Strategy and Grand Strategy: What the National Security Professional Must Know

Tami Davis Biddle, Dept. of National Security and Strategy, US Army War College

The contemporary word “strategy” came to us from Ancient Greece, where it originally referred to the art or skill of the general. But the word “strategy” has become so widely and commonly used today that one may see it applied to everything from war-fighting to the marketing of beverages. Often it is a substitute or synonym for the rather more basic term “plan.” Moreover, there is no standard contemporary definition of the term (or the related phrase “grand strategy”) used by those who write about national security and international relations. Each author, therefore, is responsible for articulating his or her own definition—or for selecting from among the many available in the existing literature.

Because this dissipation of precise meaning can lead to confusion and intellectual sloppiness, it is essential for students of national security to think hard about the meaning and history of the word “strategy,” and to reflect on what it demands of the practitioner. If students proceed beyond academic study and take positions where the term moves off of the page and into the realm of action, they will gain and hold a healthy respect for its many challenges of conception and implementation.

The crucial idea inherent in “strategy” is the intelligent identification, utilization and coordination of resources (ways and means) for the successful attainment of a

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2 Hew Strachan has written that, “The word strategy has acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning, and left it only with banalities.” See *The Direction of War*, 27. See also Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), x.
specific objective (end). \(^3\) While this sentence implies a direct and easily-comprehended relationship, the simplicity is deceptive. Barriers to creating a straightforward linkage between ends, ways, and means are not only very real, but multifaceted and persistent.

First, strategy demands a theory – a proposed causal explanation – that must stand up to rigorous analysis. A theory, in its most basic form, can be expressed as: “if x then y.” But the word “then” carries a heavy burden since it must be able to do a lot of work and bear up to intense evaluation; and this scrutiny must include, above all, the close examination of one’s assumptions. For instance, if you decide to argue for the use of economic sanctions – or air strikes, or special forces, or a carrier battle group – to solve a political problem, what theory are you relying upon to link ends and means? What leads you to believe that the economic instrument of sanctions will solve the political problem that has arisen?

Often, however, this scrutiny does not take place, either because no one takes the time for it or because it would question or challenge individual identity or organizational culture. \(^4\) Too often the “logic” of strategy ends up being little more than an organizational mantra, an overly-optimistic assertion about the ability of a particular instrument of power to effect a specific outcome, or a facile claim about opportunities presented by an adversary’s presumed weaknesses. A good strategist recognizes that he

\(^3\) This is the definition and conception utilized in the US professional military education (PME) system, specifically at its senior staff colleges which prepare senior officers for work at the strategic level of US national security. For detailed descriptions of what, specifically, is meant by “ends, ways, and means,” see, for instance, Harry R. Yarger, “Toward a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the Army War College Strategy Model” in James Bartholomees, ed., US Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy, 2nd ed., June 2006, 111-112.

\(^4\) On this point students of strategy have much to learn from students of cognitive psychology who investigate how we absorb and process information through our senses. Contemporary political scientists have helped us learn to apply cognitive psychology to the behavior of decision-makers charged with strategic choices. See Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Robert Axelrod, Framework for a General Theory of Cognition and Choice (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1972); Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment (New York: Free Press, 1977).
or she must be able to explain the logic linking the means to the end. And he or she recognizes that this will require, above all, doing one’s homework. If, for instance, one wants to coerce a rival state into making a concession, then one must assess, at a minimum: the stakes involved for both parties; the nature of the adversary -- including the structure of its political and social composition--and the nature and robustness of its popular and elite will; and the nature and robustness of one’s own commitment at the popular and elite levels.

One must assess the instruments of power available for coercion, and whether or not they are suitable to the task. One must assess competing demands and available resources. And one must assess whether the methods for coercion will be viewed as legitimate in the eyes of domestic and international audiences. And these questions, though crucial, are only a starting place. Each one of them raises other questions to pose, and answers to obtain. The work is painstaking and demanding. If the problem affects the national security of a state, then it must be staffed out to skilled professionals, and it must be made the object of interagency communication and cooperation.

And even if one’s assumptions are sound—if the logic of strategy makes sense on a fundamental level—many other factors will intrude to erode or break the link between means and ends. These will include the challenges of communication inherent in complex enterprises, the adaptability of one’s adversary, the complications of domestic politics, the stresses and strains of civil-military relations, and the unavoidable biases and limitations of the agencies attempting to implement the strategy.5

5 For a perceptive analysis of these challenges, see Richard K. Betts, American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 232-271. Richard Hart Sinnreich has observed that “even in war…grand strategies almost never will be executed as conceived. The fortunes of war are too chancy and adversaries too unpredictable to underwrite such prolonged
This essay is meant to give the student of strategy an anchor point, a foothold that can be used as a foundation for further reading and analysis. After looking briefly at the terms “strategy” and “grand strategy” – and their use over time – the essay will examine the myriad challenges one must face in their implementation. The student of strategy who also seeks to become an effective practitioner of this difficult art must, by necessity, prepare to develop such qualities as patience, empathy, judgment, and – above all – the resilience and determination to rebound from inevitable and repeated setbacks.6

**Strategy and the International System**

Any political actor operating in the international system has a set of interests it seeks to defend and advance through the utilization of its available resources. Actors (whether the city-states and empires of the past, or the states and non-state actors of the present) are willing to expend resources to protect and further those interests. If we link this observation to strategy, we can see that interests relate to ends, and resources relate to ways and means. If they are sufficient in quality and quantity, an actor’s resources can serve as “instruments of power”—leverage mechanisms—that can help it to sustain itself, and perhaps even thrive, in an anarchic, highly competitive and often dangerous international system. Historian and analyst Sir Michael Howard has observed that, “The objective of most states most of the time is always to maintain their independence, often

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6 Paul Kennedy explains that “…grand strategy can never be exact or foreordained. It relies, rather, upon the constant and intelligent reassessment of the polity’s ends and means; it relies upon wisdom and judgment.” See Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 6.
to extend their influence, and sometimes to extend their dominion. The classical tools at their disposal have been three: armed force, wealth, and allies.”7

The instruments of power that a political actor can wield – and the complexity of the interactions among them – varies with the degree of social, economic, political, and scientific advancement it has attained. But the nature of the international system itself matters greatly as well since the tools at an actor’s disposal are influenced by the nature of the system. Armed force, because it enables an actor to protect its territory and possessions, typically has been considered the ultimate guarantee of existence in an anarchical system. But a powerful indigenous military is not always necessary for success. For instance, post-World War II Japan relied on its close ties with the United States to protect its territorial integrity and regional interests. This enabled it to develop internally, and to focus its energy on education, economic development, and non-defense production. These activities, in turn, created wealth – and wealth offered Japan another instrument of power with which to determine its own fate.

Since the 19th century – and particularly since the end of the Second World War – a highly-developed network of international institutions has allowed modern states to operate (and even gain out-sized influence) in a system shaped by more than the actions of armies on battlefields. But, at the end of the day, that body of institutions is underwritten and guaranteed by a select group of actors who possess powerful coercive leverage and lethal force. Prior to the Second World War the task of underwriting the dominant global order was performed largely by Britain, in particular its powerful navy. Since then the great bulk of the burden has been carried by the United States. Thus

strategy, as it applies to the behavior of political actors, cannot ever be considered wholly without reference to military power.

As we noted above, the word strategy had its roots squarely within the military realm. Many writers—including some contemporary ones—use it exclusively in that capacity. This specificity has many advantages, not least of them being focus and rigor. In a seminal article on strategy written in 2000, Professor Richard K. Betts argued, “Strategy is the essential ingredient for making war either politically effective or morally tenable. It is the link between military means and political ends, the scheme for how to make one produce the other. Without strategy, there is no rationale for how force will achieve purposes worth the price in blood and treasure.” This is among the most powerful and perceptive definitions of strategy ever written, and it is one that military officers and national security professionals must take to heart and never forget. It underscores the fact that when armed force is involved, strategy includes an inherent, undeniable moral component.

Most contemporary writers expand their scope for strategy beyond armed force and warfighting, however. The modern international system affords a wide array of tools that political actors can employ to attain the political ends they seek; these include, among others, wealth and economic leverage, information and moral suasion, and diplomacy. But the demands of strategy and strategic decision-making are just as high in these realms as they are in the military realm (even if the cost of failure may not be quite

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so acute). Every time an individual instrument of power is used, it must have a logic that informs how means will produce ends. That scheme must be robust enough to stand up to critical thinking and aggressive analytical scrutiny—and it must be resilient enough to endure unforeseen events, unanticipated barriers, failures of imagination, and the natural complications of human interaction and communication.

The situation grows more complex when multiple instruments are employed simultaneously to address a serious and sustained problem. In this circumstance it is appropriate to use the phrase “grand strategy.” Writing in 2012 for the flagship journal of Britain’s Royal United Services Institute, Peter Layton explained that in grand strategy, “the means used are comprehensive, embracing a diverse array of instruments of national power rather than focusing on a single type of instrument, as strategy does.” Importantly, he added that, “The essence of grand strategy is its integrative nature. In a conceptual sense grand strategy is a system: a set of interdependent elements where change in some elements ... produces change across the system, and the entire system exhibits properties and behaviours different from the constituent parts.”

This echoes what historian Paul Kennedy noted a generation earlier, when he described grand strategy as a “complex and multi-layered thing” that demands the intelligent interaction of all of a nation’s significant resources, in order to achieve a desired political end.

The first requirement of strategy (and grand strategy) is that it be physically possible and economically feasible. Second, it must be acceptable—both morally and culturally—to the people who will implement it. And third, it must be sensibly matched

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10 Layton, “The Idea of Grand Strategy,” 58. He adds that grand strategy also concerns itself with “assembling the manpower, money and material necessary to build and sustain the means needed.”
11 Under the heading of resources he included economic, technological and scientific resources; diplomacy; and national morale and political culture. See Kennedy, ed., Grand Strategies in War and Peace, 4-5.
to the problem (or set of problems) at hand; in other words, it must be suited to solving the problem itself. Failure in any one of these categories will mean failure overall.\textsuperscript{12} Because these fundamentals are so important, students of strategy at US senior staff colleges are taught to subject any potential strategy to a “FAS test,” which is an acronym for feasibility, acceptability, and suitability.\textsuperscript{13}

During the 20th century—in the era of the two World Wars and later during the Cold War—the phrase “grand strategy” came into common usage. In his classic 1954 book \textit{Strategy}, historian and military analyst Sir Basil Liddell Hart explained that, “As tactics is an application of strategy on a lower plane, so strategy is an application on a lower plane of ‘grand strategy.’” The role of the latter, he explained “is to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war.”\textsuperscript{14} Both Liddell Hart and American historian Samuel Eliot Morison saw the phrases “grand strategy” and “higher strategy” as synonymous.\textsuperscript{15} The need for grand strategy in the tense and deeply competitive environment of the Cold War years pushed American national security specialists to embrace the term even in the absence of a “hot” war.

Other prominent authors, writing in the same era, had begun to envision “grand strategy” as a phrase that was relevant and applicable in both wartime and peacetime. In the first (1943) edition of the classic text \textit{Makers of Modern Strategy}, editor Edward

\textsuperscript{12} Betts, writing about military strategy, notes that, “Strategy fails when some link in the planned chain of cause and effect from low-level tactics to high-level political outcomes is broken, when military objectives come to be pursued for their own sake without reference to their political effect, or when policy initiatives depend on military operations that are infeasible.” Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” 7.
\textsuperscript{15} Samuel Eliot Morison, \textit{Strategy and Compromise} (Boston: Little Brown, 1958), 6. He stated: “grand strategy or higher strategy is simply national foreign policy continued in time of war.”
Meade Earle set forward elegant definitions of strategy and grand strategy that were
descriptive and normative:

    Strategy is the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation—or a coalition of
    nations—including its armed forces, to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted
    and secured against enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed. The highest type of
    strategy—sometimes called ‘grand strategy’—is that which so integrates the policies and
    armaments of the nation that the resort to war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with
    the maximum chance of victory.16

    Earle did not restrict either “strategy” or “grand strategy” to the wielding of
    military power alone, but he placed them squarely within the framework of international
    security and related them directly to the making of war and the preservation of peace.
    Earle’s integrated definition of strategy and grand strategy asked that one draw
    intelligently from a broad but not inexhaustible resource base, structuring and
    coordinating those resources as efficiently and effectively as possible to facilitate the
    realization of discernable endpoints that have been articulated by legitimate authorities
    and have won general support. With respect to grand strategy in particular, he offered an
    overarching conceptualization of an ideal—but an ideal that is inherently demanding and
    difficult to achieve.

    In a lecture to the US Naval War College in 1952, Liddell Hart told students, that
    where warfare is concerned, grand strategy must take a long view – “for its problem is
    the winning of the peace.”17 In this he was surely right. Any actor seeking to attain
    political aims through war-fighting must think hard about how those aims will facilitate a

better, more stable peace than the one that preceded the fighting. Statesmen must understand that when they move toward the use of military power, they open their nations up to the vicissitudes of chance and contingency. It is not at all unusual for actors to opt for the use of force based on fallacious assumptions about enemy will and determination. Sometimes a “quick” victory on the battlefield is perceived as a relatively painless way of resolving a problem, or distracting attention from troublesome domestic issues. Sometimes leaders are pressured against their will by domestic political groups that view military instruments as the method of first resort. But there are only a very few historical instances in which war-fighting has been either quick or painless. And, in many cases, the outcome achieved is only loosely aligned with the original end sought.

Not infrequently actors will opt for the use of military power when other instruments might have been better suited to achieving the political aim. For instance, Wilhelmine Germany almost certainly would have attained its political objectives in the early years of the 20th century if it had avoided an over-reliance on military power (which helped to trigger the First World War). Michael Howard has argued that, “Germany’s growing wealth and productivity would eventually by itself have dominated the continent and gained her all the allies she needed. She could have acquired the status of World Power without having to fight for it.”\(^{18}\)

At times, actors can be poor judges of their own vital interests. Despite a widespread view that land wars in Asia were to be avoided, US decision-makers were nonetheless lured into a long and costly fight in Vietnam in part because of an often-repeated but superficial mantra that had gained traction in domestic discourse, “the

Fearing that his ambitious domestic agenda would be jeopardized if he did not look sufficiently tough in his foreign policy, President Lyndon B. Johnson thrust the American military into a post-colonial conflict that they did not understand and were poorly-equipped to address. Additionally, a political actor’s ends will very rarely, if ever, align completely with its allies’ preferred ends. Allies may share one or two overarching objectives, but they are very likely to differ over the nature of more specific ends, and methods to achieve them. And these differences can be acute and troublesome. Americans, due to their nature and culture, have a particularly hard time accepting that others do not want the very same things that Americans want.

Liddell Hart’s insistence on “winning the peace” demands that soldiers and statesmen bear in mind that, in most cases, the hardest work comes after the battles have been fought and the armistice terms have been agreed upon. Soldiers are crucial here, since they provide whatever ongoing coercive leverage the victorious side may need to apply, and they provide the basic security required to facilitate all other developments within the defeated actor’s territorial realm—at least until the victor can feel sure that, upon his departure, the armistice terms will stick. The moment marking the transition from “war” to “postwar,” can be particularly fraught and dangerous since it is especially

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19 This idea, which gained traction during the Eisenhower administration, argued that if one nation fell to communism, it would affect those around it, in the same way that a falling domino knocks over those around it. See Frederik Logevall, Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 31.

20 Writing at the height of the Vietnam war, Bernard Brodie addressed the US identification of interests in scathing but highly perceptive terms. “Vital interests, despite common assumptions to the contrary, have only a vague connection with objective fact. A sovereign nation determines for itself what its vital interests are (freedom to do so is what the term ‘sovereign’ means) and its leaders accomplish this exacting task largely by using their highly fallible and inevitably biased human judgment to interpret the external political environment.” Brodie, War and Politics (London: Cassell, 1973), 2, and 343-345. See also Doris Kearns, Lyndon Johnson and The American Dream (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 263-265.
demanding of civil-military cooperation. Seams that are not stitched carefully will allow the fabric to tear and fray.  

**Strategy in History**

Contemporary ideas about strategy and grand strategy have been shaped and informed by past experience. A brief look back at this history enables one to understand the layers of complexity inherent in these terms. In addition, it allows one to see how they have evolved in relation to changes in politics, culture, and technology over time.

The high level of civilization achieved by the ancient Greeks led to their wielding power in ways that seem familiar and “modern” to us today. But this changed with the coming of a feudal order in Europe; not until the late eighteenth century would that sense of modernity re-appear in full form, in particular with the return of “the people” – and popular will – as a key element of strategic calculation. The political and industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth century, and the re-emergence of democracy as a powerful political idea, changed the landscape of strategic decision-making fundamentally. These changes placed a new emphasis on civil-military relations: the requirements of “representative government” meant that decisions about the wielding of military and coercive force increasingly would be in the hands of *elected* officials who, unlike their military counterparts, had to face possible sanction at the ballot box if their strategies failed or lost popular support. But these civilian decision-makers still had to rely on the professional expertise and capability of a trained military.  

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As we noted above, the ancient Greeks gave us the root of the modern English word ‘strategy,’ but their own use of the term was more akin to our modern word for “tactics”—movements on a battlefield. Still, the Greece of Socrates and Aristophanes was advanced enough in its politics to engage in activities that required strategy and grand strategy. We can, for instance, identify the latter in the plan that Pericles developed for war with Sparta. Resting on a set of assumptions about the dominance of Athenian naval power, the security provided to citizens by the Athenian long walls, and the unwillingness of the conservative Spartans to engage in a protracted campaign, Pericles imagined and articulated a strategy that he believed would finally secure full respect for the rising Athenian state. He linked Athenian ways and means to an end he desired and expected (wrongly, in the end) to be achievable at acceptable cost.

At about the same time in history, albeit in a different part of the world, the warring states of ancient China used strategy to maintain their survival in a highly-competitive environment. Sun-Tzu’s articulation of strategic principles, which would ultimately be collected in a volume that modern readers know as *The Art of War*, continues to be studied carefully by students of strategy around the world.

We can discern strategy, as well, in the empire-building of ancient Rome. The Romans were able to use a heavy reliance on military power to build a vast empire,
despite their possession of few natural resources. Constant exposure to external danger helped mold a society that valued military skill, elevated martial values, and made military service a central element of citizenship. Indeed, Roman citizens between the ages of seventeen and forty-six owed the state no less than sixteen years of military service. To build its armies, Rome also drew upon two outside groups: the Latins who were linguistically similar to the Romans, and the non-Latin tribes in Italy who were subject to Rome’s will. Thus, Rome could field large, formidable armies, and the polity itself could endure high casualties without changing its political aims. The ability of the Romans to extract such manpower resources enabled them to create and sustain a far-flung empire that was a vehicle for the extension of Roman influence.27

Europe in the Middle Ages had specific legal, social, and military structures centered on the obligations between vassals and overlords.28 Interactions among political actors rested on diplomacy (including marriage arrangements), economic leverage, and the work of feudal armies. Eventually, the development of firearms and artillery contributed to shifts driven principally by the expansion of a money economy: wealthy overlords increasingly could use payments to secure the services of those who would protect their interests militarily.29 The deft combination of missile fire and rapid movement demonstrated so well at Agincourt in 1415 was replaced over time by large formations of musket and pike. Limited in their communications and dependent on fixed points of supply, these formations were lumbering and sluggish. Heavy reliance on

mercenaries contributed to the ossification of strategy and the indecisive nature of war in this era. Even when they were generally competent, mercenaries were prone to desertion and mutiny unless they were promptly paid and supplied; most states found them “unreliable and often dangerous to their employers.”

By the early 16th century the problem of raising and wielding an army for the purposes of the state attracted renewed attention, spurring a revival of interest in the military methods of the classical civilizations—and in particular in the linkage between citizenship and soldiery. Machiavelli’s *Arte della guerra* (The Art of War), emphasizing training and hierarchical command, was the most notable of many treatises that turned for inspiration to the Greco-Roman military system. The “new laws of warfare” that Machiavelli sought to distill for contemporary use were in fact “the old laws of the Roman military order.”

Machiavelli fundamentally believed that to conquer and expand were the natural tendencies of man; therefore he believed that war “was the most essential activity of political life.” In this quintessentially realist conception of international affairs he developed a utilitarian idea of war and politics that pulled away from more traditional ethical considerations and made his name odious to later generations. But he had edged in the direction of modern social science by relating warfare to economic and political

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imperatives; he sought, as well, to “enlarge the realm of human planning and to reduce
the field of chance.”  

Working at the University of Leiden between 1571 and 1591, philosopher Justus
Lipsius – an admirer of Machiavelli – perceived war not “as an act of uncontrolled
violence, but rather the orderly application of force, directed by a competent and
legitimate authority, in the interest of the state.”  This perspective helped to drive the
Dutch reforms enacted by the princes of the House of Orange-Nassau in order to create a
new model army. Inspired by the example of the Romans, these long-service
professionals were “reasonably efficient instruments of state policy, responding in a
predictable pattern of obedience to the orders of a defined political-military chain of
command.”

Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden and Raimundo Montecuccoli of the Austrian
Hapsburgs--both admirers of the Dutch reformers--also believed that disciplined troops
were the key to that most central of all political activities, war. Montecuccoli was
responsible for the first systematic effort, in the early modern era, to address war in all its
dimensions—including its administrative, political, and social dimensions. This
intellectual heritage was passed on to the Duke of Marlborough in Great Britain and
Frederick the Great in Prussia. Subsequently it influenced thought and action during the

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33 R.R. Palmer, “Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bulow: From Dynastic to National War,” in Paret, ed.,
Makers of Modern Strategy, 91. See also, generally, Preston, Roland and Wise, Men in Arms, 87-90.
35 Gustavus Adolphus, King of Sweden and reforming general, ascended to power just a few years before
the start of the destructive Thirty Years’ War in Europe, 1618-1648. Raimundo Montecuccoli, a field
marshal of the Austrian Hapsburg army was a noted reformer, administrator, and master of maneuver
warfare. He fought in the latter stages of the Thirty Years’ War.
French Revolution, and the Prussian reformers who responded to that revolution, including Gerhard von Scharnhorst and Carl von Clausewitz.  

Overall, the seventeenth century reformers had enlarged armies and placed renewed emphasis on discipline, drill, chains of command, and orderly administration. They had sought to make armies into true instruments of foreign policy. But they worked in a dynastic era when warfare was a clash between rulers rather than peoples. A hereditary class of officers oversaw a mass of soldiers who were drawn from the less productive classes, and who lived largely apart from the citizenry. Kept on a short leash, soldiers employed tactics that were mechanistic and routine-based; to send them on distant reconnaissance missions was to risk losing them to desertion. While they could be effective instruments en masse, they were not trusted as individuals. And it was often difficult for a commander to bring battle against an unwilling enemy.

_A Revolution in War and Strategy_

As historian R.R. Palmer has noted, the period between the ascendance to power of Frederick the Great in 1740 and the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815 saw not only the increasing perfection of the dynastic form of war under Frederick, but also the dramatic influence of an entirely new form, as manifested in the French Revolution. That historical turning point, which mirrored at least some of the ideas and forms of the earlier

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38 Palmer, 91. For a helpful general overview, see David Kaiser, _Politics and War: European Conflict from Phillip II to Hitler_ (Harvard University Press, 1990), 203-270.
American Revolution, changed the nature of the relationship between a people and their government—and thereby changed what was possible in the military realm.

Hew Strachan has argued that the “idea” of strategy derived from “the growth of standing professional armies on the one hand and of the Enlightenment on the other.”39 While not all historians would agree with his specific location of the idea, it is surely true that much of what we recognize in our contemporary notion of strategy finds its provenance in this eighteenth century convergence. Strachan cites the work of a little-known Frenchman, Paul Gideon Joly de Maizeroy, as signaling a decisive shift towards the modern. In his *Theorie de la guerre* (1777), Joly de Maizeroy argued that war-making involved reflection, foresight, and reasoning: “In order to formulate plans, strategy studies the relationship between time, positions, means, and different interests, and takes every factor into account … which is the province of dialectics, that is to say, of reasoning, which is the highest faculty of the mind.”40

Facing a conservative coalition of European powers in 1793, the revolutionary French Republic created the Committee on Public Safety to arrange for the security of the French people. Unfettered by the limits that had bound the dynastic rulers, the Committee aroused the population, called for a general draft (the *levee en masse*), and imposed a war economy. The French general Napoleon Bonaparte took full advantage of these opportunities to shock and overwhelm the opponents he faced. In 1799 Bonaparte became the leading autocrat of France, and a year later he destroyed the Second Coalition arrayed against him by his decisive victory at the battle of Marengo. With large armies fired by revolutionary zeal, Bonaparte was able to part company with more limited forms

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of warfare. Though he worked with familiar tools – infantry, artillery, and cavalry – he was able to employ them with new levels of sophistication. He could take advantage of maneuver, reconnaissance and exploitation in ways that his opponents could not. When a Third European Coalition was formed, Bonaparte again humiliated them at Ulm and Austerlitz in 1805.41

In addition to tactical genius, Bonaparte exploited planning skills, administrative excellence, and superior staff work. And all these were enhanced by the new meritocracy that opened command positions to those outside the hereditary classes. In this he sought to reduce the element of chance in battle, and to elevate the significance of strategy—the considered linking of ways and means with political aims. As the perceptive observer Heinrich Dietrich von Bulow noted, issues of military command began to overlap with those of diplomacy and domestic affairs: “under modern conditions of strategy there could be no separation between politics and war – great soldiers must understand foreign affairs, and successful diplomats must understand military action.”42 In this observation we see the beginnings of a modern conception of that crucial element of modern strategy: sound civil-military relations. Von Bulow was surely correct to argue that generals and politicians needed to understand one another’s work.

Hew Strachan has noted that “Napoleon himself did not use the word strategy until he was exiled at St. Helena, but those who wrote about what he had achieved certainly did – not only Clausewitz, but also Jomini …and the Austrian Archduke Charles.”43 It would be the linkage between politics and war – the idea of war as a

42 Palmer, Makers of Modern Strategy, 117.
43 Strachan, The Direction of War, 29.
continuation of politics “with other means” – that would be, perhaps, the most important observation of Napoleon’s most important observer, Carl von Clausewitz. It was not the newness of Clausewitz’s statement, but rather the forcefulness of its assertion that set Clausewitz apart: “His originality is not in his reassertion of what must really be an old idea but rather in the clarity and insistence with which he hews to it and develops it.”

War, which can make sense only if it serves a political aim, is thus a political process conducted “with other means” -- a process that analyst Thomas Schelling, writing in the mid-20th century, would describe as “vicious diplomacy.”

Clausewitz’s On War, published a year after his death in 1831, remains the greatest effort ever made to understand the nature of war. No doubt because he had faced Napoleon as an opponent, Clausewitz placed a heavy emphasis on the role of chance in war, and on the profound and sustained effort required to overcome “friction” in war-fighting. Swiss writer Antoine Henri Jomini, who had fought alongside Napoleon and thus wrote from a very different (and rather more optimistic) perspective, sought to identify and enumerate the “scientific” principles of war-fighting that had enabled Bonaparte to enjoy such dominance for nearly two decades. In large part because they seemed tangible and concrete—and thus seemed to offer the prospect of being reproducible in other situations—these principles would hold great appeal for many, especially in the 19th century. Jomini would have a deep influence, for instance, on the

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44 “It is an accomplishment against perennial resistance, indicated by the fact that this understanding has never fully got across to the great majority of those people who think or write about war, and even less to those who fight it.” See Brodie, War and Politics, 1-2.
45 Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966), 2. See generally pages 1-34.
newly-professionalizing United States Army, which had its intellectual roots in the discipline of engineering.\textsuperscript{47}

As the US Army was trying to educate itself and professionalize, so too was the US Navy. In concert with growing US economic power, the US Navy expanded notably in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. While navies had long been crucial elements of state-based coercive leverage, the nature of their power as military and economic instruments was not fully articulated until the turn-of-the-century when two talented theorists, Alfred Thayer Mahan of the US and Sir Julian Corbett of Britain, put their observations and insights on paper. Mahan drew a linkage between maritime trade and national prosperity – and therefore between sea power and security. He also drew attention to the relationship between a state’s geography and its strategic culture. Continental powers, surrounded by potentially hostile armies, had no choice but to focus the bulk of their attention on land power. But states freed by geography from the need for vigilant and expensive land-based defenses, could develop cultures that highlighted individualism, capitalism, and the cosmopolitan outlook that comes with naval power and overseas trade. Both Corbett and Mahan sought theories of grand strategy; for the latter there was a “symbiotic link between sea power, liberal democracy and ideas of grand strategy.” What Corbett called “major strategy” had “in its broadest sense to deal with the whole resources of the nation for war.”\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} On Jomini’s influence see John Shy’s masterful essay in \textit{Makers of Modern Strategy}, 143-185. See also Hew Strachan, who writes: “His [Jomini’s] ideas were plagiarised by military theorists across the continent, and they provided the axioms inculcated in the military academies which proliferated from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries . His emphasis on planning, cartography and lines of communication meant that his definition of strategy became the \textit{raison d’etre} and even justification of the general staffs which were similarly institutionalised during the course of the nineteenth century.” \textit{The Direction of War}, 29.

\textsuperscript{48} Strachan, \textit{The Direction of War}, 31-33. On the rise of sea power and the influence of the Pax Brittanica, see Preston, Roland, and Wise, 104-156 and 192-208.
Also in the early 20th century, the development of airplanes as powerful instruments of war also highlighted the role of geography and culture in grand strategy. States with ongoing land-based threats tended to focus on air-land cooperation, while states like Britain and the US had more freedom to think about air power as an independent coercive instrument, operating on its own to structure an enemy’s incentives. The first main body of air power theory would develop during and after the First World War, its most public iterations issuing forth from the pens of Guilio Douhet, Sir Hugh Trenchard, and Gen. Billy Mitchell. These authors were not as explicit as they might have been, however, about the linkage – the exchange mechanism – between the employment of air power and the achievement of a satisfactory political end. They did not tend to submit their own work to serious the serious critical analysis necessary for sound strategic thinking.49

In the aftermath of the First World War many writers, including the British theorist of war J.F.C. Fuller, would reject the idea that “grand strategy” ought to be divided into military, naval and aerial components. In 1923 Fuller wrote, presciently, that “the first duty of the grand strategist was to appreciate the commercial and financial position of his country.” In addition, he argued, the strategist must possess a deft understanding of the history, culture, and governmental systems of his nation, since these “form the pillars of the military arch which it is his duty to construct.”50

Strategy and Grand Strategy in the War-torn 20th Century

50 Fuller quoted in Strachan, The Direction of War, 33.
Public opinion had become an important element of international relations during the time of the French Revolution – a fact recognized by Clausewitz in his “remarkable trinity.”\(^5^1\) Rapid progress in sanitation and medicine would greatly increase the populations of European states, allowing for the possibility of vast conscripted armies. Political reforms and expansion of the franchise had extended the voice of the people in democratic states, and the growing circulation of newspapers to an expanding reading public in Europe had heightened the volume and intensity of that voice. In general, the role of public opinion had expanded over time: “The mobilization of public opinion at home, the persuasion of opinion in neutral states, and the undermining of the legitimacy of the enemy government through propaganda, all became as much tools of grand strategy as the maintenance and deployment of armed forces, the preservation of a healthy economy, and the preservation of alliances.”\(^5^2\)

When Europe plunged into war in 1914—just shy of one hundred years after Napoleon’s defeat—science, technology, economics, social relationships, and politics were all in the midst of rapid and unprecedented change. Industrialization and the widening array of highly lethal weapons had changed the nature of war forever (although neither soldiers nor civilians fully appreciated this fact prior to 1914). And other industrial processes – including mass production (for everything from trucks to foodstuff and clothing) – would also affect the size of armies and the ways in which they could fight.\(^5^3\) Ideas and ideological fervor would, in the end, make mass armies a reality. And with all this happening at once, war-fighting became a vastly larger and more daunting

\(^{52}\) Howard, “Grand Strategy in the Twentieth Century,” 3.
\(^{53}\) For an elaboration, see Preston, Roland and Wise, 212-216. **add sources
enterprise than it had ever been before in history. The need for nations to fully organize their own resources -- and to coordinate them with those of their allies -- became acute, a matter of life and death.

The way in which different actors handled these changes affected their ability to leverage their strengths, compensate for their weaknesses, and link ways and means—both military and non-military—to political objectives. The First World War, which was the largest, costliest, and most complex conflagration that the world had ever seen, created a need for a grand strategic thought that was unprecedented in its range and scope. The states of the Entente (including Britain, France and, ultimately, the United States) fared better in the end than the Central Powers, anchored by the undemocratic Wilhelmine Germany and the fragile, fading Austro-Hungarian Empire. The grand strategy employed by the allied powers included the mass mobilization of state resources (human, industrial, technological, and scientific); information and propaganda campaigns, the extraction and leveraging of the resources of the British Empire; and the eventual attraction of American resources and American citizens to the cause. On behalf of political ideals, members of the Entente endured prolonged, brutal military campaigns on the Western Front, and sustained an array of costly peripheral campaigns as well. Keeping their coalition together despite the loss of the Soviet ally in 1917, they revealed resilience and commitment to the goal of protecting democracy on the European continent. But the price was frightful—and the outcome of the war, detailed and articulated in the Treaty of Versailles and a set of related instruments, would unsettle world politics for the remainder of the 20th century and beyond.54

Deep German resentment of the Treaty of Versailles would eventually give Adolf Hitler running room to implement his vision for overturning the existing order and implementing a craven racist ideology. The absence of the United States as a European security guarantor after the war, and the Anglo-French fear of facing another costly conflagration so soon after the last one, helped to open doors for Hitler that otherwise might have been closed to him.55

In the end, Britain and France reluctantly decided that they had to stand up to Hitler’s challenge to the international system. At the start of the Second World War, the survival of democratic principles and a capitalist economic structure for the developed world were once again in the balance. After France fell quickly, Prime Minister Winston Churchill realized Britain had little hope of a successful grand strategy in the absence of American help. But that help came slowly, first in the form of materiel, and then later in the form of a fully-developed alliance with shared resources and knowledge. In the interim, the democratic cause received an unexpected and ironic boost when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union.56

Though American resources were partially diverted eastward after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Americans proved wealthy enough to fight on two fronts on opposite sides of the world. Once again, two democratic states, working in a loose but crucially important alliance with the Soviets, were able to prevail in the art of grand strategy. This was not done, however, without considerable difficulty—and multiple


setbacks along the way. Hitler’s Third Reich was a formidable, adaptive foe that forced an intelligent, effective, and sustained use of Allied resources. The energy of Allied grand strategy—and the glue that held it together—was the shared goal of defeating Hitler’s heinous and exceptionally dangerous regime. Crafted in real time, Allied grand strategy was iterative and not infrequently based on mistaken assumptions and judgments. Often it reflected the strains that stemmed from the different postwar hopes and visions of the US, Britain, and the Soviet Union. But, flawed as it was, it had strengths and advantages that Axis grand strategy simply did not possess.57

If we look specifically at American grand strategy in World War II, we can identify five central pillars of success. First, Americans built and sustained a functional civil-military relationship that facilitated all other activity; second, they found ways to mobilize men and material, and to fight inside a democratic, capitalist paradigm that worked in concert with the nation’s existing institutions. Third, Americans leveraged the moral high ground ceded to them by their enemies, and sustained national will by relying on mechanisms with well-established roots in the culture. Fourth, they used their ongoing relationship with the British to make better strategic choices than they might have made entirely on their own. Finally, they embraced adaptability and resiliency, which allowed them to learn from their many mistakes and setbacks, and take advantage of their enemies’ mistakes.58

The post-World War II environment proved to have little in common with the hopes and aspirations of any of the combatants, either victor or loser. The United States,

which had emerged from the war largely unscathed and in a dominant economic position, found itself taking increasing responsibility for the liberal, capitalist world order that the Royal Navy had previously underwritten. The Americans, much to their dismay, discovered that alliance in the war against Hitler had not transformed the battered, distrustful Soviets. Stalin’s speech of February 9, 1946 made it clear that the Soviet leader did not expect any easy coexistence between communism and capitalism. A new environment entrenched itself as an “Iron Curtain” came down across central Europe. This “Cold War” brought an atmosphere of great mistrust, trapping the contending parties in an odd paradigm between war and peace. Once the Soviets acquired nuclear weapons in 1949, the role of US armed forces (and their allies around the world) became, more than ever, to deter wars rather than fight them.59

The US grand strategy for coping with the communist threat—“containment,” first authored by Soviet specialist George Kennan—sought to limit and circumscribe Soviet influence without actual war-fighting; the Soviet system, Kennan believed, would ultimately collapse due to its own internal deficiencies.60 Kennan’s original conception, developed in 1946-47, was hardened and sharpened when National Security Council Report number 68 gained traction after the Korean War began in June 1950. As a result, vast resources moved to the Pentagon, which began to eclipse the State Department in power and influence. Both Kennan and NSC 68’s author, Paul Nitze, had envisioned a grand strategy that brought myriad resources—including economic, diplomatic, and

59 Hew Strachan has written, “…theories of deterrence were developed and employed … Deterrence itself then became the cornerstone of a new discipline, strategic studies, but strategic studies were concerned not so much with what armies did in war as how nations used the threat of war in peace.” The Direction of War, 36.

military resources—to bear; but Nitze’s version of containment placed much more emphasis on military power than did Kennan’s. In terms of our focus here, the main point is that the US found it necessary to develop a grand strategy for a sustained engagement that it deemed to be existential in its stakes, but was not in any traditional sense a war. This expanded the notion of what “grand strategy” was, and which circumstances demanded it. One central element of the new grand strategy—nuclear strategy—“had no real precedents, beyond the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan. And so it focused on finding a new methodology, building scenarios and borrowing from mathematics and probability theory.”

The nature of the international system changed in another fundamental way in 1945. Rejecting their earlier abandonment of the League of Nations after World War I, Americans took primary responsibility for the development of a new international constitutional system that gave a voice to all nations, and created a mechanism for collective security. Through this means, small nations – many of them coming out from under the yoke of European imperialism – were able to gain forms of influence and leverage never before afforded to them. Under certain circumstances they were able, like Lilliputians pinning down Gulliver, to restrain and shape US behavior.

The grand strategy for the Cold War, which had its own costs and tradeoffs, and which went through many iterations between 1945 and 1989, served reasonably well as an overall framework for the US, even if the Americans sometimes failed to identify their

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62 Strachan, The Direction of War, 37.

own vital interests, and even if they sometimes alienated nations that did not wish to have to choose between the US and Soviet models. The rather abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union thrust the US and its allies into a new security paradigm that was, at first, driven by the self-restructuring of the former Soviet empire, and then by the rising threat of al-qaeda’s militant activists. After the latter’s attacks on US targets on 11 September 2001, the US shifted briefly to a preventive war strategy. But this departure from containment and deterrence, put into practice in the war against Iraq in 2003, brought myriad complications and setbacks—not the least being a bloody, sustained engagement that dragged on for years beyond what its authors had envisioned, and took on a new character due to wars in neighboring lands and the persistence of ethno-sectarian divides. It not only undercut the US effort to drive the Taliban permanently out of Afghanistan, but it hindered the US battle with its most dangerous enemy, al-qaeda.64

In the second decade of the 21st century the US is struggling to find the best ways and means of contending with the wide array of security threats that compromise its present and its future, including al-qaeda, fragile states, international criminal networks, cyber warfare, and global warming (and the many forms of displacement and upheaval the latter will cause). And all this must be undertaken against the backdrop of a dramatically shrinking budget, driven largely by expanding entitlements to an ageing population. These threats all require strategies – and grand strategies – that will make intelligent and robust linkages between ends sought and means available.

64 Emphasizing civil-military tension, Hew Strachan writes that “strategy was driven out by the wishful thinking of [the US military’s] political masters, convinced that the United States would be welcomed as liberators, and determined that war and peace were opposites, not a continuum. This cast of mind prevented consideration of the war’s true costs or the implications of occupation, and the United States found itself without a forum in which the armed forces could either give voice to their view of the principles at stake or be heard if they did.” The Direction of War, 45.
The Challenges of Devising and Implementing Strategy and Grand Strategy

In an article he wrote for *The Washington Post* in December of 2009, scholar and former State Department advisor Eliot Cohen explained that, “Strategy is the art of choice that binds means with objectives.” He added that it involves “priorities, sequencing, and a theory of victory.”65 The first is terribly important since strategy, unavoidably, involves tradeoffs. It requires the practitioner to accept the idea of limited resources, to choose wisely among them, and then to organize and utilize them so that they serve a defined political end. For grand strategy, this demand grows exponentially. One must not only choose wisely among resources, but integrate, rationalize, and synchronize their use—frequently in conjunction with allies. (And all that is in addition to creating a robust logic for linking ends and means for each instrument of power that is selected and utilized.)

In the US, those who would criticize a given administration’s grand strategy for its lack of clarity, purpose, or vision are usually those external to the administration who are observing it from the outside—often from think tanks and academic posts. Those inside the administration are, instead, busy trying to cope with daily events and crises. While they will make efforts to articulate their broad vision in the Congressionally-mandated “National Security Strategy of the United States,” and in speeches at various venues, they will find themselves fighting, daily, to get out from under the reactive stance that is largely unavoidable inside government, and is exacerbated by the 24-hour news cycle.

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All parties who are necessary to the success of a strategy or grand strategy must attempt to stay in ongoing and open communication with one another, not least of all to make sure that the logic relating ends and means is not usurped or undermined by the course of events, or simply forgotten. (Once a problem has existed for any length of time, it often becomes difficult to recall the original logic underpinning the strategy for dealing with it.) Progress, or lack of progress, towards the aim must be monitored constantly, and adjustments made in light of setbacks or stagnation. This requirement has significant ramifications at the organizational and bureaucratic levels. In the US, the National Security Council (NSC), as the main interagency coordinating body, has a high responsibility not only to tee up issues appropriately for senior decision-makers, but to understand and monitor – to the greatest extent possible – the actions that flow from these decisions. Only in this way can integration and forward momentum be sustained.66

Where strategy and grand strategy have a significant military component, the complexities of civil-military relations have a serious impact on processes and outcomes. Soldiers are, unavoidably, consumed by the relentless, ever-changing needs of a campaign: making and then adapting plans, implementing decisions and revisiting them in the light of feedback and data; building necessary infrastructure; supplying and sustaining troops, equipment, morale, and momentum. On the other hand, politicians and policymakers are equally consumed by their own unique challenges and burdens; indeed, they must spend as much time on domestic politics and inter-agency coordination as they spend on the development of plans. They must, above all, invest an extraordinary

66 Steven Metz has observed that grand strategy “attempts to impose coherence and predictability on an inherently disorderly environment composed of thinking, reacting, competing, and conflicting entities.” See Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008), xviii.
amount of time in creating a domestic environment that will enable them to implement and build and sustain a strategy *in the first place*.

The civil-military relationship within a nation is a complex one that is partly structured and partly improvised, but always challenging. There are good reasons for this. First of all, one must consider that war-fighting is, *in itself*, one of the most complex and demanding of all human endeavors—not only physically, but also emotionally and intellectually. Indeed, to enter into war is to lift the lid on a Pandora’s Box of uncertainty and contingency, with each new act or phase either opening up or closing off future options. It is enough to find ways to fight effectively against an enemy trying to thwart you at every turn. But you must do more: you must tie every military action to the political aims sought by the political leaders in charge of the effort. To keep those aims in view and to implement them within the cacophony of a democratic political structure is a challenge of the highest order.67

Political decision-makers must understand when it is justifiable to use military force to solve a political problem, and they must understand the limitations of the blunt instruments that the military wields. They must never move toward violence in the absence of strategy; and they must understand that violence, once employed, will take on its own momentum and will, ultimately, re-shape the political landscape—both domestically and internationally. The great contested stew of domestic politics will, often, complicate their efforts and force their hand. Decision-makers must comprehend

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67 Betts explains that, “Both policymakers and soldiers have more than they can handle, working around the clock to deal with the demanding problems in their respective realms, with neither focusing intently on the linkage—the bridge between objectives and operations, the mechanism by which combat will achieve its objectives.” He warns that when the logic link is broken, strategy becomes “whatever slogans and unexamined assumptions” occur to them in the moments “left over from coping with their main preoccupations.” “Is Strategy an Illusion?” 7.
that the triumphs and failures of the military will constantly re-define which ends are still possible, and which ones are not. Finally, they must understand that weariness, emotional fatigue, and shortened attention spans (often caused by the press of events) will ineluctably affect the quality of the choices they make and the policies they implement.

Many nations, including the US, possess all-volunteer, professional military organizations that are drawn from society but tend to live and work apart from it. Military experience – or even experience working alongside military personnel – is thus limited to small segments of a national population. This means that fewer and fewer civilians in high policy-making circles have any military experience; they therefore lack a first-hand appreciation of the inherent complexity of military operations, including their propensity for what Clausewitz called “fog and friction.”68 This inclines them to believe that military operations are fairly straightforward—more or less like other business and commercial activities. And this, in turn, leads them to be overly-optimistic about what missions the military can accomplish, how quickly they can be concluded, and what resources will be necessary for their success.

While those in the military generally have a full appreciation of the unique complexity of military operations, they too can contribute to inflated civilian expectations about the decisiveness of military force and warfighting. In their competition for funding and missions, the military services often oversell their capabilities, making exalted and unqualified claims for them. Additionally, their professional identity and institutional culture, built around a “can-do” mentality, asserts optimism and tends to direct attention away from potential barriers to success.

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68 See Paret and Howard, trans., On War, 100.
Even academics who write about international affairs and strategic studies may be poorly-equipped to effectively analyze the “barriers to effective strategy” because “so few of them anymore learn enough about the processes of decision-making or military operations to grasp how hard it is to implement strategic plans, and few focus on the conversion processes that open gaps between what government leaders decide to do and what governmental organizations implementing those decisions actually do do”. 69

Any hope of civil-military communication depends on clear and honest interaction and cooperation between two very different tribes with different priorities, cultures, and challenges. Not infrequently, the things that one party needs to say most are the very things that the other party wants least to hear. A strong sense of trust between political and military leaders is essential. That kind of trust must be built, in part, on education, and on the belief that a general will not use his/her power and influence to meddle in the realm of democratic politics. (Any improper behavior by generals, the most egregious example being Gen. MacArthur’s disregard for the views of President Harry Truman in 1950-51, can erode trust in highly consequential and lasting ways.) Civil-military trust must be reinforced and buttressed every single day since there is no point at which it becomes automatic and self-adjusting. 70

Richard Betts observed presciently that, “politicians often conflate strategy with policy objectives (focusing on what the desired outcome should be, simply assuming that force will move the adversary toward it), while soldiers often conflate strategy with operations (focusing on how to destroy targets or defeat enemies tactically, assuming that

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69 Betts, 7.
70 The details of the Truman-MacArthur crisis are explained well in Brodie, War and Politics, 57-112.
positive military effects mean positive policy effects).”71 Policymakers may indeed reach too readily for armed force as a preferred instrument because they assume, simplistically, that force will have the desired effect on the enemy. And, in the US, this tendency to reach for the military has been made easier by the creation of a professionalized all-volunteer military, and the erosion of the requirement to obtain popular consent, through Congress, for the use of force.72 For decision-makers anxious to keep a problem off the front pages (thus opening up or preserving space for other political priorities), the use of force – including, in recent years, the employment of unmanned aerial vehicles – can be a highly seductive option.73 Equally, soldiers conflate strategy with operations because, as Hew Strachan has pointed out, armed forces are inherently attracted to the operational level of war: “it allows them to appropriate what they see as the acme of their professional competence, separate from the trammels and constraints of political and policymaking direction.”74

Even when a sound strategy is devised, however, significant barriers to its successful implementation will be imposed by the limitations of the implementing organizations. Since we live in a world comprised of far more data than any one of us can possibly take in and process, we filter information—readily accepting that which suits our pre-existing or preferred beliefs, and downplaying or discounting that which does not. Stove-piping of information, bureaucratic infighting, and organizational and cultural biases also can cause us to founder on the shoals of ignorance, self-interest, or

71 Betts, 7.
arrogance. And interpersonal relationships will matter too, especially at the deputies and principals levels; key players must be willing and able to pull towards an agreed-upon end state. If they refuse, even the soundest strategy will be in jeopardy.

Because of the myriad opportunities for miscommunication and failure, resilience and recovery mechanisms must be built into the process. These mechanisms depend above all on healthy, trust-based institutions that facilitate and support learning and adapting – both from the top down and from the bottom up. And the learning and adapting depend, of course, on analysis and critical thinking. Being able to ask the right questions at the right time is key – but this skill requires courage, sound judgment and wisdom. Finding answers to those questions depends on the presence of a skilled and diligent staff of dedicated professionals who are adaptive and will allow information to flow freely, often from the bottom up. And, once the answers are reasonably clear, the implementing organizations must be able to follow adroitly in the direction that new insights take them.

To be even partially successful, a strategy must have staying power and robustness. With reference to the military instrument, Richard Betts has observed, “If effective military strategy is to be real rather than illusory, one must be able to devise a rational scheme to achieve an objective through combat or the threat of it; implement the scheme with forces; keep the plan working in the face of enemy reactions (which should be anticipated in the plan); and achieve something close to the objective.” This is surely
a non-trivial set of demands, but it is fully justified, he argued, in situations where the
stakes are high, lives are at risk, and failure will be costly on multiple levels.75

Historian Walter McDougall has defined sound grand strategy as “an equation of
ends and means so sturdy that it triumphs despite serial setbacks at the level of strategy,
operations, and campaigns. The classic example is Allied grand strategy during World
War II.”76 Serial setbacks surely beset US grand strategy in World War II—from the fall
of the Philippines to the mis-steps at the Kasserine Pass; from the chaos of the Sicily
landing to the early failures of the strategic bombing offensive; from the glider disasters
at Normandy and the torpedo failures in the Pacific, to the enemy counterpunches at
Arnhem and the Battle of the Bulge. But each time the Americans, in concert with their
allies, recovered and adjusted.

Peter Layton has identified two alternatives to grand strategy that may be valid for
some actors under certain circumstances. “Opportunism” posits that an actor may
change, shift, or evolve in order to take advantage of possibilities as they present
themselves. This requires less a specific aim point, or end, than a general direction. It is
an option for actors who may not have the resources to shape outcomes, but instead may
wish to grasp and exploit the breaks that come their way. It surely has advantages, not
least being that it can be far less resource-demanding than grand strategy. But it has
downsides too. It is reactive, leaving an actor largely at the mercy of outside forces it
cannot control: “In being responsive, the state using opportunism does not initiate and

75 Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” 6. He adds that “strategies are chains of relationships among means and
ends that span several levels of analysis, from the maneuvers of units in specific engagements through
larger campaigns, whole wars, grand strategies and foreign policies.”
76 Walter McDougall, “Can the United States do Grand Strategy?” The Telegram April 2010. Available at:
http://www.fpri.org/articles/2010/04/can-united-states-do-grand-strategy
therefore must accept boundaries determined elsewhere; the state is part of another’s project and is responsive to that.”

The flip-side of the opportunism coin is “risk management.” In this approach, an actor will seek mainly to avoid harm to itself as a result of the forces around it. Actors can anticipate potential harm and take steps to make themselves less directly or acutely subject to it. These steps can include “building capabilities and capacities to survive shocks,” or “continuing operation[s] in the presence of external stresses,” or “absorbing shocks and evolving in response.” These shocks and disruptions might be political and/or physical in nature. An example of the latter might include the building of protective walls to hold back rising seas caused by melting Arctic ice. Like opportunism, though, risk management will not offer the sense of agency and destiny that strategy and grand strategy can confer when they are well-designed and implemented.

It is important to realize that neither strategy nor grand strategy and indeed can rest upon individual genius (although good fortune can sometimes lend a hand). Some of those we frequently identify as successful strategists, including George Marshall and Winston Churchill, promulgated seriously flawed strategies at various points in their careers. But they had people alongside them who could offer contrary opinions and catch errors; and they had organizations under them that could do dedicated, first rate staff work—the kind of work that allows for learning, adaption, and adjustment. Indeed, responsiveness is, perhaps, the single most important quality of strategy—the quality that is most likely to give an actor an advantage over his competitor.

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After a lengthy examination of the hurdles to sound and sustainable strategy, we might conclude that the art is so hard as to be nearly impossible to practice in any kind of idealized form. But the rewards to investment can be high if the strategist is informed, diligent, and determined. And when lives are involved, we have a moral obligation to put forward a herculean effort, with unflagging energy, to craft, implement and sustain sound strategy and grand strategy.