

**Al spoils the party**  
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**Frank Pellegrini**

The tag has been made; Bill Clinton is off to Japan, and Al Gore is going home. Back to the bench. But as the Asian-Pacific Economic Conference broke up Wednesday with almost nothing resolved in the way of Asian free trade, restarting Japan's economy, or even that whole currency crisis thing, Asian leaders are blaming the lost summit on Gore and his big mouth. After loudly interfering in Malaysian internal affairs by praising protesters -- the "brave people of Malaysia" -- at an economic summit, does the veep deserve that promotion he's bucking for?

Special"Clinton probably would have left that out of the speech," says TIME foreign correspondent William Dowell. "You have to question Gore's diplomatic savvy after he wades into a summit and says that." Of course, it's quite possible that Gore knew exactly what he was doing -- risking a foreign-policy flare-up for a nice sop to the Democrats' less pragmatic, pro-Gephardt wing. Gore's sudden attack of principles may get him votes in 2000, but Dowell thinks it's cost the U.S. some much-needed goodwill overseas. "Especially in Asia, subtlety is very important." Malaysian leaders already call the U.S. the Great Devil; was it necessary for Gore to act the part?

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