Speaker Johnson, Reaching Across the Aisle, Reaffirms America's Heritage of Bipartisanship in Foreign Policy

by Conrad Black

Speaker Johnson is a hero, and his act in putting the American national interest and the strategic interest of the West ahead of his own job security by assuring the passage and enactment of desperately needed aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan should earn him the homage of his party and his country. Tying those questions to President Biden's disgraceful opening up of the southern border in a cynical drive to create a permanent Democratic majority, no matter the cost in rising crime, strained social services, and aggravation of chronic narcotics problems, might have seemed to have some merit as a tactic.

When the Democrats responded with a completely unacceptable "border compromise" that would admit at least two million illegal migrants each year, though, it was clear that the issues had to be separated. The Democrats must carry the can for their misguided policy on the border, and the Republicans are right to have ignored the know-nothing, head-in-sand, paleoconservative isolationists who were prepared to acquiesce in the Russian gangster-invasion of Ukraine winning back the largest piece of what they lost in the great, almost bloodless, western victory in the Cold War, while also jeopardizing Israel as it fights for its life, and practically inviting the subjugation of Taiwan by China.

Appalling though the political condition of Mr. Biden's America is, chiefly because of Mr. Biden, historians of the future will recognize the deliverance achieved when President Trump endorsed aid for Ukraine and strongly supported the speaker. Together they suppressed the mindless isolationists in the Republican Party, while Mr. Biden finally started to face down the antisemites in his party. A great and historic disaster has been avoided and Mr. Johnson has shown that America has not completely lost its sense of self-preservation and its moral bearings.

Through much of the Cold War the frequently repeated truism "politics stops at the waters' edge," coined by the distinguished Republican senator, Arthur Vandenberg, a former isolationist, applied to American foreign and security policy. Apart from misuse of customs and tariffs, in which the Democrats were for tariffs "for revenue only" and the Republicans for higher tariffs that protected American industry and promoted American employment but raised the cost of imported goods, foreign policy was rarely an important issue in American policy until President Wilson was compelled to enter World War I because of German sinkings of American merchant ships on the high seas, and had the inspiring vision of making the Great War a "war to end all wars" and "to make the world safe for democracy."

To this end, Wilson proposed a defensive alliance between the United Kingdom, France, and America, and a League of Nations in which all independent countries would participate and where serious mechanisms for the resolution of international rivalries would be created. Wilson, a Democrat, had not troubled to take any Republicans with him to the Paris peace conference, nor to consult them at all, and a bitter partisan debate ensued, and the United States declined to join the League of Nations, though it was an American invention, and made no alliance with Britain and France. As many had predicted, the resulting peace planted the seeds

of *revanchisme* and as the supreme commander of the Allied armies in World War I, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, stated, “This is not peace, it is a 20-year cease-fire.”

America lapsed back into isolationism, Prohibition, the greatest equity bubble in history, followed by the Great Depression, which spread throughout the advanced world and blighted the 1930’s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had served as assistant secretary of the Navy under Wilson and was an advocate of Wilson’s program but also agreed with his cousin Theodore Roosevelt’s desire for the United States to play a role in the world appropriate to its great power, spoke French and German and had many connections in those countries and saw the next war coming with great clarity. His vast New Deal workfare programs absorbed the chronic unemployment of the 30s and recycled millions of people back into the private sector as the economy recovered, were transferred from infrastructure and conservation to national defense.

With great virtuosity, Roosevelt gradually shifted the support for his administration away from the famous liberals like George Norris and Robert La Follette, who were isolationists, toward southern supporters of large armed forces and traditional amenability to the British and the French, such as Walter George and Pat Harrison, who had opposed much of the original New Deal. The soon-to-be world-famous aircraft carriers Enterprise and Yorktown were largely constructed by unemployed people who quickly learned about riveting and other basic shipbuilding skills, under the direction of naval architects and shipyard foremen.

To assure general support for his war and post-war plans, Roosevelt padded his administration with Republicans including Henry Stimson, who had been President Hoover’s secretary of state as Secretary of War; Frank Knox, who had been the Republican vice presidential candidate in 1936 as Secretary of the Navy; John G. Winant, Republican governor of New Hampshire, as ambassador to Great Britain; Patrick Hurley,

Hoover’s war secretary. as ambassador to China; and Edward Stettinius, Republican chairman of United States Steel, as Secretary of State.

The man who set up and directed the OSS, forerunner to the CIA, was a former Republican candidate for governor of New York, William J. Donovan. He sent equal delegations of Republicans and Democrats to the San Francisco conference that founded the United Nations in 1945, and the spirit of bipartisanship that he sponsored during the war continued almost seamlessly into the Cold War. This was exemplified by Vandenberg supporting the Truman administration’s policy of containment. The last gasp of traditional Republican isolationism until recent days vanished when Senator Taft was defeated at the Republican convention in 1952 by General Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Western Europe and founding commander of NATO.

The uniform collaboration of both parties in international relations probably reached their highest point with the Formosa Resolution of 1955 in which the Democratic-controlled houses of the Congress, directed by the Senate majority leader, Lyndon Johnson, with a vote of 85 to 3, and Speaker Rayburn, by 410 to 3, delivered practically unanimous votes authorizing the president to use any level of force he judged appropriate in the Formosa Straits separating Free China from the communist mainland. It was understood that this included nuclear weapons.

America and the world were well served by having at that time a president so militarily knowledgeable as General Eisenhower. On several occasions in the year after the adoption of the Formosa Resolution, he received visits from the chiefs of staff requesting the use of nuclear weapons against the People’s Republic of China. As Eisenhower out-ranked all of these petitioners and some of them had served under him, he had no difficulty discerning that their arguments in favor of recourse to nuclear weapons were nonsense, and that the

consequences of agreeing to the requests would have been strategically dangerous and morally indefensible.

The concept of a bipartisan foreign and strategic policy was blown up in the Vietnam War, and President Reagan's introduction of anti-missile defenses, which ultimately won the Cold War, and incidentally saved Israel from terrible damage ten days ago, was generally ridiculed by the Democrats in the Congress, by few more strenuously than by Mr. Biden. A narrow consensus was patched together in the first Gulf War, but it disintegrated in the shambles after the second Gulf War. Mr. Johnson has revived it, and deserves the nation's gratitude and respect.

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