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In My View

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Ian Ollver

IN MY VIEW . . .

Vietnam and the Absence of Strategy

Sir:

Almost immediately after their stunning successes in World War II our country's military leaders began a process which in twenty years was to play a big part in drawing down upon the United States the disaster and humiliation of the Vietnamese War.

This was the surrender of military intellectual leadership to the civilian scholars and systems analysts. It stemmed from three primary causes: the military leaders' preoccupation with their struggles over service unification, the creation and shaping of the Department of Defense, and the controversies centering on the B-36 bomber; their preoccupation with nuclear weaponry; and their growing contempt for the study of military theory, particularly of logistics. The process of the resulting civilian domination was made clear by the relief of Admiral George Anderson from the office of CNO in 1963 and the TFX decisions of the same period.

In this process first the military lost control of their language, then of their organization, and finally, of their operations. Intellectual honesty and rigor were smothered under an avalanche of esoteric jargon and meaningless calculations, while the critical calculations and relationships were largely ignored by civilians and military alike.

One observer, Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., recently put it this way: "Instead of concentrating attention on military strategy which had become unfashionable after World War II (and to many, irrelevant in the nuclear era), there was an increased emphasis on technical, managerial, and bureaucratic concerns."¹

One result of all this was that, when Vietnam became an issue that required major decisions, at no time did anyone in authority make a rigorous estimate of the situation—an estimate that would have started with an analysis of the objectives. In consequence, as Colonel Summers says, "the confusion over objectives . . . had a devastating effect on our ability to conduct the war."²

¹Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy—the Vietnam War in Context* (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 1981), p. 28.

²*Ibid.*, p. 66.

Summers points out while the United States, violating the precepts of Clausewitz, got into trouble, the North Vietnamese, who adhered to Clausewitz, won.

No one can expect to understand strategy merely by reading and quoting from Clausewitz, Mahan, and suchlike. What it takes is deep thought plus the ability to appreciate the influences of the physical aspects of warfare—geography, time, distance, and capabilities—to attain an intuitive understanding of the whole problem.

The essence of strategy lies in an authoritative combination of: the objective, i.e., the effect desired; the means, i.e., power derived from resources; and the scheme or plan to use the means to achieve the effect desired.

But, if a man cannot make an intuitive evaluation of the relationship of key objectives, tactical and logistical resources, and time, he is still not a strategist. What he is is a mere speculator.

While Clausewitz should be studied, no one should think that he is the final authority. What he did was to provide us with a splendid base from which to develop our own ideas.

Rear Admiral Henry E. Eccles, U.S. Navy (Retired)

"Why Most Have Failed" (cont'd)

Sir:

F.J. West, Jr., writing in the March-April 1981 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, "Secretaries of Defense: Why Most Have Failed" has ignored a critical aspect of the Defense "problem." That aspect (which determines to a large degree the focus of the Secretary's efforts) is the environment in which he operates.

Washington, D.C. today is more known for the military "expertise" that lies outside of the Pentagon than that which resides within it! The exponential growth in Congressional staffs coupled with an increased willingness to exercise Congress' oversight prerogative has placed OSD management into a fishbowl. In addition, the fiscal pressures and controllability of DOD expenditures has led to increased attention and "micro-management" on the part of OMB. Faced with these adversaries (who because of political or budgetary time perspectives focused on short-term "fixes") the Secretary of Defense had little choice but to meet the attack by focusing on the management of the Department.

This focus on management was of course perceived by the services as micro-management on the part of OSD. Yet on many occasions when the political appointees confined themselves to making "policy" the services appeared to act to thwart those policies. This resulted in some few cases because of a fundamental disagreement with the policy but more often was simply a classic example of bureaucratic inertia. In any event the end result was often an intensified focus on management to insure that policies were followed.

Add to this mixture a manager's natural urge to focus on something tangible and the outcome was assured. Thus it is not too surprising that

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Secretaries of Defense concentrated on internal management in the past and continue to do so today.

These observations are based on service on the Air Staff, as Military Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Special Assistant to the Director, Office of Management & Budget.

Sincerely,

Lt. Col. Paul D. Murphy, USAF

Bring the Army Home? Cut Back the Fleet?

Sir:

Dr. Keith A. Dunn's article, "Strategy, the Soviet Union and the 1980s," (Sept-Oct 1981) omits two major areas of consideration that seem likely to influence U.S. strategy in the 1980s:

1) The U.S. economy. Let's face it, there is just not enough money in the till to finance anything like the range of "options" Doctor Dunn describes. Somehow there must be a drastic reduction—in the order of at least 30-40 billion dollars—in the Defense budget. Presidential Counselor Edwin Meese III indicated recently that the buildup to a 600-ship Navy is the one part of the Defense budget that will not be sacrificed. If that is to be the case, and if we are to obtain the "flexibility" Doctor Dunn seeks, the monetary saving we need can come only from the large U.S. subsidy now provided to Europe. At least as concerns Europe, Doctor Dunn hits close to the mark when he suggests we might want to move our overseas land forces back into reserve positions. That, however, would not achieve the large-scale savings that must be obtained. Given two or three years' notice, our allies in Europe could easily make up the five divisions we maintain there. By withdrawing and deactivating those divisions we would make a considerable start toward balancing the Federal budget, an objective every bit as important as regaining strategic "flexibility."

2) The emergence of the Pacific Basin as an area of U.S. interest at least coequal with Europe. Dr. William T. Tow's superbly researched article in the same issue amply illustrates the shift in the world's political and economic center of gravity toward the Pacific and Asia. The evidence at hand, however, suggests that Doctor Tow is too optimistic about getting Western European U.S. allies involved in Pacific and Asian power politics. And that is all the more reason why the United States must regain "flexibility"—better stated as "freedom of maneuver"—if it is to protect its worldwide interests. In short, we must persuade our European partners that the U.S. resources now tied down in Europe could be used more profitably elsewhere, to the benefit of Europe as well as ourselves.

Beyond these omissions, I find it difficult to understand Doctor Dunn's seeming equation of U.S. and Soviet motives and actions in the Third World. Doctor Dunn asks, "Is covert manipulation of Third World domestic politics acceptable for the United States in order to contain the Soviet Union?" The question,

it seems to me, should be put in quite a different way: "Should the Soviet Union be permitted to gain a stranglehold on the non-Communist world by subverting weak governments and independence movements controlling vital resources; or should the United States and its allies intervene to whatever extent is necessary to maintain the free flow of ideas and goods, for the benefit of the Soviet peoples as well as ourselves?"

When read in sequence these two articles are an important contribution to the reexamination of U.S. strategy that is now taking place.

Colonel William V. Kennedy, U.S. Army Reserve

Sir:

I am confused by Mr. Kennedy's remarks. On one hand, he seems to want the United States to deactivate current divisions deployed in Europe. On the other hand, he says that "we must persuade our European partners that U.S. resources now tied down in Europe could be used more profitably elsewhere, to the benefit of Europe as well as ourselves." Does Mr. Kennedy mean the same divisions which he recommends deactivating should be moved to the Far East? The likely reality is that divisions deactivated in Europe would be lost to the force structure and not available for redeployment elsewhere. This is precisely why I suggest pulling US divisions off the front lines in Europe and Asia but not bringing them back to the United States.

Mr. Kennedy focuses his remarks upon divisions in Europe. I also said that US forces in Korea should possibly be pulled off line. If Mr. Kennedy believes that the United States needs to obtain "flexibility" or more "freedom of maneuver," why should US forces in the Pacific be treated differently than those in Europe?

Finally, I am not sure how Mr. Kennedy arrives at the figure of \$30-40 billion which must be eliminated from the defense budget. It is clear that the removal of 4-5 US Army divisions from the force structure will not result in a budget reduction anywhere near \$30-40 billion. If you are going to reduce the defense budget by that amount, major cutbacks in high expense programs such as B-1, strategic C³I, M-X, and the 600-ship navy will have to occur. Moreover, I do not accept that my "options" are not economically achievable in the coming decade. Remember, I suggest pursuing arms control and SALT. Primarily, I favor this for reasons of strategy, but successful strategic nuclear arms negotiations will obviously result in some monetary savings. With the exception of enhanced security assistance, the other options would result in virtually no increases to the defense budget.

I think Mr. Kennedy needs to reread the section on options from my article. Closer reading should indicate that I am not suggesting the types of things that Mr. Kennedy implies in his letter.

Keith A. Dunn

