

# America's Short-sighted 'Grand Strategy'

"Tough-guy/gal-ism" remains the dominant rhetorical approach to foreign policy emanating from Official Washington, which may protect the political and media careers of the tough-talkers, but it is doing grave damage to America's strategic standing in the world, as military analyst Franklin Spinney explains.

By Franklin Spinney

The contemporary theory and practice of grand strategy by the United States can be summarized in the sound byte uttered in 2001 by President George W. Bush shortly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, "You are either with us or you are with the terrorists."

Bush did not invent this conception of grand strategy. His sound byte was simply a variation of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's triumphalist theory that America had become the world's "essential power" with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now clear that Bush's assertion of unilateral prerogative blew back on itself to create all sorts of problems at home and abroad. It is also clear that, notwithstanding the blowback, his coercive grand strategic outlook became more entrenched and ossified during the Presidential tenure of Barack Obama.

This is evident in Obama's unilateral escalation of drone attacks; his fatally flawed Afghan "surge" decision ([click here](#) and [here](#)); the foreign and domestic spying by the NSA, which included tapping the cell phones of close allies like German Prime Minister Angela Merkel; his administration's aggressive meddling in Ukraine, together with the demonization of Vladimir Putin that is now well on the way to starting an unnecessary new cold war with Russia; and Mr. Obama's so-called strategic pivot to the East China Sea to contain China.

Surely, the art of grand strategy is more subtle than a bipartisan theory of coercive diplomacy grounded on an assertion of a unilateral military prerogative. Surely, there is more to the art of grand strategy than the notion of coercion embodied in the question Secretary of State Albright's posed to General Colin Powell during a debate over whether or not to intervene in the Balkans, "[What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?](#)"

America's descent into a state of perpetual war ought to suggest it is time to

rethink our approach to grand strategy.

### **What Is Grand Strategy?**

So, how do we define grand strategy? More to the point of this essay, what considerations make up a constructive grand strategy?

The late American strategist, Col. John R. Boyd (USAF Ret see [bio](#)), evolved five criteria for synthesizing and evaluating a nation's grand strategy. Boyd's brilliant theories of conflict are contained in his collections of briefings entitled a "Discourse on Winning and Losing" (which can be downloaded at his [link here](#)). I will briefly introduce the reader to what I will call Boyd's criteria for shaping a sensible grand strategy.

Boyd argued that any country should shape the domestic policies, foreign policies, and military strategies used to pursue its national goals (our national goal can be found in the Preamble to the Constitution) in a way that a nation's decisions and actions work to:

- Strengthen that nation's resolve and increase its political cohesion or solidarity;
- Drain away the resolve of its adversaries and weaken their internal cohesion;
- Reinforce the commitments of its allies to its cause and make them empathetic to its success;
- Attract the uncommitted to its cause or makes them empathetic to its success;
- And most importantly, end conflicts on favorable terms that do not sow the seeds of future conflicts.

These common sense criteria should not be thought of as a checklist, but as being general guidelines for evaluating the wisdom of specific policies or actions, say, for example, of President Bush's response to 9/11 or Obama's meddling in Ukraine (which I will leave to the reader for evaluation).

Obviously, it is difficult to construct policies that conform to or reinforce all these criteria at the same time. This challenge is particularly difficult in the case of the unilateral military strategies and the coercive foreign policies so popular with the foreign policy elites on both sides of the political aisle in the United States. Military operations and political coercion are usually destructive in the short term, and their destructive strategic effects can be in natural tension with the aims of grand strategy, which should be constructive over the long term. History is littered with failures to reconcile the natural tension between military strategy and grand strategy.

Moreover, the more powerful a country becomes, the harder it is to combine these often conflicting criteria into a sensible grand strategy. The possession of overwhelming power breeds hubris and arrogance that tempts leaders to use their power coercively and excessively. But lording over or dictating one's will to others breeds lasting resentment. Thus, paradoxically, the possession of overwhelming power increases the danger of going astray grand strategically over the long term.

That danger becomes particularly acute and difficult to control when aggressive external actions, policies, and rhetoric are used to prop up or increase internal cohesion for domestic political reasons, such as the goal of winning an election.

Very often, the effects of military strategies or coercive foreign policies that are perceived as to be useful in terms of strengthening domestic political cohesion backfire at the grand-strategic level, because they strengthen our adversaries' will to resist, push our allies into a neutral or even an adversarial corner, and/or drive away the uncommitted which, taken together, can set the stage for growing isolation and continuing conflict, which eventually blows back on itself to erode cohesion at home.

#### **Case Study: Wilhelmine Germany, 1914**

The German invasion of France through neutral Belgium in 1914 provides a classic example of how a policy shaped by inwardly focused strategic considerations (in this case, Germany's well-founded fear of isolation and a two-front war) can induce a well-trained, professional strategic leadership elite into perpetrating a grand-strategic blunder on a colossal scale for the most "rational" of reasons.

Germany was not trying to conquer and permanently occupy Belgium or France at the beginning of World War I. But in the ten years leading up to WWI, the German general staff became obsessed with the idea that it was strategically necessary to attack and defeat the French army very quickly in order to knock France out of the coming war, before France's Russian ally could mobilize in the East.

Germany's operational-level problem was that the Franco-German frontier was heavily fortified, so the German military leadership convinced itself of the strategic need to avoid these fortifications by invading small neutral Belgium, which had much weaker defenses.

While the German plan was grounded in logical military considerations (i.e., it appeared to be the quickest way to penetrate French defenses), the German obsession with military strategy blinded its military planners and the Kaiser to

the grand-strategic implications of such an invasion, especially if that invasion failed to produce a quick, clean victory.

Germany's military strategists understood that violating Belgian neutrality would likely bring Great Britain into the war. But they did not appreciate how the civilized world would react to their invasion of a small neutral country, whose independence and neutrality had been guaranteed since 1839 by the Treaty of London (whose signatories included the German Confederation led by Prussia) , a treaty the German Empire recognized when it absorbed Prussia's treaty obligations.

In 1914, the German Foreign Minister (who had no say in shaping the German army's determination of the invasion strategy) arrogantly dismissed the likelihood of Britain's entry into the war by characterizing the Treaty of London as a "scrap of paper." However, the Treaty of London turned out to be more than a scrap of paper.

The German invasion of neutral Belgium and then France brought Britain into the war and enraged the civilized world. Then, the German invasion was stopped at the First Battle of the Marne (September 1914), only one month after they invaded Belgium. The Marne established the conditions for a lengthy stalemate and a bloody war of attrition. The spillage of blood increased the determination of each side to prevail. More importantly, at the grand strategic level of conflict, the Germans effectively handed the British a propaganda windfall that the Brits milked brilliantly for the rest of the war.

Over the next four years, the British successfully constructed an image of Germany as a force of unmitigated evil (which was not the case at the beginning of World War I). The successful propaganda operation was reinforced by continued grand-strategic blundering on the part of German leadership (e.g., the Zimmermann Telegram, unrestricted submarine warfare, etc.). These self-inflicted wounds served to morally isolate Germany at the decisive grand strategic level of the war. (See my essay The M&M Strategy for a general description of Boyd's powerful theory of moral isolation, which applies to any form of conflict.)

Germany's moral isolation also created a psychological asymmetry that increased the freedom of action of her adversaries: to wit, the British were able to avoid criticism, while they conducted a ruthless blockade of Germany that resulted in far greater indiscriminate death and suffering to civilians than the damage and death caused by Germany's submarines.

Indeed, in an ominous foreshadowing of U.S. policy in Iraq in the 1990s, the propagandized sense that Germany was an unmitigated evil became so effective that Britain was able to maintain its murderous blockade of Germany

(particularly the restriction on food imports) after the Nov. 11, 1918 armistice, until July 1919, without any outcry by its allies or neutral countries.

The ominous parallel of Britain's WWI blockading policy applies to the U.S. sanctions policy in Iraq during the Bush-41 and Clinton Administrations: Painting Saddam Hussein as an unmitigated evil after he invaded Kuwait freed up US "strategists" to persuade the world to impose sanctions on Iraq from August 1990 until May 2003.

No one knows how many innocent Iraqis died from the combined effects of the blockade and Saddam's ruthless countermoves, but estimates made in mortality studies now run from 500,000 to a million. Asked in May 1996 about the deaths of Iraqi children by Leslie Stahl on "60 Minutes," then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright infamously replied: "we think the price is worth it." Nevertheless, her claim that these deaths being "worth it," did not prevent the United States from using false claims to justify an unprovoked invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In World War I, even America, with its large German population and widespread anti-British sentiment (something now forgotten), rejected its long tradition of neutrality and joined Germany's enemies and thereby provided the injection of enough fresh troops and resources to break the stalemate and make the German defeat inevitable

No doubt the British grand strategic success in isolating Germany morally during the war also worked to fuel the arrogance that led to the excessively vindictive terms imposed on Germany at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. That these onerous terms "ended" the conflict on terms that helped to sow the seeds of future conflict is now self evident.

By deviating from the criteria of sensible grand strategy in victory, Britain, together with the connivance of Italy and France and President Woodrow Wilson's inability or refusal to impose moderation in the peace terms, inadvertently helped to pave the way for the emergence of a truly pathological state in the form of Nazi Germany.

It is revealing that today, American politicians and warmongers love to raise the specter of Hitler and Munich but never refer to the cause of Hitler's rise to power, the Vengeance of Versailles.

Today, a 101 years after the start of World War I, the world is still paying a price for Germany's grand-strategic blunder in 1914 and the Allies ruthless exploitation of that blunder at the Versailles Peace Conference, the problems in

the Balkans, the Middle East, the Russian heartland, and the Caucasus, to name a few, have roots reaching back to destruction of world order that flowed from the invasion of 1914, the vengeance of 1919, and the violent aftermath of that vengeance.

So, the important lesson of this German case study is this: It is very dangerous to allow military strategy to trump grand strategy. Whenever a great power fails to adequately consider the criteria shaping a sensible grand strategy, painful unintended consequences can metastasize and then linger for a very long time.

### **Emphasis on 'Toughness'**

Today America's central foreign policy problem and the problem of American militarism can be simply stated: Military strategy is trumping grand strategy. The result is not only a state of perpetual war, but as the emerging Ukraine and China policies show, it is one of an expanding confrontation that can lead to even more war and more blowback.

That, in a nut shell, is why it is time to do a grand-strategic evaluation of the coercive unilateralism that is evident in America's ever-mutating war on terror, its meddling in Ukraine, and its so-called strategic pivot into China's backyard to threaten China's exceedingly vulnerable sea lines of communication and "contain" China, whatever that means. The time is ripe for a substantive political debate on a real issue.

The Presidential campaign will move into high gear on the day after Labor Day. But as it now stands, the American people are about to be inundated with speeches and debating points over why it is time to rebuild America's defenses, with most of the candidates beating their breasts in an effort to out-tough each other.

Wouldn't it be refreshing if at least one candidate stopped beating his or her breasts and spoke thoughtfully to the importance of moving our country onto a pathway away from blind militarism toward a more sensible grand strategy.

Unfortunately, that probably won't happen; in America, as elsewhere, all foreign policy is local in the sense that it is shaped by domestic politics. And in our country, too many people in the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex on both sides of the aisle are becoming rich and powerful by feeding off America's self-referencing politics of unilateralism, fear, and perpetual war.

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