

# HISTORY STRIKES BACK (CONTINUER L'HISTOIRE IN FRANCE): PREFACE WRITTEN BY MADELEINE ALBRIGHT, FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE OF THE UNITED STATES

Hubert Vedrine

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In 1999 NATO blocked Yugoslav dictator Slobodan Milošević's brutal attempt to expel much of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population from its homeland. The decision to intervene was made without explicit authorization from the UN Security Council and was condemned by critics as a violation of Yugoslav sovereignty. Because NATO acts by consensus, this humanitarian action could not have taken place without the support of French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine, and yet endorsing it ran contrary to some of Védrine's strongest instincts. As a supporter of international law, Védrine was hesitant to undermine the prestige of the Security Council, which in this case could not act because of a threatened Russian veto. As a realist, the foreign minister was wary of moral outrage as a trigger for military action because he believed that self-righteousness and wisdom are often at odds—and that moral intentions are no guarantee of moral results. Finally, as a defender of Gallic pride, Védrine inevitably had qualms about an operation viewed by many around the world as a confirmation of America's post-cold war leadership. So why did Védrine support intervention in Kosovo? The answer, quite simply, is that it was the right thing to do. Neither the United States, nor France, nor our other allies were prepared to stand by and watch as thousands of innocent people were killed or made homeless in the heart of Europe. NATO's action served the cause of justice, saved many lives, and presaged an end to Milošević's disastrous political reign. These beneficial outcomes do not mean that Védrine's initial reservations about the operation lacked merit. Through the rigor of his questions, Védrine made clear that Kosovo should be considered an exceptional case, not a precedent for future actions. America had been given no general license to take NATO support for granted, rely too much on military solutions, or disregard the prerogatives of the UN. To avert bloodshed in Kosovo, Védrine was flexible in applying his principles, but he did not abandon those principles. A few years later, in Iraq, the types of concerns he had raised about the Kosovo intervention were wholly disregarded, at great cost to us all. During my years as America's secretary of state (1997–2001), I never ignored Védrine's perspective. Even if I had tried, he would not have let me. Hubert insisted on having his say, and whenever he spoke, he did so exceptionally well. Conversing with Védrine was like kayaking down a fast-flowing river. There was enough movement to demand concentration, enough excitement to keep spirits high, and enough danger to prevent complacency. As a result, he was my favorite diplomat with whom to disagree. Whether we were conferring in Paris or Washington, we rarely viewed an issue in precisely the same terms, but neither did we argue so strongly that communication became impossible. Védrine is an intellectual who is ever-conscious of the broad currents of history; I am more of a problem-solver who operates primarily in the here and now. I admired Hubert because he didn't mince his words; he appreciated me because I replied to his words in French. Usually our exchanges focused on the crisis of the moment. On less urgent occasions we were able to deal more generally with the affectionate yet touchy relationship between our two countries. While I emphasized our nations' shared interests, Hubert made plain his distress that the trend toward globalization was being driven by Anglo-Saxons. While I emphasized America's agenda within the context of the Euro-Atlantic partnership, he was a fierce defender of France's leadership role within Europe. When I pointed to Lafayette as an inspiration for Franco-American solidarity, Védrine smiled and replied, "Ah, but you see, chère Madeleine, Lafayette did not cross the Atlantic to help the Americans; his motive was to defeat the British." Now that we are both out of office, we still meet and speak but have found less to argue about and more about which to worry. In this decade, al Qaeda has emerged as a significant threat; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have strained NATO unity; progress toward Arab-Israeli peace has stalled; environmental and energy challenges have been neglected; and the global divide between rich and poor has widened. Meanwhile, the international nuclear nonproliferation regime has weakened, multilateral institutions are showing their age, and rising food and fuel prices are battering the world economy. All this provides abundant material for thoughtful analysis and debate. There is, of course, no shortage of experts offering their opinions about world affairs. The difference between a former foreign minister such as Hubert Védrine and a commentator from the realms of academia or journalism is that Védrine has experienced the pressures of practical decisionmaking. His views have been tested in the unforgiving environment of domestic and international politics, where every statement is dissected and every miscalculation exposed. As a writer, Védrine blends the insights of a skilled practitioner with the thematic scope of a creative theorist. The provocative results are evident in each fascinating chapter of *History Strikes Back*, a volume written just as Western leadership was shifting from one quartet (Blair, Chirac, Schroeder, and Bush) to the next (Brown, Sarkozy, Merkel, and either Obama or McCain). In these pages, Védrine does not attempt to lay out a detailed blueprint for the future. He does, however, recommend a few changes in attitude. To begin, America must recognize that it is respected less now than it was only a decade ago. In Védrine's view, America's new president would be well advised to help strengthen multilateral institutions rather than try to work around them as his predecessor did so unsuccessfully. Europeans, meanwhile, must understand that solutions to global problems cannot be found by relying on a benign and cohesive "international community" that does not actually exist. Védrine argues that the popular belief that nation-states have become irrelevant is belied by inescapable facts. The major plagues of our era—such as terror, strife, poverty, climate change, and disease—can be addressed effectively only if national governments are both capable and engaged. According to Védrine, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic must accept the fact that the axis of global power is shifting. The three-fourths of the world's inhabitants who are neither European nor American are busy organizing themselves. They are not waiting for a divided West to lead. It follows that the institutions established by the West after World War II are due for a makeover. Finally, Védrine counsels us all to steer clear of enthusiasms that promise more than they can deliver. He refers, in particular, to America's penchant for "democratic Messianism" and Europe's tendency to embrace "multilateral fundamentalism." To Védrine, it is folly to believe that faith in a particular doctrine—however uplifting—will obviate the need for intelligent and nuanced action. In every chapter of this volume, Hubert Védrine challenges our illusions. He demands that we see the world as it is, not because he wants us to accept the status quo, but because we will never engineer the right kind of change if our actions are based on false premises. Those who think too highly of their own moral purity, or who place too much faith in the altruism of others, are doomed to disappointment. The same is true of those who believe that goodwill alone can provide a stable foundation for global politics. Védrine urges us to develop an international system that accommodates national interests within a framework that encourages decency and civility but anticipates neither saintliness nor consistency. An imperfect world demands arrangements that can absorb flaws without surrendering to them. Only if we reserve our indignation for the issues that matter most will we be able to forge international policies that deal effectively with the gravest problems. Although Védrine is skeptical of American leadership, he fully accepts the world's ongoing need for an articulate guiding voice. He does not expect the election of a new U.S. president to heal all ills, but he does hold out hope that a change in the White House will restore a broader sense of common purpose within the West. Such a restoration is most likely if the new president is knowledgeable about history and culture, aware of the limits of U.S. power, and conscious of the complexity of global relationships. I heartily recommend *History Strikes Back* not because I agree with every sentence, but because every sentence is worth reading whether as a source of information, an invitation to debate, or a rebuttal to easy assumptions. This is a work of remarkable intelligence at a moment when critical thinking is essential and history is moving ahead at full throttle. My invitation to you is to read and ponder this timely volume; you will enjoy doing so and will end up considerably wiser than when you began. Madeleine K. Albright August 2008



Homepage > Publications > History Strikes Back (Continuer l'Histoire in France): Preface Written by Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State of the United States



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