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STILL WORTH FIGHTING OVER? A JOINT RESPONSE

P. H. Liotta and James F. Miskel

Readers may recall that in the Autumn 2002 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, Professor James F. Miskel, of the National Security Decision Making Department, argued that the U.S. government often defines national interests in such general terms that its specific goals are not clearly communicated to the American public and to other governments.¹ In the Spring 2003 issue, Professor P. H. Liotta, also of the National Security Decision Making Department, responded with a counter-essay arguing that while distinguishing core strategic interests—those for which Americans would be willing to die—from significant interests is almost never easy, it is also essential. Liotta disagreed with Miskel that U.S. national interests are “vague platitudes” used by policy makers and argued that they are in fact long-term, enduring, abstract principles that are embedded in the U.S. Constitution. He disagreed as well with Miskel’s argument that national security strategies are simple expressions of national interests.² Rather, Liotta argues, national security strategies are presidential declarations of strategic interests and policy objectives, as well as explanations of the means offered to achieve these ends.

Dr. Liotta is the Jerome E. Levy Chair of Economic Geography and National Security at the Naval War College. A former Fulbright scholar, he has received a Pulitzer Prize nomination, a National Endowment for the Arts literature fellowship, the International Quarterly Crossing Boundaries Award, and the Robert H. Winner Award from the Poetry Society of America. His recent work includes The Uncertain Certainty: Human Security, Environmental Change, and the Future Euro-Mediterranean (2003).

Dr. Miskel is the Associate Dean of Academics at the Naval War College and a former professor in the College’s National Security Decision Making Department. Earning his doctorate at the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1977, he served in the Department of Health and Human Services before joining the Federal Emergency Management Agency in 1984. He was the director for defense policy on the National Security Council staff in 1987–89, thereafter returning to FEMA as assistant associate director. He is the author of Buying Trouble? National Security and Reliance on Foreign Industry (1993) and of articles in numerous journals.

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In the end, we agree that when there is a need to articulate national interests, when it is necessary to do so (and we both are convinced that there are times when this must happen), it is no time to be half-hearted or vague.

After further consideration of each other’s views, we agreed to disagree on key issues that involve defining and declaring interests and the fundamental purpose of publishing a formal national security strategy (and we have promised to continue to argue with each other). There are areas, nonetheless, where our views are less contradictory than our respective essays might suggest. We thought it would be worth clarifying these areas of agreement because, in light of the latest *National Security Strategy of the United States*, there are issues where we have mutual concerns about how, when, and where the concept of national interests is used and abused.

To begin, *we agree* that national interests should express the goals of the nation. While there are, often,

occasions when it pays to be ambiguous in terms of articulating exactly what those goals are, there are also specific times and events where ambiguity is inadvisable. Miskel argues that ambiguity about the national interests is most often the inadvertent product of the domestic political process rather than a deliberate choice made by statesmen. In his view, ambiguity is usually the path of least resistance for policy makers and their spokespersons, not the result of a conscious judgment that ambiguity best serves the goals of the nation. Liotta acknowledges that interests are occasionally defined in ambiguous terms but argues that the ambiguity is more often deliberate than Miskel maintains. There are times, he suggests, when policy makers really have to rely on interests and objectives that build in latitude for action—in other words, “wiggle room”—for specific policy circumstances.

We also agree that ambiguity, even inadvertent ambiguity, is often “good enough.” It is not, however, good enough when the issues require long-term, persistent commitment of national resources. The current post-9/11 security environment *may* be one of those times.

Miskel argues that some security issues that the nation faces today (the war on terrorism, or nation building in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans, and elsewhere) cannot be resolved without years of concerted effort. Further, this effort cannot be maintained without a clear understanding of national interests on the part of the American public. *Liotta counters* that despite the evident truth of such an argument, there are at least two problems. First, it is not clear that such goals can be elevated to sustained and long-term, high-level commitments that the public would support, except in rare circumstances—such as the Cold War. Second, it is not clear that the American public has the kind of stomach for imperial involvement on a global scale not known since the United States occupied Germany and Japan.

Perhaps, intriguingly, administrations will end up committing themselves to such interests in the absence of public support or understanding. Notably, former secretary of state Dean Acheson is said to have remarked to Edmund Muskie during his failed bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, regarding foreign policy decisions and national interests, “Why should we care about the American public?”³ *Miskel suggests* that Acheson’s reputed advice is particularly ill suited to long-term projects like the war on terrorism or security building in states and regions.

The Bush administration’s early disavowal of nation building, particularly in the Balkans, is a good example for exploring the differences between the perspectives of Professors Miskel and Liotta. *Liotta notes with dismay* that the current president has reduced U.S. commitment to stability-building measures in the Balkans and that this is a result of what he believes is the administration’s misperception of the national interests at stake in southeastern Europe—among

other regions. *Miskel argues* that the problem is not misperception but rather a predictable consequence of the failure of previous administration(s) to engage the public in a serious dialogue about the national interests in Balkan stability.

Liotta agrees that statesmen may sometimes choose not to engage in such dialogues for sound strategic reasons but holds that avoidance of public discussion and debate cannot last forever. In the case of the Balkans, the previous administration simply refused to consider the Balkans as an issue in the national interests of the United States—or the NATO alliance—until 250,000 people had died and two million refugees had fled the wars of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Even as the various versions of the Clinton administration's national security strategy of *Enlargement and Engagement* to 1995 claimed, as matters of the national interest, the significance of the advancement of human rights and the promotion of democracy, these issues involved neither vital national survival interests nor economic interests and were largely ignored. In November 1995, however, following the Dayton Accords, President Clinton suddenly declared that Bosnia was indeed in the "vital" interest of the United States—although nothing on the ground had essentially changed. Yet the United States, not Europe, acted, rightly or wrongly, to preserve "the vital interest" of the North Atlantic alliance as a credible, meaningful alliance in a time of crisis. Today, we are faced with even more challenges in more places. We can win the war but cannot win the peace alone. We cannot ignore (but likely will, according to Miskel) all the necessary aspects of nation building—or, more appropriately, "security building," or whatever term one chooses to consider for sustaining communities and regions that cannot sustain themselves by themselves. If we ignore that and fail to admit it in our open declarations, what we face in the future is decades and decades of military engagement and political frustration, with little accomplished.

The problem remains that since the end of the Cold War, we have enforced national interests primarily through the military arm and practiced far less commitment to sustaining security in unstable regions through other means. To be blunt, we are able to "kick in the door in" quickly in hot spots but have trouble putting the door back on and instead tend never to close the door (whether in Korea, the Sinai, the Balkans, or the Greater Near East) but just leave. There are ways to change this practice and actually save precious resources over the long term. But to do so requires radically different thinking that begins with radically different rethinking of national interests.

Confusion or lack of clarity about national interests is not just the by-product of the post-9/11 environment. In truth, the environment we entered after the Cold War—which was, and was not, a large international war in the traditional sense—is radically different from any other experienced in our history. In terms of military power, the United States remains preeminent; in terms of economic

and political power, however, it is strategically dependent on any number of institutions, regions, and realities. Thus, while the Asia-Pacific may offer future economic opportunity (and military threat), the United States remains bound by alliance relationships in Europe and committed to engagements in Central and South Asia (where it would seem to have no vital interests at all). Equally, the slow but certain emergence of the Western Hemisphere leaves unanswered whether or not U.S. strategic priorities will shift from an exclusive East-West orientation to a North-South dynamic as well. Until 11 September 2001, most in the United States largely believed that we were nestled in a period of uncertainty that we uncomfortably and most often referred to as the “post–Cold War era.” (The ironies, of course, persist: the United States and much of Europe remain *driven* by post–Cold War uncertainties while still having to address the demands of the so-called War on Terrorism.) We are still in the “post–Cold War era,” just as we are locked into the “post-9/11” environment. But—aside from telling us what phases of history we are not in—such “post” phrases do not at all help us define the exact time and issues we face. One could think of these phrases as code for the reasons why it is seemingly so preferable to fail to define national interests precisely, to fail to distinguish convincingly between what Liotta calls “core strategic” and “significant” national interests.

Both of us acknowledge that the formulation of national interests cannot be divorced completely from the political process. *Miskel goes farther* in arguing that they should not be divorced at all when the issues require long-term investment of national resources. He also maintains that by ambiguously defining national interests, strategists and statesmen may actually be attempting to effect the divorce indirectly.

We agree that there is a difference between interests and objectives—interests being the end states that the nation hopes to achieve over the short and long terms, and objectives being the steps or milestones on the way to those end states. Interests are long-term and abstract (yet fundamental to strategy); objectives *should* always be clear and precise for the execution of policy. That, sadly, almost never proves to be the case. Thus, interest and objectives become confused, muddled, and perhaps inadvertently ambiguous as well.

We further agree that policy makers do not always recognize the difference, or that if they do recognize the difference, they do not invest enough time and energy in explaining the difference to Congress and the public.

Although the two terms may overlap, there is also a difference between interests and values. A value is not an end state or a goal; it is either a characteristic or attribute of the end state/goal or a principle that may or may not guide the actions that are taken in pursuit of the end state/goal. As an idealized example, the Clinton administration envisioned a world in which democracy was the norm.

Thus it defined as a national interest an “enlarged” family of democratic nations. Democracy was the value to which nations were encouraged to adhere, and strategy was the game plan for actually increasing the size of the family.

Of course, not just the Clinton administration but all administrations from the end of World War II until today have come to recognize the value of an enhanced family of democratic states as a national interest, one (in the words of John Ikenberry) that suggests that the promotion of democracy “reflects a pragmatic, evolving, and sophisticated understanding of how to create a stable and relatively peaceful world order.”⁴ Indeed, as Ikenberry and others have noted, the great Wilsonian of our age—the champion of a free world, of democracy, of self-determination—is not William Clinton but rather Ronald Reagan. As hopelessly idealistic as it seems, there are many—including many in the current administration—who believe that we secure our interests by spreading our values.

Liotta and Miskel agree that interests and values are occasionally conflated in official documents like national security strategy reports. *To Miskel* the conflation results from the fact that the documents maintain such a high level of generality that the distinctions between interests and values remain obscure. *Liotta agrees but rejects* Miskel’s judgment that the political nature of such documents virtually guarantees their too-general tenor.

Interests, of course, are subjective, based on judgments that come from different perceptions of reality. Policy makers should carefully weigh those perspectives and consider alternative criteria before leaping to the declaration of vital interests.

Despite our differing views about the value of recent national security strategy reports in terms of their specificity on national interests, *we agree in principle* that *National Security Strategy* reports can serve a highly useful purpose. That useful purpose is informing the public and Congress about the nation’s main goals or end states (as perceived by the executive branch) and the major policy initiatives and courses of action that the president intends to pursue in furtherance of those goals. In his article *Miskel maintains* that recent security strategy reports have, in their ambiguity about national interests, largely forfeited the opportunity to inform the public or engage it in a dialogue about the grand purposes of foreign and security policy. *Liotta counters* that the national security strategies of the 1990s were remarkably consistent in their statement and became increasingly clear in their relevance to specific regions, priorities, and issues of strategic interest over time.

We also share mutual concerns about the latest *National Security Strategy of the United States* (September 2002, available online at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html). Specifically, while the strategy itself is grand in purpose and expansive in its lofty and ambitious goals, it sometimes distinctly conflates interests and objectives, often sees interests and values as the same thing, and offers few

specific details as to what are the most pressing priorities—other than the obvious goals of protecting American citizenry and territory from attack—versus those that are merely important to embrace. Indeed, the conflation of these issues appears intentional. In the introductory passage of the strategy, for example, we see the declaration, “The U.S. national security strategy [is] based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. . . . Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity” (page 1). But these goals are in some ways in conflict with each other even in their immediate declaration and are not specific in their emphasis. Even subsequent declarations of interests do not help clarify these goals. Nowhere in the document is there a clear, definitive distinction made between “core values” and “strategic priorities.”

It seems significant, then, that the Bush strategy does not precisely define national interests in its introductory session, “Overview of America’s National Strategy.” Indeed, not until pages 10–11 of the document, in a description of problems in Africa, is there a distinction made between values and interests; specifically, the document refers to “preserving human dignity” as a core value while “combating terrorism” is a strategic priority. Does this distinction recognize a core value as a national interest or only suggest that a *strategic* priority is one? It never becomes clear in the document itself; by the time some distinction is attempted in the national strategy, the differences between interests and objectives, between interests and values, and between the need sometimes to be ambiguous and sometimes deadly precise may have already been lost on most readers.

In sum, we agree that national security strategies should be published—and revised—but perhaps only when they reflect a definite “rudder shift” for the nation rather than to meet the chronology of congressional mandates. The requirement to *state*, *define*, and *defend* national interests in a public national strategy should remain. *According to Liotta*, for the United States, stating, defining, and defending interests in the national security strategy both demonstrates a commitment to democratic process and explains how America see its role in the world. *According to Miskel*, many forms of public debate can (but rarely ever do) generate the necessary clarity about interests that long-term national commitment requires. *For both Liotta and Miskel*, the important point is that the debate takes place. The national security strategy document would then be revised or rewritten to reflect the results of the debate. National security strategies that do not follow such a debate will be often steeped in ambiguity about national interests or will fail to address adequately the needs of a nation to declare its goals, its purpose, and its place in the world.

NOTES

1. James F. Miskel, "National Interests: Grand Purposes or Catch Phrases?" *Naval War College Review* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 96–104.
2. P. H. Liotta, "Still Worth Dying for: National Interests and the Nature of Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 123–38.
3. In defense of Acheson, nonetheless, it does seem that the American public is not always well informed or interested in issues of national security and foreign policy, especially over the long term. Even as American opinion increasingly came to favor intervention in Iraq, for example, regardless of whether or not the United Nations approved intervention or allies objected, a survey poll taken by Fox News on 13 March 2003 that asked, "What is your assessment of Prime Minister Tony Blair, French President Jacques Chirac, and Chancellor Gerhardt Schroeder?" revealed some interesting results. Seventeen percent of those surveyed did not know who Tony Blair is, 24 percent did not know Jacques Chirac, and 46 percent could not identify Gerhardt Schroeder.
4. John Ikenberry, "Why Export Democracy?" *Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 1999), p. 56.