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Stability Operations in Strategic Perspective: A Skeptical View

COLIN S. GRAY

Because this article is friendly to much of the content of the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (QDR), it will pull no punches in offering constructive criticism.¹ The subject of stability (and reconstruction) operations will be discussed explicitly, but it should be understood that this subject has to be regarded as a highly dependent variable. Stability operations, the demand for them and the provision of new capabilities to perform them well, are the downstream product of larger decisions on foreign policy and strategy.

We can pick one of two rival judgments on the QDR and its novel endorsement of the need for competence in irregular warfare and postwar stability operations. On the one hand, we can choose to see the QDR's thrust toward countering irregular and asymmetric foes, and in favor of developing the skills to enhance social and political stability, as an overdue course correction in American policy and strategy. On the other hand, we may prefer to be less generous and instead suggest that the vision in the QDR amounts to a gross overreaction to the problems most characteristic of the present day. This is the sin of "presentism." The Defense Department has peered out through the fog of the future to 2025 and has seen—guess what?—a future that is very much like today. We are warned to expect surprises and we are told repeatedly that ours is an era of uncertainty, but nonetheless no reader could possibly miss the report's central message on threats. The perils of the near- to medium-term future will be largely irregular. We dare to ask, "Is this likely to be true?" and, even if it is true, "What should it imply for US national security policy?"

I suggest that a QDR composed at the current juncture of events in Iraq and Afghanistan is not entirely to be trusted as a source of balanced guidance for the future. But, to be fair, no analysis can escape influence by the major preoccupation of its drafters. That granted, the QDR does suffer from a heavy, indeed an unduly heavy, burden of “presentism.” That is to say, it is seeing the future with terms of reference that derive excessively from today. What is more, I am concerned about the number and significance of truly major political and strategic assumptions that are simply passed over in silence.

The Argument

This article comprises an eight-point argument that presents both a strategic perspective and, as promised in the subtitle, a skeptical view of some of the more vital assumptions that appear to be shaping policy and strategy today. As an aid to comprehension, as well as an encouragement to economy in explanation and justification, the article will proceed from an itemization and brief explanation of the elements of the argument to their discussion in greater detail. The eight points are these:

- *The United States is the global hegemon at present, by default we must add.*² This hegemony is real, but it is nonetheless only partial, it is context-specific, and it is certain to be challenged.

- *As the hegemonic, “world-ordering” power, America’s competence, strengths, and reputation or prestige are of vital importance for global stability.* International order cannot afford its principal guardian to make major errors in statecraft or strategy.

- *America’s national ideology, which is an integral part of its culture, does not travel as well as many Americans believe.* The issue is not the merit in the ideology, but rather the power of that ideology to misguide national security policy.

- *The American way of war reflects American society, while the American armed forces reflect American foreign policy demands, actual, anticipated, and plausibly possible.* It remains to be demonstrated whether or not the United States can “transform” its armed forces so that they will excel in the conduct of irregular warfare. A malign combination of poor foreign policy choices, a public culture or ideology that is inherently contestable

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abroad rather than revealed universal truth, and a deeply ingrained traditional “way of war,” must raise serious questions as to feasibility.

- *It is not quite as self-evident as the QDR’s authors assume, that America’s dominant current strategic challenge has been conceptualized accurately.* In a much quoted passage in *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz claimed as follows:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test [fit with political context] the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.³

Should America consider itself engaged in a long global war against violent extremists who employ terrorism? If the answer is “perhaps not,” then the QDR, and much else besides, rests upon unsteady foundations.

- *The leading threat at present to American global guardianship for international order is not Islamic fundamentalism, rather is it nationalism.* In the 21st century nationalism probably will be every bit the preeminent motivation that it was in the 20th century.

- *Stability operations must be approached as being integral to strategy, not as behavior that follows the “war proper.”* War is only about the peace that follows. It should be waged in such a style that the subsequent peace is not fatally mortgaged. With respect to irregular conflict, the current focus of most attention, stability operations, are, or should be, part and parcel of the US strategy from the very outset. If you wage the war, be it regular or irregular, intelligently and effectively, the need for postwar stability operations should be minimal.

- *The QDR says many sound things about irregular warfare, and especially about the vital importance of America’s soldiers and their skills. However, it is also deeply imbued with the country’s love affair with technology, to the point where the technophilia encourages serious strategic misassessment.* There is a place for technical marvels, even in irregular warfare. But the technological dimension of irregular warfare typically is only of relatively minor

significance. Some of the argument in the QDR leaves one in doubt as to whether the nature of irregular warfare truly is understood in America's higher places of policy and strategy.

The Argument Considered

Let us now discuss each of these eight points in turn.

The American Sheriff or Hegemon

Every world order needs to be policed by someone or something. We are fortunate that in the United States we have a superpower, indeed the sole superpower, willing and sometimes able to play the role of guardian for that order. This is not a role that can or should be played alone, save in truly exceptional cases. Moreover, there are contextual limits to American effectiveness in the sheriff's role. Some of those limits are, of course, of America's own making.

This should not be surprising. Whoever or whatever plays the role of guardian of world order, there will always be minuses as well as pluses. Some difficulties stem simply from the hegemonic position and role itself. Other states as well as dissatisfied parties of a non-state character will resent the guardian, object to its intrusions into their neighborhood and affairs, and generally will regard it as the most appropriate target for their anger. The sheriff or guardian role amounts to the mission of being willing and able to undertake the toughest jobs necessary for international order, the ones that no one else can tackle. Needless to add, perhaps, there are some "missions impossible" that no one should try to tackle, including the superpower sheriff. If the United States should decide to step back from its current global activism, however, and behave more along the lines that were promised in George Bush's 2000 campaign, then there would be a vacuum of power, at least at the level of potentially forceful global policing.

America's Reputation

Thucydides was right. Politics fight for reasons of "fear, honor, and interest."⁴ For so long as America is committed to the global guardian role, it is essential that it maintains and protects a reputation for competence. America may not be loved—hegemon rarely are—but it must be respected. The global cop needs to be trusted to pick the right dirty jobs that have to be done on behalf of international order, and then to do them well. The rest of the world has a major stake in America's honor, its reputation, because on that reputation rests the prospects for dissuasion and deterrence in many cases.

At present, the Iraq imbroglio is inflicting costs of several kinds on America's ability to play the necessary guardian role. First, the superpower is

***“If terrorists will be defeated only when
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believed to be incompetent, and that is a deadly perception, whether or not it is true.⁵ Second, it is more likely than not that the United States will behave in the near future as if it had been snake-bitten on the Tigris and will be most reluctant to intervene when probably it should. The American public will be saying “no more Iraqs.” Third, the general international opinion that America has been incompetent will make it more difficult in the future for the country’s policymakers to garner foreign support for controversial missions. Many countries will sign up to join a winner; they will be less enthusiastic in the wake of Iraq. If I am right in my suspicion that lengthy episodes of irregular warfare will not be popular at home in America after Iraq, it should follow that stability operations by the armed forces will not be in great demand by foreign policy.

American Ideology

America is a country, perhaps a civilization even, with a mission. It is an idea and it is the bearer of an ideology. For most countries such a condition is simply a harmless domestic eccentricity, but when the one global superpower functions as a missionary, the consequences are not likely to be entirely benign. The American sheriff is not only riding forth to apprehend or otherwise deal with the bad guys, he is striving to reform the social contexts that produced the bad behavior. We might profit from recalling the maxim that the path to hell is paved with good intentions.

The QDR is nothing if not ambitious. It tells us that victory over our violently extremist irregular enemies “requires the creation of a global environment inhospitable to terrorism. It requires legitimate governments with the capacity to police themselves and to deny terrorists the sanctuary and the resources they need to survive. It also will require support for the establishment of effective representative civil societies around the world, since the appeal of freedom is the best long-term counter to the ideology of the extremists.”⁶ The trouble with the worthy statement of the American credo just quoted is that it is not obviously true for much of the world. For example, “freedom,” the center-

piece among American beliefs, is a highly and essentially contestable concept. And when is a government deemed legitimate in the eyes of its people?

The problem is not with American ideology per se, but rather with its effect upon American policy and strategy choices. If terrorists will be defeated only when the world is populated by civil societies worthy of the name by American standards, then truly we are in for a very long war. Since strategy is an eminently practical business, this strategist must advise Americans to heed their own, admirable, new-found enthusiasm for cultural understanding, and forswear impossible tasks. America cannot build, or rebuild, civil societies, let alone build “nations,” by acts of will and determination, or by technical and even cultural skills in the conduct of stability operations and reconstruction.

The American Way of War

Societies fight as befits their nature and condition, albeit with some external discipline imposed by uncooperative enemies. There is a traditional American way of war, one traceable from Ulysses S. Grant in 1864 to the present day. In recent studies, this author has identified 13 characteristics of the American way.⁷ In summary form, the American way of war is:

- Apolitical
- Astrategic
- Ahistorical
- Problem-solving, optimistic
- Culturally challenged
- Technology dependent
- Focused on firepower
- Large-scale
- Aggressive, offensive
- Profoundly regular
- Impatient
- Logistically excellent
- Highly sensitive to casualties

If we examine that list for its compatibility with the most typical requirements of effectiveness in irregular warfare, let alone stability operations, we discover that there is a massive mismatch. This is not to argue that America cannot adapt its way of war to suit new political and strategic contexts, but it is to claim that the demands of low-intensity conflict do not challenge the US armed forces in areas where they are strong. Most of what the QDR has to say about irregular warfare is sensible, even incontestable. The issue is not the ability of the country to recognize and understand the challenge. Rather is there a problem with the ability of Americans to behave as the nature of irregular warfare requires, if success is to be secured. Armies are not

usually equally competent at the waging of regular and irregular warfare. While the United States has registered some successes against irregular enemies over the past century, the evidence of poor performance is sufficiently substantial, and recent, to give grounds for anxiety.

If American society necessarily is reflected in its armed forces and their preferred way of war, so the missions and tasks of those armed forces must reflect the choices of American foreign policy, modified by the need to react to external surprise. The QDR assumes that the country will be globally active, and that the armed forces, especially with their enhanced commitment to stability operations, will be long engaged in draining swamps here, there, and everywhere. It may be that America's armed forces are in danger of being transformed in the low-intensity conflict dimension in support of a foreign policy that is ill judged. Indeed, it maybe the case that swamp-draining, well-intentioned efforts to build civil societies where they did not exist before, and the delivery of the blessings of Western-style democracy on occasion actually will be counterproductive for international order.

*Is the United States Engaged in a
Long Global War with Violent Extremists?*

If you ask the wrong question, you are certain to come up with the wrong answer. One of the costs of the ideological dimension to culture is that it can lead you astray in the perception and definition of threat. People tend to see what they expect to see, and to interpret it according to their settled beliefs. This is comforting in that chaos is avoided and even an unfriendly context makes sense. But is that sense sensible? The subject that gives overall purpose to this article—stability and reconstruction operations—enjoys a radically heightened popularity today because of a dramatic shift in American threat perception. Braving a charge of heresy, perhaps apostasy, I am going to suggest that the irregular threat in its several forms that fuels the “long war” that the QDR has declared may well be grossly exaggerated. If that is deemed to be at least plausible, it should follow that the current emphasis on a military transformation privileging skills in stabilization duties is of doubtful value.

Let us begin by identifying official US claims that are manifestly untrue. Americans are told that their enemy today seeks “to destroy our free way of life.” Terroristic foes, globally, are said to be the enemies of “freedom,” that magical, but alas contestable, value-charged concept again. So, Americans, and their armed forces in particular, are gearing up to wage the virtuous irregular, global fight on behalf of good against evil. But isn't this highly idealized view of the strategic context a notable distortion of reality? Is al Qaeda, including its franchised spin-offs and its imitators, at all interested in destroying “our free way of life”? I doubt it. Are those bad guys even the enemies of

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freedom? In their eyes they are not, nor may they be so identified in the eyes of key target populations.

We should reconsider whether it is accurate or helpful to postulate as the centerpiece of our national security policy a long global war against terrorists who are plotting our downfall. Of course, violent extremists are a menace and should be disposed of when possible. And of course a catastrophic marriage between such folk and weapons of mass destruction is a threat we must approach with the utmost seriousness. But, still, do we not flatter to deceive ourselves. I do not go quite so far as the recent writers for the *Boston Globe* and the *International Herald Tribune* who, respectively, labeled bin Laden as a “petty cult leader who has to be thwarted but who must not be allowed to inspire innate fear,” and “al Qaeda and individual international terrorists” as “marginal phenomena.”⁸

We are in danger of inflating the significance of al Qaeda and its imitators and, as a consequence, of setting off boldly to wage a long global war that is considerably misconceived. Above all else, we are likely to mistake local discontents for evidence of the evil influence of the global enemies of freedom. As a result, the United States may be moved to employ its armed forces on inappropriate missions.

Nationalism, not Islamic Fundamentalism

The most potent force in both the 19th and 20th centuries was nationalism. It is probable that, notwithstanding the alleged erosion of frontiers by globalization, nationalism will be preeminent in the 21st century also. Naturally, terrorists and would-be insurgents will hijack issues of national pride opportunistically. If America overreacts to some evidence of terrorism, and is prone to interpret most political violence as proof of the unfolding of devious plans by religious extremists, it is likely to seek to apply the wrong medicine in line with its faulty diagnosis. American efforts to aid local stabilization could well backfire painfully, because a foreign presence would feed the discontent and contribute to the delegitimization of the extant authorities.

The Arab, even the Islamic, realm may well be ready to benefit from less corrupt government and more democracy, but beneficial reforms can be

effected only from within those societies by local effort. As a general rule, American or other endeavors to aid modernization must, on balance, prove counterproductive. Of course, there will be Islamic extremists everywhere. But they will be marginal figures, of little significance, unless Americans donate them credibility on the popular issues of the defense of national self-determination and the protection of religion.

Stability Operations, Strategy, and Warfare

Stability operations must not be approached as if they were behavior only, or mostly, appropriate for phase two of a conflict, succeeding a phase one dominated by actual combat. This point applies only to irregular warfare. If America wages irregular warfare competently, if it is willing to learn from the very extensive historical record of failure and success, it will know that stability and reconstruction are key to victory. If we concentrate on seeking, finding, fixing, and killing the terrorist insurgents, postponing stability operations to a future time when the security context will be less fraught, the postponement may well prove to be all but permanent.

Stability operations need to be understood as integral to counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine. In order for that to happen, the armed forces have to grasp the most vital differences between regular and irregular warfare. In particular, they need to understand, and act on the understanding, that chasing and eviscerating bad guys, though probably good for soldiers' careers, is strictly a secondary concern. The primary object in counterinsurgency is protection of the public, not the military defeat of terrorist-insurgents. The latter will succeed only if they enjoy the support or acquiescence of a large fraction of the public. When terrorist-insurgents lose public sympathy, they are out of business. Stability operations, targeted for the benefit of the all-important general public, must be a critically significant element in the defeat of the violent extremists.

Technology and Irregular Warfare

It is not hard to identify valuable uses for new technologies in the waging of warfare against irregulars. One does, however, need to beware of the working of the law of the instrument. In other words, machines will be employed because they exist, and the more impressive their military-technical performance, the more likely we are to exaggerate the importance of that performance to the course of events.

By all means let us exploit America's technological prowess, but let us also not forget that technological prowess is at most of only marginal significance in most situations of insurgency. Indeed, historically viewed, not only is there no correlation between the technical sophistication of an army and

its success in counterinsurgency, but the correlation is actually negative. The reason is not difficult to locate. Armies that are short of machines are obliged to pursue a human-focused approach to conflict. Since the battlespace in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency is the hearts and especially the minds of the public, it is scarcely surprising that improvements in the means of direct combat against bad guys are unlikely to offer systemic advantages.

Given America's long-standing love affair with technology, an infatuation in no significant way reduced in the 2006 QDR, it is especially difficult for US soldiers to appreciate that counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are not about killing enemies. Rather, the job is to protect civilians, gain their trust, and thereby leave the enemies of stability out in the cold, politically irrelevant. The technological dimension to the current process of transformation is of distinctly secondary importance to the prospects of America succeeding in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.

Conclusions

This article has advanced the following points:

- The United States is at present the only possible principal guardian of global order.
- America's reputation for effectiveness—its credibility, the respect in which it is held—is of vital importance for peace and security, worldwide. That reputation must not be squandered.
- American culture, or ideology, favoring “freedom” and identifying a simple manichean struggle between good and evil (the enemies and the defenders of “freedom”), is apt to mislead Americans themselves in their identification of threats and hence in their action policies.
- The traditional American way of war is distinctly regular in character, and is not friendly to the radically different doctrinal demands of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. The jury is still out on whether or not the US armed forces will be able to adapt themselves adequately, so that they can be effective in irregular conflict.
- The QDR states as a fact what probably is not a fact. It claims that the country is engaged in a long war of global domain against violent extremists who resort to terrorism.⁹ This official assertion is challengeable both on its own terms and in relation to greater threats that loom as more than long-shot possibilities (e.g., the emergence of a Sino-Russian bloc to oppose US global hegemony, and the dire consequences for international order of some features of rapid climate change). The “long-war” hypothesis expresses a brutal conflation and compounding of diverse sources of instability.
- Nationalism is the source of more hostility to American global policing behavior than is religious fanaticism. As the earliest exemplar of the

potency of the demand for national self-determination, the United States should have little difficulty appreciating this point.

- Stability operations should be conducted as a part of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategy, not as a separate matter. The proper focus in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency is upon the support, or tacit and not unfriendly acquiescence, of the general public.

- New technology, as lauded in the QDR, is likely to prove somewhat useful, but it is of only minor significance, at most, in the conduct of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. Such conflict is about people and their attitudes, not about body counts of bad guys.

By way of final thoughts, two caveats may be found to have some value. First, one does not require a crystal ball in order to predict that the current Iraqi and Afghan experiences are certain to dampen whatever domestic enthusiasms there may once have been for American conduct of what is now called, contestably, the “long war.” I suspect that we will soon become familiar with the slogan, “No more Iraqs!” If I am correct in my suspicion that protracted irregular warfare will not prove domestically sustainable, it has to follow that there will be only a modest policy demand for stability and reconstruction operations. Second, stability operations seem near certain often to cause offense to local pride. Also, their character and motivation cannot but reflect American culture, which is to say ideology, among other things, and as a consequence they are unlikely to be successful in American terms, except in truly exceptional circumstances. The QDR invites us to believe that Iraq “can serve as a model of freedom for the Middle East.”¹⁰ We need to beware of confusing the desirable with the possible.

NOTES

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3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 88-89.

4. Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to "The Peloponnesian War,"* trans. Richard Crawley (rev. ed.; New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 43.

5. The charge of incompetence is advanced forcefully in Nigel Aylwin-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations,” *Military Review*, 85 (November-December 2005), 2-15; Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005); and Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006).

6. *QDR*, p. 22.

7. Colin S. Gray: *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, March 2006); “The American Way of War,” in *Rethinking the Principles of War*, ed. Anthony D. Mc Ivor (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2005), pp. 13-14.

8. “Bin Laden’s Threat,” *The Boston Globe*, editorial, reprinted in *The International Herald Tribune*, 21-22 January 2006, p. 6; William Pfaff, “A ‘Long War’ Designed to Perpetuate Itself,” *The International Herald Tribune*, 11-12 February 2006, p. 4.

9. *QDR*, pp. v, 9ff.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 10.