President with U.S. defense leaders discusses new defense strategy during Pentagon briefing

DOD (D. Myles Cullen)

The Whole House of Strategy

When it grew too hot for dreamless dozing, I picked up my tangle again, and went on ravelling it out, considering now the whole house of war in its structural aspect which was strategy, in its arrangements which were tactics, and in the sentiment to its inhabitants which was psychology; for my personal duty was command, and the commander, like the master architect, was responsible for all.

—T.E. Lawrence

Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph

By **COLIN S. GRAY**

The world is awash with political and strategic advice purporting to be remedies for current and anticipated ills. Rather less abundant are works that seek to render thought about strategic problems more robust. To that end, I examine strategic phenomena from five perspectives, each of which is seriously undertheorized for the explanation necessary as a basis for understanding. My chosen five are concepts, ethics, culture, geography, and technology. Despite the familiar character of these perspectives and their intrinsic significances, comprehension of their meanings for strategy in general and for their relative importance in particular historical cases is seriously weak. Lawrence sees a whole house of war, which I adapt as a whole house of strategy.

It is ironic, not paradoxical, to argue for a holistic understanding of strategy and to lay emphasis upon a general theory whose tenets unite the field, while also emphasizing the need to explore the single subject of strategy from different perspectives. The contradiction between unity and division is only apparent because it is the robust inclusivity of the general theory of strategy that enables

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particular perspectives to be explored safely. When the general theory is regarded properly as being conceptually sovereign, the danger is greatly reduced that strategic practice will be in thrall to some reductionist views (for example, strategy regarded as applied intellect, morality, culture, geography, or technology). It is only possible to allow the distinctive perspectives on the whole house of strategy their due when that edifice is standing whole and well constructed.

There is no correct number of perspectives in which strategy can be viewed. As a social scientist, I am intellectually comfortable with a subject that does not yield to research and analysis in quest of a Higgs boson–like most fundamental particle of truth. As a fairly devout Clausewitzian, I would like to claim that politics is the God particle for strategy, but such an assertion could not be entirely satisfactory. When one starts down the path of fundamental enquiry into causality, there, is unlikely to be a happy epiphany because the journey can have no attainable end. Behind and fueling politics is human nature, but a nature that probably requires contextual placement to be translatable for a meaningful perspective on strategy. For illustration, it can be difficult to come to grips analytically with moral and other authority. As context always itself must have context, so moral authority can only derive in its turn from yet higher moral authority, and so on, rather unhelpfully for useful understanding.

Unlike strategy's general theory, which should by definition be complete, if ever unfinished, perspectives on strategy can always be augmented or reduced according to intellectual taste and fashion concerning desirable inclusivity and exclusivity. Scholarly mission creep is an enduring danger. To explain, studies of World War II respectively in conceptual, moral, cultural, geographical, or technological perspective may slip the leash of conceptual and empirical discipline and "go native" by producing a moral, or cultural history of the war. The partial perspective intentionally privileged from the outset is, in effect, hard to prevent from swallowing the rest. This is a familiar malady.

In his command performance, the strategist strives to cope well enough with multilayered complexity. Each perspective always is in play and has some relevance. This can be frustrating to the scholar who unwisely seeks a measure of certain understanding that history, let alone contemporary or future contexts, cannot provide, no matter how elegant the equations or how powerful the data analyzing machines may be. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, it is not accurate to conceive of strategic studies as a scholarly discipline. Particularly unhelpful are efforts to maintain the "stovepipes" of alleged purity for historical, social scientific, or hard physical scientific methodologies. Social science without history can be likened to driving in the dark without a rear-view mirror to reveal whence you have come and what is behind you (and may well still be with you).[1] History with little or no social science worthy of the name is likely to teeter on the brink of explanation that under-reaches in the meaning to events it can supply. Indeed, so powerfully can the contextuality of history impose a respect for (yesterday's) presentism that the historian is likely to be unable to answer, if he even understands, the social scientific strategist's question, "So what?"

The Theory of Strategy: Coping with Complexity

While the general theory of strategy educates about the permanent structure and functioning of the whole of its subject, it aspires to achieve no more than that. The theory educates its students to help enable them to cope with the specific strategic challenges of their day. There is need to capture two realities: that of a united subject, but also that of a subject manifesting itself in ever-changing forms. The architectural endurance of the whole house of strategy might mislead the unwary into believing that the weight of relative influence of the perspectives either is permanent or is equal among them all. In historical practice, every perspective yields a contributing subnarrative to the gestalt that is the grand narrative of strategy. But those subnarratives, confusingly interdependent though they are, reveal a course of events and suggest an explanation wherein some factors would seem to carry more weight than others.

Whereas, on the one hand, strategy is difficult to do well enough because of the complexity of its domain, on the other hand, that complexity provides options to help work around problems. The challenge to clarity of understanding posed by the complexity of the whole house of strategy is easily illustrated. Wherever one looks in strategic history, the competition for pole position as most significant perspective is apt to be intense; if it is not, the reason probably is because scholars have not examined the case in sufficient width, depth, and context.[2]

For any strategic historical case, there will be human decisionmakers behaving with variable discretion in a context of political, bureaucratic, cultural, moral, and other contexts. Histories that favor the conceptual, the ethical, or the geographical perspective, inter alia, can hardly help but give an unbalanced interpretation of events. Yet each perspective is in some measure true. The general theory of strategy should be able to advise on what to look for, but it can never be mobilized itself to explain how the perspectives it accommodates should be rank-ordered for their relative potency. Geography (distance, terrain, weather) usually explains a lot, but the specific reasons why it is relevant to historical strategies have to be sought in human personality, circumstance, and beliefs.

The attractions of monocausality ("strategy is really all about . . .") are as obvious and substantial as they are lethal to balanced understanding. Nonetheless, the scholar would be well advised not to be so tolerant in his recognition of complexity and multicausality that meaningful explanation is impossible. One can adapt Gresham's Law—that bad money tends to drive out good—to read that a proliferation of strategic explanations with lower value tends to obscure and diminish the worth attached to explanations with higher value. Although all coins in circulation have some value, the fact that those of lower worth circulate more rapidly—Gresham's point—should not be allowed to obscure the intrinsic worth of higher denomination coins. To convert this illustration: although strategic history is a drama played by a cast comprising the subjects of every perspective, however organized conceptually by category, at most times, in most places, and in most circumstances, some perspectives, perhaps just one or two such, can plausibly be judged dominant (for example, the political spirit is willing, the purpose is morally imperative, but alas the helicopters cannot fly in fog).

The strategic theorist can be thought of as a maker of conceptual tools for the practicing strategist. In his harrowing moral memoir of his combat tour in Vietnam as a young Marine officer, Karl Marlantes offers

the thought that "Weapons are tools. Tools are an extension of ourselves. Tools make you more effective. They are ego enhancing. Ask any good carpenter how he feels about a really good tool. We enhance our feelings of self-worth if we have good tools."[3]

When strategic theorists discuss the relationship in strategic history between mind and muscle, brain and brawn, they are apt to commit the same kind of error as do politicians and soldiers, though from a different point of view. Of course, there is an objective empirical difference between thought and behavior. But in historical reality this seemingly unambiguous distinction is blurred. Behavior is thought in action. Not all concepts are converted into action and applied in strategic performance in the field, but it is a fair generalization to claim that there has to be some fusion of thought and deed. Orders and commands may be obviously exterior to the directed behavior, but there is a sense in which, once committed to action, the military instrument will have internalized the relevant part of the conceptual contribution to fighting power. The soldiers commanded will attempt to play out the roles that the conceptual script demands, while the troops' armament and elements of supporting infrastructure reflect and express recent conceptual preferences. The distinction between the theory and practice of strategy is both objective and subjective; it is real, yet it is also artificial. The mind and its conceptual constructions are not set aside, parked for the duration, when soldiers go to war or when inert materials are converted and assembled into weapons.

The essential unity in the apparent duality that is strategic thought and strategic practice is a major source of misunderstanding and confusion in strategic studies, but so is what one can identify as the yearning for ever-more fundamental truth. By analogy, the God particle malady lurks close to my argument. The laudable desire to penetrate ever deeper into the complex mystery that is strategy has the unfortunate and undeserved consequence of fueling scholars in a futile quest. Expeditionary efforts to discover the true source of the metaphorical Nile for strategy divert endeavors from grasping that which is attainable and is both good enough for its purpose and incapable of major improvement. In truth, the source of the Nile for the understanding of strategy already exists and is readily accessible in the canon of strategic classics written over the course of two and a half millennia.

As well as the hope that the specification and testing of assumptions will serve a panacea filtering duty, a reductionist urge can seduce scholars and commentators into the error of the big game hunt for the factor that could be the prime mover of strategic phenomena. Among its many virtues, the general theory of strategy serves to discourage monocausal explanation. For example, while there is support in the theory for the claim that strategy must be technological, in plentiful addition the theory asserts that strategy is political, human, ethical, and geographical, inter alia. But because strategy is so complex in its working parts, and causes and effects are inherently so problematic, there is always some empirical basis upon which an overreaching partial theory can rest. It is a prime duty of strategic education to explain the enduring structure and functioning of strategy so that the limitations of partial theory are identified. Just as there is no single master cause of war that might be expunged from history as a result of dedicated assault, though politics and human nature (or human behavior in society) would be prime candidates were causal cleansing practicable, so also there is no golden key to the understanding of strategy in theory and for practice.

Because the strategist always must attend to the balancing of political ends with available means, orchestrated in appropriate ways, there is a simple essential structure to any strategic project. On the one hand, the subject is formidably complex and encompasses a cast of thousands that can prevent success. But on the other hand, there is an elegant simplicity to the triadic structure of the strategy function that almost begs for duty in service of effective practical performance. Strategic tasks exist at every level of human effort, from grand strategy or national security, to a small-scale operation by a company of soldiers. Ends, ways, and means—and assumptions also, notwithstanding the skeptical comments offered above in their regard—are as unarguably different in meaning from each other as they are interdependent. Historical contextual detail is known to contemporaries as it may be to later scholars, in as much fine granular detail as they need or are able to discover. But in principle at least, the elegant simplicity of the ends, ways, and means trinitarian formula provides so potent an organizing concept that the complexity, confusion, and even the chaos of messy interdependent behaviors and events are manageable. The competent strategist copes with complexity, confusion, and impending chaos; he does not seek the fool's goal of a winning formula that rests upon a severely reductionist prioritization of what matters more, and less.

Five Perspectives on Strategy

Each perspective exploited here—concepts, ethics, culture, geography, and technology—encourages predatory theorizing by its scholar-advocates. Each has misled some scholarly devotees into asserting that it either does, could, or should provide the master narrative. By this I mean that strategic history is purported to be really the story of concepts and theory, or morality and its ethics, or culture, or geography and its geopolitics and geostrategy, or of technology (pick one, or possibly two). It is my conviction that if there is a master narrative to strategic history, it is to be found in the ceaseless quest for power by human beings both individually and socially regarded. Power is sought as a value in and of itself, as well as for its instrumental worth in aid of interests that are ever open to subjective evaluation as being defensive or offensive, though they usually are both. The relations of relative power, known as politics generically, are eternal and universal because they derive from the biology of our speciation and the sociology of our survival. Humans cooperate, combine, and compete for security that has survival value as well as more limited benefit. The master narrative is strategy itself and the politics that fuel it in all its complexity and with all its variability in character over time and in different places.

Concepts. Strategy cannot be understood and explained satisfactorily strictly with reference to ideas. Strategic theory and its expressive concepts are necessary but not sufficient ingredients in the mix that is strategy. Mind is superior to human muscle and to the inert material of military tools, but exceptions great and small are fueled mightily by material referents to perceptions and considerations, as well as by circumstances and memories. In addition, no matter its absolute or relative potency, the mind and its concepts may need muscular and other material enablers if they are to affect behavior. How a weapon is employed

is more significant than the weapon's technical characteristics, but this claim has a significant potential to mislead. Superior concepts carry no guarantee of strategic success in the deeply ironic realm of strategy (unless, that is, one succumbs, innocently of course, to unintended tautology). Excellence in concepts is always decided in practice by a host of factors, most importantly including their situational relevance. Also, strategic history reveals that the strategic intellect has often fallen perilously far behind emerging material technical realities. The case of cyberpower today and the pressing need for its strategic comprehension is but the latest example of conceptual lag.

Ethics. The ethical perspective on strategy is unarguably essential; what is more, it is unavoidable for human beings. The reason this is so is because we humans appear to be hard-wired to think in moral terms. It is a survival necessity for our species to reason morally. We need to distinguish right from wrong, and permitted from forbidden behavior. So far so good, since it would seem that moral reasoning, applied in ethical codes, is inherent in our humanity. Unfortunately, two major factors complicate the picture. First, one needs to recognize that just because all people, except for deviant and dysfunctional individuals, think morally, it does not follow that they think morally in the same way. In other words, while it matters profoundly that my neighbors should have a clear sense of right and wrong, what matters no less strongly is the content of their moral beliefs. What do they believe to be rightful action? Culture rules over, transcends, and becomes ethics. The problem for the strategist is not an enemy who eccentrically is amoral, but rather one who is licensed in his behavior by an ethical code that expresses moral beliefs I reject. Second, it is a universal and apparently eternal truth that strategic ethics are always more or less situationally determined, notwithstanding the sincerity of the moral beliefs they typically reflect. Morality in action as strategic ethics frequently accepts the perceived necessity of circumstances as an excuse for what otherwise must be categorized as wrongful behavior. Moral beliefs always need translation into an ethical code for applicability in the unforgiving world of perceived and often misperceived (expedient) necessity.

Culture. Is there an American, Russian, Chinese, inter alia, way of war, or way in strategy? Perhaps a shift from the singular to the plural is more appropriate, as also is serious entertainment of the idea that ways in war and strategy may change over time. If one is willing to grant the proposition that because a polity's military instrument is certain to be diverse in its complex character, it has to follow that it is likely to harbor a range of preferred "ways." The more closely one examines the idea of culture, and the more nuanced one's appreciation of its ever-arguable complex domain, the more difficult it can be to find forensic merit in it as an aid to strategic understanding, let alone as a valuable predictive tool. However, not only does culture inspire and sometimes demand an influence upon behavior, but inconveniently for analytical discipline there is culture in, as well as on, behavior. Culturally fueled action itself can beget culture in many forms. Is there not a sense in which all strategic behavior simply has to be culturally expressive? After all, such behavior is performed by necessarily and unavoidably encultured people who are shaped in their thoughts and deeds by the interests of the organizations they represent, interests expressed in some cultural forms. The challenge is neither to find the lacunae in culturalist arguments, nor to seek to refute anticulturalist assault. By and large, those necessary tasks have been completed. The mission now is to save what is sensible in the arguments for cultural awareness about strategy from the claims in its praise that were excessive. Sensibly understood, culture is not the singular golden key to strategic understanding, but it can nonetheless provide vital clues and cues that have practical value. Culture is inescapable from Man's estate, and enculturation is always somewhat local in content to time, place, and as a consequence identity, much of which is socially inherited.

U.S. Army (Ken Scar)

Deputy commanding general for maneuver discusses strategy for Operation *Shamshir* in the Mata Khan District with U.S. Soldiers, Afghan National Army soldiers, and members of local Afghan Uniformed Police

Geography. As culture is perilously imperial for strategic understanding in its elusive ethereality, so geography menaces conceptual grip for reason of its physical ubiquity. While much if not all that matters for strategy has some often arguably cultural content, there is no room for dispute over the presence of the geographical wherever strategy is thought or done. The unique geophysical properties of each of the five geographical domains of strategy—land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace—dominate tactical feasibility and hence operational and strategic opportunity for political gain and loss. The physical stage for the long-running drama of strategic history is indifferent to human strategic endeavors. Geography is neutral in human strategic history, but it is liable to be influential as security communities seek to exploit or offset geographically defined opportunities and limitations. Strategy must always be done within a geography, while often essentially it is about geography. And geography is not only a physical matter of the natural realm. In addition, the geography coveted most is deemed sacred and is uniquely valued by a political community (or two such). The challenge is less to recognize the relevance of geography to strategy than to be able to restrict its allotted scope for influence to some prudent distance short of the exciting assertion that geography is destiny. This claim has merit, but considered in isolation it falls a long way short of providing the whole grand narrative of strategic history.

Geography, geopolitics, and geostrategy have been imprudently neglected by students of strategy for more than half a century.

Technology. Strategy is not about technology, though much of the popular media effort to exploit the largely male fascination with machines focuses on the military means in the strategy triad. As a consequence, one might be excused for the belief that technology's artifacts lie at the core of strategy. Whereas the moral impulses behind ethics and the values expressed in culture themselves yield motives that in political form serve as the ends of strategy, concepts and technology are strictly enablers of strategic achievement; as tools disconnected from their strategic and political purposes, they have no merit. Neither strategic ideas nor weapon systems are discovered or manufactured in order to be attractive to the intellect or to the emotions as ends in themselves. Particular intellectual and technical forms are preferred for the anticipated excellence of their fit as enablers for the realization of strategic and military intentions. The argument that we fight with, and not for, technology engineered as weapons is so obvious as to be banal. And yet the whole political and societal effort to invent, pay for, produce, improve, and use with doctrinal best practice weapons and their supporting systems is so consuming of attention that the political ends and strategic ways often disappear from view. Money and physicality attract public attention. Weapons in action, photogenically often in motion at least, can be understood tactically, as can their monetary cost; hence they attract notice and controversy. Means are easier to grasp and debate than are strategic ways and political purposes. One might recall with advantage these immortal cognate words by Michael Howard: "the complex problem of running an army at all is liable to occupy his [the commander's] mind so completely that it is very easy to forget what it is being run *for*."[4] Expertise in tactical matters necessarily confers no like grasp of genuinely strategic concerns, but such expertise is essential if the strategist is to comprehend what his military instrument might be able to accomplish. Although strategy is ever superordinate in providing meaning for behavior, it has to be done by tactics. When understanding of strategy is not grasped in the round as presented in the general theory, its particular military instruments, ranging from special operations forces, through long-range bomber fleets, to individually super-destructive weapons, commonly are confused with—they are mistaken for—strategy. This prime conceptual error of miscategorization is found most frequently in the mistaken belief that there are some inherently strategic weapons, while other weapons allegedly are substrategic or nonstrategic.

Strategy is a project that is always practiced in particular times and places. Whatever historical examples of strategy one elects to consider, they had temporal provenance and consequences as legacy value from past experience. The study and practice of strategy have to deal with continuity and change as well as causes and consequences. The future is not foreseeable, but a historical perspective ensures that the great chain of contestable historical causation should at least be noticed and respected, even though it could not have been predicted in real time, which is to say in advance. The ever-imperfect wisdom of hindsight serves as a source of caveats potent for contemporary strategic practitioners, who may be seduced by the apparent novelty of current challenges into forgetting that the chain of cause and effects (for example, first, second, and third order) is likely to be neither reliably predictable nor even seriously capable of anticipation. The practicing strategist is a risk taker of varying courage, wisdom, and luck who throws metaphorical dice. Clausewitz went to some pains to make this claim. Strategic education has been ill-served by paucity of cooperation between the somewhat rival "stovepipe" professionalisms of military history and strategic studies. Tribal members of the latter persuasion incline professionally to take a negative view of "mere" historical narrative, while members of the former readily wax eloquent on the subject of strategists with an empirical historical knowledge so thin that their theorization inherently must be suspect. The social scientist as strategist frequently finds professional historian colleagues to be methodologically challenged, specifically in their apparent neglect of the "so what?" question. Some historians are suspicious of social scientists who have been known to engage in professional poaching on their tribal terrain. Admittedly, the integrity of the past can be violated by later scholars who have cases to make that far transcend unimpeachable evidence. But since the facts of the past tend to be silent unless they are explained, which means theorized, it is not obvious that the historian and social scientist must differ for reason of their preferred methodologies. I believe that social scientific strategists should be deeply respectful of the past, which means to the stories told by historians that collectively are termed history. In addition, indeed in parallel, I believe that historian-strategists need all possible assistance in seeking understanding for plausible explanations they can extract from the writings of their strategist colleagues who are social scientists. Adoption of the elementary, but elemental, triptych of ends, ways, and means as a guide for strategic historical enquiry would be a useful step toward some enlightening fusion of scholarly realms.

Although strategy can be examined in many perspectives, nonetheless it is a unity. When examined closely, each perspective is revealed both to be identifiably distinctive, yet porous to influence from other perspectives. It has to follow that the subject of strategy cannot sensibly be regarded as offering alternative flavors in substantive interpretation. It is not sound to conceive of strategy as being essentially, or even primarily, a conceptual, moral, cultural, geographical, or technological project (inter alia); it is all of these combined, even fused, albeit in combinations with historically widely varying relative weights. Strategy is a single enterprise. Theory and practice have to be considered as one whole project, not merely as joint ventures that episodically are linked in a relationship of some interdependence; the nexus is far more organic than that. The unity of all strategic phenomena is expressed effectively in strategy's general theory. That theory provides the big tent of understanding that shelters and indeed binds together the whole subject. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] I am grateful to Richard Danzig for the inspired wording of the title to his monograph, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions About Prediction and National Security* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, October 2011).

[2] Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (London: Counterpoint, 1983), 215–217.

[3] Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War* (London: Corvus, 2011), 71.

[4] Howard, 214, emphasis in the original.