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The Democratization of Grand Strategy

By *Sean F. X. Barrett*

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The Democratization of Grand Strategy

Sean F. X. Barrett

Calls for a formalized strategic planning process and grand strategy have been mounting for years. However, those sounding these calls erroneously remember a past that rarely if ever existed and overestimate the importance of a formalized process and a final product. Most disconcertingly, they assume that government is necessarily the only supplier of grand strategy, while ignoring that those in government are not incentivized to actually produce it. In fact, the proliferation of communications technology, which provides the means for accessing a wealth of open source intelligence and for disseminating ideas, and the plethora of academics, analysts, and other intellectuals outside of official government communities provide a more effective, democratic, and transparent substitute to the (oftentimes imagined) Project Solariums of the past. The environment in which these intellectuals operate nurtures “real devils,” who vigorously propose policy and strategy alternatives in which they truly believe and have a stake in seeing implemented, resulting in a *de facto* strategic planning process, whose merits far exceed those of a *de jure* one.

While a lot of ink has recently been spilled discussing the Department of Defense’s (DOD) ongoing Strategic Choices and Management Review and the upcoming 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), [i] calls for a formalized strategic planning process and grand strategy have actually been mounting for years. For example, The Princeton Project on National Security was established by Michèle Flournoy, a future Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the first Obama Administration, to foster more strategic thought by undertaking a three-year bi-partisan initiative to develop its own sustainable and effective national security strategy formulation process for the United States. She and Shawn Brimley dubbed their input into this initiative “A Project Solarium for the 21st Century,” in reference to the era immediately following the conclusion of World War II, when strategy was deemed more purposeful, impactful, and necessary due to the growing Soviet threat. President Eisenhower’s administration undertook an immense project, Project Solarium, to develop an anti-Soviet strategy that would, ultimately, guide United States foreign policy until the end of the Cold War. Flournoy and Brimley lamented that it is “both remarkable and disturbing that the United States has no truly effective strategic planning process for national security . . . no integrated planning process from which to derive the vital strategic guidance necessary to protect U.S. national interests and achieve U.S. objectives.”[ii]

Charles Hill, the Brady-Johnson Distinguished Fellow in Grand Strategy at Yale University and author of *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order*, has repeatedly “made the case” for grand strategy as a framework for better understanding the “big picture” of America’s role in the world.[iii] Former Governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, even took to the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to call for an end to “the barrage of ad hoc, short-term policy initiatives,”[iv] and while Governor Bush seems to mistake

economic strategy—but one instrument of national power in the common DOD “DIME-FIL” framework—for grand strategy, the sentiment still resonates. Thus, both sides of the political aisle, as well as more removed academics, have sounded this common refrain for grand strategy. In fact, Paul Pillar of *The National Interest* remains one of the few commentators *not* in agreement with this seemingly overwhelming sentiment: “But a truly sweeping redo of thinking about U.S. grand strategy and America's place in the world will have to await a loosening of the embrace of the dominant paranoia of the post-9/11 era.”^[v]

Many of these calls for grand strategy, however, are simply symptoms of a general disappointment with current political, economic, or foreign policy trends and look to grand strategy as a panacea or silver bullet to cure these perceived ills. Those sounding these calls assume that grand strategy resulting from a formalized planning process cannot in fact be mistaken, erroneously remember a past that rarely if ever existed, and overestimate the importance of a formalized planning process and a final product, even at the expense of a more vigorous debate and exchange of ideas. Most disconcertingly, those sounding these calls assume that government is necessarily the only supplier of grand strategy, while ignoring that those in government are not incentivized to actually produce it. In fact, the proliferation of communications technology, which provides the means for accessing a wealth of open source intelligence and for disseminating ideas, and the plethora of academics, analysts, and other intellectuals outside of official government communities provide a more effective, democratic, and transparent substitute to the (oftentimes imagined) Project Solariums of the past. The environment in which they operate nurtures “real devils,” who vigorously propose policy and strategy alternatives in which they truly believe and have a stake in seeing implemented. The arguments and alternatives that these intellectuals and amateurs alike proffer are open for public consumption, and politicians and senior policymakers can pick and choose bits and pieces from among them, thus forming the basis of a *de facto* strategic planning process, whose merits far exceed those of a *de jure* one.

Grand Strategy As Panacea

Many of those sounding the call for a formalized strategic planning process and grand strategy hearken back to a day that has rarely, if ever, actually existed. For example, in his treatise, *Modern Strategy*, Colin Gray notes, “Strategy is as difficult to perform well in a purposive manner as it is all too rarely performed consciously at all. Probably more polities have been the beneficiaries of uncalculated, though perhaps otherwise deserved, successful strategic effect than have merited such successes by virtue of superior strategy.”^[vi] Similarly, in the concluding chapter, “Patterns of Grand Strategy,” to volume, *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Politics, Diplomacy, and War*, Richard Hart Sinnreich argues, “Grand strategy is much more likely to be imputed retrospectively by admirers and critics than developed and applied self-consciously by the statesmen whom they typically credit or blame.”^[vii]

Furthermore, when formalized strategic planning processes and grand strategy have actually existed, their importance has largely been exaggerated. For example, Richard Immerman debunks some of the myths surrounding Project Solarium, which is often referenced today as a model for grand strategy. In referencing the intelligence that was ostensibly utilized during Project Solarium to guide the formation of grand strategy, he argues that, even though President Eisenhower—whose highest priority was to exploit the full resources of government to formulate a more effective and sustainable national strategy—was welcoming of CIA input, this input had minimal impact on President Eisenhower’s policies or grand strategy.^[viii] After such a long time serving in the Army, President Eisenhower had already developed highly formed beliefs about national security, and while intelligence has been perceived as playing a critical role by confirming his beliefs, a lack of confirmation would not have significantly impacted or altered his decisions.^[ix] Furthermore, Immerman claims that he has “never been able to locate a scintilla

of evidence collected by the CIA and other agencies that changed Eisenhower's [mind]."[x]

In his famous Berlin Wall address, President Reagan overruled the objections of the State Department and his own National Security Council and rejected mere containment in favor of victory outright.[xi] The speechwriter for President Reagan's Berlin Wall address, Peter Robinson, claims that Reagan began insisting that the wall had to be dismantled during his first visit to Berlin, in 1978.[xii] This was a full three years after he had officially—and only temporarily, of course—left public service and two years after his failed Republican presidential primary campaign in 1976. These beliefs, then, stemmed largely from his own worldview, and it seems highly unlikely that advice stemming from a formalized strategic planning process would have changed his mind. It should also not be discounted that President George W. Bush and President Obama, absent a formalized and grandiose strategic planning process, utilized their respective commencement addresses at the United States Military Academy to present what might loosely be described as their grand strategies.[xiii] Thus, it is not unlikely that a formalized process for the formation of grand strategy will not simply be used to legitimize what has already been decided in advance, and it does not necessarily follow that a formalized process would result in the selection of the best course of action.

Grand Strategy and the Marketplace of Ideas

Reducing a formalized strategic planning process and grand strategy to a means for producing a tangible operating directive—which in itself would require constant updating—for directing action and allocating resources moving forward largely misses the mark and results from what David Jablonsky, Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Army War College, refers to as the allure of “structural certitude.” [xiv] That part of grand strategy dealing with long-term vision exists largely in the realm of principles and ideas,[xv] and frameworks and processes for organizing such ideas and principles do not in fact actually produce them. For example, while Gray focuses more on abstract theory and on the interplay between war and strategy as opposed to grand strategy writ large, he notes that the chief utility of a general theory (or framework) lies in its ability to provide insights and questions, not answers.[xvi] Theory should educate politicians as to the “nature, structure, and dynamic workings” of the instruments available to them. It should guide, not direct. Similarly, Sinnreich argues that grand strategy is more likely to endure when defined as a broad guiding aim or principle, albeit one that does not absolve the strategist from maintaining a constant alertness to changes in the environment and correcting one's course midstream.[xvii]

Looking to formalized processes and the government as the provider of such ideas or principles, or even as the solution in its own right, is mistaken. Government and bureaucracy in general focus more on what has been termed single loop or lower level learning, such as refining processes, rather than questioning whether those processes should or should not actually exist.[xviii] Furthermore, long-term thought dependent on the government also becomes dependent on its continued acquiescence. Bureaucratic entrenchments, however, more often than not favor the status quo, making it likely that bureaucracy would simply utilize any formalized strategic planning process to justify the status quo and breed conformism rather than produce new thoughts or ideas that might be viewed as rocking the boat.

With reelection in mind, politicians have necessarily short planning horizons and are incentivized to produce tangible results—albeit many with long-term, strategic implications—for constituents today.[xix] Senior policymakers, as political appointees, largely operate on these same time horizons. Neither wants to waste valuable time and energy prodding civil servants to think more creatively, or to do so themselves, especially when that could possibly—although not likely—result in strategy that runs counter to their more immediate concerns of capturing funds for constituents and gaining reelection. It seems ironic, then, that we look to government officials and politicians to produce—or at least commission and

sponsor—grand strategy when their very actions (i.e., spending) have already drastically undermined and eroded the intergenerational social contract upon which the ideals of long-term, grand strategy should be based.

It should come as no surprise that three of the first four members of the 2014 QDR’s “independent” panel are those that self-selected into the DOD and conformed and performed so well as to achieve flag officer rank, including retired Marine Corps Gen. James E. Cartwright, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; retired Air Force Gen. Gregory S. Martin, former commander of Air Force Materiel Command; and retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael D. Maples, former Defense Intelligence Agency director.^[xx] The fourth member, Michele Flournoy, former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, has been deemed politically palatable enough by both Congress and the Obama Administration, and one must assume the DOD well, since nominations are not made, and consent by Congress not given, without DOD’s at least tacit approval. That we insist on calling this panel independent should be disconcerting enough in itself. The first four members were selected by the Senate Armed Services Committee, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel will appoint the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the panel, and the other panel appointees will be made by the chair and ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee. This situation is not entirely dissimilar to China under the Ming emperors, wherein the emperors’ concern for stability, obedience, and conformism overlapped with the bureaucracy and their strong aversion to changing the status quo. The imperial literary examination system of Imperial China helped breed this mutually beneficial conformism, and its effects prove quite relevant in this regard. While the examination preserved the cultural unity and political stability of China, it also impeded originality and experimentation.^[xxi]

In his own (albeit small) chapter on grand strategy, noted strategist B. H. Liddell-Hart observes:

Moreover, regrettable as it may seem to the idealist, the experience of history provides little warrant for the belief that real progress, and the freedom that makes progress possible, lies in unification. For where unification has been able to establish unity of ideas it has usually ended in uniformity, paralyzing the growth of new ideas. And where the unification has merely brought about an artificial or imposed unity, its irksomeness has led through discord to disruption.

Vitality springs from diversity—which makes for real progress so long as there is mutual toleration, based on the recognition that worse may come from an attempt to suppress differences than from acceptance of them.

Today’s abundance of intellectuals in academia, think tanks, institutes, analysis centers, and elsewhere and the wealth of open source intelligence and communications technologies have together democratized grand strategy and taken the place of formalized strategic planning processes. These intellectuals are incentivized to produce contrarian viewpoints, as this is what quite literally makes many of them money or earns them tenure. The ideas they produce are open for everyone to see, debate, and refine. These intellectuals are free from the administrative burdens and operational and political constraints and responsibilities of those working in official government communities. Additionally, they intellectuals are free to publish their ideas in the public domain and lay claim to an idea and are thus less susceptible to hoarding information in pursuit of bureaucratic one-upmanship. As the number of these intellectuals and their financial support continue to profligate, so do the number of ideas that enter the grand strategy debate. Equally importantly, the transparency of the public domain negates many of the criticisms that

would undoubtedly result from a more opaque and delayed strategic planning process like Secretary of Defense Hagel's current *Strategic Choices* study.^[xxii]

In contrast, multiple advocacy approaches within formalized strategic planning processes, such as those taken during Project Solarium or to a lesser extent during then-Director of the Central Intelligence Agency George H. W. Bush's Team A/Team B exercise, which attempt to provide multiple viewpoints to which the key decisionmakers involved are exposed, suffer from a healthy self-selection bias in terms of who is chosen to participate and are still comparatively limited in the number of varying viewpoints they address due to necessary resource and time constraints.

President Eisenhower commissioned Project Solarium in part to devise a strategy for coping with a lack of knowledge about the Soviets' intentions and capabilities. Today, however, more and more strategic intelligence is publicly available. For example, the National Intelligence Council's^[xxiii] new *Global Trends* series is unclassified. We now arguably suffer not from too little information, but from too much. This has increasingly democratized the arena of grand strategy and enabled more and more even amateur analysts to help process the wealth of information in the public domain and formulate it into alternative visions for the future. One might argue that what these different entities focus on is simply policy or at best strategies for individual instruments of national power. However, even individual policy or strategy analyses might instead be seen as reflections of the overarching principles that they support (and that are often enumerated in the mission statements of many of these think tanks, institutes, and analysis centers), which as Sinnreich contends, are what in fact help form the basis of an enduring grand strategy.

Thus, it seems a bit disingenuous that Flournoy looks to government to provide a formalized strategic planning process and grand strategy even as she pens the introduction to CAPT Wayne Porter (USN) and Col Mark "Puck" Mykleby's (USMC) article, "A National Strategic Narrative," which proffers just that—its own long-term vision for the future.^[xxiv] It seems more likely that she was simply disappointed by the general direction our foreign policy under the Bush Administration was taking us. And while it should not be too readily discounted that the American people might derive some utility from an official grand strategy document insofar as their confidence in their leaders and in the direction the country is headed increases, lamenting the demise or poverty of grand strategy is far from accurate. Those that do are simply looking for it in the wrong place.

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End Notes

[i] For a small sample, see Tony Capaccio, "Hagel Orders Pentagon Strategy Review in Uncertain Times," *Bloomberg News*, March 18, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-03-18/hagel-calls-for-strategic-choices-review-to-shape-2015-budget.html> (accessed June 4, 2013); Douglas A. Macgregor, "Growing Concern Over Hagel's *Strategic Choices and Management Review*," *Time Magazine*, June 4, 2013, <http://nation.time.com/2013/06/04/growing-concern-over-hagels-strategic-choices-and-management-review/> (accessed June 4, 2013); and, John Reed, "2014: The Year of the Shrinking QDR?" *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2013, http://e-ring.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/26/2014_the_year_of_the_shrinking_qdr (accessed June 4, 2013).

[ii] Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, *Strategic Planning for U.S. National Security: A Project Solarium for the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Project Papers, 2006), 1.

[iii] See, for example, video of this presentation at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.: <http://www.heritage.org/events/2011/11/the-case-for-grand-strategy>.

[iv] Kevin Warsh and Jeb Bush, "A New Strategy for Economic Growth," *Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904007304576498110929470674.html> (accessed June 20, 2013).

[v] Paul Pillar, "Grand Strategy and the Dominant Paranoia," *The National Interest*, February 11, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/grand-strategy-the-dominant-paranoia-8092?page=1> (accessed June 20, 2013).

[vi] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 120.

[vii] Richard Hart Sinnreich, "Patterns of grand strategy," in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Politics, Diplomacy, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 254.

[viii] Richard H. Immerman, "Intelligence and Strategy: Historicizing Psychology, Policy, and Politics," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 1 (Jan. 2008): 10.

[ix] *Ibid.*, 11-12.

[x] *Ibid.*, 11.

[xi] Peter Robinson, letter to the editor, *Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2009, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704402404574527764020693266.html?mod=WSJ_topics_obama (accessed April 29, 2012).

[xii] *Ibid.*

[xiii] See President George W. Bush, Addresses and Remarks, "Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 38, no. 23 (June 10, 2002): 944-948. In his remarks claiming that "new threats also require new thinking" (946), President Bush laid out his logic for preemptive war. He stated, "And our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives" (946). Preemptive war comprised one part of his more overarching grand strategy, which can be loosely defined as democratization. Also, see President Barack H. Obama, Addresses and Remarks, "Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York," *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents*, no. 00412 (May 22, 2010): 4. President Obama notes, "As influence extends to more countries and capitals, we also have to build new partnerships and shape stronger international standards and institutions." One might loosely define his initial grand strategy as one of cooperation and, implicitly, restraint.

[xiv] David Jablonsky, "Why Is Strategy Difficult?" in *U.S. Army War College Guide to Strategy*, ed. Joseph R. Cerami and James F. Holcomb, Jr. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), 143. Jablonsky observes that Arthur Lykke's ends-ways-means framework is often favored by his

students because it provides this aforementioned structural certitude, even though, as he notes, students already know from time spent in the field that “there are limits to the scientific approach when dealing with human endeavors (143).”

[xv] I acknowledge that grand strategy cannot simply ignore the circumstances of the present.

[xvi] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 128.

[xvii] Sinnreich, 256.

[xviii] Insofar as Williamson Murray claims that grand strategy involves a willingness and ability to think about the future in terms of the goals of the given political entity involved, while also necessitating a willingness to “adapt to the difficulties of the present in reaching toward the future,” bureaucracy is best suited for managing these difficulties of the present. See Williamson Murray, “Thoughts on grand strategy,” in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3. Whether they can in fact actually adapt to them is work for another paper.

[xix] It is worth noting that much of the angst concerning the lack of a formalized process for grand strategy is misplaced. It should be directed at the lack of incentives for politicians to act in accordance with long-term plans for the future and the lack of means for holding them accountable for not doing so, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I focus on how best to produce these ideas, plans, and visions for the future. However, the ability of intellectuals outside of official government communities and their ability to use communications technology to hold politicians and senior policymakers accountable for their actions should not be discounted.

[xx] Such a panel would benefit greatly from the perspectives of individuals that are not products of the DOD system. Some examples of these individuals might include economics or sociology professors specializing in organizational behavior and incentivizing innovation and creative thought; executives from transformative companies such as Facebook, Amazon, or Google; or, businessmen from large firms that have to manage geopolitical risks in making foreign investments.

[xxi] Paul F. Cressey, “The Influence of the Literary Examination System on the Development of Chinese Civilization,” *American Journal of Sociology* (September 1929): 250–262.

[xxii] See Mackenzie Eaglen, “Hagel’s *Strategic Choices* study is something Americans need to see—now,” *Time Magazine*, June 6, 2013, <http://nation.time.com/2013/06/06/hagels-strategic-choices-study-is-a-warning-americans-need-to-see-now/> (accessed July 1, 2013) for an illustration of the criticisms that would ensue from a similarly opaque grand strategy process, which would undoubtedly be even more extended time-wise.

[xxiii] The National Intelligence Council falls under the auspices of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

[xxiv] CAPT Wayne Porter (USN) and Col. Mark “Puck” Mykleby (USMC), *A National Strategic Narrative* (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011).

About the Author



Sean F. X. Barrett

Sean F. X. Barrett is an active duty Captain in the United States Marine Corps. He is a signals intelligence officer and is currently an interagency intelligence fellow assigned to the Office of Intelligence and Analysis, U.S. Department of Treasury. He is a graduate of the National Intelligence University (NIU) and is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of War Studies, King's College London.

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