

Why Aren't Americans Better at Strategy?

Steven Metz

This article followed Colonel Arthur F. Lykke Jr.'s article in the May 1989 edition of Military Review, which was devoted to strategy. Here, Steven Metz outlines the difficulties of defining a coherent national security strategy in a democracy where consensus and the need for short-term results often seem to outweigh long-term interests. Such a situation is especially difficult for the military profession, which remains responsible for developing and executing a coherent national military strategy. Metz's frank views were accompanied with the standard Department of Defense disclaimer, noting that "the views expressed in this article are those of the author" and did not reflect establishment thinking.

TODAY AMERICAN SECURITY professionals and policy makers are inundated with calls for a coherent national security strategy. Critics contend that no comprehensive strategy emerged to replace the one shattered by the trauma of Vietnam. And, the argument continues, the absence of a unified strategy is rapidly passing from a bearable handicap to a true danger. Even those who do not go so far as to insist that the United States has no grand strategy admit that strategy is not a national strength. In general, Americans "have not developed a native tradition of strategic thought and doctrine" and exhibit an "inability or unwillingness to think strategically."¹ No one is more aware of this than military officers who deal on a daily basis with the threats facing the nation. Since all military missions flow from strategy, vagueness and inconsistency in the national strategy hampers the efficient performance of military tasks from the platoon level to the Pentagon. Skill in tactics or the operational art is useful only as a reflection of strategy; thus, the coherence or incoherence of national strategy reverberates throughout the military.

Strategy, according to B.H. Liddell Hart, is a process of calculating and coordinating means and ends.² Given the absence of a strategic tradition, the US currently faces a mismatch between commitments and the capability to attain or protect these commitments.³ There are three potential solutions to such a dilemma:

- An increase in means.
- A decrease in commitments.
- The development of more efficient and effective ways of using existing capabilities.

It is unlikely, given political and economic realities, that a substantially larger proportion of national resources will be devoted to security in the upcoming decade, and retrenching on global commitments is both difficult and dangerous. This leaves only the drive to squeeze the maximum impact from existing capabilities. One way to do this is through a superior national strategy that coordinates all elements of national power in pursuit of clear objectives.

During the last 40 years, there were 13 attempts to craft a broad national security strategy.⁴ Most recently, Congress mandated the publication of an annual statement of American national security strategy by the president. In an associated move, the blue-ribbon Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy produced a number of suggestions.⁵ Yet, as concrete blueprints for a coherent national strategy, both of these suffered from serious shortcomings. The White House document was more a statement of "here's what we're doing" than a framework for the future, and the commission's findings proved so politically controversial that they were not embraced by top national security policy makers.

Retired Senator Barry M. Goldwater, who is painfully aware of the mismatch between national commitments and national means, bluntly stated, "We need a

Centuries of isolationism, the absence of clear threats to national security and abundant natural resources meant that there was little need for strategy. Attention naturally turned inward, and domestic matters received priority over international concerns. In addition, the geographic isolation of the United States, during the crucial period when the nation's political culture and Weltanschauung developed, led to a self-centeredness and misunderstanding of other cultures. Any coherent strategy must be grounded in comprehension of both one's own values, proclivities and perceptions and those of potential allies and enemies.

grand strategy and we need it now.”⁶ Clearly, the nation is beginning to suffer the consequences of an approach to the world driven by whims and disjointed policies. Such an *ad hoc* technique is short on precisely the characteristics that determine strategy: vision, consistency and creativity. But even while the US desperately needs a coherent strategy, security professionals and policy makers seem incapable of developing one. The causes of this conundrum lie deep within our national psyche and encompass cultural, organizational and historical factors. Since the military is an active participant in the drive for a national strategy, the better an officer understands these obstacles, the better he is equipped to transcend them.

Cultural Factors

Impatience permeates American culture. Whether in finances or national economics, the thirst for quick gratification generates a “credit card” mentality. Resources are used wantonly and frugality rejected, since, like the grasshopper of childhood myth, the nation assumes that the future will take care of itself. Deficits and weaknesses can be confronted later rather than now. This results in a “throw away society” where next week’s fashion, automobile or song must, by definition, be radically different than this week’s.

American foreign and national security policy reflects this. Where Asians and Europeans appear willing to wait decades for the attainment of objectives, the United States flits from tactic to tactic, giving each only the briefest period to generate tangible results. This impatience amplifies rapid swings in popular moods, particularly concerning the extent of American responsibility for the construction and maintenance of world order. Over time, attitudes range from megalomaniacal

confidence that our system of social, political and economic organization is appropriate for all nations, to morose self-doubt, characterized by the belief that the exercise of American power invariably generates evil.

From this comes a variant of liberal internationalism—the American ideology which is essentially antivisionary. American liberalism is process-oriented rather than value-prescriptive. As long as the proper processes are followed—representative democracy, capitalism, rule by law, constitutionally guaranteed liberties—the ideology does not specify codes of individual or group behavior. The dilemma for the United States comes when the appropriate processes do not generate the expected outcomes, such as political stability, individual rights and economic prosperity. On one hand, the United States hesitates to dictate outcomes to other nations—witness our discomfort with manipulation of the election in El Salvador to assure the election of Jose Napoleon Duarte—yet becomes frustrated when liberal processes are perverted by erstwhile allies.

In a sense, any sort of central planning is considered a potential threat to freedom. A rigid plan is seen as the depersonalized equivalent of a dictator, and instead flexibility, manifested as “muddling through,” is favored. Traditionally, Americans believed that “grand strategy was the agenda of monarchs, serving their needs at the expense of their people.”⁷ This mitigates against what Edward N. Luttwak calls the “discipline of strategy.”⁸ Further hindrances to strategic thinking come from the general American approach to problem solving. This favors atomist and reductionist techniques that stress dichotomies and differences rather than linkages and relationships.⁹ The outcome is national security policy stressing a historical and politically sterile quantitative analysis.¹⁰

Organizational Factors

Cultural activities affect the way that decision making is structured. Organizational factors, in turn, create obstacles to the development of strategy. Two elements of our political organization are particularly problematic. The first is the dispersion of power—the system of checks and balances integral to the American political system. From Montesquieu on, political theorists touted the ability of checks and balances to preserve individual liberty and protect against state repression, but this same feature also mitigates against coherence and creativity.

Strategy making in the American system is essentially a process of consensus building. Power is spread among a multitude of agencies, and authority and responsibility are often quarantined. This is especially

evident in relations between the branches of government. As the keeper of the purse, Congress is a vital actor in strategy formulation, but the natural antagonism between the legislature and the executive branch, when combined with the domestic orientation of Congress, hinders consistency. The congressional budget process, which leads to erratic funding levels for international commitments, amplifies this problem.

The electoral process erects further obstacles to a coherent and consistent strategy. Policies are susceptible to radical quadrennial swings. In fact, such swings are virtually guaranteed by the need of political challengers to draw distinctions between themselves and incumbents. In addition, the spoils system, which is a traditional part of American politics, often leads to the selection of policy makers based more on loyalty to the president or possession of proper ideological credentials than on an understanding of history, statecraft or strategy.¹¹

Within this political turbulence, the intended vehicle of stability is the professional elite—both civilian and military—that staffs the national security bureaucracy. This talented group does, in fact, impart some sorely needed steadiness to American security policy. But the problem, as Henry A. Kissinger noted, is the essential lack of creativity and innovation inherent in any bureaucracy.¹² Standing operating procedures, precedents, and the imperatives of interagency consensus and intra-agency conformity often stifle new ideas, and repressively channel policy into tested patterns reflecting past problems rather than present ones.

Beginning in the 1960s, the predominance of a “managerial” style within the Department of Defense (DOD) further isolated those rare planners who did think in strategic terms. Associated with the DOD reorganizations of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, this was initially an attempt to solidify civilian dominance of the military.¹³ The services quickly adopted the position, “if you can’t beat them, join them,” and began to stress management technique and quantitative analysis in their own practices and training.¹⁴ The predictable result was a decline in the skills needed for strategy.

Historical Factors

Shackles on innovation are not simply the creation of bureaucratic socialization, and rapid swings in political moods do not come solely from the absence of courage in contemporary elected officials. The reasons lie deeper than that. In fact, the “astrategic” nature of the American approach to the world grew directly from our historical experience.

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meant that there was little need for strategy. Attention naturally turned inward, and domestic matters received priority over international concerns. In addition, the geographic isolation of the United States, during the crucial period when the nation’s political culture and *Weltanschauung* developed, led to a self-centeredness

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and misunderstanding of other cultures. Any coherent strategy must be grounded in comprehension of both one’s own values, proclivities and perceptions and those of potential allies and enemies. The psychological isolation of the United States, which lingers to this day, hinders such understanding.

In a great twist of irony, American military success was thought to prove that a peacetime grand strategy was unnecessary. In the 19th century, the only truly difficult war fought by Americans was, in fact, fought among Americans.¹⁵ Twentieth century experience further reinforced the belief that production, rather than skill at strategy, determined national security. The ability of the United States to mobilize appeared boundless, hence these did not have to be used with efficiency. It was only conflict with an adversary equally deep in military resources—the Soviet Union—that began to chip away at this confidence. In a new variation of this traditional belief Americans concluded that technological superiority could offset quantitative weakness, and again, skill, frugality and efficiency—all features of strategy—were ignored.

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Clearly, the United States has not become a purely conservative or reactionary power along the lines of Prince Metternich's Austria. There is still something of the old liberal spark in American foreign policy and at least a misty vision of a preferred future world. But at the same time, the conservative tendencies in our statecraft are undeniable, and all too often we seek to thwart change rather than encourage and manage it. Whether one supports or opposes the conservatism that accompanies global responsibility and world leadership, the obstacles posed to the generation of a national strategy remain.

The "astrategic" characteristics of Americans are at their worst in the realm of grand strategy. It is there, where the need for integration and the impact of cultural and organizational factors is the greatest, that creativity, consistency and vision are in the shortest supply. Military strategy suffers somewhat less. Because the military is, to some extent, isolated from the rest of society, a distinct military subculture, which includes patterns of analysis, understanding and problem solving, exists. As a general rule, the military subculture is less hostile to strategic thinking than the wider American culture. But while the military subculture softens the impact of cultural, organizational and historical factors, it cannot totally deflect them. After all, military strategy must be accepted by the wider political leadership and, on a personal level, no officer is totally divorced from the nonmilitary dimension of American culture. Military strategy is simply one small part of a larger whole, since, as Gregory D. Foster noted, "strategy in the modern

age can only be thought of as *grand strategy*."¹⁶ Thus, the military strategist must understand the impact that both his immediate environment and the wider social context have on strategic planning.

Yet, however useful it is to understand the reasons for the "astrategic" tendencies of the United States, such understanding is, at best, a small step toward resolution of the problem. The real key is to search for ways to transcend these limitations. But given the pervasiveness and depth of the constraints on strategy, partial solutions are the best that can be expected. Many of the factors, particularly cultural and historical ones, are beyond the control of cognoscenti who decry the lack of an American strategy. Even organizational factors, though more controllable, can prove extremely resilient to reform. The failure of the most serious and sustained attempt to organize American national security strategically—that of Richard M. Nixon and Kissinger—illustrates how truly difficult it is.

The unhappy conclusion is that in the short term, the United States must accept the costs that accrue from the inability to craft a coherent and consistent grand strategy. The consensus required to truly transcend the factors that hinder the development of a national strategy will only emerge as the costs of an "astrategic" national security policy become glaringly clear. Even the officer who is aware of this cannot enact major changes in the essence of the American system; but armed with understanding, he can learn to tolerate the frustrations that come from striving for strategy in an "astrategic" setting. **MR**

NOTES

1. Richard B. Foster, "Editor's Introduction," *Comparative Strategy* (1978), ix; Gregory D. Foster, "Missing and Wanted: A U.S. Grand Strategy," *Strategic Review* (Fall 1985):14.
2. B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d revised edition (New York: Signet), 322.
3. Jeffrey Record, *Revising U.S. Military Strategy* (New York: Pergamon, 1984).
4. Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Making of American National Strategy, 1948-1988," *The National Interest* (Spring 1988):66.
5. *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, January 1988); *Discriminate Deterrence*, Report of the Commission on Long-Term Strategy, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 1988). The first version of the official statement was in January 1987.
6. Quoted in the US Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *National Security Strategy: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services*, 100th Congress, 1st Session, January-April 1987, 6.
7. Michael Vlahos, "The End of America's Postwar Ethos," *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1988):1,093.
8. "On the Need to Reform American Strategy," *Planning U.S. Security*, ed. Philip S. Kronenberg, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1981), 13.
9. Gregory D. Foster, "Missing and Wanted," 14-16.
10. Richard B. Foster, "Editor's Introduction," x.
11. I.M. Destler, Leslie H. Gelb and Anthony Lake, *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Unmaking of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).
12. Henry A. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 3d edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 17-26.
13. James M. Roherty, *Decisions of Robert S. McNamara: A Study of the Role of the Secretary of Defense* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970), 105-106.
14. Colin S. Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Experience," *International Security* (Fall 1981):26.
15. *Ibid.*, 27.
16. Gregory D. Foster, testimony in US Senate, National Security Strategy, 165.

Steven Metz is the Henry L. Stimson professor of military studies at the US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. He received a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University. He served on the Strategic Studies Committee, Department of Joint and Combined Operations, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and has been on the faculty at Towson State University and Virginia Technical Institute. He has been a frequent contributor to *Military Review* since 1987.