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The American Political Culture and Strategic Planning

FREDERICK M. DOWNEY and STEVEN METZ

The job of the military strategist is not an easy one. In addition to dealing with dangerous enemies, unreliable or vulnerable allies, and inadequate resources, he must also confront the distractions of politics. However much the strategist might prefer to ignore it, both the objectives of strategy and the context of strategy formulation are political. Simultaneously balancing the dictates of politics and the need to deter or defeat an enemy is perhaps the core dilemma of strategy formulation.

All strategic advice must pass three tests: it must be suitable, feasible, and acceptable.¹ Suitability and feasibility can accurately be called the rational criteria of strategy formulation. Tests for suitability and feasibility are admittedly complex and require mature professional judgment, but reduce well to a linear, almost mathematical thought process. Since they are prepared by training and education, most officers have little trouble with this. Acceptability, however, is partly rational and partly not. It requires the strategist to assess not only military costs, but also the preferences, moods, values, and proclivities of decisionmakers and the public. The test for strategic acceptability, in others words, is based in a political as well as strategic culture.

Every nation has a political culture which comprises the context of strategy.² It is the source of the nonrational criteria for strategy formulation and is composed of preferences, values, and proclivities derived from the nation's historical experience, ideology, and political and economic organization.³ Political culture provides the equivalent of battlefield friction that erodes the cold rationality of the strategic process.

A strategy that fails to integrate the political culture, however well it may meet the rational criteria of suitability and feasibility, is doomed to failure. This is particularly true in the United States, where civilians dominate national decisionmaking, public opinion affects strategic choices, and separate military subcultures exist. As Liddell Hart noted, "He who pays

the piper calls the tune, and strategists might be better paid in kind if they attuned their strategy, so far as is rightly possible, to the popular ear."⁴ This means that the sensitivity of the military strategist to political culture helps determine the eventual acceptability of his product.

American political culture is particularly complex and changes rapidly, but there are certain constants and enduring themes. While there is little the military strategist can do to transcend the distractions of politics, understanding key themes of the political culture is the first step in assuring that his advice passes the test of acceptability.

Attitudes Toward Time

Americans often behave as if the world were created in 1945. In US foreign policy there is little of the deep sense of history that pervades the statecraft of European and Asian nations. This should not be surprising: obsession with new things is central to American culture. Whether in popular songs, clothing, automobiles, breakfast cereal, or public policy, the newest is usually considered the best. The American culture is decidedly anti-classical, and history books are thus considered dusty obstacles to a schoolboy's graduation rather than reservoirs of guidance on the motives and intentions of other states.

The successful strategist must overcome this narrowness of historical vision, and integrate deeper antecedents into his analysis. At the same time, he must be sensitive to this characteristic of the American political culture, and package strategic advice in such a way that its newness is accentuated. Even when "old wine" is best, the strategist must sometimes decant it into new bottles. A clear example is seen in the current development of a strategy for low-intensity conflict. Much of this is derived from 1960s-style counterinsurgency experience, but anything labeled "LIC strategy" stands a better chance of acceptance than "counterinsurgency strategy," which

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smacks of defeat in Vietnam and thus is politically unpalatable. Even those dimensions of counterinsurgency doctrine which have stood the test of time must be repackaged so as to appear new.

The desire for quick and conclusive resolution of conflict is closely linked to this narrowness of historical vision. Impatience places the United States at a decided disadvantage when dealing with steadfast antagonists such as the North Vietnamese or Soviets.⁵ The US electoral cycle accentuates impatience, since the security strategy of any presidential administration must generate tangible results before the next campaign.

For the strategist, impatience creates problems. Even when aware that recommendations likely to generate quick solutions will find a receptive audience among political decisionmakers, the astute strategist also knows that it is precisely those types of recommendations that can easily fail once implemented. The strategist is often put in a position of choosing between giving bad advice that is likely to be heeded and good advice that will probably be ignored. There is no easy solution to this dilemma. The best the strategist can do is to remain aware that political costs must be factored in when recommending courses of action unlikely to generate quick results. Because of these political costs, recommendations in behalf of long-drawn-out courses should be made only on pressing issues where the long-term benefits justify short-term political costs.

Attitudes Toward Political Power

Ours is a tempestuous and lusty democracy; such is both a blessing and a burden. Authority in the American political system is diffused and, at times, fragmented. The division of powers in the Constitution institutionalizes some diffusion of power, but its actual extent varies according to shifting popular attitudes and moods. From the late 1940s until the 1960s, the belief prevailed that the United States should speak with a single voice on security issues. The result was a great deal of deference to the president and his top advisers. Vietnam shattered this. Congress challenged presidential leadership on national security by legislation such as the War Powers Resolution and the Jackson-Vanik, Clark, and Boland amendments, and built a counterweight to the executive branch bureaucracy through enlargement of congressional staffs.

The strategist deals directly or indirectly with legislators who have widely differing political constituencies and different ideas about what constitutes national security. These two factors affect the priority assigned domestic and international aspects of security by the legislator. Thirty-thousand congressional aides support these legislators, and each is vying for influence and authority. Some are knowledgeable; many are not. The 25-year-old congressional aide attempting to influence strategy can be a real

problem for the military strategist. But at the same time that staffs grew, authority within Congress was shattered by the decline of the seniority and committee systems. Today, Congress with its numerous princes and political fiefdoms would exasperate and confound even the ideal military genius adumbrated by Clausewitz.

This diffusion of authority is a vital safeguard of individual liberty. As Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert noted, "When strategy is freed from effective political control, it becomes mindless and heedless, and it is then that war assumes that absolute form that Clausewitz dreaded."⁶ But at the same time, diffusion of political authority hampers strategic coherence.⁷ To the extent that strategy formulation is political, it becomes less a rational matching of means and ends and more the application of clout to enforce compromises and produce acceptable political outcomes. The strategist must be aware that acceptance of his recommendations is in part contingent on their congruence with the world view of the top political elite. However much this may hinder dealing with the enemy efficiently and effectively, it is reality. And the more that authority is diffused—the larger the pertinent elite—the more that compromises must be made during strategy formulation.

Consensus constrained partisanship on strategic questions before Vietnam. Temporarily a sense of imminent threat stoked the belief that politics should "stop at the water's edge," but as a result of the war in Indochina strategy became grist for partisan politics.⁸ Once the Pandora's box of partisan disagreement concerning the war in Southeast Asia was opened, more general politicization of strategy was unloosed upon the land. Since this situation persists, the military strategist must understand the ebbs and flows of domestic politics.

Despite occasional protests from early critics like Emory Upton, American political culture traditionally held that the military should be quarantined from politics. When the nation was founded, the professional military was considered an element of state power: to the extent the military was strong or a military style of thinking dominated public policy, individual rights were deemed threatened. This attitude changed during World War II and its immediate aftermath.⁹ In the early years of the Cold War the impact of former officers such as George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower and the institutionalization of a system for military input into strategy formulation, particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff, raised the influence of the uniformed military over foreign and national security policy.

After this brief ascent, the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 and Robert McNamara's use of systems analysis in strategy formulation once again began to limit the role of the military.¹⁰ Since Vietnam, the influence of the military over national policy has shifted according to public attitudes and the proclivities of the president. As the recent furor surrounding the Iran-Contra hearings showed, distrust of the military actor at the strategio-

political level persists in some quarters. "Ollie for President" bumper stickers notwithstanding, Americans do not want strategy and policy run solely by the military, even though they seem to admire the personal qualities the uniform exemplifies. The idea of trading arms for hostages and using the profits to support the Contras may have been a "neat idea" and a logically sound approach, but it clearly failed the test of acceptability.

Anti-militarism means that any recommendation perceived as strictly military is likely to encounter problems. The uniform sometimes brings credibility, but can also be a political liability. In communicating recommendations, then, the military strategist must make use of non-military political allies from both the executive and legislative branches of the government. The credibility of strategic advice is contingent on having the support of both military and civilian thinkers.

Attitudes Toward Military Force

Historically, Americans have distrusted the use of military force for the attainment of national objectives, but this began to change when the nation assumed global responsibilities following World War II. From the late 1940s until the 1960s, US strategy increasingly relied on military force. The NSC-68 version of containment dominated national strategy, and military power was often considered a panacea for political problems. Following Vietnam, public attitudes swung strongly in the other direction, with a resulting depreciation of any use of military power. In the 1980s, this feeling declined somewhat, but national strategists no longer placed the same blind trust in military force as in the 1950s and early 1960s.

A corollary to mistrust of military means in the attainment of national objectives is the de-coupling of politico-diplomatic initiatives and military force. Americans have traditionally assumed a clear demarcation between peace and war, with different rules for each. Force and diplomacy were mutually exclusive alternatives, with force to be used only when all diplomatic initiatives failed. As the debate over the Grenada intervention showed, the decision to intervene was initially challenged on the basis that it was not clear that all diplomatic options had been pursued or exhausted. This attitude leaves the United States ill-prepared to deal with conflicts that

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fall somewhere between war and peacetime diplomacy, including military operations short of war such as the reprisal bombing of Libya, and all of the other activities now classified under "low-intensity conflict."

The successful military strategist must be aware of this tendency, but must also recognize the organic relationship of diplomatic and military elements of national power; strategic recommendations should reflect this. A strategy which relies heavily on military force must be coupled with the use of non-military elements of national power in a multi-track approach. Multi-track strategies are intrinsically useful when dealing with ambiguous problems in low-intensity conflict, but the astute strategist represents the tracks as essential and mutually reinforcing rather than as separate alternatives.

Attitudes Toward Other Nations

If the United States is not solipsistic, it is at least terribly self-centered. To some extent, of course, all nations tend to impute their own perceptions, values, and motivations to others in what is called "mirror imaging."¹¹ The United States, however, often carries this tendency to extremes, with the result that American strategy overlooks key differences in the perceptions, values, and motivations of both allies and opponents.¹² The military strategist should attempt to transcend this tendency and remain sensitive to cultural differences in friends and enemies. In fact, Liddell Hart argued that "a nation might profit a lot if the advisory organs of the government included an 'enemy department,' covering all spheres of war and studying the problems of war from the enemy's point of view."¹³ Even while the strategist attempts to think like the enemy, he should also be aware that in those instances where differences in national perceptions play a major role in his strategic recommendations, such a spin may be difficult to explain to decisionmakers not equally sensitive to cultural differences.

One important perceptual difference which flavors US strategy concerns technology. As befits a nation with great technological prowess, the United States often attempts to solve strategic and political problems with technological fixes. The air war in Vietnam and the use of the battleship *New Jersey* off the coast of Lebanon are clear illustrations. According to André Beaufre, this infatuation with technology and superior firepower led to a general depreciation of strategy, while Edward Luttwak argued that reliance on technology caused the United States to rely on "nonstrategies."¹⁴

A military strategist cognizant of this propensity will be better prepared to avoid its pitfalls. American technological superiority clearly is a factor in strategic analysis, but it is not a panacea: there are no strategic panaceas. Strategy involves at least two actors, each with different, culturally determined attitudes to technology. Any strategy which imputes American perceptions—including an infatuation with technology which sometimes

borders on awe—to others is suspect. The strategist must also be sensitive to the domestic impact of the American fondness for technological solutions. Since political pressure to seek technological solutions will exist, the strategist can explore these before recommending more ambiguous and expensive alternatives. A rationale for the rejection of purely technological solutions could then form part of the strategic recommendations.

Attitudes Toward World Role

The epic historical accomplishments of the United States—continental expansion, the building of the world's preeminent industrial economy, technological prowess, and the creation of a stable, free, and democratic society—spawned in its citizens a sense of optimistic exuberance. Thus, as Colin Gray noted, "It was believed that Americans could achieve anything that they set their hands to in earnest."¹⁵ Confidence of such magnitude makes it difficult to establish priorities. If, after all, everything can be accomplished, there is little need for the arduous labors of prioritizing objectives. The frequent result is a means/ends mismatch such as the two-and-a-half-war strategy and John Kennedy's promise to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe."

However justified this sense of omnipotence might have been in the 1960s, it is less valid today given the economic limits of American power and the arrival of US-Soviet strategic parity. Strategic recommendations today must not only indicate what means should be used to attain certain objectives, but also justify the priority assigned objectives. The strategist must be aware that even when given fairly limited objectives and asked to discover means of attaining them, there are always a number of other national objectives which demand resources. The skilled strategist thus knows that his immediate task is part of a larger fabric, and occasionally the immediate task must be sacrificed for the greater good.

Another traditional element of the American political culture is a sense of "specialness." The United States was the first nation organized by a written constitution based on protection of individual liberties; this set us apart from the European powers. For 150 years this sense of specialness supported isolationism in foreign affairs, as the United States believed that involvement in great-power politics would force the nation to compromise its ideals. When isolationism was no longer possible, this sense of specialness facilitated the acceptance of leadership of the Western world.

The tendency toward isolationism remains deeply embedded in the American national psyche. This reality is important to the strategist because it often causes a difference in perspective between decisionmakers, who tend to be more internationalist, and the general public where isolationism remains strong. This is especially true when assigning priorities among

domestic and international issues since the public generally focuses on domestic problems unless a clear and present international threat exists. This tension results in boom-or-bust defense budgets and periodic swings between engagement and disengagement from world responsibility. These factors make steady, long-term planning difficult, but are an immutable part of the American strategic environment.

World responsibility also makes American strategy ripe with symbolic content. For the rest of the world, American inattention to a problem carries meaning. For example, failure to censure Israel for its treatment of West Bank Palestinians or to force the government of South Africa to dismantle apartheid are seen by many Third World nations as tacit acceptance of and support for these practices. Inaction, in other words, is as symbolically important as action. The pressure to take a stand on every world problem complicates the task of matching means and ends. There is nothing the individual strategist can do about this, but he should attempt to ascertain the symbolic content attached to American actions (or inactions) by others, and use this in pursuing national interests.

Conclusion

The successful strategist must remain aware that certain combinations of means and ends are preferable or unacceptable because of cultural factors. If not so aware, he may create a theoretically efficacious strategy which cannot or will not be implemented. Or, the strategist might overreact in the opposite direction, consciously or unconsciously avoiding the travails of politics and cultural factors by over-generalization. This results in a strategy that lacks priorities and discrimination.¹⁶

To be sure, the successful military strategist must not let cultural factors dictate strategic decisions. He should never forget that he is charged with the efficient attainment of political objectives. But he also knows that efficiency and probability of success are only part of the equation. They are joined by the criterion of acceptability which is determined by the perceived congruence of strategic recommendations and political culture. Unfortunately, perceptions make packaging nearly as important as content. That is reality.

The successful strategist must understand American political culture. Attaining such understanding is a life-long endeavor. There are enduring themes of the political culture, but other elements emerge, disappear, and change in importance. A simple checklist will not suffice, because the themes of the political culture are not of equal importance in every situation. The strategist must be alert to social conditions which cause shifts in values. For example, changing American attitudes toward race since the 1950s have affected the political acceptability of strategic cooperation with South Africa. Other identifiable trends such as public concern with drug trafficking, the

desire for a balanced federal budget, and the growing political importance of Hispanic Americans will soon begin to take on strategic implications. The strategist who ignores such factors and recommends something like strategic cooperation with South Africa on strictly military grounds is egregiously at fault for failing to apply the test of political acceptability. Since evaluation of the political culture requires insight, it is best approached by a serious, rigorous, and continuous study of American military and social history and current events. Formal professional and civilian education alone is not enough.

The strategist must not only create a strategy that will achieve the desired end, he must also sell it. One can argue that this is not the task of the military strategist, but rather of civilian political leaders. This is true, but it is also naive. A strategist who creates a product solely according to the criteria of suitability, feasibility, and acceptable military cost has done the most important three-fourths of his job, but that missing fourth—failure to package the strategy in a politically palatable fashion—may make the other three-fourths irrelevant.

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