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Grand Strategy: Principles and Practices

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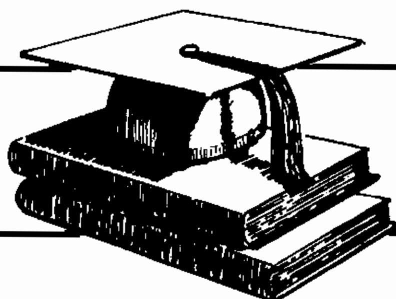

PROFESSIONAL READING

Collins, John M. *Grand Strategy: Principles and Practices.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1973. 338p.

At long last someone has written a book which contains a concise, no nonsense compendium of the terms, techniques, and considerations one finds frequently used and often poorly defined, if defined at all. Concepts of deterrence, retaliation, flexible response, and limited war are some of the items included in this compendium, which also contains a very useful glossary. In addition, there are brief, but thorough, outlines of U.S. policy and strategy in the major geographic regions of the world. This succinct, but encyclopedic, treatment of a host of disparate terms, concepts, and policies is the great strength of this book. Alone it would make the book valuable.

In addition, the author has provided a more than adequate, but by no means exhaustive, survey of the relevant and significant literature in the field. An annotated bibliography, containing most of the standard works, will be helpful to the practical military man or to the layman. Joseph C. Wylie's *Military Strategy* is properly included. Unfortunately, Henry E. Eccles' *Military Concepts and Philosophy* is not. This omission is inexcusable in a book purporting to discuss the abstract as well as the practical aspects of grand strategy.

The terms "grand strategy" and "national strategy" are used interchangeably. "National strategy" is the American equivalent of the term "grand strategy," which is found in British and European literature. While this interchange of one term for the other may be confusing to a degree, it does not obscure the meaning. "National strategy fuses all the powers of a nation, during peace as well as war, to attain national interests and objectives." This forthright statement from the text does not differ significantly with the author's definition in the glossary of grand strategy: "The art and science of employing national power under all circumstances to exert desired types and degrees of control over the opposition by applying force, the threat of force, indirect pressures, diplomacy, subterfuge and other imaginative means to attain national security objectives."

The point of this somewhat tedious concern with definitions is that the author has clearly in mind that grand (or national) strategy is concerned primarily with the direction of all of the elements of national power to attain objectives in accordance with national policy. The nature of strategy is correctly seen as comprehensive. The objective of strategy is control for a purpose.

The great virtue of the book lies in its enumeration and terse descriptions of the practical elements of grand strategy. The author's impressive grasp of the nuts and bolts particulars is evident. However, he falters when he moves from the realm of practice to that of principles or theoretical considerations. *Grand Strategy* points the way to the analytical fundamentals and reveals an intuitive grasp of them. But they are not stated specifically. For

example, the "principles of war" (purpose, initiative, flexibility, concentration, et cetera) are correctly cited as a "collection of basic considerations accumulated over the centuries." They are only guides or maxims, and they belong in the category of rules of thumb. They are not fundamentals of strategic analysis.

The Vietnam war is cited as a case study in grand strategy. It is a brilliant summary of the policies, strategies, and tactics employed by the United States, the South Vietnamese, and both the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. It is dispassionate and as objective as possible, which clearly distinguishes it from the usual academic and pseudo-intellectual writings on the subject. This masterful summary concludes with a plea to return to the fundamentals of strategic analysis. "The Principles of War" are trotted out as a tool to evaluate strategic performance. The tool is used well, but it is too crude to be used effectively.

What better analytical tool is there? Eccles in his *Military Concepts and Philosophy* clearly states that, among other things, strategic realism requires (1) challenging assumptions, (2) analyzing objectives, and (3) appraising expectations. In this sense an assumption is something so vital to the success or failure of whatever is proposed, that if it is invalid, failure will result. What were the assumptions upon which U.S. participation in Vietnam was based? Did these assumptions change as the course of our involvement proceeded?

What precisely were the U.S. objectives in Vietnam? They are clearly listed in the text, but they are not analyzed in terms of immediate, intermediate, and long-range objectives. Did objectives change as the situation changed? Did our actions change as our objectives changed?

Were the expectations of American policymakers reasonable in the long course of our involvement? If not, why not? The text does provide some answers. In this and other respects the author is close to the mark, even though the reader is not told how expectations can be correctly appraised.

These criticisms in no way invalidate the value of this exceptional statement. Rather, they indicate that more analytical work must be done by the military intellectual who seeks to penetrate the inner nature of war and the theory of strategy for the purpose of making sound military decisions. Indeed, these are the fundamentals to which the author refers in his conclusion.

In discussing American concepts of collective security, the correct definition of collective security is given: "a global security system based on the agreement of all or most states to take common action" in specified circumstances. This definition is dismissed as purist. However, it is also accurate. The system commonly referred to as collective security is essentially an alliance system directed against the Soviet Union and, to some extent, against Red China. It is not qualitatively different from other alliance systems in other historical periods. Unfortunately, *Grand Strategy* continues the current sloppy use of the term.

Despite a reviewer's somewhat niggling criticisms, the essential message of *Grand Strategy* comes through loud and clear: Strategy is comprehensive. Factors which must be considered are geography, character of the armed forces, arms control, economic and fiscal constraints, science and technology, national character and attitudes, in addition to the specific circumstances of the strategic environment. Each of these factors has been awarded a separate chapter. These factors cannot be fed into a computer in hopes of producing a useful or viable strategy. Taken with good sense, good judgment, intellectual integrity, a clear sense of purpose and direction, and a grasp of the fundamentals of strategic analysis, a reasonable,

rational, and, hopefully, successful national strategy can be devised and executed.

The author is quite correct when he says, "Strategy formulation always has been and always will be an art as well as a science."

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Corson, William R. *Consequences of Failure*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974. 215p.

Consequences of Failure is an echo of the aftermath of the Vietnam war. William Corson has successfully avoided a head-on confrontation with the open question of *why* we failed and instead has dealt with what war-related problems have been created for various segments of our national life.

A writer sympathetic to the traumatic nature of such affairs, the first part of Corson's book seeks to soothe the attendant bitterness, much like a doctor trying to comfort a nervous and confused patient. He does this by removing the immediate cause of ill feeling, the particulars of Vietnam. He instead concentrates on the failures of other great powers: Rome, Imperial Spain, and England in the American colonies and the Irish Revolution of 1916-22. He makes it clear to the reader that the United States is not the first nation to suffer such a failure and that when put in the proper perspective, failure may not be as disastrous as first appears.

Corson has also used the historical vehicle both to illustrate particular points that he later attributes to the American scene and to create possible American scenarios. For example, the shoddy treatment received by British troops after their failure in the Hundred Years' War and the unwillingness of the British Government to confront certain war-related problems within the "system" created the roots of an unwieldy social problem that ultimately led to the Wars of the Roses—civil war. The warning to America, though never openly stated, is clearly implied.

The second part of Corson's book concentrates on the specific problems that have been created by Vietnam for the American military, economy, and public. The military, as a microcosm of society and an area in which Mr. Corson has considerable personal experience, is singled out for particular attention. His observations are far from flattering. An ever-expanding drug abuse problem, dissent and disillusionment over the nature of America's role and the methods used to carry out that role, the breakdown of civilian and military leadership, and the accelerated level of racial tension are all discussed individually and are directly related to the Vietnamese failure.

Just as every great success must have its heroes, so a failure must have its villains. *Consequences of Failure* leaves little doubt as to the identity of this unfortunate group. It consists of those who saw the possibility of failure and, either through knavery or self-delusion, sought to cover it up and those who attempted to substitute artificial success for reality by using such things as the "body count" for a yardstick. Corson does not limit membership in this group to the ones who "perpetuated" the war, but includes those who should have acted far sooner to reduce the problems of drug abuse and racial conflict. Mostly through the efforts of these people to obscure or misrepresent their own nonperformance, Corson feels the great majority of public confidence in government was replaced by cynicism.

The book's conclusion reflects an equally pessimistic note. Recognizing a tendency to forget Vietnam that has been accelerated by the preoccupation with Watergate, Corson has described the reaction of American society to the phenomenon of failure as similar to that of a man with all the warning signals of cancer but who refuses to see a doctor