

## *Thoughts on Grand Strategy and the United States in the Twenty-first Century*

Williamson Murray

One might begin an examination of the issues involved in grand strategy with an effort to describe what we mean by the term. Over the centuries, some governments and leaders have attempted to chart a course for their nations that has involved something more than simply reacting to the course of events. In most cases they have confronted sudden and major changes in the international environment, often resulting from the outbreak of great conflicts, but at times involving economic, strategic, or political alterations that threaten the stability or even existence of their polities.

Yet, grand strategy is a matter of great states and great states alone. No small states, and few medium size states, possess the possibility of crafting a grand strategy. For the most part their circumstances condemn them to suffer what Athens negotiators suggested to their Melian counterparts in 416 BC about the nature of international relations: "The standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by Rex Warner (London, 1954), p. 402. There are two exceptions to the rule. Both the Swiss and the Finns were able to exercise a certain independence that allowed them to maintain a grand strategic frame work: the former by balancing great powers off against each other; the latter by creating the distinct impression in the minds of the Soviets that they were willing to fight to the last man and woman in defense of their independence.

But if great states have choices compared to their smaller cousins, then the concomitant burden they must bear is what one might best describe as overstretch. Quite simply, overstretch is an inevitable part of the landscape in which they exist. They have no other avenue but to address a wide variety of vital interests in the economic, political and military spheres, some which are contradictory by their nature and demands. And those vital interests will inevitably present threats either in the immediate present or to the state's long-term survival. General James Wolfe, victor on the Plains of Abraham before Quebec City in 1759, described conflict best in his short aphorism: "War is an option of difficulties."<sup>2</sup>

The same is even truer for grand strategy. In a world where great states confront overstretch, they must make hard choices. Thus in the end, grand strategy is more often than not about the ability to adjust to the reality that resources, will, and interests will inevitably find themselves out of balance in some areas. Strategy is about balancing risks. But above all, it is about insuring that the balance is right in those areas that matter most. And it is also about adapting national focus in times of great stress on the international environment to those areas of overstretch that threaten the polity to the greatest extent.

What distinguishes those who have attempted to develop and execute a grand strategy is their focus on acting beyond the demands of the present. In other words, they have taken a longer view than simply reacting to the events of the day. Nor have they concentrated on only one aspect of the problem. Instead, in times of war, while they may have focused on the great issue confronting them, such as Lincoln's effort to maintain the Union in the great civil war that enveloped North America in its embrace, that vision has recognized the political, economic, and diplomatic framework within which the conflict was taking place.<sup>3</sup>

There is, one must admit, considerable confusion of grand strategy with policy,

---

<sup>2</sup> Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War, The Seven Years' war and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Thus, in discussing the goal of his grand strategy, namely the preservation of the Union as he was about to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln quite simply commented: "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could do it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Quoted in Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red, The Battle of Antietam* (New York, 1983), p. 166.

military strategy, and strategies to achieve this or that specific goal. Grand strategy is none of those, but to one extent or another it consists of all of them. It demands a recognition of and ability to react to the ever-shifting environments of war and peace. Thus, the day-to-day decision-making that drives policy-making must be involved in grand strategy's execution. The latter will envelop military strategy and diplomatic strategy. Nor must grand strategy ignore the other issues that invariably confront those leaders who are in a position to develop and execute it. But it also demands that statesmen encompass within their view of the larger goal the pieces of bureaucratic decision-making, policy, and specific strategic approaches. Thus, those who develop a successful grand strategy never lose sight of the long-term goal, whatever that might be, but are willing to adapt to the difficulties of the present in reaching toward the future. Above all, at the same time that they have maintained a vision focused on the possibilities of the future, they have adapted to the realities of the present.

Those who are interested in the subject of grand strategy must understand that much of the flesh and muscle that went into its creation and maintenance in its various forms is lost to the pages of history. To a considerable extent the past remains an unrecoverable land, where time has muted or obscured the relationships, hatreds, and calculations of those who make decisions. As one of the leading historians of the rise of Britain to mastery over the world's oceans has noted about the creation of Britain's strategy during the War of Spanish Succession:

[The proximity of the major military and political players in London during the winter when strategy was made] makes the process of strategic formulation almost unrecoverable for the historian, at least in its more interesting aspects. Parliamentary debates and gossip remain, but thousands of other informal discussions in saloons, taverns, dinner parties, balls, and random encounters are lost. Unofficial correspondence exists only when key figures retreated to their country estates or were otherwise absent, and official documents tend to reflect decisions rather than the processes that created them. The compromises, trade-offs, and private deals characteristic of advanced systems of clientage are often lost to recorded memory. Decisions were usually compromises, and those who dissented could only grumble and criticize until victory dismissed

their complaints or misfortune made them next year's policy.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, those who have developed successful grand strategies in the past have been very much the exception. The affairs of man as recorded by historians seem nothing more than one long catalogue of crimes, follies, and egregious errors.<sup>5</sup> Wars begun with little or no thought of their consequences, assumptions unchallenged in the face of harsh reality, the possibility of second or third order effects casually dismissed with the shrug of a shoulder, and idle ignorance substituted in place of serious considerations, have bedeviled the actions of statesmen and generals over the course of recorded history. During that period a strategic framework, much less a grand strategy, has rarely guided those responsible for the long-term survival of polities either in a political or military sense.

And so the inevitable question that should concern American policy makers and military leaders, much less the polity as a whole, is simply put: Is there even the possibility of charting a grand strategy for a United States that at present confronts monumental challenges to its security?<sup>6</sup> Is there a strategic path that would protect the United States, its interests, and its values more effectively than simply reacting to the next great crisis? If so, what does history suggest about how those few in the past who have done so have thought clearly and coherently in setting out a course to the future? In other words, how have first-rate statesmen and their military and diplomatic advisers developed effective approaches to grand strategy in meeting the demands of the present as well as those of the future?

The history of the past century certainly underlines the importance of a coherent approach to grand strategy, one that is flexible, realistic, and above all that connects means to ends. It warns, however, that this has rarely been the case. In an article examining military effectiveness and the impact – or lack thereof – of a coherent strategic approach over the years from 1914 to 1945, this author and his colleague Allan

---

<sup>4</sup> William S. Maltby, "The Origins of a Global Strategy: England from 1558 to 1713," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> The title of Barbara Tuchman's book and title, *The March of Folly*, encapsulates much of mankind's historical record.

<sup>6</sup> For a general examination of strategy as a process over the course of human history see Murray, Knox, and Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy*.

Millett argued:

No amount of operational virtuosity... redeemed fundamental flaws in political judgment. Whether policy shaped strategy or strategic imperatives drove policy was irrelevant. Miscalculation in both led to defeat, and any combination of politico-strategic error had disastrous results, even for some nations that ended the war as members of the victorious coalition. Even the effective mobilization of national will, manpower, industrial might, national wealth, and technological know-how did not save the belligerents from reaping the bitter fruit of severe mistakes [at this level]. This is because it is more important to make correct decisions at the political and strategic level than it is at the operational and tactical level. Mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but political and strategic mistakes live forever.<sup>7</sup>

No simple, clear definition of grand strategy can ever be fully satisfactory. The closer one comes to understanding what it entails, the more complex and uncertain in historical terms are the aspects that encompass its making and use. One might adapt a comment by Clausewitz to our purpose to develop a theoretical understanding of grand strategy.

The second way out of this difficulty is to argue that a theory need not be a positive doctrine, a sort of *manual* for action... It is an analytical investigation leading to a close *acquaintance* with the subject; applied to experience – in our case [strategy] – it leads to thorough *familiarity* with it. The closer it comes to that goal, the more it proceeds from the objective form of a science to the subjective form of a skill.<sup>8</sup>

Grand strategy involves some willingness and ability to think about the future in terms of the goals of a political entity. Yet, those who have been most successful at its practice have also recognized that the “future is not foreseeable,” and consequently have been willing to adapt themselves to political, economic, and military conditions as they are rather than as they wish them to be. Above all, grand strategy demands an intertwining of political, social, and economic realities with military power, as well as a

---

<sup>7</sup> Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, “Lessons of War,” *The National Interest*, Winter 1988/1989.

<sup>8</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 163.

recognition that politics must in nearly all cases drive military necessity.<sup>9</sup> It must also rest not only on a realistic assessment and understanding of one's opponents, but also of oneself.<sup>10</sup> There is rarely clarity in the effective casting of grand strategy, because by its nature it exists in an environment of constant change, where chance and the unexpected are inherent.<sup>11</sup> Thus, simply thinking about developing a concept of grand strategy demands not only a deep understanding of the past, but also a comprehensive and realistic understanding of the present.

Grand strategy may be as concerned with avoiding war as with fighting it, although there are times where there is no alternative to conflict.<sup>12</sup> War avoidance was certainly a basic principle of Byzantium's approach to grand strategy, at least from the death of Justinian in 565 AD.<sup>13</sup> Thus, one should not assume that grand strategy is only a matter of war; some of the greatest successes of grand strategy have been wars not fought, the most obvious of which was the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, miscalculations of grand strategy in peacetime, such as Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement and its execution, can lead to catastrophic results not only in peace but in the initial conduct of military operations, though the latter, not surprisingly, are far easier to see with historical perspective than the former.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The German military in the First World War consistently rejected strategic and political concerns in what its leaders consistently posited as "military necessity" – a concept which they used to override all political and strategic concerns. In this regard, see particularly Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction, Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Sun Tzu's most justly famous aphorism is that "if you know the enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles." Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. and ed. by Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, 1963), p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> One of the most important contributions to our understanding of international relations, diplomatic and strategic history and the conduct of war has been the impact on nonlinearity. For its implications for history and political science see John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 3, Winter 1992/93.

<sup>12</sup> This was the case with the response of the Western Powers in dealing with Hitler's Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

<sup>13</sup> This is the main theme in Edward Luttwak's book on the grand strategy of the Eastern Roman Empire.

<sup>14</sup> See among others John Gaddis, *Now We Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York, 1998); and *The Cold War: A New History* (New York, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Neville Chamberlain's decision to surrender Czechoslovakia in September and October 1938, while maintaining Britain's leisurely pace of rearmament, underlines how crucial decision of grand strategy in peacetime can be. For further discussion of the military and strategic results of Munich see among others Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939, The Path to Ruin* (Princeton:

And history is essential to any understanding of the present, for only the past can clarify and elucidate the factors, trends, and political, economic, and economic frameworks which have made the present and will certainly drive the future. Moreover, grand strategy demands a recognition of unpleasant realities and a willingness to challenge one's own assumptions and the myths and truisms of one's own culture – not normally characteristics of the human race in general or its political or military leaders in particular, who generally prefer pleasant and comfortable illusions to the dark truths of reality.

Given its importance, one might suppose that grand strategy and strategy would be the subject of innumerable books and studies. In fact they have not been. The greatest of all books on war, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, presents a deep and thorough examination of grand strategy, among a number of other crucial issues.<sup>16</sup> But the Western historical canon is largely silent on the subject until Machiavelli, and even he is largely focused on stratagems for the individual ruler to follow in the pursuit of internal and external power. Jomini concerns himself largely with the geometry of war, although he was finally forced to admit that Clausewitz was right that war is a matter of "the continuation of politics by other means."<sup>17</sup> The great Prussian theorist himself admits at the start of *On War* that policy and strategy represent the crucial drivers and determinants of human conflict, but since his subject is the phenomenon of war, his work only discusses these subjects peripherally.

Nor is grand strategy described better by more recent theoretical approaches such as Alfred Thayer Mahan's work on sea power; Guiliho Douhet's on air power; or British pundits Basil H. Liddell Hart's and J.F.C. Fuller's theories of the indirect approach and armored warfare.<sup>18</sup> Each of those authors focused his attention on

---

Princeton University Press, 1984), chs, 7 and 8.

<sup>16</sup> One of the more bizarre aspects of modern historiography is the argument among ancient historians that there was no understanding of strategy in the Greco-Roman world. For a refutation of such nonsense simply refer to the speech given by King Archidamnus in Book 1 of Thucydides' great history of the Peloponnesian War: *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans., by Rex Warner (New Turk, 1954), pp. 82-86.

<sup>17</sup> "We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means. What remains peculiar to war is simply the peculiar nature of its means." Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> Douhet's major works were not translated into English until after the Second World War, although

specific aspects of the technological attributes of war, although Mahan and Liddell Hart were willing to use historical examples effectively to support their arguments. Only Julian Corbett, the great British naval thinker, was willing to draw on Clausewitz for understanding the fundamental nature of war as a means to understand the place of naval conflict in grand strategy.<sup>19</sup>

In the twentieth century, the subject of grand strategy as a topic for rigorous historical examination appears first in serious form in Edward Meade Earle's classic *Makers of Modern Strategy*, which not surprisingly appeared at the mid-point of America's participation in the Second World War.<sup>20</sup> Of the voluminous official studies of the two world wars commissioned by the various governments involved, only the British undertook a deep study of their performance at the level of grand strategy.<sup>21</sup> America's official histories were far less coherent and, in the end, less satisfactory in their efforts to discuss grand strategy.<sup>22</sup> Their examination of the war was more about military strategy and decisions involving the employment of military forces than about American grand strategy.<sup>23</sup>

Why then, considering the importance of the topic, has the subject of grand strategy proven so peripheral in the literature of war and peace? There appear to be several explanations, none of them entirely satisfactory, but useful nevertheless. Grand

---

translations of his articles were available at the Air Corps Tactical School in the 1930s. For Basil Liddell Hart's views on the subject see *Strategy*, (London, 1929).

<sup>19</sup> See Julian Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* Mineola, NY, reprint, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Meade Earle, ed., *The Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943). It was re-edited by Peter Paret in 1984 in a far less satisfactory volume: Peter Paret, ed., *The Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> See the outstanding six volume series, dealing with British grand strategy in the Second World War, published by Her Majesty's Stationary Office from 1957 through 1972. The most outstanding volume in the series is Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy*, vol. 4, *August 1942 – September 1943* (London, 1972).

<sup>22</sup> For examples of the American approach to the analysis of grand strategy see Maurice Matloff, *The United States Army in World War II, The War Department: Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944* (Washington, DC, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> In fact, much of the discussions in the Green Books, as the Army's official histories are known, are flawed by faulty assumptions and sloppy research. The clearest example is their almost complete silence on the strategic debates that took place in late 1942 over American mobilization and the nation's ability to support the build up of ground forces as well as the argument, entirely fallacious, that George Marshall argued for a landing on the coast of Northwest France in 1943 at the Casablanca conference. For a refutation of such views see, James Lacey, "Economic Foundations of American Military Strategy, 1940-1943" Ph.D., University of Leeds, 2009.



strategy lies at the nexus of politics and military strategy and thus contains important elements of both. Moreover, it exists in a world of constant flux, one in which uncertainty and ambiguity dominate. And the international environment will more often than not have its say, as national opponents take the most inopportune moments to change their policies, while internal and ideological factors also have a vote.

Thus, the *Weltanschauungen* (world views) of statesmen and military leaders alike – a major determinant in the formation of any grand strategy – will come under constant assault from the ever-changing environment within which they work. One does not make effective grand strategy entirely as one would like, but rather according to the circumstances in which a national polity finds itself. Finally, as noted earlier, great states possess considerable wiggle room in the casting of grand strategy, but small states have virtually none.<sup>24</sup>

A part of the problem in understanding grand strategy, or for that matter strategy of any kind, lies in the belief of most historians and commentators that it represents an enunciated set of goals and principles to which statesmen and military leaders adhere in a consistent fashion. However, historical examples of marches toward clear goals are less than enlightening, one example being the disastrous trajectory of the Third Reich. From his beginning as a street agitator in Munich through to his dismal end in the bunker in Berlin, Hitler possessed a coherent, carefully thought through, long-term grand strategy, from which he rarely deviated in the course of his rise and fall, although in his early years in power he was willing to make temporary adjustments such as the Non-Aggression Pact with Poland in 1934. Initially, that brought Nazi Germany great military and diplomatic triumphs, but within those successes lay the seeds of catastrophe, because Hitler's conception of grand strategy and the assumptions on which it rested led straight to the invasion of the Soviet Union and his declaration of war on the United States.<sup>25</sup> In fact, while the goals of grand strategy may be clear, the

---

<sup>24</sup> In the cold, dark words of the Athenian negotiators on the island of Melos in 416 BC: "in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 402.

<sup>25</sup> By far and away the best books on Hitler's grand strategy, its origins, its development, and its end are Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms, A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994); and MacGregor Knox, *To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33*, vol. 1, *Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships* (Cambridge, 2007).

path to achieving them is invariably tortuous and uncertain, a reality that has inevitably led to great difficulties.

In fact, the best analogy for understanding grand strategy is that of how French peasant soup is made – a mixture of items thrown into the pot over the course of a week and then eaten, for which no recipe can possibly exist.<sup>26</sup> In thinking about the soup of grand strategy, recipes and theoretical principles are equally useless. What works in one case may well not work in another case. In various strengths, grand strategy consists of leadership, vision, intuition, process, adaptation, and the impact of each nation's particular and idiosyncratic development and geographic position, but in no particular order or mixture.<sup>27</sup>

Geography, historical experience, and culture have all invariably exercised a heavy, but often unseen, influence over the making of national grand strategy, but individuals and their own particular abilities to upset every seemingly rational calculation represent a factor that statesmen rarely seem to command. In other words, Murphy's Law works at every level.<sup>28</sup> This is particularly so because what appears rational to the leaders of one national group inevitably reflects their own cultural biases.<sup>29</sup> Thus, one must think of grand strategy in terms of an idiosyncratic process rather than a specific, clearly thought through approach to the world. When successful, it almost invariably involves the choices and guiding hands of single individuals, for better or worse, rather than an effective bureaucratic system. Thus, as a human endeavor, it is suffused with the idiosyncrasies that mark all of humanity's decision making.

The two greatest grand strategists of the nineteenth century, Abraham Lincoln and Otto von Bismarck, are cases in point. Neither one began his course with a clear idea of his route or the political and international framework within which he was going to have to work. Both had specific long term goals in mind: Lincoln, the

---

<sup>26</sup> This analogy, used in a different context, and apparent used often by General William E Depuy in various briefings, was passed along to the author by General Don Starry, USA (ret.).

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of these issues see Murray and Grimsley, "Introduction, On Strategy, " in *The Making of Strategy*.

<sup>28</sup> The law posits that if something can go wrong, it will go wrong.

<sup>29</sup> This reality makes the whole concept of "the rational actor," on which so much of American political science rests completely irrelevant to any real understanding of the world.

preservation of the Union; Bismarck, the political security, internal as well as external, of the Prussian monarchy. Both found themselves remaking and even extending their goals. Lincoln, for his part, turned to emancipation of the South's slaves, which was not a part of his original agenda, as an essential component of the preservation of the Union.<sup>30</sup> Bismarck eventually turned to unifying the "Germanys," southern as well as northern, in order to secure Prussia.

Perhaps the most important factor that one needs to recognize in thinking about grand strategy is that the decisions that constituted it in the past confronted considerable ambiguities in the international environment. That recognition is crucial, because the uncertainties of the present are little different in their fundamental nature from those that have confronted statesmen and military leaders throughout history. As the Bible clearly underlines, mankind peers into the future "through a glass darkly" – a reality that Winston Churchill caught so brilliantly in his history/memoir of the First World War:

One rises from the study of the Great War with a prevailing sense of the defective control of individuals upon world fortunes. It has been well said, 'there is always more error than design in human affairs.' The limited minds of the ablest men, their disputed authority, the climate of opinion in which they dwell, their transient and partial contributions to the mighty problem, the problem itself so far beyond their compass, so vast in scale and detail, so changing in its aspects – all this must be considered [in understanding the outbreak of war in 1914]... Events... got onto certain lines and no one could get them off again...<sup>31</sup>

For that reason alone, grand strategy is much easier to recognize after the fact, when events have clarified the landscape, the uncertainties have disappeared, and only historians remain to pick over the bones. The balancing act that statesmen confront between the means available and the ends desired disappears, and only its results drive the conventional wisdom of historians. What appeared difficult and complex when

---

<sup>30</sup> In this case Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation had as much to do with undermining the economic stability of the Confederacy and bucking up the North's morale and strategic situation than because of his belief that slavery represented a moral wrong, which he did. But politics and grand strategy is a matter of the practicable.

<sup>31</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis* (Toronto: MacMillan and Company, 1931), p. 6.

statesmen were charting an intelligent course in a complex and uncertain environment now appears simple and obvious in the aftermath of events. And therein lies the great danger in historical analysis, for, again to paraphrase Clausewitz, grand strategy may appear to be a simple matter, but given the enormous uncertainties within which it must work and the prevailing forces that work upon it, its execution is exceedingly difficult.<sup>32</sup>

Of particular importance for those who are interested in grand strategy, its articulation, and its success or failure is the context within which it has occurred. No theoretical construct, no set of abstract principles, no political science model can capture its essence.<sup>33</sup> That is because grand strategy exists in a world of flux. Constant change and adaptation must be its companions, if it is to succeed. Not only does it find itself under the pressures and strains of the politics and processes of decision making, but the fact that the external environment can and often does adapt will inevitably affect the calculations of those who attempt to chart its course. The goals may be clear, but the means available and the paths are uncertain. Exacerbating such difficulties is the reality that grand strategy demands intuitive as much as calculated judgments.

Americans have proven that they too can follow a consistent and coherent grand strategy. As early as 1946 in his “long telegram”, George Kennan had laid out the nature of the Soviet threat and the response that would best lead to a modification in the behavior of the Soviet Union. In the following year he published his famous “Mr. X” article in *Foreign Affairs*, and in 1948 he commented:

[T]he Soviet leaders are prepared to recognize *situations*, if not arguments. If therefore, situations can be created in which it is clearly not to the advantage of their power to emphasize the elements of conflict in their relations with the outside world, then their actions, and even the tenor of

---

<sup>32</sup> Clausewitz comments on the fundamental nature of war: “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.” Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Clausewitz puts the matter simply: “All the positive results of theoretical investigation – all the principles, rules and methods – will increasingly lack universality and absolute truth the closer they come to being positive doctrine. They are there to be used when needed, and their suitability in any given case must always be a matter of judgment. A critic should never use the results of theory as laws and standards, but only... *as aids to judgment*.” Ibid., p. 183.

their propaganda to their own people, *can* be modified.<sup>34</sup>

In retrospect Kennan was correct; containment and the inherent internal contradictions of an economic system that failed resulted in the collapse of the late 1980s. The end was not foreseeable, nor was the tortuous path that America's grand strategy followed between 1947 and 1989. Yet despite the failures and the faulty choices made at times, the framework remained sufficiently in place to see the Cold War through to its astonishing end. And therein lies the rub, because the great advantage the United States possessed throughout the period of the Cold War was the fact that the Soviets consistently provided more than sufficient proof that they represented a moral and strategic threat to America and its allies.

At present Americans confront the most confusing and uncertain strategic environment in their history.<sup>35</sup> It may also be the most dangerous to the well-being of their Republic, but only history will unravel the full extent of the potential threats the nation confronts at present.<sup>36</sup> The major problem is that the current environment provides no clear, certain threat like those posed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Yet, the past also suggests that the nation's survival may well depend on its political and military leaders establishing a strategic vision that moves beyond the immediate challenges that the present raises. As this essay has stressed, such a vision and framework of grand strategy must rest first and foremost on an understanding of the past. History provides a number of crucial elements necessary to craft realistic strategic expectations. It is not so much the direct lessons of the past that are germane to think about the future. Rather, it is the understanding of the ambiguities and uncertainties that political and military leaders have confronted in the past and will confront in the future that is the basis of any successful grand strategy. The problem for

---

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know, Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, 1997), p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> For the nature of that strategic environment, its ambiguities and uncertainties, its historical framework as well as the range of potential trouble spots that the United States and its military forces might confront in the coming decades of the twenty-first century see Joint Forces Command, "The Joint Operational Environment," Norfolk, VA, November 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Certainly the American Civil War and World War II posed threats to the continued existence of the United States. Whether any of the current or potential threats will represent such direct challenge to the nation is impossible at present to say.

Americans in thinking about the issues involved in its development and execution is that there are no easy, simple solutions, no silver bullets.