

The Accidental Strategist

By JOHN M. COLLINS

*I wouldn't be the person I am today, I wouldn't be where I am now,
and I may not even have been here if it wasn't for the accident.*

—Rick Allen, drummer for Def Leppard

Joint Force Quarterly has devoted a great deal of ink to strategy and strategists in recent issues. This has occurred against a background of evolving allied strategies in South Asia as well as academic criticism of the quality of strategic thought in the U.S. Armed Forces. Strategists might be born, but it is indisputable that they can be trained. Pure serendipity introduced me to the field four decades ago, and strategy has retained my attention ever since. My introductory experiences in the field led to unforeseeable opportunities and ultimately to four imperishable lessons precipitating career-shaping advice for aspiring strategists today.

Introduction to Strategy

Immediately before I left for Vietnam in June 1967, I told the National War College (NWC) deputy commandant, “You need me,” and he countered, “We need you like we need another thumb.” Fortunately for me, someone on the faculty must have died because subsequent orders made me a faculty member when the next class convened in August 1968.

It had been many years since a military faculty member had delivered a formal lecture at the War College when Army Lieutenant General John E. Kelly, the commandant, for reasons that remain obscure, invited me to compare Arab military capabilities with those of Israel soon after my arrival in 1968—perhaps because I had attended a summer seminar at American University Beirut 16 years before as an Army captain.

I offer a few snippets from that presentation so you can sample its flavor.

Thirteen centuries ago a handful of wild-eyed Bedouin boiled out of central Arabia on their way to immortality. Within 9 years of the Prophet's death, this rag-tag mob destroyed

the 1,200-year-old Persian Empire and drove Byzantium to its knees, a feat roughly equivalent to the simultaneous defeat of the United States and Soviet Union by the Students for a Democratic Society. They accomplished that miracle without experienced generals or logistical support, but spilled over into the Punjab, swept all of North Africa, and battered the gates of Western Europe until Charles Martel stemmed the tide at Tours in 732 AD.

Fast forward to 1948, when tiny Israel, armed mainly with a John L. Sullivan complex, stymied all Arab states, who had lost their martial spirit and sense of cohesion. Arrogant Israelis, like the Boston Strongboy,

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still offer to whip any sonofabitch in the house, and from the looks of Arab opposition, they can do it. How did they get that way? Let's first see where they spawned their key leaders, starting with Orde Wingate, a latter-day Gideon with a talent for unconventional warfare to whom the Lord said, “Go in this, thy might, and thou shalt save Israel.” His disciples included Moshe Dayan, then-Chief of Israel Defense Forces, who admitted that Wingate “taught me and many another Israeli Soldier everything we know.”

And so it went. Smitten by my presentation, General Kelly stated, “You now are Director of Military Strategy Studies.” My response was, “Sir, I can't even spell strategy,” to which he replied, “Neither can anyone else. Go make a name for yourself.” That challenge changed the rest of my life.¹

Initial Strategic Experiences

My first NWC military strategy syllabus taught me more than it taught students because, unlike any other course director, I wrote a brief introduction to each of the 19 topics, then posed a series of questions to guide intellectual investigations. The table of contents opened with the fundamentals of military strategy and nature of modern war across the board, followed by threats, military strategies during the incumbent Nixon administration, implementing force postures, and a quick look at the impact of science and technology. A comprehensive assessment capped the course. The second edition of that compilation totaled 165 pages, plus a 19-page bibliography.

I began to expand my syllabus into a primer entitled *Strategy for Beginners* while still an NWC faculty member. That product received nine rejection slips before the U.S. Naval Institute Press finally published it under the bogus title *Grand Strategy: Principles and Practices*. The dust cover crowed, “This is the only book on grand strategy. Liddell Hart's classic *Strategy* contains a seven-page chapter on the subject. Most texts ignore it entirely.” The *Economist* in London wryly remarked that if nobody had previously written a book about grand strategy, neither had I. That conclusion, of course, was correct because *Grand Strategy* barely nodded at political, economic, social, and psychological ramifications, but rave reviews nevertheless poured in from home and abroad.

Subsequent Sidetracks

At age 51, I shed the uniform of an Army colonel on Friday, May 31, 1972, and the following Monday reported for duty with

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the Congressional Research Service (CRS) as its Senior Specialist in National Defense. The CRS Selection Board, in response to my question about duty hours, said, "The job's too big for you or anybody else, so just do the best you can." That admonition encouraged me to float "help wanted" ads in the Pentagon 7 weeks before I reported for duty at CRS. Recipients were the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and all four Service chiefs. I explained my forthcoming responsibilities, then made my pitch as follows:

Manifestly, it is in your interest as well as mine that I be well informed of [your] views regarding what you believe to be critical problems, issues, and trends that bear on U.S. national defense. To ensure that your opinions are represented, it therefore would prove very useful if [your] staff could bring me up to date sometime during the period 15 May–2 June. Moreover, I would be most appreciative if a permanent point of contact on your staff could be designated.

Secretary Melvin Laird, who had served nine terms in the House of Representatives, was the only dissenter, whereas all five military addressees complied. So did their successors as long as I labored at CRS. They furnished otherwise inaccessible information and reviewed my drafts for factual accuracy.

Congressman Melvin Price, soon to chair the House Armed Services Committee, became my first heavy-hitting sponsor in February 1973 when he asked CRS to "survey primary developments related to U.S. national defense during the period 1965–1972." Every Air War College student received a reprint of *Defense Trends in the United States* the following September. The school's dean told the commandant that "if students could walk away from here knowing what's in this document, they would have the substance of two-thirds of the curriculum under their belts."

Congressman Lee Hamilton, who then chaired the Near East and South Asia Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, was my second sponsor. My third committee print for him, coauthored with Clyde Mark in August 1975, was an international blockbuster released hard on the heels of public speculation by President Gerald Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger that U.S. Armed Forces might seize foreign oil fields if embargoes

by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries threatened to "strangle" the industrialized world. Clyde and I concluded that "prospects [of U.S. success] would be poor, and plights of far-reaching political, economic, social, psychological, and perhaps military consequences the penalty for failure." Colonel Charlie Bunnell, the Marine member of the Chairman's Staff Group, told the Great Man himself (General George Brown) that Collins and Mark, "using entirely unclassified sources, came up with a better study, based on more hard facts, than you were able to get from your Joint Staff."

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Senator John Culver, a Pentagon critic, soon thereafter asked me to assess the U.S.-Soviet military balance. My response took off like a scalded cat in January 1976. Many foreign as well as domestic newspapers, magazines, professional journals, and the *Congressional Record* printed excerpts, which most often featured

is the way my comparison put it). Lieutenant General Danny Graham, USA, who was then director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, regretted that Congress, rather than his outfit, produced the appraisal. Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan quoted "Culver Report" statistics during a television address on March 31, 1976.

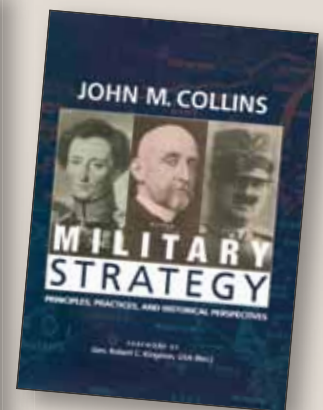
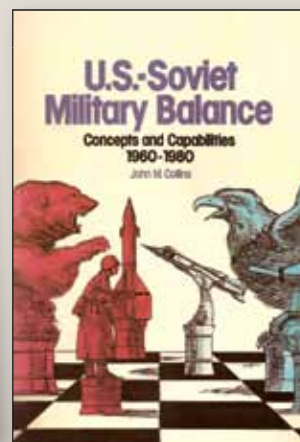
My main claim to fame for the next 15 years was as a net assessment guru who specialized in the U.S.-Soviet military balance. I should have been pleased, but opportunities to make my mark as a strategic thinker were on extended hold. I didn't realize until much later that every congressional report I prepared was a strategic building block.

Invaluable Lessons Learned

During my tenure at the National War College, I learned four valuable lessons that appear imperishable. The following paragraphs summarize their essence so you can quickly get their gist.

Lesson 1: The Value of Fundamentals.

Grand strategy is a game that anybody can play, but only gifted participants win prizes. Fixation on fundamentals is a precondition because national security interests, threats, and objectives form the framework within which policies, strategies, operational art, and tactics fit like pieces in a



the following conclusions: "As it stands, the quantitative balance continues to shift toward the Soviet Union. U.S. qualitative superiority never compensated completely and, in certain respects, is slowly slipping away." Mixed reviews followed, but plaudits far outweighed disparagements. Senator Culver endorsed sufficiency as the correct criterion ("what each side has is less cogent than what U.S. forces can do on demand despite Soviet opposition")

jigsaw puzzle. The main aim of each game is to match realistic ends with ways and means, minimizing risks in the process.

Our politico-military leaders implicitly understand strategic fundamentals, but frequent failure to consciously consider them in a disciplined fashion remains the root cause of most problems atop the U.S. national security pyramid. After one National Security Council session during the Vietnam War, so the story goes, Cabinet officers scurried for their

limousines. Something nagged at Secretary of State Kissinger. He muttered, half to himself, "Not one of us mentioned the national interest." Many seasoned observers currently question our end game in Afghanistan and wonder whether costs in terms of casualties and national treasure will be conscionable. Strategists who want to refresh their memories about ends, ways, means, and risks might find chapter 1 in my 2001 *Military Strategy* opus useful.²

Lesson 2: The Value of Strategic Precedents. A cartoon in my Funny File pictures a son telling his father that "there's nothing new under the sun." "That's right," replies Dad, "but there's a lot of useful facts and figures we've forgotten." My elderly War College elective course on the "Evolution of Strategic Thought" noted that modern policymakers and planners could learn a lot from the ancients about ends versus means, risks versus gains, the limits of force as a foreign policy tool, ad infinitum. Large parts of that presentation concentrated on two strategic trailblazers: Sun Tzu, a theoretician, and Alexander the Great, a creative practitioner.

Sun Tzu's timeless treatise *The Art of War*, penned about 500 BCE, balanced direct and indirect approaches beautifully, many centuries before B.H. Liddell Hart became famous. Passages underlined in my copy include, "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill"; "Know the enemy and know yourself"; "All warfare is based on deception"; "The worst policy is to attack cities"; and "It is supremely important to attack the enemy's strategy." Violence in his view was the court of last resort, not because he was squeamish, but because he believed it is stupid to destroy enemy assets that could serve friendly purposes. Compare that conclusion with strategic bombing concepts that lay widespread waste and see which premise is preferable. U.S. planners who ignored Sun Tzu's advice in other respects invited serious problems in Vietnam, where we oriented on opposing armed forces instead of opposing strategies. We overestimated ourselves and underestimated our enemies. Technological strengths and superior numbers consequently conferred no advantage on the United States or South Vietnam.

Alexander, who played politico-military interactions like a piano, shaped enlightened policies that helped him amass an empire greater than any predecessor. He heeded his father's advice that armies are not the only

weapon in the strategic arsenal, and are often the least important. He rejected Aristotle's assumption that Greeks were the Master Race, which was pretty presumptuous for a teenage prince, given his tutor's towering reputation. Alexander placated conquered people in Asia Minor, the Levant, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, and then persuaded Persian leaders to switch sides after their defeat. To cap that coup, he wed one of Darius's daughters and, in a mass ceremony, coupled many of his officers and men with Persian maidens, a splendid example of political intercourse. Satraps thereafter lessened Alexander's needs to detach forces for rear area and supply line security while he wended his way to India.

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Try my take on "How Military Strategists Should Study History" to embellish your historical knowledge base most rapidly. It is in the August 1983 issue of *Military Review*.³

Lesson 3: The Value of Strategic Flexibility. Rear Admiral J.C. Wylie's little classic, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*, captured my attention shortly after publication in 1967. I cannot count the number of times I've quoted his wise words, "Planning for certitude is the greatest of all military mistakes." It also is one of the worst mistakes national security strategists can make. I made that point when Air Force General Russell Dougherty, in his capacity as commander in chief, Strategic Air Command, invited me to address every flag officer under his command during a 3-day symposium at Offutt Air Force Base in September 1976. Attendees included Air Force Chief of Staff David Jones, 9 lieutenant generals, 1 vice admiral, 11 major generals, 21 brigadier generals, and a slew of academic celebrities.

My topic, "The Influence of Extremes on U.S. Strategy," documented indictments across the conflict spectrum to show how consistently U.S. strategists specialized in extremes. My presentation concluded with these words: "I'd like to announce that U.S. leaders have learned hard lessons, but they haven't. Old habit patterns persist." They still

do today, when counterinsurgency and counterterrorism outrank every other facet of the Nation's strategies. Like Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and the enemy is us." Anyone who wants to pursue strategic inflexibility further can do so by scanning my critique entitled "Déjà Vu All Over Again" in the July 2005 issue of U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*.⁴

Lesson 4: The Value of Intellectual Outreach. The Secretaries of State and Defense, Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, chiefs of all U.S. military Services, combatant commands, and their main subsidiaries all lack institutional ways to generate and sustain chain reactions of creative thought that they could use to solve strategic, operational, tactical, logistical, budgetary, and countless other pressing problems. Autocratic restrictions, built-in biases, compartmentalization, enforced compromise, and security classifications aggravate routine reliance on resident thinkers and selected think tanks.

I presented intellectual clearinghouse proposals to Dr. Arthur G.B. Metcalf in June 1978, when he edited *Strategic Review* and chaired the U.S. Strategic Institute with advice and assistance from seven retired flag officers: Air Force General Bruce Holloway and Admiral John McCain, Jr.; Air Force Lieutenant General Ira Eaker; Vice Admirals Harold Baker and Ruthven Libby; Marine Lieutenant General Victor "Brute" Krulak; and Army Major General Thomas Lane. They declined.

Lieutenant General James Lee, who was director of the Army Staff in July 1981, viewed clearinghouse concepts favorably and recommended that the Army War College activate such a center as part of its strategic studies. The commandant not only agreed, but also let me draft my own job description. Those arrangements were derailed when a death in the family forced me to reluctantly decline.

A decade later (July 1992), I told Chairman Colin Powell that each issue of National Defense University's (NDU's) forthcoming publication entitled *Joint Force Quarterly* "should feature a clearinghouse for innovative ideas that the Secretary of Defense, [Chairman], and their staffs could use as intellectual tools to help solve critical problems." His response was, "I have sent your recommendations to Vice Admiral Jack Baldwin, the President of NDU, for his consideration during [the journal's] initial development. I am sure he will find your thoughts very stimulating."

Neither the lame duck Baldwin, who soon retired, nor his replacement ever contacted me concerning that topic.

Correspondence from me to General Wayne Downing in August 1993 related:

A picture on the wall of my office shows David standing over Goliath. The caption reads, "Who Thinks Wins." U.S. Special Operations Command [USSOCOM] needs all the help it can get to thrive during these trying times. We discussed the establishment of a clearinghouse for new ideas when you were a brand new brigadier general. Now that you are [commander of USSOCOM], I offer to show your staff how to put concepts into practice. You have a lot to gain and nothing to lose.

General Downing agreed, but his clearinghouse never amounted to much, mainly because the absence of a global communication (email) network severely restricted outreach. The entire project dropped dead the day he retired.

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I finally hit the jackpot shortly after September 11, 2001, when I conceived, recruited, and began to steer the Warlord Loop, a national security "debating society." That real-time email forum taps the broadest possible spectrum of opinion. The resultant intellectual clearinghouse features freewheeling exchanges that ventilate crucial issues from every quadrant of the compass 7 days a week. The roster currently counts about 450 national security specialists who include potentates and senior staff officers in the Defense Department, State Department, Senate and House Armed Services Committees, other civilians, and Active as well as retired Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard representatives who range in rank from sergeants to four stars. Males, females, liberals, conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, and nonpartisans touch every point on the public opinion spectrum from far left to far right. One backchannel message not

long ago likened benefits to a graduate education in national security at no cost except time expended.

Career-shaping Advice for Aspiring Strategists

I advise *JFQ* readers to differentiate between strategic specialists and generalists, and then decide which camp you want to occupy. Most strategists today are specialists, who figuratively dig professional post holes. Generalists are a mile wide and a quarter-inch deep, but possess abilities to point all specialists in the same direction at the same time through quality synthesis. That's the small, select group I decided to join. A CRS colleague once asked with regard to my U.S.-Soviet military balance reports, "Don't you get bored out of your gourd writing about the same subject all the time?" My answer was, "No, because the scope is stupendous." Many skilled specialists addressed various aspects in much greater detail, but nobody else produced unclassified assessments that put all relevant topics into a composite package covering comparative security interests, objectives, strategies, and tactics; military roles, functions, and missions; organizational structures from top to bottom; budgets, manpower, technologies, and industries; alliance systems; nuclear, biological, chemical, unorthodox, and traditional force capabilities on land, at sea, in the air, and in space; logistical pluses and minuses; regional deployments; related issues, options, limitations, and apparent trends. What's my bottom line? Be a strategic generalist if you want to be uniquely useful.

End of sermon. I hope that all of your strategic accidents turn out as well as mine did, or better. No walk of life can be more rewarding intellectually than that of a strategist, whether you plan for it or not. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ "Strategic and Tactical Paper Pushing," *Army* (February 2009), 46–49, describes intelligence, contingency planning, and operational planning experiences that prepared me to make that switch.

² John M. Collins, *Military Strategy: Principles, Practices, and Historical Perspectives* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2001).

³ John M. Collins, "How Military Strategists Should Study History," *Military Review* 63, no. 8 (August 1983), 31–44.

⁴ John M. Collins, "Deja Vu All Over Again?" U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (July 2005).

LETTERS

To the Editor—Admiral Mike Mullen hits the nail on the head with his recent article on strategic communication (*JFQ* 55, 4th Quarter 2009): actions *do* speak much louder than words. No amount of good news stories can outweigh the billions of dollars we spend to support governments that are corrupt in the eyes of their people and do not share our own ideals.

It would be better to amplify the horrendous actions of our enemies against the people they claim to support. The Anbar Awakening is a perfect example of this at the operational level. A second critical vulnerability of our enemies is their own ideals—we must expose them as flawed both directly and indirectly. Mao Tse-tung was the master of this and did so effectively during the Chinese Revolution. Do not attack the individual—attack the idea and expose its flaws.

I disagree with the thought that we cannot launch ideas downrange like a rocket. Just look at the news: our enemies do so very effectively. We have been ineffective because we launch the wrong messages. We should launch attacks against our enemies' ideas, not sell our own. The goal is to make people hate our enemies more than they dislike us. Furthermore, we should worry less about reassuring our everlasting support; it will create dependency. Unfortunately, despite our best intentions, our history shows a poor record of living up to our promises and lofty ideals.

—Colonel Michael Brassaw, USMC

To the Editor—As author of the Navy's first doctrinal publication on religious ministry (Naval Warfare Publication 1–05, *Religious Ministry in the U.S. Navy*), I read with interest John W. Brinsfield and Eric Wester's article, "Ethical Challenges for Commands and Their Chaplains" (*JFQ* 54, 3^d Quarter 2009). Seven years ago, the late naval chaplain, Captain Bradford E. Ableson, argued that joint doctrine needed to include professional training requirements so that chaplains