

A paper presented at the

2008 Joint Operations Symposium:

***Strategic Re-Assessment: From Long-Range Planning to Future  
Strategy and Forces***

Hosted by:

The Institute for National Strategic Studies  
of  
The National Defense University

4-5 June 2008

***The Strategic Thinking Deficiency:  
Diagnosis and Cure***

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# The Strategic Thinking Deficiency: Diagnosis and Cure

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Numerous commentators have come to profoundly disturbing conclusions about the U.S. government's ability to think and execute strategically. In a world in which U.S. strategy must account for a vastly changed security environment and provide a coherent and comprehensive response, this is a concern. If we want to effectively fulfill America's traditional leadership role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, this is more than a concern—it's a crisis. Thus, curing America's strategic thinking deficiency is an appropriate topic for a major conference.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. National Security Commission/21<sup>st</sup> Century was established by Congress in response to a perception of slow strategic readjustments in the aftermath of the Cold War. That bipartisan body of 14 senior American leaders concluded that we faced a crisis of competency in government. The Commission's Phase 3 report concluded that "strategic planning is largely absent within the U.S. government." Of gravest concern, they could find no overarching strategic framework guiding U.S. national security policy or the allocation of resources.<sup>2</sup> The planning that does occur they found to be *ad hoc* and specific to Executive departments and agencies. The commission identified the need for a culture of coordinated strategic planning to permeate all U.S. national security institutions.

The Beyond Goldwater-Nichols study project also noted the lack of any planning culture outside of Defense, and more recently noted that "senior U.S. officials find it almost impossible to break the tyranny of the inbox and find time for strategic planning." Not surprisingly it found that the budget process is not aligned with strategic planning. Even at the highest level, the executive branch does not take a holistic approach to the

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<sup>1</sup> I referred to this in my assessment, F. G. Hoffman, "Assessing the Long War: America's Strategic Thinking Deficiency," FPRI ENote, Jan 4, 2007. See also Newt Gingrich, "United States Security and the Strategic Landscape," speech delivered at the Business Executives for National Security, 15 May 2008, accessed at [www.aei.org/include/pub\\_print.asp?pubID=28007](http://www.aei.org/include/pub_print.asp?pubID=28007)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. National Security Commission/21<sup>st</sup> Century, *Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change*, Washington DC, March 15, 2001, p. 48.

most pressing security problems.<sup>3</sup> While each national security agency brings its experience and focus to bear on security challenges, “the mechanisms to integrate the various dimensions of U.S. national security policy and to translate that policy into integrated programs and actions are extremely weak, if they exist at all.”

It notes that the U.S. government currently lacks the capacity necessary to support strategic thinking and long-range planning in the national security arena. National security officials orient on the crises and demands of the day, and not long term trends or planning work. While the National Security Council (NSC) staff may develop planning documents for their respective issues, the NSC staff lacks adequate capacity to conduct integrated long-range planning for the President.<sup>4</sup>

Last, Princeton’s Aaron Friedberg has observed that:

The U.S. government has lost the capacity to conduct serious, sustained national strategic planning. Although offices and bureaus scattered throughout the executive branch perform parts of this task for their respective agencies, no one place brings all the pieces together and integrates them into anything resembling a coherent, comprehensive whole.<sup>5</sup>

This marked inability to think strategically and see the “whole” rather than just the disparate parts is potentially fatal. We cannot default to Cold War patterns, intellectually or fiscally, to guide us. We need a grasp of the whole problem which is inherently different than the past. Our ends, ways and means need to be realigned to address tomorrow’s challenges. In short, we need to cure American’s strategic thinking deficiency, as it reduces our capacity to secure our interests in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **The Security Environment**

The need to come to grips with a more comprehensive understanding of the process of proper decision making is magnified with the ongoing changes in the security environment. We need to comprehend the context in which the various instruments of our national power must operate within. The world has experienced a transformation in

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<sup>3</sup> Clark A. Murdock, *et al*, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era*, Phase 1 Report Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2004, pp 61-62. Hereafter referred to as BGN report. See also BGN Phase 2 Report, 2006, p. 26. This report can be found at [www.csis.org/](http://www.csis.org/) [http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/bgn\\_ph2\\_report.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/bgn_ph2_report.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, “Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2007-8, p. 47..

strategic affairs that we have only begun to appreciate.<sup>6</sup> This strategic environment has an impact on the nature and importance of policy development, and the military's role within it.

In such a world it is appropriate to talk about big, unpredictable and dramatic surprises, what Nassim Taleb has made famous with his book *The Black Swan*.<sup>7</sup> Some attention to inflection points and "wild cards" are well known elements of forecasting. But this novelty overlooks the messy reality of dealing with potential problems that are identifiable if not predictable. In *Inevitable Surprises*, Peter Schwartz points out that we will face numerous sharp jolts or major discontinuities in political, military, and economic areas. "If anything," he notes, "there will be more, not fewer, surprises in the future, and they will all be interconnected."<sup>8</sup> These interconnected surprises, which Schwartz calls discontinuities, will bring about a different world, one in which the rules of the game are fundamentally altered. Many of these discontinuities have roots in ongoing measurable trends and we can anticipate them. By realizing what today's driving forces are, we can alter our grasp of emerging realities, anticipate the consequences, and avoid surprise.

The next Administration will face both enduring and new challenges. In some areas these challenges are stark but are not adequately recognized. They are not highly improbable, they *are inevitable surprises because we have chosen to ignore the data*. That should be our emphasis, and thus I think the Boiling Frogs metaphor is more appropriate (albeit biologically incorrect). We are the proverbial frog sitting in a pot of tepid water over a flame. We are relatively unaware of the scope and danger of the boiling water swirling around us until it's too late.

Some of the ongoing environmental conditions that are the slowly boiling water of my metaphor include:

- The majority of the world now lives in dense urban centers with intense implications regarding their services, governance and sanitation.
- Some competitive societies are outpacing our productivity growth and could outsize our economy.

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation in Strategic Affairs*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, New York: Random House, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Schwartz, *Inevitable Surprises, Thinking Ahead in a Time of Turbulence*, New York: Gotham, 2003, p. 4.

- Our economic potential is declining relative to possibly adversarial states.
- Our capacity to invest in the future is tied up by a large national debt and low savings rate.
- A significant and growing portion of the federal budget is committed to entitlements programs that will balloon as the boomers retire.
- As much as 25% of US GDP could be expended for health care, and another 15% for energy, several orders of magnitude higher than the past.
- As other economies grow, we face a relative decline in our national S&T base, a strategic strength in the past for both the economy and our military.
- There will be an Asian face to globalization, and perhaps a new center of gravity in a global economy.
- The global economy may not see the dollar as a useful reserve currency, with attendant decline in its value and U.S. economic influence.
- Our traditional allies face demographic and economic crises that will make them older, smaller in terms of population size, and poorer.
  - While our own demographic changes present a tsunami of federal entitlements that are not sustainable.
- The developing world will eventually use more energy than the OECD, and China could consume more energy than U.S.
- The U.S could depend on foreign energy imports for 70-75% of our needs.
  - 80% of the global oil supply could be in hands of unstable or autocratic states.
- We could soon find ourselves in a wildly proliferated world, and this proliferation might be in the materials sciences, not just the nuclear weapons.
- Finally, nonstate actors might hold WMD and aspire to alter the character of conflict to negate our conventional military superiority.

## **Implications**

Globalization has produced a world in which national security issues are affected by a range of diverse, complex and nonlinear factors. The development and execution of effective strategy in such an environment is more diffused, integrated and iterative. While our existence is not directly contested by a monolithic threat with the demise of the Soviet Union, myriad threats, challenges and opportunities swirl around us. Isolating these for linear review and processing appears difficult if not infeasible.

Seamlessly integrated strategies are now the order of the day, mandating more coordination and organizational adaptability than ever before. Problems and opportunities appear faster, demanding more agile answers than our hierarchies are used to providing. The problems of the day also reflect a greater convergence of interested parties and

stakeholders. For example, nation-building and counter-insurgency programs require far more input from non-military agencies. Homeland security concerns require inputs from not only major federal bureaucracies but also from State governors and local officials. Most security concerns today produce highly charged and competing interest groups from various quarters including major components of the economy. Old boundaries that separated domestic and international concerns are blurring. Globalization has created a world in which people, ideas, images, finance, and goods move faster and further than ever before.

The urgent need for mechanisms of horizontal coordination are markedly rising in proportion to the exponential increase in interdependency.<sup>9</sup> But our federal silos of excellence, our large institutional muscles, are uncoordinated at the top and in the field. They remain rooted and rigidly turf conscious in a world in which organizational and jurisdictional boundaries matter less than before. The homeland security and intelligence reforms are indications of a need for strategic adjustments to the Cold War architecture constructed for a different world half a century ago. As Yale's Paul Bracken notes, the organizational pathologies of our current system impede if not preclude success.

The costs of structural dysfunction will get worse, too, because both problems and opportunities in the global environment are becoming increasingly diverse and multidimensional. Handling a nuclear Iran and fighting terrorists, rescuing Darfur and rebuilding failed states, managing the entry of new powers in to the international order and protecting against the meltdown of the international financial system---all of these new challenges demand integrated approaches the current system cannot deliver, designed as it was for a Cold War world that no longer exists.<sup>10</sup>

Our decision making machinery is slow and sclerotic, which contradicts the need for prompt responses to changing circumstances. The temporal dimension of strategy and American strategic performance is often overlooked. Tactically, the military thinks in terms of rapid "OODA loop" cycles, and the advantages incurred by controlling the relative tempo of events. Yet the slowing spinning decision and action cycles of the U.S. government churn slowly, letting the insurgents operate well within our OODA loop. Thus, one seasoned analyst concludes "the U.S. government has become an increasingly ponderous beast, unable to act quickly or even to understand how its various parts fit

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<sup>9</sup> Bracken, pp. 78-80.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Bracken, "Managing to Fail, Why Strategy Is Disjointed," *The American Interest*, Sept./Oct. 2007, p. 71.

together to act at all.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, a world of blurring boundaries, a smaller but more competitive world, and a faster tempo characterizes our operating environment.

## **Prescriptions**

Our strategic planning challenge is significant but we have not passed the point where our institutions are on life support. The diagnosis is not yet terminal but the patient requires a concerted team effort. The prescriptive solution will involve three components, the first is intellectual, the next is procedural, and the last resort involves organizational reform.

## **Intellectual**

The foremost impediment to long range strategic planning is intellectual or conceptual. We need to markedly change how we incorporate foreign culture into our intelligence and planning procedures. How we see others, and how we account for our own strategic culture is critical. Furthermore, the incorporation of strategic history into our assessments and policy development is vital. Finally, we need to deal with the cognitive influences presented by surprise and uncertainty.

*Cultural Understanding.* An influential strategist once observed that “good strategy presumes good anthropology and good sociology.”<sup>12</sup> Fundamentally, war involves an iterative competition between peoples whose behavior patterns will be a result of a complex combination of factors. Our national security community has experts who rigorously study the strategic culture of adversarial states, and assessing an opponent’s military capabilities. During the Cold War, we created an entire cadre of experts in Russian history, language, and culture. However, we became what General Zinni calls Order of Battle oriented, focused on quantifying a known opponent and laying out his capabilities in neat templates.<sup>13</sup>

This will not help us in the future, a world of “fault line” wars.<sup>14</sup> These are the sorts of culturally intensive, ethnic or religiously divisive conflicts that occur between different cultures or civilizations. Such fault line wars are protracted, violent and highly

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce Berkowitz, “Marking Time, Why Government is So Slow,” *The American Interest*, Sept./Oct. 2007, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 332.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Zinni, in Joe Strange, *Principles of War*, Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 1995 p. 266.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, pp. 207-8, 252-4.

contagious. Unfortunately, these are exactly the kinds of conflicts we will be involved in for the next few decades. “Fault line” wars place a premium on an in-depth knowledge base of the other component of a nation’s strategic culture—its societal culture.

The role of culture cuts both ways. We need to understand ourselves as much as our opponent. It is a source of great strength but also institutional inertia. It can close minds to learning and innovation, or promote organizational excellence. The British strategist Colin Gray has long argued that culture plays a significant role in the identification of strategic choices and thinking.<sup>15</sup> This is because this collective set of biases, presumptions, and values frame how planners and strategists from one culture think and act. It is inherently impossible for a strategist to separate himself from his culture, and it is just as impossible to understand the development and execution of a strategy without assessing the role that prior experience and encoded cultural values play.

Historical scholarship underscores the role of institutional culture of armed forces as a source or inhibitor of strategic adaptation or doctrinal change. John Nagl’s recently reissued *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* also reinforces the distinctive impact that culture has in organizational adaptation during war. Such an approach offers a potential for greater understanding of the mental blinders of planners than traditional rationalist approaches.<sup>16</sup>

The role of cultural influences on the American Way of War offers useful insights into dysfunctional aspects of pre-war planning for Iraq, as well as the subsequent inability to rapidly adapt to the evolving characteristics of the “post-conflict” phase. The set of serial failures that created our current challenges in the Middle East are more easily understood if one accounts for the attributes of American strategic culture, particularly its techno-centric optimism. The same can be said for understanding the influence of the Vietnam War for the bifurcation of political and military spheres in our strategic councils. Because of that conflict, the American concept of war is “rarely extended beyond the winning of battles and campaigns to the gritty work of turning military victory into

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<sup>15</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Strategic Culture as context,” in his *Strategy and History: Essays on theory and practice*, Oxon UK: Routledge, 2006, pp. 150-169.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Kiers *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, and John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, Chicago University Press, 2005.

strategic success.”<sup>17</sup> Hew Strachan notes that a part of our military culture and its operational focus views the theater level of war as a purely military domain, a “politics free zone.”<sup>18</sup>

Too often, technology dominates American strategic thinking. This is despite the fact that the overwhelming historical record underscores a clear conclusion, technology does not win wars.<sup>19</sup> Technology is neither a substitute for strategy nor a panacea. Technology is an element that permeates the history of conflict and the conduct of warfare, but it must be harnessed to relevant ends, not pursued as an end unto itself. American strategic culture incorporates technology and innovation as a critical dimension of our overall preeminence, but it is neither an automatic passport to strategic victory nor a “cure all” for weaknesses in other dimensions.<sup>20</sup>

For far too long American military planners and civilian policy makers have imagined future military capabilities through rose-colored glasses. In the 1990s, the “peace dividend” was paramount and threats were allowed to fester under the illusion that they could not harm America. Later, the Information Technology (IT) boom fed another delusion, that the fog and friction of human conflict could be swept away. The resulting mania known as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) produced an interesting but inconclusive debate. A spate of interesting theories about Network Centric Warfare (NCW), Rapid Dominant Operations, Shock and Awe, and Effects Based Operations were put forth.

These concepts fed into the transformation agenda that the Bush Administration brought in to shape priorities at the Pentagon. Not all of these concepts were inappropriate or unfounded, but most overlooked the existence of a thinking opponent, an adversary with a set of his own interests and motivations. The enduring continuities of History were

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<sup>17</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria, II, “An American Way of War or Way of Battle?” Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, Jan., 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Hew Strachan, “The Lost Meaning of Strategy,” *Survival*, Autumn, 2005, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> This theme dominates the historical analyses conducted on this topic. See MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, *Dynamics of Military Revolutions, 1300-2050*, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 BC to the Present*, New York: Free Press, 1989; and Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History*, London: Frank Cass, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> For a remarkable and concise review of American strategic culture, see Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy; Can the American Way of War Adapt?* Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006, pp. 29-49.

displaced by the possible discontinuities of technical advances. While technology is a dimension that permeates the military sciences, it must be harnessed to relevant ends, not pursued as an end unto itself.

*Incorporating History.* The studious exploration of history is not a consistent element of the American Way of Strategy. But as one historian has stressed, “The future cannot be known at all, and the past suggests that change is often radical and unforeseeable rather than incremental and predictable.”<sup>21</sup> So should we care about history? Yes, despite ambiguities, history remains our only reliable guide to the range of possibilities open to us in the future.

In many respects, our prospects in Iraq are the culminating point for a decade of ahistorical thinking about the nature of war and strategic studies in American policy circles.<sup>22</sup> History offers many insights into how other major powers balanced the competing needs of multiple security objectives within a period of competitive confrontation and rampant technological change. Instead, it requires a degree of understanding that must be acquired or interpreted by a more enlightened security community imbued with a deep understanding of the historical and cultural context that has generated the conflict to begin with.

As Dr. Kagan puts it

The U.S. strategy community in the 1990s was in general so caught up with the minutiae of technology that it lost sight of the larger purpose of war, and there missed the emergence of a challenge even more important than that of technology, the challenge of designing military operations to achieve particular political objectives.

Military historians should know better. The lesson of innovation in the interwar period was that those who rigorously studied the last war and realistically tested their assumptions proved to be best prepared to fight and adapt to the realities of combat.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Macgregor Knox, “What History Can tell Us about the New Strategic Environment,” 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy*, New York: Encounter Books, 2006

<sup>23</sup> Williamson Murray, “War and the West,” *Orbis*, Summer 2008. Williamson Murray and Richard Sinnreich, *Past as Prologue, The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

However, the multi-disciplinary nature of modern conflict strongly indicates that the history to be studied should not be confined to military history.<sup>24</sup>

We need to approach history with what Eliot Cohen has called the “historical mind.” This mindset focuses on key questions to ask, the linkages between cases, and the specifics of context. Such a mind set allows for the ability to detect patterns and the relevance of analogies. It helps the strategist identify the continuity of a case, but more importantly the discontinuities that could disqualify the lessons of one case or to avoid attributing causation of one aspect of one case and another.<sup>25</sup> As other historians have stressed “The ability to see differences as well as similarities, to understand that generalizations do not always hold in particular circumstances” is the beginning for a comprehensive understanding of history.<sup>26</sup>

Success in the future requires a degree of understanding that must be acquired or interpreted by a more enlightened security community imbued with a deep understanding of the historical and cultural context that has generated the conflict to begin with. This will require an ability to outreach to different sources of expertise, and new ways of fusing diverse insights and perspectives into multi-dimensional campaigns. The planning process and manifest failures that led to the post-conflict debacle in Iraq are hopefully instructive.<sup>27</sup>

Only through the study of history and culture can we build the foundation necessary from which to interpret and then counter emergent threats. This is not the type of information that can be quickly absorbed by satellites and sensors. Instead, it is a degree of understanding that must be acquired from human networks and sources. It is information that can only be successfully interpreted by policy and military officials imbued with a deep understanding of the historical and cultural context that has generated the conflict to begin with. History offers an invaluable tool for making sense of the nature of the problem and evaluating potential solutions. But do not look for templates or simple

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<sup>24</sup> John Kiszely, “Learning about Counter-Insurgency,” *RUSI Journal*, Dec. 2006, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, “The Historical Mind and Military Strategy,” *Orbis*, Autumn, 2005, p. 575.

<sup>26</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> On planning failures see James Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 2004, pp. 53–74.

answers. Across history's pages one finds "no formulas for the successful framing of strategy or conduct of war."<sup>28</sup>

*Uncertainty.* It has become a cliché to note that we live in an age of uncertainty, and that the Cold War was an era characterized by stability and consensus. The issue of uncertainty was underscored in the National Defense Strategy issued by Mr. Rumsfeld, which identified uncertainty as posing "a paradigm shift in force planning" and the defining characteristic of our strategic environment.<sup>29</sup> It was repeated in the Pentagon's last *Quadrennial Defense Review*, issued in February 2006. That report described the planning environment as one of transition, a shift from "a time of reasonable predictability—to an era of surprise and uncertainty."<sup>30</sup>

We are all familiar with Mr. Rumsfeld's famous quote on this topic, "because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know."

Often "known knowns" are actually debatable assertions with underlying false assumptions, the known unknowns can be inconvenient facts that we deny, and the unknown unknowns can be disagreeable elements of reality that we deliberately chose to overlook.

The uncertainty factor is vastly overdrawn today.<sup>31</sup> Strategic planning has *always* required difficult calculations regarding many variables including challengers, technology, economics, and the potential behavior of both allies and adversaries. The serial surprises this country has faced since 1989 suggest that surprise is something we are all too familiar with. But given that the future portends faster changes and possibly greater calamities, strategic planning is taking on greater salience despite its messy complications.

Ambiguity about intelligence, sources, enemy intentions, and emerging technology is almost always a constraint. But one can take stock of potential risks and ascribe probabilities of occurrence and potential consequences. As one analyst recently warned,

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<sup>28</sup> Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, "Introduction: On Strategy," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, *National Defense Strategy*, 2005, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, *Quadrennial Defense Report*, Feb. 2006, p. iii.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Fitzsimmons, "The Problem of Uncertainty in Strategic Planning," *Survival*, Winter, 2006-2007, pp. 131-146.

the strategist who believes that probabilities and risks cannot or should not be rigorously examined because uncertainty is the touchstone of environmental reality risks interjecting personal beliefs over facts or solid assessment, and relying upon “the pathologies of crisis decision-making.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, an excessive claim to strategic ambiguity retards acceptance of new courses of action when the environment shifts or when disconfirming data is available. This tends to discount new information and retard alterations to ineffective strategies in execution.

The solution to uncertainty is the two cardinal virtues of strategic planners, prudence and adaptability.<sup>33</sup> Both strategic and military planning cannot be locked in concrete, they must deal with emergent properties and new circumstances.<sup>34</sup> The old military adage “don’t fall in love with your plan” applies to strategic planning as well. In peacetime, plans should be constantly reviewed in an iterative cycle. Critical assumptions must be retested, and planners must recognize when new information disproves the basis of the plan or alters crucial decision points. “Flexibility and constant cultivation of the ability to question received wisdom,” one pair of strategic analysts conclude, “and to reconsider assumptions are the best security against catastrophic failure in a future war.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Procedural: Strategic Scenarios**

Surprise is not a function of the absence of warning or information. It is rarely a function, as Mr. Rumsfeld has suggested, of the unknowns or unknowable. Instead, denial and ignorance abetted by the lack of formal and transparent planning processes are very often the real preceptors for sudden shock. Our own biases or preferences, untested in an open discourse, blind us to new trends or discontinuities. There are corrective measures. Statesmen and Soldiers, at least the truly strategic ones, realize that there is great value in formal processes to evaluate alternative courses of action, to research wild cards in our environment, and craft scenarios to help decision-makers anticipate crises. These drivers

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 135.

<sup>33</sup> On the importance of uncertainty-pulled rather than threat driven planning see Colin S. Gray, “Defense Planning for the Mystery Tour: Principles for Guidance in a Period of Nonlinear Change,” *Airpower Journal*, Summer 1991. With regard to planning and adaptability as a cardinal virtue see Colin S. Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace and Strategy*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Clark A. Murdock, *Improving the Practice of National Security Strategy, A New Approach for the Post-Cold War World*, Washington, DC: CSIS, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft, *The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty*, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2006, p. 260.

and factors can be discussed or gamed to facilitate dialogue among strategists regarding the attendant risks, which can be ameliorated or accepted, and what solutions are available.

One prominent futurist points out that we will face numerous sharp jolts or major discontinuities in political, military, and economic areas in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>36</sup> These interconnected surprises, major discontinuities, will bring about a different world, one in which the rules of the game are fundamentally altered. Many potential discontinuities have their roots in ongoing trends, and can be identified. By studying these emerging realities and alternative futures, we can better anticipate the consequences and avoid surprise. Denial, defensiveness, and ignorance are the principal preceptors for sudden shock, not the probability of an event.

Schwartz offers a simple process for thinking anew and avoiding major shocks. The first step is to pay attention and identify and monitor the driving forces that influence tomorrow's world, get ahead of the so-called inevitable surprises, and prepare for them. The limits of human perception and the ability to objectively evaluate one's current environment much less the future is fraught with problems, which Clausewitz aptly noted as the "the difficulty of accurate recognition" constitutes a serious source of friction in war and peace.<sup>37</sup> The second step is to remove the rigid mental paradigms about what is fixed and what can be changed in the landscape. This is best done by senior leaders participating in facilitated scenario-based exercises. The final step is to envision new strategies for dealing with new circumstances. This is a difficult task in periods of great uncertainty, but it's even harder if an organization does not remain open to ongoing changes or strive to identify emerging patterns and trends. An inability to renew its scanning of the past and future, results in shallow thinking and myopic analyses that fail to recognize new threats.

Some of the best work done today in the intelligence and national security arena is based on these techniques, although sometimes just as window dressing instead of a serious exercise in "reperceiving" reality. Few organizations do this well, and most pay lip service to the process. It's often used as window dressing and not much more. In the main, the military employs strategic planning to preserve the past, never to test the

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Schwartz, *Inevitable Surprises, Thinking Ahead in a Time of Turbulence*, New York: Gotham, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Michael I. Handel, "War, Strategy and Intelligence: An Overview," p. 17 in his *War, Strategy and Intelligence*, London: Frank Cass, 1989, p. 17.

implications of a different future. The armed forces too often cling to their organizational history and their institutional rituals and icons.

Obviously, the Pentagon has a range of formal planning processes, and strategic planners who use a wide array of risk mitigation and scenario-based techniques. The Office of Net Assessment has a rich legacy of sustained research into alternative futures and potential wild cards. The Policy office also employs scenario-based planning to identify strategic drivers and major plans. It has also recently employed a commendable amount of effort into assessing long range trends, into exploring potential shocks or ‘Black Swans.’ OSD has also invested a substantial amount of senior management time in examining the implications of these drivers and trends. The “futures literacy” of OSD’s management team is not an investment that other Departments and agencies are willing to make. These techniques need to be exported to the rest of government.

I would also encourage the NSC staff to buy some intestinal medicine. The strategic diarrhea that constitutes national plans is almost comical. Policy and strategy making are not synonymous with publication of a document. We often conflate policy and strategy, and we have no shortage of published national strategies. As one U.S. Army strategist has stated

There is, to be sure, a surplus of unclassified statements of strategy that purport to govern the nation’s approach to broad national security issues...However, all rely heavily on form over substance and focus more on delivering strategic communications themes than they do on establishing real, actionable, risk-tested strategic or grand strategic priorities.<sup>38</sup>

Policy and strategy development needs to be thought of as a process that identifies interests and possible risks to those interests. It is an iterative process, more art than science, with numerous insights and often veiled biases. The process is often informed by history and experience, but just as often by personal frames of reference with little applicability to the problem at hand. Both grand and military strategies can be shaped by the collective experience and common ideological perspective of the participants, who may or may not benefit from critical thinking skills that can distinguish both the continuities of a contingency with prior experience, but more importantly the critical discontinuities that often lay unexamined by the less curious. Too often, the preferences of the participants

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<sup>38</sup> Nathan Freier, “Primacy without a Plan,” *Parameters*, Autumn 2006, p. 9.

and human limitations constrain deliberate and rational analysis. Our prewar Iraq planning clearly suffered from this problem.

To get beyond group think and simplistic linear planning requires a disciplined process, one that defines and prioritizes ends, that tightly correlates ways and means to attain those ends, and which rationalizes the relationship between the ends and the costs of attaining those objectives. One of the greatest deficiencies in the American way of strategy is the simplistic notion that policy merely establishes aims or end states, and it never has to be altered to better match with available ways and means. This crucial dialogue never appeared to have occurred during 2002 to 2003 in the bowels of the White House or the E-ring, as best as we know today. The lack of any formal and structured process allowed a state of denial to become fixated, even as evidence mounted to contradict major assumptions.<sup>39</sup> A solid process will do much to both identify and mitigate cultural blinders, personal biases, and bureaucratic impulses.

OSD and the State Department, along with other agencies recently sponsored a limited experiment with interagency scenario planning in Project Horizon. This effort afforded the representatives from various agencies to explore a common planning technique, with shared scenarios and a common lexicon to conduct a discourse on long range problems and solutions. Many participants I interviewed were positive on this experience. Such exercises have great utility in mapping out alternative strategies for our nation and the military. These simulations and the discourse they generate should be expanded beyond the Pentagon and intelligence staffs to the upper levels of government. They open up the minds of senior leaders to the potential implications of a thinking and adaptive opponent. I would encourage the extension of this project, and its sponsorship by the National Security Council.

As Professor Colin Gray has stressed repeatedly, strategy is difficult, perilously so due to its very nature.<sup>40</sup> Its character continually evolves with changes in politics, technology, and society, and economics. American strategic planning processes have not evolved as much as the surrounding context has, and leave much to be desired. If the American Way of War has been reduced to a way of battles, the American Way of Strategy

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<sup>39</sup> Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Colin S. Gray, "Why Strategy is Difficult," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Summer, 1999, p. 10.

has been reduced to a slew of policy desiderata expressed via Power point without deliberate process or rigor.

## **Organization**

Certainly there is a role in any comprehensive overview of strategic planning to discuss the organizational dimension. Our major institutional bodies have evolved over time to deal with the intricacies of planning.<sup>41</sup> As the world has grown more complex, so too have our planning structures. But their complexity has produced more bureaucratic autism than strategic insight or actionable guidance.

I will not go so far as Professor Bracken's deliberately provocative claim that "the higher organization of national security is so dysfunctional that it almost doesn't matter what strategies we select or how individually brilliant our policymakers are."<sup>42</sup> But I wholeheartedly agree that organization matters. It is important to recognize that such structures exist to support decision makers, not to develop and rationalize decisions without direction. At best, they should serve as a catalyst for strategic debate by policy makers. American planning offers structure, but they are not a substitute for effective political or military leadership.

Professor Friedberg has offered three logical solutions to this dimension of the problem. His first was a reestablishment of the National Planning Board, a throwback to the Eisenhower era. It would be comprised of statutory members from selected Departments of the Federal Government, and reside within the Executive Office of the President (EOP). Recreating this body and establishing its secretariat as a function of the National Security Advisor (NSA) is one way to reintroduce the NSC staff to long-range and conceptual thinking. Instead of a full blown interagency planning process run by the NSC staff, a dedicated NSC Strategic Planning Directorate is another option. This directorate would report to the NSA but could still be comprised of a staff seconded from the various departments, as well as academic or policy experts.<sup>43</sup> The final option is the least ambitious, the designation of a small handful of NSC staffers as a full time planning

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<sup>41</sup> On the history of these institutions, see Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design, The Evolution of the CIA, JCS and NSC*, Stanford University Press, 1999; John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush*, New York: William Morrow, 1992; and David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power*, New York: Public Affairs, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Bracken, p. 71.

<sup>43</sup> Friedberg, "Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning," pp. 55-59.

cell. Its performance would be reliant upon the NSA's authority, but limited by its weak connections to the rest of the planning staffs of other national security partners.

General Zinni has sketched out an innovative proposal for a National Planning and Monitoring Agency.<sup>44</sup> This model assumes that the current NSC staff is too crisis oriented and perhaps too politically constrained. Rather than build something within the EOP, this new entity could be created to monitor events, trends, and to develop and integrate strategic and operational plans that involve more than a single agency or Department. The leadership, appointment status, Congressional oversight obligations, and independence of such a body need to be detailed before we can fully assess it. Yet, it offers an original solution to a long standing problem.

My preferred option is a high level body from the national security cadre akin to the National Intelligence Council. Members of this council would be nominated by the various Cabinet agencies and demonstrate proven policy and strategy development skills. This body would be responsible for developing long term strategic plans, and in crises would serve as a mechanism for red teaming and vetting proposed interagency strategic plans. This National Planning Council could be composed of external experts, as well as full-time government personnel. In the main, they should be drawn from a national security service corps of experts with breadth and depth, be assigned to the EOP, and work for the National Security Advisor.<sup>45</sup>

As food for thought, expansion of the National Security Council to include senior members of the Legislative Branch is also worthy of considering. This expansion may be used only for long-range national strategy development. Alternatively, it could be used solely for crisis management situations, ensuring political support and resources for concerted American response to emerging challenges.

## **Conclusion**

The future has been described as an enigma masked by familiar myths and all too comfortable illusions.<sup>46</sup> One can try to predict the future along a very fine line with point

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<sup>44</sup> For an original proposal regarding strategic organizational initiatives, see Tony Zinni and Tony Koltz, *The Battle for Peace: A Frontline Vision of America's Power and Purpose*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> On the concept of a cadre of national security experts with interagency experience, see *Roadmap for National Security*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>46</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Adam Garfinkle, editor of *The American Interest*, for this formulation.

estimates of dubious precision. But prognosticating is a difficult art as well as a dangerous hobby. One could elect Churchill's approach. He once quipped that he did not make predictions "because it is a much better policy to prophesy after the event has already taken place."<sup>47</sup>

But today, prudent national leaders and security officials will not be kindly remembered for strategic postdating. History is not kind to retroactive strategic reasoning, and the taxpayer should hold his elected officials to a higher standard. Unlike Mr. Churchill, we won't get to write our own history. In the end, the best strategists do not get to elect to wait for events that may reduce their chances of success. They know that it is bad policy to react as events unfold, when anticipation or proactive intervention could resolve a crisis more easily at less cost. Serious statesmen and generals realize (or should) that incomplete information is the norm, and that all crystal balls are cloudy. Yet, policies have to be defined out, strategies formulated, and defense institutions shaped, no matter how vague or imprecise our conception of the future is. Strategy, both the process and the product, are essential. It is *not* an illusion; it's a requirement for long term success.<sup>48</sup>

For America to retain its place on the world's stage, it will have to change its strategic mindset and machinery. Organizational change may also be required. Standing still is not an option. As Macgregor Knox concluded, ultimately policy makers "must weigh imponderables through structured debates that pare away personal, organizational, and national illusions and conceits." They must squarely face the parochial interests of bureaucracy, accurately discern strategic options, and make choices with imperfect information. True leaders embrace adaptability and "cheerfully face the uncertainties of decision and the danger of action."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Winston Churchill, found online at Brainyquotes.

<sup>48</sup> Richard K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security*, Fall 2000, pp. 6-40.

<sup>49</sup> MacGregor Knox, "Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy," p. 645, in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States and War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.