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STRATEGIC FAILURES

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by

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This is a timely conference in that the President's Blue Ribbon Commission on Defense Management has just concluded its work. As one of the Commissioners, I felt that the single most important recommendation we presented to the President was our proposal for bringing the Commander-in-Chief directly to bear upon the process by which grand strategy for the nation is devised, and transformed into defense budgets, force structure, and weapon systems. We of the Packard Commission came to realize that many more millions of dollars, conceivably billions, are wasted annually on strategic redundancies and lacunae than on overpriced toilet seats and ash trays, and we became convinced that existing strategic procedures need overhaul. Let me characterize the state of affairs as I personally perceived them:

- **Strategy**, a word which in its Greek root refers to the affairs of the top military leader, has largely been

dictated by civilians. I rue the fact I rarely hear any senior military officers discussing the term other than in its modern reference to intercontinental nuclear warfare. I think it proper that professional military advice for the President and the NSC on matters of strategy has been widely questioned of late.

- Within the Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the most prominent strategists seem to have been Admiral inadvertence and General Confusion.
- The Office of Management and Budget has waged guerrilla warfare against Defense budgeteers, inducing the latter to resort to classic fiscal counterinsurgency, employing padding and "gold watch" tactics.
- And, anent the purposes of this gathering, Congress has clarified all this by (1) dictating that our senior military leadership shall be a committee in the image and likeness of those on the Hill; (2) dealing with any Administration's Defense budget either by addressing it in the aggregate, plus or minus a marginal percentage, or by micromanaging its minutia, the thousands of "line items" which control the amount and rate of expenditure for goods and services which are the stuff of local and regional politics; (3) largely ignoring national objectives or grand strategy; and (4) converting the annual process of authorization and appropriation into a

ponderous, convoluted, staff-dominated exercise in delay, obfuscation, and uncertainty. The Congressional role seems to assure that any military strategy, however artfully conceived, will be converted into a mish-mash of fits and starts, flawed in conception and deprived of that deception which confounds --and deters-- would-be foes.

I believe that the Bill which prompted this convocation is going to have to go considerably further if we are to address cogently the very significant failures which have characterized our national approach to strategy. Those failures are numerous and egregious, and are certainly not attributable to any political party or any set of leaders. Professor Rostow might have me start with President Truman's failure to insist on elections in Eastern Europe, but I propose to confine my comments to the last three decades. I suggest that in that period there have been four main failures:

Failures of process.

Failures of perception.

Failures of persistence.

Failures of priorities.

Concerning process, I think the Packard Commission has done the nation a service by recommending procedures which, if adopted, will require our Commander-in-Chief, the President, to assume a more active role in formulating national strategy, and thereby lead a more rational and effective pursuit of national goals. That we, after 200 years of independence, should still be fumbling with how to arrive at

strategy is in itself an indictment of failure. And here I might remark that this building was erected early in this century to house an institution which was supposed to redress perceived flaws in the formulation of strategy.

Let me remind you of how the Packard Commission formulated its advice on process:

Defense planning would start with a comprehensive statement of national security objectives and priorities, based on recommendations of the National Security Council (NSC).

Of course, I understand all the inhibitions against following that particular advice. As a former official of the National Intelligence Council, I know that "xerophobia" will cause many policymakers to resist putting down on paper any meaningful statement of strategy. But I believe it is true that in recent years the proceedings of the National Security Council have been reasonably secure. In any event, we do not need great, thick documents to implement any of the recommendations of the Commission. What we need is a discussion in the National Security Council, properly entered into and understood by the participants, which will lead to consensus on security objectives and priorities.

To continue with the recommendations of the Commission:

Based on these objectives, the President would issue,

at the outset of his Administration and thereafter as required, provisional five-year budget levels to the Department of Defense (DoD). These budget levels would reflect competing demands on the federal budget and projected gross national product and revenues and would come from recommendations of the NSC and the Office of Management and Budget.

The idea in the last paragraph is crucial: the OMB must be committed, by instruction of the President; to the budget levels before the Defense Department begins to work on strategies and programs. We were intent on eliminating the last-minute raids on the defense budget --the Christmas knifings-- which have become so familiar in recent years. Assuming that requisite guidance is provided to OSD:

The Secretary of Defense would instruct the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to prepare a military strategy for the national objectives, and options on operational concepts and key defense issues for the budget levels provided by the President.

Although I do not know whether President Reagan and Secretary Weinberger will implement those recommendations, I would have you note that Dave Packard and all of his Commissioners agreed that responsibility would then devolve upon the broad shoulders of him who preceded me to this podium, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

The Chairman would prepare broad military options with advice from the JCS and the Commanders-in-Chief of the Unified and Specified Commands (CINCs). Addressing operational concepts and key defense issues (e.g., modernization, force structure, readiness, sustainability, and strategic versus general purpose forces) the Chairman would frame explicit trade-offs among the Armed Forces and submit his recommendations to the Secretary of Defense. The Secretary of Defense would make such modifications as he thought appropriate and present these to the President.

The Commission might be faulted for failing to use the word "priorities" in that last paragraph, but I believe that "explicit trade-offs" says it well enough.

The Chairman, with the assistance of the JCS and the Director of Central Intelligence, would prepare a net assessment of the effectiveness of United States and Allied Forces as compared with those of possible adversaries. The net assessment would be used to evaluate the risks of options and would accompany the recommendations of the Secretary of Defense to the President.

The President would select a particular military program and the associated budget level. This program and budget level would be binding on all elements of the Administration. DoD would then develop a five-year defense plan and a two-year defense budget conforming to the

President's determination.

The President would submit to the Congress the two-year budget and the five-year plan on which it is based. Congress would be asked to approve the two-year budget based on this plan. It would authorize and appropriate funding for major weapons systems at the two key milestones of full-scale engineering development and high rate production.

In short, I think it significant for our present purposes that the Packard Commission, called into being to deal with real and presumed scandals relating to materiel acquisition by the Armed Services, should propose to the President remedial action beginning with his articulation of the national objectives which would underwrite military strategy, and proceed through a process, including two-year budgeting by Congress, which would lead to more stable and cost-effective expenditures for implementing that strategy. I think it particularly important that the Commission proposed fixing on the senior military officer of the land, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, responsibility for preparing military strategy, and that it called upon the Congress to adopt biennial budgeting, which would go a long way toward smoothing out the whole disorderly mechanism for allocating resources to carry out national strategy.

But neither I, nor as far as I know, any other member of the Blue Ribbon Commission, entertain any illusion that process, however

improved, will lead inevitably to a failure-free future. The trouble is, after all, that reasonable men sitting in the NSC or in the halls of Congress can, and often do, disagree on what our national interests may be, or on how to evaluate threats thereto, or how to assign national priorities. It is certainly no less difficult for our leaders to differentiate between situations in which they are leading the nation to a new realization of mission, and those in which they are disregarding vox populi to the hazard of us all.

The resulting frictions lead many to assay pat formulae for resolving these uncertainties, proffering strategic touchstones, such as predefining the necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of military force. In this respect, I really believe that the deterrence of war depends, as General Bernard Rogers often reminds us, on "incalculability". To the degree we induce uncertainty among prospective enemies as to how and when we will use our strength in response to their using military force, to that extent deterrence is enhanced, and our necessity to use military force becomes the more remote.

Others advancing touchstones would have us practice some form of realpolitik --manipulating some Marxists to control others, or forcing the world into strategic pigeon-holes using generalizations labeled "doctrine" --preferably with a prefixed name of a President --Truman Doctrine, Nixon Doctrine, Carter Doctrine, Reagan Doctrine. Personally, I doubt that such formulae or touchstones are useful, even in the age of television and 11-second thought-bites, and the imperative for explaining our strategy to the American people.

Personally I think that such aphorisms mislead more than they elucidate, and that we need to find a better way of informing the public.

I suspect that the nation is going to have to develop through trial and error a more mature understanding of our place in the world, and of our capabilities and limitations. Experience would suggest that we do not learn very well from our mistakes, and that, therefore, we will be a long time in adjusting our strategy to fit a dynamic world.

This leads to the central issue of perception. One man's national interest is another's overdrawn threat. What is for some strategists a pin-prick annoyance is for others penetration of a vital security zone. Sun Tzu reminds his readers that strategy is, after all, a matter of illusions. How else can one explain the abiding American faith in international negotiations? I suppose compromise is so deeply imbedded in our social mores, our law, and our politics that it is perhaps inevitable that we project our values upon other participants in state-to-state relations. I also suppose that part of our difficulty is our propensity to conceptualize peace and war as a dichotomy rather than a continuum. We thereby are led into error that Clauswitzian and Marxist strategists are well taught to avoid: despite numerous lessons to the contrary, Americans we have persisted in perceiving diplomacy and the exercise of military power as mutually exclusive, rather than complementary.

I have before me a newsletter to constituents from a prominent member of Congress, in which the latter reports on a trip to Central

America. Unlike some, the Congressman believes that the independence of the Central American nations is of vital concern to the United States, and that we have a very direct national interest in supporting democracy there. I agree with the Congressman, but I am disappointed that the strategy he advocates seems to include only negotiations and economic aid. The Hondurans, Costa Ricans, Salvadorans, the Nicaraguan rebels, and others in the region confront determined men who are convinced by training and experience that political power grows from the barrel of a gun. There may yet be peace through negotiations in Central America, but if so, it will only be because the Marxist-Leninists who threaten the peace there see a negotiated settlement as the only alternative to military defeat and political bankruptcy. I agree with Secretary of State Shultz that diplomacy alone will not suffice for meeting our objectives in Central America, any more than it could in the Middle East, or did in Viet Nam.

As another instance of defective strategic perception, I received a telephone call from a young action officer on Admiral Crowe's staff, who said, "the Chairman is going to be talking about strategic success, and you're talking about failure. We just want to be sure that you're going to talk about different incidents." I responded that part of the problem we both were addressing is that in any given instance, some authorities will perceive strategic triumph, and others set-back.

I had in mind that many Americans suppose that the lesson to be drawn from the Kennedy-Kruschev confrontation over Soviet missiles in Cuba

in 1962 is that Russians are rational, and can be negotiated with on any issue. Most would list that event as a success for American strategy. Altogether too few of us remember that one factor bearing on those 1962 Soviet decisions was the overwhelming conventional military power the United States then mobilized opposite the island. I can readily agree that our strength may have been more apparent than real --we would have been hard pressed in landing armor in Cuba-- but the Russians could not be sure.

It is also worth remembering that the handful of land-based missiles, removal of which was negotiated in 1962, have long since been replaced with submarine-based weapons of greater range, accuracy, and destructiveness. In fact, it is fair to say that the 1962 "settlement" underwrote the security of Cuba well enough to permit Castro to make the island a major center for subversion and criminal intrigue throughout the Third World, to send his armed forces to Africa there to serve Soviet purposes, to handle callously emigration out of Cuba to the U.S., and more recently, to sustain a large, dominant Cuban military presence in Nicaragua. In all these latter respects, the U.S. was a net loser from the 1962 "understandings."

Let me now turn to failure of strategic persistence. Admiral Crowe has well developed the argument that the nation articulates its strategy mainly with its defense budgets, and strategic shortsightedness has often led to anemic military posture. I agree that we should think of resource allocation not as a sprint, but as a marathon. I, for one, would settle for much lower levels of defense expenditures than those presently being sought if I could be assured

that the lower levels would be sustained over time.

But I suppose that most of us, when we think of strategic persistence, call to mind our experience in Southeast Asia. But we must be very careful to draw the right lessons from that conflict; many Americans have not. In my recent capacity as Commander-in-Chief, United States Southern Command, I was frequently subjected to pointed advice by senior officials of the government, and by non-governmental "experts", on how to handle the war in El Salvador and the developing conflict along the borders of Nicaragua. Usually the advice included enjoinders not to repeat what they termed our errors in Vietnam. For example, there was a pronounced tendency to believe that counterinsurgency as we had practiced it was an unrelieved failure, and in particular, to dismiss pacification, to take all of Robert Komer's fine work and pitch it out as irrelevant. The truth is that much that we did there worked, and could be emulated in Central America, provided that we used proper sensitivity to the obvious cultural differences.

By 1970, when I returned to Vietnam from the peace talks in Paris for my second command, the country was largely pacified, and we enjoyed the tactical initiative. To that extent, we knew what we were doing. We were also aware that our problems were not military but political. We failed, in the long run, because we could not provide a political underpinning for our campaigns. We did not develop a reliable government --a popular government-- and an effective armed force to take our place upon departure. We paid dearly for that, and I can attest that the lesson was thoroughly learned, and often much

in mind in recent years.

One Congressman came to me in Panama with a proposal that hearings be held about the lessons of Southeast Asia, and their applicability to Central America. It was obvious that he wanted to assemble "experts" to warn of an impending repetition of Vietnam. I think he was surprised by my assertion that Central America is different from Southeast Asia precisely because of those of us who brought to the formulation and execution of our strategy in CENTAM a thorough, first-hand appreciation of exactly what went right and wrong in the 60's and 70's. As a matter of fact, I said, the Congressman would be hard pressed to find a more competent group of old Asian hands than were there, in Central America, leading the U.S. effort. And we were all determined to create a democratic political underpinning for our undertakings there.

The strategic failure in Southeast Asia grew out of incrementalism --the notion that any adversary has a threshold of intolerable pain and will respond to "signals" conveyed by stepped-up attacks, often referred to as "pressures". These notions may have made sense in U.S. think-tanks and universities, but they did not in Hanoi. While it is true that, ultimately, it was military pressure which made diplomatic extrication possible, especially the devastating bombings of Christmas, 1972, and the mining of Haiphong, up until then our strategists dabbled with our adversaries so inconsequently that we signaled weakness abroad, and fractured ourselves domestically. We were unable to persist, and eventually, of course, other strategic considerations became irrelevant in the face of a massive

conventional invasion of the South by North Vietnamese divisions.

My last category of failure, **priorities**, has no better example than one of the pillars of American strategy over the last six Administrations: the commitment of the United States to help others maintain their freedom from domination by communists. President Nixon's formulation of our willingness to help others help themselves, set forth at Guam to President Nguyen Van Thieu of the Republic of Vietnam, usually figures in any statement of current strategy, often coupled with the assertion that while other nations could look to the U.S. for aid in defending themselves, none should expect U.S. military intervention on their behalf. That strategy has failed for three main reasons:

(1) U.S. Security Assistance funds, which would presumeably be the principal instrument for implementing the strategy, have largely been preempted by our according priority to arming both sides in rivalries such as those between Israel and Egypt, or Greece and Turkey, and to furnishing quid pro quo for bases in Spain and the Philippines. This year Congress preserved these priorities, and the Administration calculates that it will have a 60% shortfall in funds needed for security assistance elsewhere.

(2) Other nations offer more help for less money: adversaries like the U.S.S.R., NATO allies such as the U.K. and France, and friends like Israel and Brazil. We have assigned little importance, let alone priority, to competing to maintain

U.S. influence.

(3) What the U.S. has available under Security Assistance, whether materiel or training, has become increasingly too costly and too complicated for most Third World nations. Our Armed Services, understandably, have focused on our own readiness for conflict in defense of NATO, or on behalf of U.S. interests in the Middle East, and have have given low priority to equipment, training, or other requirements --for ourselves or for friends-- to deal with low intensity conflict (terrorism, subversion, guerrilla warfare). The upshot is a distinct lack of U.S. preparedness to help friends deal with the sort of threats manifest in Central America, the Philippines, or Southwest Asia.

I agree heartily with those who want to avoid committing U.S. forces in Third World areas like Central America. I hope we can avoid that. But we gravely increase our risks by failing to devote adequate resources to helping others provide for their own security.

Across the spectrum of war, we must deal with novel problems of national security, and hence, we need new strategies. The U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative may have a fielded Soviet counterpart in the form of physically hardened facilities. Mobile ICBMs seem imminent on both sides. Cruise missiles, nuclear or non-nuclear, grow in versatility and effectiveness. The European alliance seems to many Americans and Europeans to be outmoded. Our future in East Asia wants better definition. Iran could defeat Iraq --and then what? Soviet pressure on Pakistan grows; what of Afghanistan? What should be our

course vis a vis the turmoil in southern Africa? Can the thrust toward democracy and open society in the Phillipines and Latin America be sustained? How should we act against international drug traffickers, terrorists, and subversives?

I hope we can approach the formulation of strategies for dealing with such issues with improved process; that we can develop a sound perception of our challenges, our strengths and our weaknesses; that whatever strategy we decide upon, we pursue with persistence; and that we put our resources where our strategic rhetoric has long been through carefully chosen priorities. Given our recent failures in these respects, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, and the Commander-in-Chief, face a very tough agenda.