

1-1-2001

## Interview with Thomas R. Pickering: Preserving Centers of Sovereignty

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### Recommended Citation

Ugerotz, Tonya and Pickering, Thomas R. (2001) "Interview with Thomas R. Pickering: Preserving Centers of Sovereignty," *Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.  
Available at: [https://scholarship.shu.edu/diplo\\_ir/vol2/iss1/6](https://scholarship.shu.edu/diplo_ir/vol2/iss1/6)

## *Evolving Institutions and Transatlantic Relations*

# Interview with Thomas R. Pickering: Preserving Centers of Sovereignty

*Thomas R. Pickering is perhaps the most distinguished and respected career diplomat in the U.S. Department of State. He holds the personal rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service. He has served as ambassador to six countries and the United Nations, and is currently Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Ambassador Pickering has a distant cousin who was another notable public servant: his ancestor Timothy Pickering served successively as Postmaster General, Secretary of War, and Secretary of State under George Washington and John Adams. Tonya Ugoretz interviewed Ambassador Pickering in his office at the State Department on August 2, 2000.*

### EUROPEAN UNION

*Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations:* U.S. officials have been uniform in their praise for the continued integration of Europe. Are there limits, however, to that support? Specifically, should there be some concern that the transatlantic relationship may not always be as rosy as it is today, and that the consolidation and strengthening of Europe might conceivably pose a threat to the United States someday, whether economic, political, or military?

*Ambassador Pickering:* This is an interesting question because we are a federation ourselves. We look back historically at a close partnership with Europe, and we see long-term advantages in Europe being able to operate on a broad basis as an economy and as a polity which is whole and free.

Clearly, there have always been drawbacks. There's no free lunch in diplomacy, and one of the drawbacks has been that Europe is creating a huge economy and a huge political structure that would be a competitor.

Most of us tend to believe that competition is good, and that competition fairly handled—and that's an important qualification—can generally stimulate more efficiency in production, greater efforts to improve products, lower prices for consumers, and all those benefits that, as believers in competition, we shouldn't be afraid of. We obviously should do everything we can to ensure that it's fair.

Since the 1940s, we've had a view that areas of freer trade, whether they were customs unions or free trade areas, are normally in our interest unless, as a result of increasing trade within the area, the area found ways to become more protectionist. So we have always tried to insist that as Europe becomes increasingly more open with

respect to its trade, it doesn't turn around and become more closed to the outside world. We and the developing countries, under the Lomé agreement that has been renewed for many years, have worked hard with the Europeans to promote a wider expanse of free trade, even as they were moving in the trading area to improve their own activities.

There is a corollary to that: if, in fact, a Europe that is becoming increasingly whole and free becomes more protectionist, more closed off, more hidden from the rest of the world, either in political or in economic terms, then obviously it has disadvantages. The good news is that Europe as a collection of democratic states has followed the opposite course. So I think we have high confidence that Europe *is* on the right track, that European integration makes sense, and that the downsides, which at this point are more potential than real, can be avoided.

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### **We have high confidence that Europe is on the right track.**

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And, we have always watched those downsides very carefully. It isn't a kind of mindless U.S. support for *anything* that Europe wants to do. After all, we have trade problems with Europe these days—bananas and beef among them. But, it is a set of circumstances which allows us both to negotiate and, within the World Trade Organization, to carry forward our trading relationship on a basis where our relative negotiating leverage is not undermined, where we have an equal standing with the Europeans, and where we can defend our own interests. Our effort should be to resolve trade disputes as early as possible and as creatively as possible—not to perpetuate them or to cascade in measures of retaliation without a solution. The measures of retaliation are designed as temporary to provide a basis for solution.

*SHJDIR:* You mentioned the United States' history as a federation, and the European Union right now is philosophically going through a state of flux, not sure of what its eventual form will be. Do you have an opinion on what form it might ultimately take?

*Pickering:* I think it would be a stretch to try to shoehorn Europe into one stereotype or another. That said, Europe has shown an increasing tendency, in my view, to come together in a serious way while preserving centers of sovereignty. It has the hallmarks of a very close federation in some areas. For example, each part of Europe is responsible for the admission of aliens to the whole, and still retains the attributes of real sovereignty in terms of issues of war and peace that are decided in capitals by governments and parliaments rather than by Brussels. But, I think the general direction has been toward greater unity while still according respect for the states involved.

The old issues of sovereignty always play here. In fact, states, as a sovereign act, have turned over certain authority to regional and international bodies or to groups of states. This is in full exercise of sovereignty, and the notion that this is a diminution of sovereignty could only have application if they were forcibly required to enter these arrangements rather than doing so of their own free will. I reject the notion that there

is a kind of inevitable, irrevocable diminution of state sovereignty rather than a continuous exercise of state sovereignty in the better interest of each state's own people through broader cooperation.

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### **I reject the notion that there is a kind of inevitable, irrevocable diminution of state sovereignty.**

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Sovereignty isn't something that is static. It's a concept that is used to promote the interests of the state. And, if the interests of the state are promoted by greater cooperation, then that in itself speaks well of the use of the concept rather than in some way demeaning it.

*SHJDIR:* The issue of sovereignty and international organizations is a very interesting one.

*Pickering:* It's a little philosophical, and, in some ways, we are in danger of putting the concept ahead of its meaning.

*SHJDIR:* Some might say that it's a slippery slope, that you can't give up just a little bit of sovereignty . . .

*Pickering:* Well, you always have the right to withdraw from treaties; however, you have to pay for it. Going in, you get benefits; coming out, you subtract benefits for the people you made the deal with, and therefore it costs you. But, that's the general deal you have to undertake.

### **NATO'S ERRANT BOMB**

*SHJDIR:* In June 1999, you had the unenviable task of traveling to a very heated Beijing, standing before the Chinese government, and explaining to them what went wrong in the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. What was that like for you?

*Pickering:* On all of these kinds of occasions, I think it is extremely important that you are as truthful and straightforward as you can be in a discussion, in order to maintain reasonable relations with another country. Obviously, the fact that we had, through a terrible mistake, bombed and destroyed a Chinese embassy was not an enviable arrangement to have to set out. But, we did a lot of research, and I was ably supported by a very strong interagency team. We reviewed all the files, and we all agreed on precisely what had happened. We explained our findings to the Chinese in extensive detail, along with maps and diagrams, to let them know precisely where the mistake had originated and why it had happened. And, of course, we talked to them about what we were going to do to avoid a mistake like that in the future. Then, we discussed the question of compensation, which was later pursued by other people.

So, it was in that sense straightforward. The Chinese were not pleased to hear what happened, but I believe that despite the fact that they had said we weren't credible—which I think was said for public consumption at home—they responded to the discussion we had with serious questions. That was helpful because we were then engaged in explaining clearly what had happened, and at the end of the day, they had all of their questions answered, even if they didn't want to admit that in public. One of the most interesting things was that within hours of my discussion with them, they published for their own people in their own news agency a very thorough summary of what I had said, very accurate in all of its detail.

### IMAGE AND ENGAGEMENT

*SHJDIR*: Is anti-American sentiment abroad, and particularly in Europe, rising? How does the State Department view reports of this? Is it dismissed as jealousy on the part of other states, or is it considered a real problem that in the long term could affect our standing?

*Pickering*: I don't think that overall our polling data confirm a strong shift in public opinion in a serious way. Many of these reports are anecdotal, though there is evidence from time to time of individual actions that clearly either smacked of or seemed to be the result of anti-Americanism in a prejudicial sense. But, we do take press statements, public criticisms, and the like as matters of serious concern. It's important to analyze the reasons behind such sentiments, and we've come to a number of conclusions. One is that it's hard to be the biggest fellow on the block. Also, there may be ways in which we can change and improve the tone and content of our diplomacy to deal with these sensitive issues. I don't think anybody is contemplating any fundamental changes in our policies, which are basically reflective of our own interests and how we can best promote them. But, I do think that increasingly, we have tried to adopt a more consultative relationship with foreign countries, talking to them before we make decisions rather than just telling them what our decisions are.

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It is interesting that in some countries, running against the United States is somewhat more popular than it used to be. There are any number of reasons why that might be the case. Some of it may have to do with local politics; some with national jealousies and competition; and, some may just be areas where people have significant differences. I don't think that we'll ever see a world where everyone's views are totally harmonized with our own, nor do I think we should expect to. What we should expect is a world in which we can converse extensively with people, many of whom

will have different views; gain an understanding of why they see things differently; and, find areas where it *is* possible to harmonize our views on critical questions—that's what diplomacy is for. We also need to be increasingly able to explain in public what our views are based on and why. That's one of the challenges of the new century and of the changing diplomatic arena, as the subject matter we deal with and the focus of our foreign policy adapts to new developments.

*SHJDIR:* On the subject of the public, many Americans, including many members of Congress, do not seem to accept the basic premise that U.S. engagement abroad is vital to our interests at home. Why is the State Department losing the public relations war?

*Pickering:* That is a puzzling and difficult question because it reflects on something that is very important to us, our budgets, and the kind of financial support we dedicate to conduct and support diplomacy. I don't think that the United States as a whole, again in terms of polling data, tends to believe that foreign policy is unimportant, or that people don't agree in the main with the general tenets of U.S. foreign policy. I think that Americans do have a tendency, as citizens of a continental country, to look inward more than they look outward. Americans generally are much more concerned with the politics of their own futures and with so-called pocketbook issues, such as the domestic economy, education, health care, and their children's future. These are sensitive and important issues. Our problem is that we haven't made people aware of an important connection: more new jobs every year are dependent on our ability to conduct foreign trade, and both exports and imports fuel and fund those jobs. We need Americans to be aware that we are in an increasingly interconnected world, not only in security terms, but also in heavily economic terms. And the world of information and ideas, of course, swirls around us.

This is a huge task, and we attempt, particularly under the leadership of this Secretary, to make these views increasingly known. I don't give a speech without, in one way or another, attempting to focus at least in part on this set of issues, and many others do so as well. I also think that, with all due respect, there is a tendency for the Congress—particularly the present Congress, which is often quite conservative in its foreign affairs views—to undervalue the public's foreign policy views. Even though the public may have elected them on the basis of their domestic ideas, members of Congress should take into account the fact that poll after poll reflects that that same public is traditionally supportive of foreign policy engagement and our foreign policy interests. It may be that in terms of the priority placed on those issues, they fall down below number five or number ten on most people's lists, but they're nevertheless there. So, we have to find a way also of getting people to understand that one set of views on domestic issues doesn't necessarily translate to the same set of views in foreign policy terms. I hope we can continue to promote our vital interests abroad and convey to the American people that what we do overseas can have a real and positive impact on their lives.

Obviously, the more the public is interested in these things and talks to the Congress, the greater the opportunity that we may find a reasonable solution to this problem. But at the moment, it seems as if many in the Congress never saw a foreign aid measure they didn't want to cut. We are at a stage where we are six to eight weeks from the end of the fiscal year without a budget, and we're looking at proposals for very significant cuts. Many of them, in my view, are not just irresponsible but disastrous in terms of American interests. The fact that some of these cuts directly affect their own states tells me that we have to do more to get those economic impacts across to members of Congress. The other day I was in touch with a congressman who was about to take action which would have stopped the Visa Waiver pilot program without recognizing that his own state does a half-billion dollars worth of tourism business, that tourism is a \$100 billion industry in the United States, and that a huge number of people in his own state—eighty thousand—are employed in this industry. In fact, the steps he was considering would have cut down seriously on the number of people who visit the United States and spend money in his state.

## U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

*SHJDIR*: What do you believe is at stake in the U.S. presidential election in terms of foreign policy?

*Pickering*: I think that, in general, presidential elections rarely focus on foreign policy issues. Rather, as I said earlier, their most important questions focus on the continental preoccupations of the pocketbook—education, health, and social issues, and a lot of other frequently discussed issues that are out there, from abortion to gun control. I think that as much as I'd like to see foreign policy issues highlighted, the fact that they are generally not a serious bone of contention in presidential elections helps enormously to establish continuity in foreign policy and to strengthen continued support for the policies that have been put together, from one administration to the next. Most of these policies have a bipartisan history, with the support of successive administrations. As a result, our policies don't change with the vicissitudes of election because neither the problems, nor the bases for making decisions on them, are going to change much from election to election.

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I think that, as a rule of thumb, each administration probably has up to five significant foreign policy issues over eight years on which it could make a real change. Most administrations rarely if ever do that; I mean real sweeping changes. Jimmy Carter, for instance, introduced human rights as a major consideration. Subsequent

to that you had the introduction of environmental concerns in American foreign policy. Those kinds of changes don't occur with great rapidity.

This continuity helps us to assure foreign governments, who watch elections in the United States very carefully, that they shouldn't expect a cataclysmic shift in American policy. But, we here at the State Department do go through a transition. We do what you might call the government equivalent of spring housecleaning. We review all our policies, we write papers for the incoming administration, and we sort out where we are and how we got here. It's a kind of legacy and educational exercise. It's good in that it gives people a sense not only that they can end one term, begin another, and maintain continuity, but also that they have sat down and looked at the issues.



