

INTRODUCTION

In July 1947, the journal *Foreign Affairs* published “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” perhaps the seminal contribution to the Cold War strategy of the United States. Writing as “X,” State Department official George Kennan intended the article—which reprised points he had made in several official memoranda, including the so-called “Long Telegram” the previous year—to be an explanation and guide to understanding Soviet strategy and behavior. He aimed to describe the “political personality of Soviet power,” an effort he called a “task of psychological analysis” to discern a “pattern of thought” and the “nature of the mental world of the Soviet leaders.” If Soviet “conduct is to be understood”—and, as a matter of American strategy, “effectively countered”—it required not only a grasp of the principles of Soviet ideology but the effects of “the powerful hands of Russian history and tradition.”¹ Kennan thus argued that Josef Stalin and other Soviet leaders saw international politics and the struggle for power through a unique set of lenses, lenses that might filter and distort even nature’s purest colors and shapes. It mattered less what wavelengths objects reflected than what wavelengths appeared to Russian eyes.

This book is the first in an intended series that is an attempt to employ Kennan’s approach to understand the sources of American conduct and in particular to uncover the origins of a political personality of power conceived in the Anglo-American colonial experience, but recognizable even in the United States of the twenty-first century. This story will end at 1776 rather than begin there, as Americans mostly have been taught to do. While American independence most definitely marked a geopolitical discontinuity and a revolutionary rupture in the British Empire, the argument here is that it was George III who sought

a new direction in strategy. To American minds, the English after 1763 increasingly seemed determined to turn away from the past path of social, economic, and political progress and imperial growth. As if spooked by their spectacular and surprising successes in the Seven Years' War, the king and his counselors wanted to at least halt in place if nothing more; their colonists wanted nothing more than to pick up the pace of imperial expansion while earning for themselves a stronger hand in guiding the effort. They believed that, inevitably, the direction of the "British empire for liberty" would be set in North America. Americans are still hurrying, though we occasionally collapse in exhaustion, along a similar path.

This search for strategic motivations and direction in deep history is, in the parlance of modern political science, the study of "strategic culture," which became a fully theoretical field of inquiry in the later years of the Cold War. Indeed, there is a large and occasionally impenetrable body of scholarly literature on the subject, and it's hardly a concept without flaws, including logical flaws. The idea is itself a conjunction of two notoriously inexact terms: what constitutes *strategy* and what *culture* are questions that have themselves provoked centuries of debate. This book will confine itself to a view of strategy derived from Clausewitz: herein, as in *On War*, *strategy* means "the use of engagements for the object of the war."² That is, strategy stands at the intersection of military affairs and politics. The traditional complaint about this definition is its emphasis on military force as the tool of the strategist; even the US Department of Defense favors a broader understanding. The official dictionary of military doctrine defines *strategy* as "a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives."³ The phrase *the instruments of national power* is supposed to encompass diplomatic, informational, and economic means, as well as military power. And it is an indication of the current military understanding of American strategic culture that strategic ideas must be "prudent." Historically, strategic culture can lead to error and defeat as often as insight and victory, and it can be both successful and imprudent. Yet Clausewitz's insight that military power is the essential tool of strategy and statecraft not only still stands, but imparts a clarity and discipline in usage that is critical for the purposes of this study. This work will expand slightly on the great Prussian colonel's definitions—the "uses" of force, for example, will include preparation for potential engagements

and thus touch on a range of issues from military finance to doctrine to technology—but preserve the original meaning. The term *strategic* will describe essentially military matters.

The argument will equally insist that strategy-making emanates from a larger culture, shared across the political nation, meaning not just kings and courtiers, ministers and parliamentarians, but also society more broadly—which may wield a decisive weight. The definition of *culture* is, then, necessarily gelatinous. Culture comprises, says Merriam-Webster, “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; *also*: the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place and time; the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization; the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic.”⁴ The root of the word is the Latin *cultura*, itself derived from the participle of the verb *to cultivate*, as in the development of agriculture, and thus it contains the idea of a process and progress through time, of slow change but also of possible improvement.

But if the idea of strategic culture is perhaps inherently imprecise, it is nonetheless a powerful one, for it attempts to account for domestic political, social, and intellectual trends that may shape international behavior; it is less deterministic than the varieties of “realism” favored by its theoretical and academic opponents. The key idea behind the notion of strategic culture is that a nation—or, more broadly, any “actor” on the international stage—defines its security goals and strategy in a way that reflects its political culture, that political culture is, if not perfectly constant, then at least relatively so and has a measurable effect on the ways in which decisions are made and wars waged. Alastair Iain Johnston’s summary definition of strategic culture is plain: “Those who use it tend to mean that there are consistent and persistent historical patterns in the way particular states think about the use of force for political ends.”⁵ Or, conversely, two different “actors” facing roughly similar challenges of international politics or security might well act in entirely different ways, reflecting different strategic cultures.

The concept of strategic culture rose in interest during the 1970s and 1980s, when it began to seem that the Soviet Union and the Red Army regarded the use of nuclear weapons very differently than US and Western European statesmen and soldiers. In particular, the Soviets sounded, in their military doctrines, as though they were far more willing

to employ nuclear weapons, especially “tactical” nuclear weapons, on the battlefield and during an invasion of Germany or a war against NATO. A short 1977 RAND monograph by Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, might be said to be the spark that ignited a wider interest in the idea of strategic culture.⁶

Snyder made relatively narrow claims about Soviet strategy-making; his purpose was primarily to contrast Soviet writings with what Americans understood to be the universal logic of nuclear weaponry, war, and escalation.⁷ Yet far from liberating strategists from the excessively deterministic interpretations of realist theory, those taken with Snyder’s work tended simply to substitute another, equally rigid system: strategic culture was as ironclad as structural realism. Rather than simply shaping Soviet thought about nuclear war, Soviet strategic culture, as it came to be interpreted, was viewed as a kind of straitjacket of Russian history that not only guided but tightly bound Soviet doctrine. In the work of Colin Gray, for example, the Cold War appeared as an inevitable confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, with each side driven by a deeply ingrained strategic culture.⁸ Gray and like-minded scholars struck a chord during the turbulent times of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it appeared to many that the United States was ill-prepared for the challenges of Soviet expansionism.

In recent years, the theory of strategic culture has become more nuanced—and perhaps sacrificed some clarity and power—by subsuming more factors in its analysis. Strategic culture is now considered as less rigidly determining national behavior but rather more generally informing, shaping, or coloring strategic choices. Also, strategic culture can be measured not simply by observable behavior but by attitudes and domestic political debate, ideas expressed in military doctrine, the writings of elite and popular commentators—almost any cultural “representation” or “text.” Others have noted the interaction of organizational issues and culture, most particularly the peculiarities of professional armies, in shaping strategy-making. But in some cases, what counts as an element in strategic culture becomes so vague as to lose meaning; while it makes sense to allow that culture can change, it ought to represent more than passing fashion. The danger is that, in skilled hands, the concept of strategic culture can be so malleable as to lose any form at all.

Perhaps the most durable definition of strategic culture is that of Forrest E. Morgan: “Strategic culture is an integrated system of shared symbols, values, and customs that, working through perceptions, prefer-

ences and governmental processes, impose a degree of order on the ways that policy makers conceive and respond to the strategic environment.”⁹ This is an attempt to constrain the “cultural” element of theory to those habits and shared values most relevant to actual strategic behavior and decision-making. Thus “strategic culture” becomes, in the terminology of political science, an “intervening variable” that stands between the “independent variables” that the world presents to political leaders and military commanders, and the “dependent variables,” their responses. It acts as the filter, the lens that Kennan described. Broadly speaking, a culture consists in a wide variety of symbols, customs, and sets of values which do not necessarily or directly drive strategic decision-making—although political values may have such effects by strongly shaping what Morgan calls “strategic preferences.” And, particularly with the development of increasingly modern and complex bureaucracies, both civilian and military, organizational processes and preferences take root that become elements of a larger strategic culture.

But this book is not a case study intended to illuminate or advance theory. It is rather an attempt to borrow from theory to understand the origins of American strategic behavior. In this regard, the strategic culture school at least offers a promise that the various schools of “realism” do not. Indeed, it has almost become a litmus test of professional realism to wonder at the many imbecilities of American leaders, regardless of party, who seem impervious to the wisdom of realist theory. Ironically, George Kennan might be said to have had more empathy for the sources of Soviet and Russian conduct than he did for that of the United States. As he lost the struggle over Cold War policy within the Truman administration, Kennan began to see Americans as hopelessly ideological, as a kind of strategic brontosaurus: an American politician “lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath—in fact, you have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat.”¹⁰

Kennan’s contemporary Hans Morgenthau thought the ideological impulse in American strategy needed to be not only bridled but destroyed. It was a “nefarious trend of thought.” He lamented the fact that the American political establishment had a “bias against a realistic approach” to power.¹¹ Modern realists remain despairingly detached, quite unable to fathom why such a powerful nation over-militarizes its approach to

the world, resorts to excessive secrecy, and infringes on domestic liberty in ways that endanger the republic. “Why,” wonders Harvard political scientist Stephen Walt, “is a distinguished and well-known approach to foreign policy confined to the margins of public discourse, especially in the pages of our leading newspapers, when its recent track record is arguably superior to the main alternatives?” Chalmers Johnson concludes his long lament on *The Sorrows of Empire*: “From the moment [the United States] took on a role that included the permanent military domination of the world, we were on our own—feared, hated, corrupt and corrupting, maintaining ‘order’ through state terrorism and bribery, and given to megalomaniac rhetoric and sophistries that virtually invited the rest of the world to unite against us. We had mounted the Napoleonic tiger. The question was, would we—and could we—ever dismount?”¹²

The question for this study is not whether the United States ought to behave differently, but why it began to behave as it still does. If America indeed rides an imperial tiger, why did we choose to saddle such a beast in the first place? If realists are perplexed, the past professional literature on American strategic culture does not seem to have a compelling answer either. One academically significant analysis in the field was Reginald C. Stuart’s 1982 study *War and American Thought*.¹³ Stuart begins his book with an essentially sound observation:

Armed conflict litters the American past, even though Americans believe themselves to have been historically pacific. Viewed through a patriotic lens, all American wars have been justified struggles in self-defense, initiated only after unprovoked aggression. But the record reveals that Americans have fought both offensive and defensive wars, and that many can only be labeled aggressive, and even expansionist. Further probing suggests that in all cases, these conflicts arose from the ambitions of politicians and leaders who conceived of themselves as thinking and acting in the national interest. War, like peace or trade, has always been used as an instrument of policy, although American mythology has maintained that Americans always rejected Carl von Clausewitz’s dictum to that effect.¹⁴

Stuart also correctly roots early American strategy-making within the European tradition of the times. Indeed, he suggests, “Because they

remained Englishmen in so many ways, it is difficult to determine what was distinctively American about American attitudes toward war.”¹⁵ In Stuart’s view, American strategic culture reflected a “limited-war mentality,” rooted in the politics and political philosophy of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Importantly, he allows that “crusading impulses interwove through the period of this generation’s political domination of American affairs,” but, in his analysis, this is a much-subordinated strain. Stuart insists that crusading “ideals never breached the barricades when it came to war,” that Americans of the time “distinguished sharply between ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ warfare” and that the limited-war paradigm was recognizable even in Civil War times.¹⁶

The argument of this book will be almost completely contrary. To begin with, it is essential to look farther back than the eighteenth century, past the Enlightenment to the Reformation, especially if we are to discover the roots of the ideology of politics and war that realists find so distorting and toxic. Indeed, “crusading” impulses are not merely “interwoven” in the fabric of American strategy-making; they are the loom that gives it design and shape. No less than Cold Warriors, English colonists in North America fought not only to create a more favorable balance of power but also to secure a more just international order. If, for Clausewitz, strategy stood at the crossing point of military tactics and secular politics, for Anglo-Americans, the international politics of the colonial era was inseparable from the fortunes of a kind of “Protestant International,” a diverse and decentralized but global confessional community. Even in its most virulent manifestations, however, the distinctions between religious faith and political liberty, or “liberties,” became blurred. The Valois French or, later, the Austrian Hapsburgs might attend Mass, but their strategic behavior could align them with the “Good Old” Protestant cause, which even occasionally, as the Bourbons wrenched the French church away from Rome, enlisted the pope. Likewise, the distinction between “civilized” and “savage” war was no barricade, but a gossamer tissue that might be ripped at any time, not only in conflicts between Europeans and indigenous tribes or whites and nonwhites, but among Europeans, between Anglo-Americans, and, by the mid-1860s, between fellow Americans. A white man named “Tecumseh” promised to “make Georgia howl,” to the great delight and with the enthusiastic agreement of his soldiers.

This book seeks the deep roots of American strategic culture by examining the attitudes that shaped attempts to establish “New English”

plantations in the American hemisphere, basing them on the model used in Ireland. This is to stand against the popular prejudice to regard the American experience as springing *ex nihilo* in 1776 or during the founding generation. This is central to the myth of American exceptionalism. It is also to reject the alternative “1619” narrative lately promulgated by the *New York Times*, now published in book form as “a new origin story,” timing the American founding to the arrival at Point Comfort, Virginia, of the privateer *White Lion*, the first ship bearing African slaves and recasting the American experience as, first and foremost, an empire for slavery.¹⁷ This book offers a third narrative, in which the “empire for liberty” which Thomas Jefferson described to James Madison will be seen gestating among the English, then the British, then across the Atlantic world, and the narrative will cast the American wars of liberation as a conflict about the nature and course of this first British empire, concluding that it was left to the newly born United States to pursue the original ideals in the traditional manner while Great Britain went her own way to found another empire in the nineteenth century.¹⁸

The term *empire* will also be used liberally through this work and the series. In current usage, the word carries an immense weight of baggage and will no doubt harden some hearts against the narrative. But whatever the modern connotations, there can be no doubt that Anglo-Americans lived in a world of empires and believed that to forge their own was necessary for survival, both national and confessional, let alone for prosperity. Greater Britain was not the only “composite monarchy” of the era, and by comparison to the polities they subsumed and replaced, they were nothing if not empires. “How else is one to describe these giants?” asks Fernand Braudel.¹⁹ This first British empire was intended, as William Cecil, chief counsellor to Elizabeth, put it in the late 1550s, as a quasi-contractual “regime”—one that bound the monarch as well as the subject—in a mixed government meant to secure political “amity” and the basic Protestant religious affinity that transcended the English church to provide a bond among the many British nations and protect them against existential external dangers while securing the “liberties” that defined a just and stable international order.²⁰ Scots and Irish and North American colonists were to be partners in this enterprise, and indeed the Scottish Reformation that was contemporaneous with Elizabeth’s crowning helped to inspire Cecil’s imperial vision. It was these larger confessional and ideological purposes that justified the exercise and expansion of imperial power and elevated the regime’s interests above

those of than any individual ruler or dynasty. Two centuries onward, Jefferson, Madison, and the American founders inherited this elemental imperial idea and sought to reform it—for a second time—in order to sustain, expand, and improve it.

Several other terms deserve definition. The adjective *British* is employed in a way some would claim is anachronistic. But the idea of *Britain* well predated the establishment of the United Kingdom, and it is to this that the book refers: the concept of an imperial polity centered on England—and indeed, principally southern England—and its interests but encompassing a range of peoples as participants in a common enterprise. Yet another is the term *Puritan*, meant not only to describe a sect but to distinguish the idea of strict Protestant observance—a felt faith that began well before there was a Puritan or Separatist movement. Many of Puritan tendencies remained communicants within the Church of England, but only because they believed deeper reforms were possible.

In telling the story of Anglo-American strategy-making through a series of pulse-taking vignettes, this book and this series also attempt to give due regard to circumstance, contingency, and personality in the development of strategic culture. A culture represents an accretion of habits over time, a way of understanding and filtering experience, not a rigid doctrine or system. In part, it is this imprecision that gives the culture its durability and strength; as Kennan lamented, the Anglo-American dinosaur requires a ferocious beating before it begins to rouse itself.

Finally, this analysis is not, unlike that of Kennan or subsequent realists, intended as an immediate measure of current US policy or strategy, except insofar as it makes Americans more self-aware. That in itself might be a step forward; since the end of the Cold War, strategy-makers in Washington have looked either relentlessly outward, assessing “threats” or “global trends,” or obsessively inwards, hoping to promote “nation-building at home” while leaving the rest of the world to rot. Indeed, American policymakers often seem possessed of an almost willful ignorance both about American strategy-making in history and about military matters. An empire that sought security through constant expansion is said to have a strong “isolationist” streak. When dazzled by new technologies, military power appears to many as a cure-all; when disoriented by the fog of war, military power is disparaged as “solving nothing.” In addition to reminding Americans of their deep-rooted strategic culture and long-standing strategic preferences, these stories might serve as case studies in both the enduring uses and purposes of the *ultima ratio regis*.