



Talking Grand Strategy

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—Carl von Clausewitz

LATELY THERE HAS been a great deal of editorializing, sermonizing even, on the topic of the grand strategy of the United States. A consensus has emerged that the United States has no grand strategy. At one end of the spectrum of opinion, we have Andrew Bacevich of Boston University claiming, “There is no czar for strategy. This most crucial portfolio remains unassigned.” From the other end of the spectrum the ubiquitous Ralph Peters writes, “Pause to consider how lockstep what passes for analysis in Washington has become.” Both men are referring to the U.S. strategy—or lack of it—in Afghanistan.¹ In August 2009, on the opening day of the new class at the Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni implied that the kind of “reordering” that took place after World War II under President Truman and retired General George C. Marshall has not taken place since. I submit that when General Zinni said “reordering,” he meant “grand strategy.”² The implications of this view are troubling. How could a global hegemon like the United States lack the *sine qua non* of a coherent national security strategy?

In order to have a useful discussion on this topic we must define our terms. First, the intermediate service colleges do not uniformly teach the concept of grand strategy. The Command and General Staff College does not teach grand strategy as a separate level of war to field grade officers, and the Army’s capstone operational doctrine Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, does not mention it once. To be fair, some instructors at CGSC do teach the concept—but on their own initiative. On the other hand, the Naval War College exposes students to the concept early and often in its curriculum.³ Perhaps Clausewitz’s *On War* best defines grand strategy: “At the strategic level, the campaign replaces the engagement, and the theater of operations takes the place of the position. At the next stage, the war as a whole replaces the campaign, and the whole country the theater of operations.” In other words, grand strategy is “the next stage,”

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ART: China, Ming Dynasty, era (1368-1644) Imperial Cavalry Guards



German Federal Archive, 183-29645-001

The historic Potsdam Conference, 17 July-2 August 1945, defined the basic tenets for establishing a peaceful, democratic transition in Germany after World War II. Here, Joseph Stalin, Harry Truman, and Winston Churchill talk informally during a break.

which encompasses the strategic considerations for “the whole country.”⁴

The uneven approach given to grand strategy in professional military education is but one symptom of a larger American problem at this level of war. However, it is not the only problem. There are historical precedents for a situation where a hegemonic or imperial power lacked a coherent grand strategy beyond simply “staying on top.” For example, classical scholars are still debating whether Rome and ancient China really had grand strategies understood as such by their ruling elites.⁵ There have been a surprising number of recent books on the topic of grand strategy in the United States, but one suspects that the audiences reading them are limited.⁶ There is also the issue of strategic culture, a sometimes nefarious term with many definitions. I define strategic culture

as a set of predisposed strategic tendencies. Such tendencies do not necessarily equate to a coherent grand strategy.⁷ The United States has had a strategic culture, but no grand strategy, for at least the current and previous three U.S. presidential administrations, perhaps more, if critics like Andrew Bacevich are right.

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A good place to start looking for a coherent grand strategy is in the Constitution of the United States, from which we can extrapolate a coherent grand strategy. Although the framers of that document could not foresee the elements of national power that the United States began to wield in the 20th century, they probably always believed in the potential of the latent power their system of government promised. They were men who believed that ideas mattered and that an attractive system of democratic and republican government could wield a unique power of its own when yoked to the rich resources of North America. The goals for a uniquely American grand strategy are not the subject of a guessing game and never have been. The Preamble to the Constitution explicitly lists them: “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”⁸ The writers of the Preamble had the long view in mind in claiming these goals for their “Posterity”—us. Additionally, the body of the Constitution implies the means to attain these lofty goals. The cultural means might be the entire document itself, a model of checks and balances using a “holy trinity” of executive, legislative, and judicial branches competing with and balancing each other. A wide spectrum of polities throughout the modern world reflects this system. The message, still in doubt at the time of the framing, was “Our system works, try it.”

A Brazilian army officer attending CGSC presented a “Know Your World” briefing on his country to the students, their families, and interested local residents of the Leavenworth area. His political discussion provided parallels to the U.S. model: three branches of government, bicameral legislature, civilian control of the military, and even a capital created out of the wilderness and given its own political status as a separate province.⁹ The way to become exceptional was to adopt the American political model. This is an example of cultural power, one element of grand strategy.

However, this model cannot be divorced from its historical and geographical contexts. These contexts lead to other elements in the Constitution’s grand strategy—no longer well understood—and explain why the United States does not currently have a grand strategy. Simply put, Americans do not

understand geography and history, and their educational system reflects this.¹⁰ This was not always the case. The founders understood the natural defense power that their geographic situation promised. Accordingly, they mandated the establishment and maintenance of a Navy to take advantage of the fact that the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans protected their “New Jerusalem.” The issue of homeland defense was simply a matter of geography and having enough barriers (through either coastal forts or a fleet) as an insurance policy. As George Washington famously said, “Without a decisive naval force, we can do nothing definitive, and with it, everything honorable and glorious.”¹¹

On land, it was a different story. Here the historical context came from America’s British heritage as much as it did from Enlightenment-era philosophy. Britons’ experience with the semi-dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell and the later Glorious Revolution that deposed James II gave them and their colonial cousins a deep mistrust of military strongmen and standing armies. Further, the experience of the French and Indian Wars and the American Revolution created a myth about the efficacy of the militia. Thus, the Constitution enshrined the concept of the citizen soldier in the Second Amendment, while at the same time limiting the ability to create a standing Army in article I, section 8, paragraph 12 of the same document. The same section also contained the Navy establishment clause as well as the provision for trade warfare at sea in paragraph 11.¹² Over time, the grand strategy came to encompass military nonintervention outside the Western Hemisphere, free trade access to whatever markets Americans desired, and the right to act as the hemispheric hegemon. These last two components are known as the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door Policy, respectively.¹³ The attainment of a contiguous landmass from sea to shining sea completed the defensive geographical requirement needed by this strategy with a sort of buffer zone in the southwest along the Rio Grande. This was the American grand strategy, constitutionally based, for almost 150 years—although the geographical land component came after the war with Mexico.

The strategy changed in response to the implosion of European-led Western civilization during the first half of the 20th century. The United States made an effort after 1919 to return to its original grand



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U.S. Army GEN David H. Petraeus, commander, International Security Assistance Force, confers with LTC David Oclander, commander of the 82d Airborne Division's, 1-504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 9 July 2010, in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

strategy, but the outbreak of an even more destructive and dangerous world war in 1939 spelled doom for this effort. Competing fascist, militarist, and totalitarian ideologies culturally threatened the U.S. strategy and physically threatened the eastern shore of its oceanic moat. Meanwhile, the Japanese attacked the Open Door trade component and the Pacific moat in 1941. Once the U.S. got involved in the general war raging across the globe, American political leaders now had the force of public opinion behind them (and no Great Depression to restrain them) to replace the old grand strategy with a more internationalist one. Even so, the United States might have reverted to its baseline grand strategy after World War II had it not been for the ideological, cultural, national security, and economic threats posed by the Soviet Union and the spread of communism after the collapse of European colonialism across the globe. A grand strategy focused on a specific threat outside the hemisphere and, within the context of a balance of nuclear power, replaced the more generic grand strategy practiced previously. The ends, catalogued in the Constitution's preamble, had not changed. The means (economic power, nuclear power, and air power) had. So, too, had the ways—containment and deterrence.¹⁴

The end of the Cold War should have occasioned a review of the grand strategy. Modern Americans tend to do well at achieving short-term goals, but not so well with mid- and long-term ones. The failure to revise U.S. grand strategy after the Cold War demonstrates this. It is high time to revise our grand strategy, and sooner rather than later.

The problem seems to be that the challenges of the present prevent us from moving ahead to align the grand strategy of the United States to current global realities and trends. The beautiful thing about a grand strategy is that it need not be any longer than the preamble of the Constitution—that word length is about right. I would submit that there is not much work to do to adopt a new grand strategy. Just re-adopt the old one, technologically updated of course and with a strong, but smaller, military establishment capable of defending our air,

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sea, and space “moats.” The war that lasted from 1914 to 1989 is over. The grand strategy that served the United States well before World War II is a fine framework for the 21st century.

Today’s operational environment is actually a more promising one in which to implement the traditional strategy than it appears at first blush. The American voting public does not favor interventionism. We need only divest ourselves of commitments made in error (Iraq), in haste with little thought of the end state (Afghanistan and Iraq), and those that have outlived their utility (Korea, Japan, troops in

Europe, and our Navy in the Persian Gulf). Strategic retrenchment of this sort, in which we remove the training wheels from the bicycle and stand on the sidewalk, is a necessary step toward healthy growth. The United States has more than enough national power to get involved if the bicycle falls down, but the U.S. must control its tendency toward strategic impatience (a feature of our strategic culture). We need to practice strategic patience. We need to learn to say “no.” In doing so, we may find we actually have more strategic choices—and less strategic imperatives—than ever. **MR**

NOTES

1. Andrew J. Bacevich, “Obama’s Strategic Blind Spot,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 July 2009; Ralph Peters, “Trapping Ourselves in Afghanistan,” *Joint Force Quarterly* no. 54 (3d Quarter 2009): 6.

2. General Zinni’s 11 August 2009 comments to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Class 2010-01 were for attribution.

3. Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office) passim. Grand strategy is not listed in the index nor discussed in chapter 6. The author currently teaches military history at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff officer course and previously taught in the Department of Joint, Interagency, and Multinational Operations where the national security strategy and the national military strategy are first introduced to students. For the Naval War College curriculum cf. <<http://www.nwc.navy.mil/academics/courses/sp/overview.aspx>> (10 July 2009).

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 358.

5. Edward Luttwak, *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), passim; for a counterpoint, see Kimberly Kagan, “Refining Roman Grand Strategy,” *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 2 (April 2006): 333. For China, simply see Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), passim.

6. For example, Bruce Berkowitz, *Strategic Advantage* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

7. Many useful, and some not so useful, books exist on strategic culture. For one

with a complete discussion using Ming Dynasty China as an example, see Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). For a representative discussion of an institutional strategic culture, see Roger W. Barnett, *Navy Strategic Culture: Why the Navy Thinks Differently* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009).

8. See <www.constitutionfacts.com/index.cfm?section=constitution&page=readTheConstitution.cfm> (10 July 2009).

9. “Know Your World Brazil,” Command and General Staff College, 24 June 2009.

10. A scathing critique of American historicism can be found in Williamson Murray, “Introduction: Searching for Peace,” in *The Making of Peace: Rulers, States, and the Aftermath of War*, eds. Williamson Murray and Jim Lacey (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23.

11. See <www.history.navy.mil/trivia/trivia02.htm> (10 July 2009).

12. See <www.constitutionfacts.com/index.cfm?section=constitution&page=readTheConstitution.cfm> (10 July 2009).

13. For a dated but still fascinating discussion of the Open Door in the 20th century, see Thomas Bryson, “Admiral Mark L. Bristol, an Open-Door Diplomat in Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5 (September 1974), 450-67. The Open Door was no myth. As a component of national strategy and policy, it can be found in National Archives and Record Administration Record Group 80 General Board 420-2, CNO “Memorandum in Re Tentative Draft of U.S. Naval Policy,” 4 March 1922, 1.

14. John Lewis Gaddis, “Containment: Its Past and Future,” *International Security* 5 (Spring 1981): 74-102.