn up by US and Russian or EU diplomats and then offered up to the world. The MIT Media Lab studies also denigrate the value of tele-conferencing, e-mail exchanges, telephone calls (only one person can talk a time), and brief SMS “texting” without body language or other signals to intuition and associative senses.

Here is a dilemma: Effective decisions require honest input from each potential stakeholder. But there is no forum where all UN member states can constructively brainstorm together. Two or even 20 participants is too few, but 200 is too large and unwieldy. Getting the optimal number of participants is one problem. Providing the optimal setting is another. What if diplomats have reason to believe that every word they say or write may some day become public and be disseminated worldwide by electronic media?

Open diplomacy and information sharing at all levels and by all parties is optimal in peacetime. Most wartime decisions, however, need to be formulated behind closed doors. In wartime, secrecy, deception, and code-breaking can be decisive. What about the “neither peace nor war” Cold War conditions between the former USSR and United States or between today’s North Korea and leaders in Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow? The John F. Kennedy administration in 1962 took nearly two weeks to deliberate in secret how to respond to Nikita Khrushchev’s Cuban missile gambit. Consonant with the MIT Media Lab’s recent findings, however, Kennedy encouraged free-wheeling discussions by those admitted to his Executive Committee. He managed to overcome the natural tendency for “group-think.” However, a key part of the eventual solution — a pledge to withdraw US missiles from Turkey — was kept secret for years.

Open diplomacy has its risks: playing to the crowd for PR advantage, for example. The great sensitivity of the issues discussed in the Six-Party talks with North Korea that began in 2003 probably required that they be conducted behind closed doors. Lack of a public record of these talks, however, makes it difficult to ascertain what factors led to their frequent breakdown amid mutual accusations. To what extent, for example, were some putative agreements

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based on pledges by other countries to help the North build nuclear power plants? Some breakthroughs seemed to result from very private bilateral talks between the US and North Korean representatives meeting on the sidelines of the talks or in other venues.

Whatever the merit of secret diplomacy in conflict situations, a clear public statement by either party that it intends to reverse the conflict spiral by a series of conciliatory gestures can break the ice and reduce distrust. Professor Charles Osgood, in his book *An Alternative to War or Surrender* (1962), recommended that the stronger party make such a statement and then explain that it will initiate *détente* with modest steps that, if reciprocated, can lead to bigger and more significant strides. My book *Getting to Yes in Korea* (2010) relates how the United States and China used a version of Osgood's approach to normalize relations in 1971-1972.

It is too early to evaluate the impact of WikiLeaks on world affairs. Probably it will prove useful to expose double-dealing and schemes to gain one-sided advantage by exploiting others' vulnerabilities.[3] But what if the prospect of full and early revelation of diplomatic exchanges inhibits exploratory probes to test each side's priorities and areas of possible compromise? What if this prospect discourages brainstorming to consider innovative solutions? What if it becomes a tool for misleading decision-makers about possible solutions?[4] It may be that WikiLeaks goes too far, but enlightened policy makers should welcome publication of how good decisions — and bad — came about. As Mel Gurtov pointed out in the Winter 2010 issue of *Global Asia*, WikiLeaks — like the Pentagon Papers — reveals the real expectations of US leaders engaged in wars they probably cannot win and that, when pursued, cost thousands of lives and billions of dollars. In common with Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan promise to be major failures of US policy, conceived and facilitated by premises that could not be sustained if publicly aired and debated.

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Notes

[1] Robert D. Schulzinger, *Transparency: The State Department's Historical Advisory Committee in the Post-Cold War Era*, a paper prepared for delivery at the conference *The Power of Free Inquiry and Cold War International History*, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, Sept. 25, 1998. Retrieved from www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/cold-war/conference/schulzinger.html

[2] For a resume of Dr. Pentland's work on this and other aspects of human dynamics, see <http://web.media.mit.edu/~sandy/>

[3] Records of high-level 1970s meetings between North and South Korean intelligence and security officials, together with interpretive comments by Chinese and Soviet-bloc officials, show bad faith on all sides. Pyongyang advanced the talks to embarrass the South; the Blue House in Seoul tried to obstruct an accommodation. Beijing and Moscow secretly denounced both their ostensible client in the North and adversary in the South. See www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/New-Evidence-North-Korea-Reader.pdf

[4] WikiLeaks reports of US diplomatic cables suggest that some South Korean and some Chinese officials exaggerated, intentionally or not, Beijing's willingness to accept reunification of both Koreas with US troops remaining below the 38th parallel.