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# The New Strategic Trinity

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At the end of the 20th century, the more successful the state, the less important its military. In the early 19th century, Carl von Clausewitz, the greatest philosopher of war the West has produced since Machiavelli, created a strategic model based on the interplay of the state, its people, and its military. The concept was robust and useful, although it never applied to the United States, where the military was kept to a subordinate role unimaginable to a Central European of the Napoleonic era. Today, that Prussian theorist's model applies only to cankered, coup-prone countries, such as Congo or Paraguay, or to military-braced states such as Turkey and Pakistan. Every country in which the Clausewitzian model remains relevant is a failure. For successful states, where the military is only a tool of occasional or last resort--and not a domestic actor--the new strategic trinity describes the creative tension among the state, its people, and information.

Like all philosophers who gain public notoriety, Clausewitz has been simplified and often twisted in practice. A German Romantic forever misread as a rationalist, his core trinity examined the interplay of reason, passion, and chance, made manifest by the state, the people, and war. But even this more subtle distinction breaks down in our time. While chance still influences the battlefield, cultural determinism dramatically reduces the role of chance at the strategic level. An informationally empowered culture such as our own can be defeated by an information-deprived culture only if we choose to be, as we did in Somalia.

The Clausewitzian model was designed with balance-of-power Europe in mind, not the lopsided world of the new millennium. An archetypal German of his time, Clausewitz was forever torn between chaos and clockwork, between the drill field and the darkness of the soul. His death from cholera--in the same epidemic that killed Hegel--must have been a relief to him, absolving him of the need to finish his impossible work. While he remains worth studying, his value today lies more in his high-Romantic appreciation of the role of will in human affairs than in his interpretation of state-military relations (even his assumption of the state's rationality has crumpled--who would claim that today's Russia is a rational state, to say nothing of the Germany that immolated its soul in the ovens of Auschwitz?). And, if nothing else, Clausewitz whoppingly underestimated the importance of information in war, dismissing even the need for reconnaissance. He would have been baffled by America, and by America's success, in which the First Amendment leads directly to military victory.

We are the sum of that which we are allowed to know, and American citizens and soldiers are allowed to know more than any human beings in history.

This essay is not a commercial for computers, which are only one (albeit important) factor in the cognitive revolution dividing the world into winners and losers. Our sloppy rhetoric about the Information Age is ever short on specifics, and generally cites the wonderful volume of data now available to the average citizen as revolutionary. But that flood of information has the quality of an act of nature--immense, uncontainable, and irreversible, and, as with a natural flood, some countries and cultures prove better prepared than others to cope with the consequences. There are two salient factors that determine the success or failure of states and peoples in the post-modern age: the *quality* of information available to the population, and the *ability* of the population to discern quality information.

That sounds simple. It is not. Using the United States as the benchmark, only a handful of nations come close to the informational veracity of our society and the interpretive genius of our population. Our concept of objective facts, the

complex cross-referencing within our culture that verifies facts, and the average citizen's ability to identify, accept, and exploit facts are the products of at least five centuries of social development--and possibly of a much longer period.

Consider a recent debacle internal to the American media. CNN, the world's most powerful news selector, broadcast a claim that US forces employed nerve gas in Indochina. Even allowing for a general resentment of CNN within media circles, the speed and thoroughness of the self-correction process was remarkable. CNN had not respected the available facts, and the network's peers took them to task. CNN had to apologize publicly and fire at least a few minor players in penance.

Such a scenario would be possible only in North America above the Rio Grande or in Northwestern Europe. Elsewhere, it either would not have occurred at all because the government controlled or suborned the media, or, when it broke, other local media outlets would have jumped on the bandwagon and made even more extravagant claims.

This matters. Our "trivial" respect for the truth enables our economy, our government, and our society to function in the manner we Americans take for granted. We are a measuring culture, from gross national product down to the number of Americans who now prefer salsa to ketchup. We can't get enough factual data, and we demand that it be as accurate as possible.

Other cultures do not want to know. Consider our drug problem--which is certainly real. When I worked at the Office of National Drug Control Policy, we routinely heard complaints from drug source and transit countries that the United States was the world's greatest drug consumer, with the highest per capita addiction rate, and so on. As I visited country after country, it became evident to me that, along with select European and East Asian countries, we were the only ones attempting to keep honest books. Drug consumption and addiction rates appeared far higher in Burma, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Mexico, Brazil, the Caribbean, and a host of other countries (Myanmar/Burma may have not only the highest rate of heroin addiction in the world, but the world's highest HIV infection rates in its northern provinces). But in each of these countries, the empirical reality conflicted with their representational needs, or simply had no utility, and nobody bothered with it (Thailand is an exception). Each government and population found it more convenient to think of the United States as both the greatest victim and greatest victimizer.

The CNN Operation Tailwind/sarin-gas story also comes into play here, since no level of apologies and explanations will kill the story in the less-developed world. We may have moved on, but the belief that the United States used nerve gas against its enemies will live on through our lifetimes in countries where a lurid story is more appealing than cold truth (especially if the story "reveals" American wickedness). This includes not only countries such as Iraq and Libya that will use the instant-myth to justify their own actions, but most of the world. CNN has done irreparable damage to efforts to contain the chemical weapons threat.

Yes, there are Americans who believe the *National Enquirer*, or that our government is nothing but a layer-cake of conspiracies. But they are proportionately few--and they are almost always from the least-educated, least-successful elements of our society. In failed or superseded cultures, even elites believe the CIA is responsible when the plumbing doesn't work.

Consider Egypt. While a great deal of data is available to literate Egyptians, those individuals are not "truth literate." If you read the Egyptian papers, you will be astonished at the difference with which they interpret the world. The media is about cultural and national self-justification, not about reporting facts. In one brief stretch this year, Egyptian papers reported that Israel was behind the attacks on local tourist sites (a fabrication created by the government to avoid admitting a domestic terrorist problem); that Princess Diana had been murdered by British intelligence so that she would not deliver a half-Arab, Islamic half-brother to the heir to the throne (this story has astonishing credibility throughout the Islamic world); and that Egyptian schoolchildren were suffering convulsions because Israelis had slipped them poisoned pencils that infected them as they did their lessons (perhaps the best excuse for nonperformance since "The dog ate my homework").

A country or culture that cannot tell fact from fiction cannot succeed in the postmodern era, with its dependence on data to create wealth.

Our national ability to identify, accept, and absorb high-quality data may be our most underappreciated characteristic as a people. Consider the effectiveness with which Americans have learned to invest in stocks and mutual funds in the last decade or so. Starting from an initial distrust born of a lack of understanding and middle-class fiscal conservatism, a majority of our working citizens learned to exploit sophisticated investment instruments to improve their personal wealth and security, either through private investments or through retirement plans at their place of employment. Now there will certainly be market downturns and disappointments--but we have seen a revolution in the way our citizens develop wealth (as well as realizing Karl Marx's dream of the workers owning the means of production--through stocks and mutual funds). This has further enabled American business to expand investment and enhance productivity and profitability. While the total model is far more complicated than the outline given here, the description captures the essence of what has happened. The ability of our citizenry to learn something new, while largely avoiding false steps, is remarkable.

In much of the rest of the world, investment models either lag--concentrating on savings stashed under the mattress, or in passbook accounts, or held in physical property--or go entirely off the rails. As Americans were growing richer with reasonable security, Russians and Albanians fell for massive pyramid schemes--the Russian variant shook Moscow, while the Albanian one brought down a government and unleashed a civil war.

If a culture does not assign a high value to the unimpeded flow of factual information, it cannot make competitive decisions.

Informational dysfunction generally cripples two types of states or cultures. First, those which embrace comfortable myths over painful reality--such as most of the Islamic world and much of the former Soviet Union--and, second, those which attempt to restrict the flow of information, such as China or North Korea. Often, as in the cases of Saudi Arabia or Nigeria--and even otherwise-promising Turkey--states manifest both failings: the forcible exclusion of threatening information and the propagation of comforting myths. This amounts to volunteering for failure.

Information is a liberating tyrant. It insists on universal access and enforces an often-painful mental sobriety; in turn, it allows receptive states and cultures to compound their success. It is difficult to bring the vital importance of informational freedom home to Americans simply because it is taken for granted. Even those who would remove Darwin from our schools comparison shop for automobiles and expect that the available information will be accurate. We are so informationally privileged that it is difficult to get a perspective on the richness that pervades our daily lives. The news in the papers, on radio, or on television will be amazingly accurate by international standards, and even the most lunatic talk show is constrained in the lies it can proclaim. From stock market reports to the contents list on cereal boxes, information disseminated by business will be accurate. We even learn from television commercials--which today have an amazingly high standard of factual presentation, thanks to the competitive nature of our economy, our laws, and watchdog agencies. Our textbooks are as factual as we imperfect humans can make them, and even our politicians are usually forced to tell the truth. Our waking hours are passed in the most *accurate* environment in history, and access to the information that enables us to operate in our professions and improve our lives is nearly universal. When we choose, we can make informed decisions. We are part of a small minority of present-day humanity.

Economic data is the most difficult to accumulate and verify, and the speed of today's national and world economy makes the problem ever greater, despite our marvelous informational tools. Yet, we do a superb job of measuring that which can be measured. When Alan Greenspan makes a decision, the data on which it is based is imperfect--but superior to anything previously accumulated and filtered by mankind. Elsewhere, societies are designed to conceal data, or to obfuscate. Consider Russia, with its insurmountable economic problems. A concealing peasant culture formed the basis for the dishonest Soviet regime--and now "capitalist" Russia is plagued by inaccurate reporting and hidden assets at all economic levels. A state cannot move forward without sound data on which to base developmental and fiscal decisions. With its addiction to mythic data, Russia has no hope of gaining full economic health in our lifetimes--since each day it falls farther behind in relation to the states with which it must compete. We may, in the coming decades, see a return to autarchy among failing states, which may provide the highest level of poverty available to them.

Since at least the Civil War period, our economy has towered over our military. In time of crisis, that economy has

enabled the creation of military establishments other states could not afford or sustain. While the paradigm has changed to the extent that the technological sophistication of some forms of warfare forces us to maintain a more substantial force-in-being than we did prior to the Second World War, even that larger force is dwarfed by the post-industrial, information-driven economy it serves. We will continue to need a strong, ready military. But our military today is less important to our nation than is our banking system--to say nothing of our educational system. Our military is essential--but it is essential only for limited purposes. It is the medicine we keep in the cabinet for emergencies. On a daily basis, our media has vastly greater effect on the world than does our military.

Yet even our military is information-based and, when it is allowed to fight, its informational adeptness is a force multiplier so strong it cannot be measured (even by our measuring culture). A long time ago technologically, in Operation Desert Storm, we fielded an information-based military and won a victory so lopsided historians strain to find a precedent. Although our casualties could have been greater had we made worse decisions in some areas (and we could have been even more successful, given other potential decisions), the outcome of the conflict was never in doubt--not because we had the better troops or training or equipment (although we did, and each of these things matters), but because we had fielded a new kind of military. The fighting in Mesopotamia was as lopsided as any engagement of Maxim guns against spears.

Consider the way we handled information. In our Desert Storm force, junior enlisted personnel, from air planning staffs down to artillery battalions, had access to data of unprecedented volume and accuracy; had such data been available in the past, it would have been restricted to a few generals and staff officers. We shared data throughout the force, moving it with astonishing speed (although there were the inevitable gripes and real glitches). We have, without fully realizing it and certainly without planning it, *democratized* information within our armed forces. Of course there is still classified and restricted data, but from the reintroduction of "commander's intent" 20 years ago to the proliferation of computer terminals today, we are closer to "playing on the same sheet of music" than any military establishment in the modern age. This unity of vision facilitates independence of action. It is a devastating combination for an opponent to face.

We are already masters of information warfare, and fail to realize it.

Consider our opponent in Desert Storm. Saddam not only had access to far less information, but he hoarded what he got. Military reporting (inaccurate, in any case) went up stovepipes, and not only were services unwilling or forbidden to share data with each other, individual units would not pass data laterally. Saddam got distorted reports and clutched them against his chest. Orders went down the chain, but little useful data accompanied them. Saddam's subordinate commanders lacked the information to make intelligent decisions, even had they been permitted to do so. His forces did not know what was coming, and afterward they did not know what had hit them. It wasn't only the Iraqi military that was defeated, it was an entire culture.

Certainly, there are other factors that contribute to the success or failure of states and cultures, from their willingness to extend opportunities to their full populations to their appreciation of contract law. But that relationship between the state, its population, and information is the crucial determinant in our time.

This will be difficult for less adept countries and cultures to face. First, because it threatens their pride. Second, because the situation takes generations to put right. Examine the informational chaos in the former Soviet Union, where data had been falsified and restricted for 70 years. Sudden access to quality information in great volumes has not instantly redeemed any of the descendent states (although the Baltic states, with their different traditions, cultures, and shorter occupations are making the most progress). For many citizens, unaccustomed to sorting the informational wheat from the chaff, the sudden flood of information has been unwelcome, psychologically destabilizing, and threatening. If a population has not been acculturated over generations (if not centuries) to an instinctive evaluation of the quality of information, it will lack decisionmaking criteria, will make bad decisions, and will blame its new-found freedom. This is exactly what is happening in Belarus, within the Russian right and left, and in the struggling populations of every other regional state. Instead of embracing facts, disappointed citizens are fleeing into comforting myths, from the Trans-Caucasus to the Polar Circle.

I do not suggest that the United States is perfect. I am astonished, almost daily, by the ability of some of my

countrymen to believe incredible fantasies. Yet, on average, we are informationally empowered to a degree other states can only envy. Only the other English-speaking states approach our fact-wielding power, and only a few European and East Asian states are in the competition long-term. The gap between these comparatively few successful nations and the many states and peoples failing to adapt--culturally, psychologically, or practically--to the demands of the postmodern world, with its informational foundation and uncompromising insistence on facts, will increase throughout our lifetimes. It will make for a very jealous, unstable, and violent world.

In Clausewitz's most famous dictum, "War is simply a continuation of policy through other means." We can update that claim as well. Today, information mastery is the enabler of both war and policy.

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Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters (USA, Ret.) left the Army shortly after his last promotion. In addition to lecturing on the future of conflict, he provides commentaries to media outlets as diverse as *Army Times* and National Public Radio. He is the author of eight novels, including the recent *The Devil's Garden* and the forthcoming *Traitor*. A collection of his strategic and military essays, *Fighting for the Future*, will be published in March 1999. This is his 11th article for *Parameters*.

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Reviewed 6 November 1998. Please send comments or corrections to [carl\\_Parameters@conus.army.mil](mailto:carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil)