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Sea Power and Current U.S. Military Strategy

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SEA POWER AND CURRENT U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
30 November 1960

by

Major George Fielding Eliot, USA (Ret.)

It is always a challenging and a pleasurable experience to stand on this platform and speak to this audience. I find it most particularly so today, conscious of the honor done me in asking me to speak to such an audience, very largely a naval audience, in this year of Polaris, only two weeks after the USS George Washington stood out from Charleston Harbor to establish, deep under the icy surface of the northern seas, the response of the American people to the Soviet threat of nuclear assault with ballistic missiles. On the dock amidst the last-minute preparations, Rear Admiral K.M. McManes, who commands the Charleston Naval District, said in a reporter's hearing, "You see that young skipper on her bridge? When he says, 'Cast off, all back 3/4, left standard rudder,' he will be writing the first words in a new chapter of the long history of warfare." That was a sailor's interpretation of the meaning of Polaris. I hope this audience, in which sailors predominate, will forgive me for amplifying that interpretation with another thought.

This one comes from a politician, and it is concerned not so particularly with Polaris itself as with what Polaris ought to mean and may come to mean. One of the more experienced, and certainly more vocal members of the Defense Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations, is Congressman Daniel J. Flood of Pennsylvania. Last January during the hearings on the Defense Appropriation Bill, after

listening to a fairly optimistic and minutely detailed presentation on the state of the national defense from Secretary Gates, Mr. Flood delivered himself as follows: "You know," he said, "you are missing just one point in this business. A great nation's ability to affect the course of events in this world is dependent upon two things, not just one. There must indeed be a reality of power in a great nation. You say we have that and I believe you, but the mere reality of power in your inventories, your arsenals, and your navy yards, will not do. There must be a public image of that reality of power in the minds of the people of this country and the peoples of the world, and there is no such image. There must (went on the Congressman) be two factors in our control of world events, in our own national security—the reality of our power, and the fact that there must be a public image of the existence of that reality. Merely doing the first will not be enough; you cannot win that way." That goes along pretty well with something that Colonel George A. Lincoln at West Point has said, "Power, until it is actually used, is what people think it is." The Soviets have established their image of power. They have taken great care to do so. Sputnik—who hasn't heard of Sputnik in the farthest corners of the world? Every peasant tapping a rubber tree in Indonesia has heard of Sputnik and of the first rocket to go around the other side of the moon. The Soviets take great pains with these public presentations. But to create a true public image of the reality of power is more complicated. It is much more difficult to explain, even to a sophisticated audience, exactly what would happen to the Soviet Union if they launched a nuclear attack against the United States, then it is to point to Sputnik or Lunik and say, "See, there is the evidence of the supremacy of Soviet power over these Americans."

Two years ago, when I had the honor to stand on this platform to speak on American national strategy, I closed my remarks with a reference to George

Washington's recommendation that our military posture should always "appear truly respectable in the eyes of our friends, and formidable to those who might otherwise become our enemies." General Washington was speaking of an image of power and the need for it. National power exists only to serve the national purposes, to help achieve the national aims. Two years ago when I spoke here that purpose and those aims had just been defined in the terms of that day by the then Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. He had stated his conception of our military needs in terms of a capability for deterring nuclear aggression by the certainty of retaliation, and of containing non-nuclear aggression by a capability for a swift and effective reaction tailored to the circumstances of the case. He went on to say that it was his belief that time was on our side, that "internal pressures are bound to alter the character of Communist regimes, particularly if these regimes are denied the glamor and prestige of great external successes." Thus to deny external successes to international Communism was, in Mr. Dulles' view, the principal mission of our military forces. In principle that may still be sound enough. But for a practical application it lacks something. What it appears to lack is the development of Congressman Flood's visible image of power, visible to our own people, the people of allied states, and to the ever-watchful enemy.

An image of power is not readily evolved from negative ingredients. Polaris, rising like the bright star for which it is named above the dark horizon of the future, has to some extent supplied that lack, at least for the moment. Polaris not only represents power, but power in motion, which is the kind of military power the United States can best use for its national and international purposes. The impression abroad produced by Polaris and its deployment has on the whole been favorable among our allies. The *London Observer* remarks that the so-called missile gap is closing before it had really started to open.

Paradoxically, however, Polaris, together with our other deterrent weaponry, also establishes what we might call a condition of nuclear stability. The men in the Kremlin will not dare launch a nuclear surprise attack on the West while we possess a nuclear striking force which is immune to a surprise knockout, and therefore the threat of doing so loses much of its credibility. But since the Soviets with their closed society have the ability to conceal the location of their missile sites, they possess a nuclear striking force likewise relatively immune to surprise destruction or counterattack. While this is so, neither will we dare to launch a pre-emptive attack against them as has sometimes been urged, or be able to destroy their ability to get at us with nuclear weapons. Thus any threat on our part of nuclear retaliation for a nonnuclear Soviet aggression, loses much of its credibility. In a condition of nuclear stability based on the mutual possession of invulnerable striking power, nuclear deterrence becomes a two-way street. We need something more active and convincing than nuclear stability and mutual deterrence to give life and dynamism to our policies, to establish a convincing image of power which shall, in turn, establish that confidence which is the cement of defensive alliances. We need something more, and it lies ready to our hands—the gift of our geography which gives us almost unlimited access to the oceanic spaces of the world, and the heritage of our national experience in the use of the sea in war. The kind of war that we are fighting today, and must continue to fight while the Communist purpose of world domination endures, is not just a military war; it is a war in which the enemy uses every aspect and factor of his national power in a coordinated effort, of which the objective is the eventual destruction of our way of life while he is still capable of destroying it. It is a war in which there is an increasing degree of convertibility between political and economic warfare and shooting warfare, or the threat of it in various degrees. The Communists know only too well how to combine every

means for the achievement of their ends. They do not take military risks where the odds are all against them. They temper such risks to the offerings of opportunity. We must apply that lesson to our own necessities. We must learn to combine political purpose with military advantage where we have it, and where we have it is at sea. If we can anywhere establish a believable, convincing and continuous image of unchallengable national power, the sea is where we can do it, and that is quite a lot of anywhere. The guiding concept behind such a procedure, such a policy and strategy, must be freedom of action based on the principle of mobility.

More than 2,000 years ago Xenophon, the Greek military strategist and writer, who led the Ten Thousand in their march to the sea, wrote that the art of war is at bottom the art of keeping one's freedom of action. Marshal Foch, quoting this remark of Xenophon, observed that at the end of an operation—or still more of a series of operations—what is the result save that the victor is free to do to, and exact from, the vanquished what he will, while the vanquished is immobilized and ruled and must yield to the victor whatever is demanded of him? The one has maintained freedom of action, the other has lost it, and this is the difference between victor and vanquished in the mind of Marshal Foch. This differs very little in principle from Admiral Mahan's idea of the purpose of naval operations—to maintain the free use of the sea for one's own purposes and to be able to deny it to the enemy.

Now we see the landlocked and relatively immobile Communist states denied freedom of action on their frontiers short of unacceptable risks. We see them chafing about Communist encirclement, and yet confronted all around their peripheries with very serious risks indeed if they start major aggression across those frontiers. How then shall they continue to expand? Writing in the *Naval Institute Proceedings*

earlier this year, Dr. Maurice Hellner—a civilian analyst in the Office of Naval Intelligence—lists immediate Soviet purposes as being these four: first, the breaking out of the imperialist encirclement, by which today they really mean overleaping, not breaking through, as they did, for instance, in Egypt; second, fragmenting our alliances through exploiting divergent aims and interests of the allies outside the immediate area of the alliance; third, capturing revolutionary movements around the world and converting them into Communist movements; and fourth, creating by this ubiquitous activity an image of overwhelming Soviet power. To every one of these purposes sea power properly and vigorously used by us offers an effective answer. There can be no new beachheads, no opening of new flanks in noncontiguous territory by the Soviets unless they can have free use of the sea and of the air lanes and spaces above the sea. Egypt is a good example of that—that was their first experiment in a major overleaping of the imperialist encirclement, the shipment of arms to Egypt in 1955. And I imagine there must have been among the advisors of those who took that decision some who said, "You will never get away with it. The Americans and British will never allow you to send arms to Egypt in shiploads. They will stop the ships." Others said, "No, they won't; they won't quite get their courage up to do that, and besides they are too legal-minded." The latter were quite correct. As a matter of fact, the question of whether the Soviet ships should be stopped, whether the ports of Egypt should be blockaded, arose at a fairly high level in this country, and Mr. Dulles, whose mind was very keen and active in some areas, but was still confined by legal concepts, said, "No, we can't do that, it would be an act of war; blockade is an act of war," which is a pure lawyer's definition because no war would have resulted. However, we had trouble instead.

Consider now the other Soviet purposes. There can be no free-wheeling interference in other people's

affairs in noncontiguous territory, as is now projected for Algeria for one example, without the use of the sea. There can be no capture of revolutions abroad without seaborne logistic support, including, of course, technicians or "volunteers," to give the Communists a continuing hold on the course of affairs, which enables them to convert this revolution to their model and purpose. This we are seeing in Cuba today. There can be no image of overwhelming Soviet power if Soviet purposes are continually being frustrated by the denial of free access to those parts of the world in which the Soviets claim to have interests or seek to go. Of course, this concept gets back to the idea of the will behind it. Perhaps we need a new definition of the old idea of freedom of the seas, of which so much has been heard. Perhaps we need a new definition of contraband. Historically, there has been upon the great sea powers an unspoken obligation to maintain the peace and security of the sea as a great international highway simply because they had the means to do it in the interest of all who used the sea. Under that concept both British and American warships at one time or another have interfered with the slave trade; both British and American naval vessels have interfered with what the British called gun-running in the Persian Gulf, and what we used to call filibustering in the Caribbean—again on the high seas in international waters.

It may be thought that it is hard to produce these new definitions—to adapt them to our new requirements, but that hasn't always been hard for us to do. We have proved in the past our adaptability to the demands of self-preservation. No one could have talked more loudly about neutral rights than we did during the Napoleonic wars. We came to blows with Britain, partly on that subject, in 1812. And yet, during the Civil War, when it became necessary for the Federal Government to establish a blockade of the southern coast, "neutral rights" became very quickly indeed to be what the senior Union naval officer present on any

particular occasion said they were. Despite the bitter complaints which were constantly being addressed to our government, the Secretary of the Navy, Mr. Welles, used to protect his people, to the great annoyance of Secretary of State Seward. This state of affairs pretty well continued right down to the end of the war. The attitude of the Royal Navy is very interesting in this regard. British shipping interests were feeling the bite of the blockade in the last year or two pretty severely, when it was becoming much more efficient. The American and West Indies Squadron of the Royal Navy had been somewhat reinforced, presumably to keep an eye on these proceedings. But not much seemed to be done by the British Navy. One British admiral in Washington on an official visit remarked at a convivial moment, "I can't quite see interfering with you chaps doing a blockade when the very life of Britain may one day come to rest on being allowed to maintain an effective blockade. No, my dear fellow, we wouldn't think of such a thing. We would much prefer to be able to remind you of this on some other occasion when we need to make a tight blockade despite your interests." And this came about in World War I. Again we had a great clamor about neutral rights—especially the Scandinavian countries and Holland were being progressively restricted in their imports and the definitions of contraband were extending day by day, and our complaints about it were couched in fairly strong language.

Then came along April 1917 and we got into the war, whereupon we sent some navy and economic experts over to discuss blockade matters with the British. They took a good look at the list of contraband and at the regulations and one of our men leaned back and looked at the British in astonishment and said, "You people call this a blockade? Let's get down to business here and we will give you some of our ideas about a blockade." It is reliably reported that three months later you couldn't buy so much as a bobby pin in Amsterdam. So we do change our ideas on these

subjects, even on sacred subjects like the freedom of the seas, and maybe we are going to have to re-think that one again.

It may seem somewhat of a jump from the Atlantic blockade to Hungary, but during the Hungarian revolt when the sympathies of the American people were so strongly with the rebels who were fighting so bravely, a question was repeatedly asked in Congress and elsewhere, Why don't we help them? The answer was, in the heart of central Europe, nuclear weapons aside, the military advantage is unquestionably with the Russians. The military risks of U.S. interference are just too great. The Russians recognized that. They seemed to be fairly sure that we would not assume those risks. Why should we not assume and act accordingly in areas of the world where the military advantages unquestionably are with us, which is almost everywhere on salt water beyond the reach of Soviet coastal forces—why should we not assume that the Russians are out of their bailiwick and act accordingly? Take Africa, for example.

In a recent article in the *Revue Militaire Generale*, General J.M. Nemo of the French Army observes: "Africa is surrounded by seas. She has always been reached from the sea. It is still by sea that she receives and exports most of her merchandise. If ships should cease to stop at her harbors, Africa would suffocate economically, modern air transportation notwithstanding. What aviation does is to speed goods from harbor to user. The combination of ship and plane, of harbor and airfield, are the wherewithal of Africa's economy and of Africa's strategy." Stop and think a minute, gentlemen. In a contest involving Africa under these circumstances, and considering the geographical factors of access to the sea, in such a contest should we accept even the possibility that the Soviets could beat us? Not if we make it a contest, and that is where the image of power comes in, for the will to use power in a free society must be

generated by public and political confidence that power can be used successfully, especially when the use of power may in a particular instance have to be initiated by our side. The application of power by one member of an alliance, and particularly its initial application, needs an even wider area of confidence and hence an image of power more convincing to a wider variety of opinion. Today, largely because of Soviet threats embellishing the image of Soviet power that the Kremlin seeks to create, there is a nervous and jittery reaction to the mere suggestion of the use of force among some of our allies. Even the comparatively tough-minded British seemed, judging from their press, to be a little upset the other day when we ordered a naval task force into the Western Caribbean in response to the request of the governments of Guatemala and Nicaragua for protection against any threat from Cuba. One British paper remarked that they supposed it was necessary, but why did we have to make such a display? Why did we have to send an aircraft carrier? Couldn't we do it with a less provocative sort of approach—maybe a couple of destroyers or something? I am sure the Royal Navy didn't go along with this idea, but that is the kind of thing that is said when anybody talks about using force, and especially us. We are supposed to be trigger happy; they worry about it.

You get this incredible concept that is coming up now in NATO, about NATO's nuclear rearmament with fifteen fingers on the trigger instead of one. This is a deterrent? All this because our power image is not yet sharply defined—is not yet widely credible and accepted. Polaris—just as hardware which can be seen on the television screens—helps. It has caught the imagination of many, but actions by our government which display confidence in our power, Polaris included, will help more. I don't expect to see any great and sudden revolution in policy; things don't come that way. The policy evolves, but consider the development of the Polaris weapon—you have got these

1200-mile missiles up there in the northern seas. You have to have them there if they are to have any deterrent effect, within reach of significant Soviet targets. It is not difficult to take a globe and a pair of dividers and figure where the patrol stations have to be. We can't just send these submariners up there and leave them to their own devices. We have got to be prepared to take care of them, to support them in case of need. Making the Second Fleet into an operational force is probably one recognition of that need—the increase in operational attack carriers from 14 to 16 another move in that direction. Generally, we are widening the scope of our immediate naval interests and we are confronted by new obligations. The Soviets are not going to like having Polaris submarines deployed in waters in which their missiles can strike Soviet targets. They are going to try to revive their antisubmarine capability, which has not had the highest priority in the Soviet Navy heretofore. They are going to find out that ASW without carriers is a short-legged business. They are surely going to start thinking in terms of extending the radius of action of their shore-based aircraft by at least establishing the capability of getting advanced bases. I do not need to say more to indicate one area in which there will be a sharp rise in strategic and tactical competition in sea warfare capabilities. And there will be others.

The other day the Chief of Naval Operations for the first time publicly indicated interest in an Indian Ocean task force to fill the vast vacuum of Western power westward of Singapore along the southern face of Asia. A South Atlantic squadron has also been mentioned especially since the Congo trouble attracted our attention to the explosion possibilities among the emerging independent states of Africa. Certainly as the image of what Polaris, and sea-based power generally, means to our security becomes more clearly defined in the public and congressional minds, we shall have to have a very large-scale expansion of our

own antisubmarine warfare capabilities. So we return to our basic need, the reality of power of the kinds and quantities that our needs demand, plus a visible and credible image of that reality. Few forms of power, taken as a whole, are more visible, are more credible, to the average observer in countries bordered by the sea, than naval power. We return also to our basic concept of strategy, that is, the use of power—freedom of action, which involves limiting the freedom of the action of the enemy as an essential corollary. On our main defensive land front in Europe, we are accustomed to speak of the ground forces as the shield, and our nuclear striking power as the terrible swift sword. But on the active sea front all over the world, nuclear power, though wielded largely from mobile bases, is the shield covering the use of the sword of amphibious mobility. The situations are reversed. Here is an image and a concept which promises to serve our needs in this dangerous decade of the 1960's upon which we are entering, which may indeed, as Vice Admiral John T. Hayward suggested to Congress earlier this year, take the premium clear out of this surprise attack business, and strip credibility from the rival image of power which Mr. Khrushchev and his friends are seeking so assiduously to create. In this image and concept, gentlemen, sea power, if we will but seize upon it and use it, may serve the needs of our current strategy; our current security, and that of the Free World of which we are champion and whose shores are largely washed by the oceans upon which the image of our power must constantly be displayed. In so doing we may be laying the foundations of a future as hopeful as that of the one hundred years during which British sea power secured the peace of mankind. The Pax Britannica we all remember with gratitude as the era of the one hundred years after Waterloo during which science, education, the general welfare of mankind, made the greatest advances in five centuries. If we are going to have a similar period of peace and security for the ideals and hopes of free men and women everywhere, it is going to be,

gentlemen, a Pax Americana, and it will be based on our ability to control the seas for our own purposes and to deny them to any enemy. Thank you, gentlemen.

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Career Highlights:

Upon graduation from college, Major Eliot served with the Australian Imperial Force in the Dardanelles, the Western Front and France. He then served in the U.S. Army for eight years (1922-1930) in the Military Intelligence Reserve, attaining the rank of Major.

After contributing to fiction magazines for several years, he began writing extensively on military and international affairs. He has since become widely known as an author, journalist, radio and television commentator and lecturer. He was military correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune from 1939-1946, and was then a correspondent and columnist for the *New York Post Syndicate* from 1947-1949. Since 1950, he has been affiliated with the *General Features Syndicate*. He was a military analyst for the Columbia Broadcasting System from 1939-1947 and since 1950 has been associated with the Mutual Broadcasting System as a commentator.

Publications:

The Ramparts We Watch; Bombs Bursting in Air; Hour of Triumph; The Strength We Need; Hate, Hope and High Explosives—A Report on the Middle East; If Russia Strikes; Caleb Pettengill, USN (novel) and *Victory Without War, 1958-1961.*