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A Perspective for the 1972 Global Strategy Discussions

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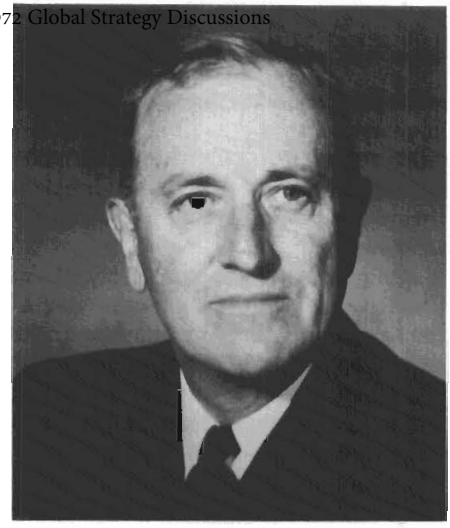
A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE 1972 GLOBAL STRATEGY DISCUSSIONS



This month the Naval War College will welcome more than a thousand participants to the 24th annual Global Strategy Discussions. The purpose of this gathering is, as always, to examine the situation facing the United States today both at home and abroad; to try to determine what our national and international objectives should be; and finally to look at ways and means of achieving those goals.

The world is in the midst of change, and our deliberations here at the Naval War College will consider these changes. The reality of new alignments among nations presents us with an atmosphere in which our discussions can have special significance. Now may be the time to redraw national strategy in order to adapt to tomorrow's world.

Most appropriately, our greatest concern in the 1972 Global Strategy Discussions will be the Navy's role today and tomorrow. But first we should examine where we have been, seeking insight into historical lessons, before analyzing where we are and where we are going.

The history of U.S. naval strategy can be roughly divided into a number of periods. The 1870's were years of studied unconcern regarding the Navy. In the 1880's there were some signs of national interest, but this naval renaissance was only tentative and relatively unambitious. By the turn of the century there were signs of genuine popular interest, especially after the stunning successes at Manila Bay and Cienfuegos, but it was short lived, and by the 1920's we relapsed once again into apathy. It was not until after 1945, however, that our Nation finally came to accept a role of truly global responsibility for our Navy.

In 1865 America's decisionmakers felt, with some justification, that the huge oceangoing and riverine fleets which had been used so successfully to literally strangle the Confederacy were no longer needed. After Appomattox, naval construction came to a virtual halt, and the vast majority of new monitors and wooden-hulled gunboats were either scrapped or simply allowed to rot at the piers. For two decades the Navy was allowed to wither to a pitifully small number of ships which patrolled distant posts, far from America's landmass and even farther from her conscious concern.

The extent of America's disinterest was exemplified in 1887 when Chief Engineer King returned from an examination of European navies to report that "All the navies of Europe have been recently undergoing reconstruction; and there has never been a time during peace when such large expenditures for naval purposes were made as at present, and such radical changes effected." Despite the implied warning in this report, Secretary of the Navy Robeson determined that the wooden-hulled sailing vessels of the U.S. Navy were "adequate for the defensive purposes of a peaceful people," because we were protected by our "dangerous coast and shallow

harbors," and because of the Atlantic Ocean which Robeson, like most of his contemporaries, viewed as a barrier rather than a highway.

Unlike Secretary Robeson, we cannot afford to live with such complacency. Although his shortsightedness did not result in disaster, this need not have been the case. Prudence would dictate that we not leave so much to chance in the future.

The first substantive renovation of U.S. naval forces came in the 1880's. In 1883 Congress passed a naval appropriations act which authorized the construction of our first modern steel-hulled ships. While these ships were unarmored and were not even remotely comparable to European vessels of that period, nevertheless they did represent a dramatic shift in attitude from the previous policy of total neglect.

Throughout the 1880's, and even in the earlier part of this century, popular American feeling toward the military centered around a vision of citizen-sailors springing to arms in time of danger, equipping their merchant ships with a few smoothbore cannon, and then sailing forth to meet the foe at sea.

Belief in the effectiveness of this traditional pattern was difficult to break down, but continuing technological changes finally forced a reevaluation—at least as far as the Navy was concerned. It was much easier for America to accept the existence of a Navy during peacetime than a standing Army. After all, a Navy was a physical presence. An Army could be created overnight—or at least so the myth went—but a Navy had to have ships afloat to which America's youth could report in case of war. The Naval Appropriations Act of 1883 provided the ships while the technology of the continuing industrial revolution provided the weaponry. Many continued to feel, however, that the men needed to man the ships could be provided in an instant. "Only let the cry for volunteers go forth, and the wharves and piers will fill with eager young Americans." But advancing technology was destroying this illusion also. New weapons and new forms of naval propulsion demanded specialists—men needed more than eagerness to run these ships. Today, of course, this is truer than ever—the increasing complexity of weapons systems makes the idea of a naval militia untenable.

The first era of U.S. naval strategy was one of formation and organization. The second was one of expansion and definition. It grew out of a continuation of changing American attitudes in the early 20th century and was catalyzed by the First World War. After 1912 *all* of America seemed to awake with startling suddenness to the fact that there was a world out there and that how it was acting had an effect on America and Americans.

This expanded outlook made our involvement in World War I a certainty. Our debut on the world stage, however, was not to have lasting effect. Lacking the benefit of sufficient practical experience, this sudden and violent intrusion into the center of world power relationships in 1917-18 was unproductive.

American policy, like the American people, reacted to the cataclysm in a state of uncomprehending shock. As historian Walter Millis wrote: "Many of the inconsistencies and seeming absurdities of the Wilsonian neutrality period may be put down to the suddenness of the surprise and to the violence with which it tore up most of the accepted concepts of the past three or four decades of international history." But, as usual, we managed to succeed despite ourselves. The American Expeditionary Force tipped the balance in favor of the Allies, and victory was secured in November of 1918. Such dramatic triumphs of nations unprepared at the outbreak of war cannot be relied upon in our modern world. Events move so much more quickly. Mobilization of

industry would occupy far too much time. Eager young Americans will not have time to spring to arms. This is where history could mislead us. One might be tempted to draw the false conclusion that even when we are not properly prepared, we are strong enough to su..nount any obstacle.

We learned a great many tactical lessons from the First World War: the tremendous potential of the submarine, the usefulness of the airplane, and the fact that convoys were more effective than single-ship patrol of sealanes. But the one great strategic lesson was missed: no nation can survive in a turbulent modern world depending primarily on friendly neighbors and a wide ocean for security.

There were a few men who argued that the United States should maintain a strong military posture in the postwar period, but they were a minority. Two years after the war, the Nation responded more readily to President Harding's call for a return to "normalcy" than to arguments for a continuation of anything that remotely smacked of military strength.

Responding to the popular mood, the United States in 1921 hosted the Washington Naval Conference to propose limits on naval construction and existing naval fleets. The details of the limitations agreement are not central to the theme of our subject, but its significance lies in the fact that it necessarily altered strategic thinking. The large wartime fleet was not to be retained. Rather, we chose to depend on the dubious security provided by international agreements.

A serious inhibition to military preparedness came in 1934 with the publication of the Nye committee reports. Their findings centered on the "merchants of death"—the munitions manufacturers. The Nye committee concluded that since many industries dependent on the production of war material had made fantastic profits during the Great War, they therefore must have been in favor of prolonging the war and of America's involvement in future wars. While the resulting popular dismay was not aimed directly at the military services, many people seemed to view the professional soldier in 1934 as an accomplice to the great industries in encouraging America to advocate military solutions. Without calling it such, the Nye committee first gave attention to the concept of the "military-industrial complex." The distrust of the military generated by these hearings led to smaller budgets and a lower profile despite efforts by President Roosevelt to upgrade preparedness.

In 1937, while the rest of the world was bracing for the conflict that was then barely over the horizon, Congress passed a strict neutrality act with a view toward immunizing the United States against the "disease of world lawlessness." National policy was based on noninvolvement. President Roosevelt tested public opinion in 1937 by announcing in Chicago a plan to quarantine nations which had been convicted of aggression by the League of Nations, an obvious reference to Japan and Italy, but the reaction was so hostile that he abandoned the plan. Whenever a military officer, honestly concerned about the trend of international events, called for preparedness, he was usually accused of desiring a war in order to further his professional ambitions.

Since a nation's strategy is really the extension of its national policy, our naval leaders were left with the only strategy that was then possible: to try to isolate the Nation—to spread what little we had as far as we could to provide whatever protection was possible. Our strategy was not global, it was parochial.

U.S. naval and other strategic planners were lifted from this dilemma rather startlingly by the December attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

The tactical changes wrought during

Naval War College Review, Vol. 25 [1972], No. 6, Art. 1

World War II were once again dramatic and meaningful, on the sea as well as on land. But the most important result of our participation was that it established the United States once and for all as a world power whether we liked it or not. Surprisingly, we seemed to like it. We even went so far as to invite the United Nations to establish itself within our territorial limits, but this role as world leader was thrust upon us more by circumstances than by our ambitions. We were the only major power that had not been touched by the war directly; Pearl Harbor was as close as the enemy ever got. It seemed clear that we should attempt to pick up the load and help the war-ravaged members of the Allies and even the Axis nations to get back on their feet.

It has only been since the Second World War that our Nation has continuously occupied center stage in the arena of international politics and global strategy. The very existence of a global strategy before World War II would have been considered superfluous. Strategy, after all, is the means for translating a nation's policy into action. And prior to 1941 we believed we had no need for global involvement. It is only since World War II that we have recognized the essentiality of global planning.

So after 1945 U.S. leaders were faced with the task of developing a world strategy. Our national interests were generally agreed: containment of Communist Russia with its gigantic army and clear intention to expand its influence as well as its territory. Our first attempt to devise a strategy to accomplish this hinged on the fact that the United States alone possessed nuclear weapons. The role of the Navy in this national strategy was minimal—the Nation's primary commitment was to the Air Force and to strategic bombing.

In 1950 we discovered that a reliance on a nuclear deterrent was not of much value when we were confronted with a ground attack in South Korea. The only alternatives we had were: (1) to bomb heavily North Korea, or (2) watch the Communists take over South Korea. We declined to do either and developed, in great haste, a conventional capability based on ground troops and a surprise amphibious landing.

The near disaster of the Korean incursion led to a reexamination of our strategic defense posture. The crises in Suez, Lebanon, and elsewhere led to a realization that massive retaliation by itself was insufficient to keep the peace and to protect our interests. Consequently the second phase in U.S. postwar strategy was based upon "flexible response." This strategy, designed to cope with situations like the Korean invasion, gave the Navy greater responsibilities. In addition to serving as a deterrent force, the Navy had to be prepared to deliver troops and material safely through protected sealanes. The new strategy was soon tested in Vietnam where we first depended on military advisers and then a steadily increasing number of ground troops to fend off Communist aggression. We seem to have gained success, but at great cost.

Both Korea and Vietnam have led to changes in our strategic thinking. This in turn implies that these strategies were to a certain extent either inadequate or inadequately applied in response to the challenge.

Currently we are charged with four missions for the Navy: Along with our sister services we contribute to the nuclear deterrent that is the backbone of our defense policy. We are responsible for the maintenance of "sea control." We must maintain a capability for the projection ashore of ground troops and airpower, and we maintain a physical presence abroad in the troubled and developing areas of the world.

We have not been overwhelmingly successful in performing all of these missions, and in the future our ability to carry them out will be even less than it

is today. There are reasons for this. In 1965, for example, the U.S. Navy possessed 24 aircraft carriers. Today we have but 16 and by 1980 that number could be as low as nine. But decreasing numbers of ships is only half the problem. The other half is in the fact that the Navy has been asked to perform an increased variety and number of missions with this smaller fleet.

Our generation is not the first to be presented with seemingly impossible responsibilities for inadequate naval forces, but ours is the first generation in which failure to correct this dilemma may lead to a final, national disaster.

The first goal of strategy, after all, is to achieve national objectives without tactical battles. The measure of any strategy's success is the degree to which battle becomes unnecessary. Nevertheless, a second yet vital goal remains—sound strategic thinking requires that we have our Nation's resources so disposed that if battle does come, our Nation will surely prevail.

It is with this background, then, that we will meet for the 24th annual Global Strategy Discussions. We cannot hope nor do we expect to arrive at finite, pragmatic solutions to the many problems. But we can expand our own individual thinking as to how our country can best achieve its objectives in the years ahead.

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