



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Natural Law of Strategy: A Contrarian's Lament

Wm. J. Olson

If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there.
The White Rabbit to Alice

Few things are more common in government circles these days than the lament that what we need—name the circumstance—is a strategy; we don't have a strategy—name the circumstance—and until we do—name the circumstance—we are at a loss as to what to do, or how, or with what. On its surface, this is a truly puzzling contention. There is an industrial-strength enterprise in the government today, particularly in DoD and DHS, to produce strategy on ever conceivable necessity or non-necessity. There is a Noah's Ark of hes and shes, two by two, strategies. The Congress requires the president to submit a national strategy, if not annually at least regularly and has done so in law since 1987. Administrations duly produce a national strategy and executive branch agencies generate a family of subordinate strategies in bewildering numbers, which then become the occasion for producing yet a further set of implementing operational and tactical documents in rococo detail, not to mention the follow-on budget documents purporting to add ways and means to all these ends. Virtually all of these documents are unclassified, available on line and are the product of intensive, intra- or interagency processes with many hands involved. Yet, the impression persists that there is no current strategy.

What follows relies on two propositions to address this conundrum: first, that what is currently called 'strategy' is in fact no such thing; and second, that in order to understand what strategy is it is necessary to analyze current ideas of what strategy is.¹ The conclusion, stated here at the outset, is that we will see that current ideas of strategy actually make it impossible to have a strategy. One cannot square the circle, though it took two thousand years to realize that point. Therefore, what follows does not try to do what can't be done, that is provide a solution. Policy prescriptions do not follow from the argument. We already have enough of these and we can see just how well they work and how long any of them last. If winning the Cold War did not lead to the kind of basic reassessment of our circumstances that require a strategy and consequent reorganization, and the resulting muddle has only led to squaring the error, then there is little hope in yet more policy urging.

¹ As used here, a proposition is not meant to be a statement of facts but an argument as to what the facts might mean.

Portmanteau Words

How to account, then, for the prevailing or pervading sense that we do not have a strategy? Either no one but the writers and their editors read the stuff, which seems all too likely; or these various documents are rote exercises with no real connection to what is actually happening, generally the case; or they fail to reflect the realities of the strategic culture, having been reduced to the lowest common denominator of instrumentalities—ends, ways, means—with only tangential connection to the realities that ought to give these meaning, also clearly the case; thus all of the above stemming from the last point. Or, as seems just as likely, no one knows what strategy actually is apart from the term used to describe certain behaviors that are regarded as being strategic. Thus there is no connection between strategy as articulated and strategy, whatever it is, as it is practiced, if it is. Or, as Humpty Dumpty said to Alice, “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

Perhaps this is because there is a disconnect between policy formulation and strategy, which is meant to bridge the gap between intention and action. If so, then the idea of incorporating ‘ends’ into strategy seems amiss. Strategy, as such, is not about ends, which are provided by another, perhaps mysterious, process and handed off. There is no trinity of ends, ways, and means. All of this may be semantic confusion, since ‘strategy’ is a slippery term that everyone knows the meaning of but doesn’t recognize it when they see it. Or perhaps the distinction lies in the difference between Grand Strategy and strategy, the former concerned primarily with ends the latter mostly with ways and means. In this case, strategy merely restates the ends of Grand Strategy with the intent of now adding ways and means to get the job done. This hardly seems an improvement or a clarification that clarifies.

Grand Strategy, as such, derives its ends from policy. Thus it does not—cannot—provide its own ends. It only reflects them. Perhaps the distinction and the difference lie in the level of detail expected in the respective precincts of activity. Grand Strategy, then, is closest to policy and policy formulation, an intermediate step, and while less abstract than policy it begins the process of translating intent into effort. Strategy, the next step down, then concerns itself with details once the big ideas are set. But again, including ends in strategy, except to note that they have been imported from elsewhere from a process unrelated to strategy, suggests that strategy is really about ways and means.²

There is little relief in trying to pin the word down definitionally. Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary defines strategy as 1 *a* (1) : the science and art of employing the political, economic, psychological, and military forces of a nation or group of nations to afford the maximum support to adopted policies in peace or war (2) : the science and art of military command exercised to meet the enemy in combat under advantageous conditions *b* : a variety of or instance of the use of strategy; 2 *a* : a careful plan or method : a clever stratagem *b* : the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems toward a goal; 3 an adaptation or complex of adaptations (as of

² There are any number of efforts to address what is meant by Grand Strategy. These are not generally any more successful at clarification than all the ink spilled on defining strategy. For a recent foray see Williamson Murray, et. al., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011).

behavior, metabolism, or structure) that serves or appears to serve an important function in achieving evolutionary success <foraging *strategies* of insects> ; First Known Use: 1810; **synonyms:** arrangement, blueprint, design, game, game plan, ground plan, master plan, program, project, road map, scheme, plan, system; and related words: trick, conspiracy, contrivance, device, technique, procedure, conception, project.

Try to triangulate the word using a thesaurus and the picture becomes even more diverse. A typical entry in Roget's might contain such related terms as *plan*, *scheme*, or as the term applies to warfare. *Plan* has 55 related terms such as conception, enterprise, idea, systemization, schematization, chart, arrangement, layout, approach, methodology, blueprint, forethought. *Scheme* has at least 43 related terms such as artifice, stratagem, gambit, sleight of hand, design, gimmick, dodge, deceit, expedient. And so on. Historically, from Sun Tzu, to Machiavelli, to Napoleon, to Clausewitz and Jomini down to today's burgeoning legion of commentators, the term has been manipulated like a Rubik's cube every which way. The term has meaning in biology, business, advertising, and politics. It covers a wide range of uses each with their own definitional framework and accompanying synonyms and variations on a theme. While the military might have a more precise definition, how it is actually employed beyond the Joint Services' definition partakes of as much precision as elsewhere, which is to say, little.³ The military also has a complex planning system that generates a whole range of strategies, some for specific geographic areas, some on thematic subjects—terrorism, maritime—some on overarching subjects—national military strategy—and so on. It is a target rich environment. With so many meanings and permutations, the term itself is so flexible as to escape meaning, although it has not lost its usefulness, whatever it may actually include.

The term 'strategy' derives from the Greek *strategos* for 'general', and strategy was what generals did. Since even Greek generals, who in Athens were often leading politicians elected to the post, tended to get the point that what they did was to act on the goals and objectives of others, derived from the political circumstances of city-states and their goals, what the generals did, what their strategy was about, was about ways and means, generally of a military nature—maneuvering to engagement, deploying to fight—ends coming from elsewhere, supplied as it were. Today, this does not seem very satisfying, and it does not seem to capture expectations among erstwhile strategists of the modern sort. We do not elect generals any more and while promotion within the military may have its political moments, amateurs, at least from outside the system, are no longer appointed to generalship. Nor is it the way that thinking about strategy is currently conceptualized and taught, most particularly in DoD school houses across the Republic. There the holy trinity of ends, ways, and means is the mantra.

³ The DoD dictionary of terms defines, currently and subject to change, strategy as 'A prudent idea of set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in as synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.' Joint Publication 3-0, Doctrine for Joint Operations, accepts this definition but adds 'This term and its definition modify the existing term and its definition and are approved for inclusion in the next edition of JP1-02.' Delve into any of the joint or service doctrine manuals and the picture becomes increasingly intricate and complicated. This leaves aside all the professional discussion, or is that 'narrative' or 'discourse', that adumbrates the definitional question—or or how to thinking about, resolve it, teach it—in so many directions and with so many conclusions that it is impossible to reach a conclusion much less a consensus.

The problem is, there cannot be, no, there shouldn't be, any strategy independent of its context, that is it cannot be considered separate from the non-strategic struggles that shape it (inter- or intra-agency, inter-branch, public discussions and debates). But for much of current strategy and for much of the way it is taught, that is precisely what is happening, that is, *strategy is considered as somehow a separate phenomenon that can be understood as a thing unto itself*. As a result, it is divorced from its meaning. Cut thusly adrift, but with the necessity remaining, strategizing becomes its own reality, supplying its own justifications without recourse to the context. When that context itself is missing or unclear, then the gap between strategy and purpose becomes even more pronounced and self-fulfilling. One is tempted to argue that strategy is too serious to be left to strategists. Or, despairing, that there is no such thing as strategy at all. What is clear is that one of the single most important elements in strategy, however conceived, has tended to disappear from the process, that is its political nature.

Of Cabbages and Kings

I suppose that the essential point of my critique aimed at various parts of the whole, as I see it, is an attack on the current state of strategic thinking, or, more to the point, a note on the absence of such thinking and of the strategic culture that must sustain it. The current trend is to define strategy as the artful combination of ends, ways, and means, or some other Trinitarian combination of unlike things into something like a coherent whole. But in the absence of a strategic culture, the political context, what this operational approach does, is bound to do, is unable to avoid doing, is reduce strategy and strategic thinking to a set of instrumentalities. At some point, that is undoubtedly necessary, but the trend now is a Gresham's law of strategy in which non-thinking is raised to an art form driving out thinking while creating the illusion that busy work is actually thinking; that responding to the in-box in a timely way constitutes strategy on any given day. Inevitably, the consequence of such instrumentalized thinking is to equate strategy with the resources necessary to achieve it, and ultimately to reduce everything to a discussion of resources and how to make strategy conform with and confirm the institutional agendas of the players whose resources are at issue. Without a strategic culture that tames this tendency, there can be no strategic thought only the illusion of it. But exactly what is a 'strategic culture', presuming one exists?

One way to access the idea of a strategic culture is to consider the ends-ways-means approach in isolation, on its own terms. As such, this approach is legally and morally neutral, and therefore a potential legal and moral disaster. Viewed thusly, the ends justify the ways and means, a purely utilitarian assessment that what works is what matters, the limits being determined by budgets, resources, interest, and will. And maybe, legal considerations. While different political societies may make different assessments, few will subordinate strategic planning to such a stark utilitarian agenda. Other considerations will weigh in to determine what is considered appropriate and not just necessary, what is justifiable not just justified. In this backhanded way, one can begin to perceive the outlines of strategic culture, those not always obvious qualifiers and silent determinants governing choices and thus shaping ends and the ways and means to match. It is the political environment and context that give purpose. The hint here is that, so conceived, strategy is a top-down enterprise. Thus, instrumentalities are not strategy; they are neither necessary nor sufficient in trying to understand what strategy is about or needs to be about. Any specific strategy will derive not from its consideration of itself but of what and how

it reflects the strategic culture, or environment, that it is based on and must conform to—if rightly conceived.

Perhaps the easiest way in to understanding this is in consideration of what, exactly, is involved in determining ends. While probably true in most national circumstances, the reference point here is the United States. In speaking of ends, in this context, one way to understand the subject is to recognize that legitimate ends reflect—or should do—the national interest. Obviously, countries act, choose to act, choose actions that reflect or seek to achieve the national self-interest. Fine. Most accept this. But who, in the United States, determines just what, at any given moment, the national interest is?

The short answer is ‘no one’. There is not a single, decisive source nor any precise moment that determines the national interest and no fixed decisions on what its elements are. Nor, if history is any guide, is it a fixed quality that does not change or evolve over time in response to changing circumstances or national mood. It is a product of debate and complex negotiation involving a bewildering array of interests and people, and not just among current players, but with past participants, precedent, legal and moral considerations, and some, however vague, sense of commitment to the future. This is a permanent condition not a transient one.

Thus the national interest, or determining it, is irreducibly complex. At best it represents a consensus agreement not a definitive or universal one, perhaps best understood when that consensus fails, as in the American Civil War, or over the war in Vietnam. And even if a consensus is reached on the really big issues, say on Cold War containment, that does not necessarily end debate or negotiation over just how the national interest is best understood or pursued in particular cases. And all of this before any discussion begins on ways and means, which, theoretically are derivative of the ends sought. In fine, the strategic culture must reflect this reality and bring it to bear before discussion of instrumentalities. But somewhere along the way, this has fallen out of the mix. There is now a disconnect between strategic culture and strategy formulation. And, in some important ways, it appears that the strategic culture itself has disappeared or become so attenuated as to no longer play a role. Strategy is now an orphan, adopted by the agencies charged to implement but incapable, in fact, of providing the groundwork for their own efforts, thus the perennial favorite: we have no strategy. Ways and means have become the ends. The sense of drift is palpable.

Yet, this has not always been the case. Perhaps the first, and arguably the last, time the United States had and proved itself capable of having a national strategy based on a strategic culture was the evolution of containment strategy as it came to rest in NSC-68 in 1950 and its subsequent family of implementing concepts, later endorsed by the Eisenhower Administration through the so-called ‘Solarium’ project. Its ghost still haunts.⁴

In its most immediate terms, the containment strategy, which governed US Cold War engagement and fathered the creation of America as a superpower, was the product of two competing intellectuals: George Kennan, whose secret telegram and later ‘Mr. X’ article started

⁴ Possible exceptions include the Monroe Doctrine, largely the work of John Quincy Adams, which had a longer run overall than containment; elements of Lincoln’s approach to winning the Civil War; Wilson’s Fourteen Points; and elements of the US, and British, concepts for winning WWII.

the ball rolling; and Paul Nitze, who succeeded Kennan at the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department, and who was most responsible for giving containment its chief policy arguments. As policy, however, containment was the product of two presidents, Truman and Eisenhower and their principal advisors, which was a vanishingly small number of individuals—a point not without significance.

This early formulation of national policy was also interesting institutionally. In these early years, and in the wake of the National Security Act of 1947 creating the NSC and the Department of Defense, it was the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department that was central to the overall policy development effort, far different from the situation today where not only the role of the Policy Planning Staff is inconsequential, beyond speech writing for the Secretary of State, but the influence and role of the State Department as central to US security policy planning has shrunk as the Department of Defense's role has grown in relation to the relative size of the budgets and staffs respectively. While there are many reasons for this, one of the principal elements lies in the success of the containment doctrine as the foundation for American foreign policy from 1950 to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the consensus in public and policy circles that endorsed and sustained it for so long. With the principles firmly in place, accepted by succeeding administrations and Congresses, basic rethinking was unnecessary so long as the primary threat—the Soviet Union—remained. Thus, subsequent planning became more about implementation. With the ends well established, ways and means became the only real areas for creative approaches, and so gradually, strategy and strategic thinking became inexorably tied to second order concerns—what to do and how to do it, the why having been answered.

In the process, in giving reality to containment, a host of institutional arrangements developed and evolved to give substance to the idea and responses to changing circumstances—Eisenhower's military-industrial complex. The cumulative result was to construct a host of government and related institutions and ways of doing business and habits of thinking and acting essential to waging a Cold War. The approach, however, did not comprehend its own circumstances, that is the revolutionary nature of the situation being responded to and the revolutionary changes that containment contained within it. But that races ahead of the story. Hold the thought.

Twas Brillig

Strictly speaking, viewed from the state of play today, what Kennan proposed in containment was not a strategy but a doctrine, a concept of engagement.⁵ He believed it necessary to match ends to means, but one of the components of a strategy, the military, was largely absent in his outline. It was a matter of emphasis. Kennan did not exclude consideration of some means of defense, of military capability, but it was marginal to his concerns. It also reflected a concept of asymmetric engagement, that is, not trying to match the Soviets man for man, tank for tank, area for area, but to employ American versatility, economic prowess, and technological know-how applied against Soviet weaknesses. Based on a concept of the inherent impracticability of

⁵ Kennan resisted the notion that he was even developing a doctrine, which in his view would limit thinking to a single equation. He was advancing principles upon which to base an understanding of circumstances and what might then follow, logically, as responses, how to deal with the Soviet Union being his initial focus. On this see John Lukacs, *George Kennan: A Study of Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2007).

communism in the long term, it was a question on how to wear the bear down without the necessity of a major war.⁶

In line with this, the Truman Administration kept military spending in check in order to increase the ability to concentrate on economic development approaches, whether through the Marshall Plan or other, similar efforts. Truman and his advisors bought Kennan's argument, which was persuasive, coherent, and consonant with the times. With the world in ruins after WWII, economic recovery and development were seen as the most important policy approaches, to rebuild shattered economies and to shore up anti-totalitarian political order where possible. As Truman noted to Congress in 1948, 'We are moving toward our goal of world peace in many ways. But the most important efforts we are now making are those which support world economic recovery.'⁷ Of course, some of this 'complacency' was based on the then American monopoly on nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them without significant consequences for a reciprocal attack on the American homeland, even if Europe was more exposed—hence NATO. This and the concurrent estimation that the Soviets did not want or would not risk a major war with the United States, subversion being the most likely form of aggression. Thus, at the outset, containment doctrine focused on largely non-military approaches based on a set of assumptions about the inherent flaws in communism and the Soviet system and a shrewd analysis of likely Soviet intent and capability. But there was a fly in the ointment. The question was one of timing. Given that the expectation was that the Soviet system would eventually collapse, just how long would that take and just what would the Soviets do before historical inevitability caught up?

Reality caught up with idea. China fell to Mao; the Soviets exploded an atomic bomb and very quickly thereafter a hydrogen bomb; Greece and Turkey teetered on the edge of a communist insurgency; Eastern Europe was behind an 'iron curtain; Britain and France wanted American engagement on the ground in Europe to preclude a Soviet invasion, made more likely with the US loss of its nuclear monopoly; and North Korea would shortly invade the South (with Japan at risk?), with Chinese and Russian support, which seemed to undermine Kennan's notion of the divisibility of communism into antagonistic parts. Under the influence of these developments, 'the architect and the implementers of containment parted company.'⁸ It seemed increasingly unlikely that economic development, alone, could contain containment. In Kennan's view, the tendency became one of mistaking political threats for military ones, with policy consequences that tended to militarize the whole effort.⁹ The contrary view as it evolved was that political

⁶ See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 54ff.

⁷ Gaddis, p. 62. Or this from then Secretary of Defense Forrestal: *At the present time we are keeping our military expenditures below the levels which our military leaders must in good conscience estimate as the minimum which would in themselves ensure national security. By so doing we are able to increase our expenditures to assist in European recovery. In other words, we are taking a calculated risk in order to follow a course which offers a prospect of eventually achieving national security and also long-term world stability.*

⁸ Quoted in Gaddis, *Strategies*, p. 72.

⁹ Kennan had longstanding concerns about a strain of unrealism, as he saw it, in US policy thinking, a theme he developed after he left the State Department. He began work on a series of essays on policy that would develop his ideas in the years to follow: 'I endeavored to show how successive [US] statesmen had sought, in these ostensibly idealistic and pretentious undertakings [pre-WWII pacts to outlaw war, achieve world peace through multilateral diplomacy], a concealment for failure to have a genuine foreign policy addressed to the real problems of international relations in a changing world—how all these vainglorious and pretentious assertions of purpose, in

approaches without the military means to respond to military-based threats was like trying to push a tiger away with a rope. This divide can be personified in the departure of Kennan from Policy Planning and the arrival of Paul Nitze as his successor. Of course, the policy divisions and discussions were much broader and a shift in personalities did not create the divide only reflected it.

Critical to that divide was the vexing question of the role that nuclear weapons added to the mix of thinking about war, defense, and deterrence once the Soviets ended America's nuclear monopoly. Two logical processes, one based on historical experience, the other on concerns about the future, came into play, complementing or contending with each other in policy debates, then and ever since. The historical process involved the logic inherent, up to WWII, in rivalry between states and the role of war as a political instrument in conducting or ending that rivalry. Although it had long been an American intention to redesign international relations to rule out the resort to force and violence—war—as a regular feature of state-to-state relations, it nevertheless remained a seeming certainty that, all things considered, irreconcilable rivalry between states would eventually resolve itself into adjudication by war. Before the advent of nuclear weapons, that seemed the irresistible conclusion of history, with war, and military preparedness, being a rational component of an irrational process, that is state-to-state rivalries. Thus, between the 18th and the 20th centuries Europeans had involved themselves and much of the rest of the global in a series of world wars, the last, WWII, being the most destructive. That being the case, it was only reasonable to assume that the emerging irreconcilable differences between the Soviet Union and the United States, following historical logic, would, of necessity, have to involve the two powers in respective security arrangements all too likely to resolve themselves into war. Nuclear weapons, however, added a new logic, or some would say an illogic.

With war, with both sides possessing nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, mutual destruction seemed assured. The idea of war was to achieve one's policy goals not to eliminate for all concerned the chance of ever again being able to resort to war as a policy. War, or all-out war, was now irrational and the logic that had hitherto applied could no longer be relied upon to resolve differences. This was a truly unique circumstance that no one knew how to incorporate into thinking and planning, although there were any number of ideas on the subject. But the older logic did not disappear. Thus, rivalry continued along with efforts to prevent it from becoming a war to end all wars. Part of that rivalry was a nuclear arms race, following the older logic, but with the added notion that the purpose was to make it impossible, hopefully, to ever realize the logic. If, however, that was to work but military means remained part of the environment, then war and preparation for non-nuclear war retained their historic role, if limited. This added weight to the need for conventional capabilities and a conventional arms race, but with the inherent idea, at least in US thinking, that the goal was to have an ability to wage war in order to preclude the possibility of having to wage war. A seeming contradiction. But one required by weapons of assured destruction and superpower rivalry. The policy result, in the first instance, was NSC-68 as national strategy and the creation of a national security architecture

other words, had served as unconscious pretexts for the failure, in fact the inability, to deal with the real substance of international affairs.' Statements like these have led a generation of international relations scholars to classify Kennan as of the realist school. A real mistake. See Kennan, vol II, *Memoirs, 1950-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 71.

without precedent in US experience. The consequence was the progressive militarization of US capabilities, reflected today in the relative size of DoD budgets vice the Department of State or other components of the national security architecture.

This rather rough and tumble summary hardly does justice to a very complex subject and its subsequent evolution, but it is, I believe, reasonably faithful to the larger context of US Cold War policy, and it helps to explain, without an even greater digression, the situation with which this essay started, that is, the current idea that we do not have a strategy, which is both right and wrong. To fast-forward.

Gyre and Gimble

The reason it is both right and wrong, why we have strategies without the sense of knowing what the strategy is, is that we have a security architecture based on a doctrine, containment, that no longer applies, responding to a threat, the Soviets, that no longer exists. What passes for strategy today, along with all the institutional means for developing strategy, are legacy habits and institutions marching to the sound of the last drummer. This is a consequence of the ways and means—the institutions and institutional interests—created to give effect to the ends determined by Cold War necessity and an existential threat. The problem arises now in that those ways and means, now largely military means predominating, are drivers in determining ends, that is, recapitulating the efforts that justifies their existence. ‘Strategy’ as such is now the province of bureaucratic mechanisms, most of which are under the Department of Defense. Unlike the processes leading to NSC-68, presidents, cabinet secretaries, Congressional leadership are largely irrelevant to the development and implementation of strategy beyond endorsing bureaucratic products or tweaking the margins, hence the disconnect with ends and the repeated, mainly bureaucratic effort, to find in present circumstances the types of existential threats that recapitulate the Cold War menace and thereby justify the elaborate establishment necessary to meet such a threat. Further, the nature of the national security bureaucracy has expanded into a machine that would go of itself.

To conceive of that bureaucracy in simple terms, that is as part of either the executive or the legislative branches, is to miss a critical fact: the explosion of policy think tanks, freelance pundits, beltway bandits, and a host of non-government government contractors that exist to debate policy and recommend, in bewildering splendor, every conceivable idea of what constitutes threats and what to do in response. All of this, too, grew up in the shadow of the Cold War and partakes of that environment, with many of the individuals aspiring to be the new Mr. X, or Mr. Y, or whatever. But the very fact of multiplicity of proponents and options precludes the very possibility.

While many of these groups and individuals, this one included, have argued for the need for a basic reexamination of the current Post-Cold War environment in order to form the basis for a new strategic concept, or policy consensus, the sheer number of participants creates a cacophony of competing voices and ideas working against the possibility of consensus, while deep-rooted institutional practices labor and lobby to prevent changes to business as usual as they affect missions, which are conceived and justified as budgets. By degrees, therefore, strategy has come adrift from the realities that ought to guide it; the mechanisms for developing it are mostly

concerned with ways and means justifying pre-existing agendas; and political leadership has failed to lead, to engage in realigning what passes for strategy with international realities and with what the public understands as the national interest and is prepared to support. If this were not the case, the pervading sense of a lack of strategy despite all the extant documents and capabilities for generating an endless stream of things called ‘strategy’ makes no sense. Contrasting this environment and situation with that which led to the containment doctrine, NSC-68, and the subsequent sustaining consensus, one must wonder if the present byzantine reality precludes the possibility of precisely the sort of reexamination and restructuring that circumstances and anxiety about a lack of strategy currently engender. While not a pessimist, I see nothing in the present circumstance upon which optimism can survive. Only the Cheshire Cat’s ironic grin remains.

Strategy and Natural Law

Any prediction, about the future, to be valid, since the future does not exist, must of necessity take the following form to have any hope of being more than wishful thinking: tomorrow it will rain or it will not rain. And even this is based on an unacknowledged assumption, that there will be a tomorrow, which is not a known known. Thus, despite the fact that Kennan’s assessment was one of the most impressive and influential bits of political analysis in US history—impressive because it was influential, and influential because it was impressive—it cannot be judged on the basis of the fact that the Soviet Union collapsed as he argued it must. That collapse was, in the end, not the result of a prediction or of waiting on history to live up to its obligation but of a major commitment of effort by successive US administrations, with public consensus, to shape the desired outcome.

Kennan’s analysis was perspicuous because it was, he was, deeply well informed on the subject matter, intimately involved in a discussion at a time of great challenges and changes, and because there was a relatively small enclave in which discussions proceeded and from which decisions emerged in response to an existential threat. Part of that environment, what was earlier in this argument called ‘strategic culture’, involved a long, informed debate on what the national interest was, how to combine that with an understanding of what the present involved, how the one had to respond to the other, and what was necessary to convince and engage the public in a long war; a debate that included two administrations, though a small number of actors, and because of that created a bi-partisan foundation for subsequent evolutions on shared assumptions. Enter natural law.

The main contention of natural law is that there is a law above law, that is a moral context that precedes any specific law and against which anything calling itself law must conform with to be anything but arbitrary and unjust. This is to be contrasted with ‘positive’ law, which basically holds that law is what any legitimately constituted authority with lawmaking power and the ability to make it binding determines is law, lawfulness proceeding not from some esoteric universalism but from particular circumstances. Law is self-referential as long as there is a process to make it. A self-licking ice cream cone.

At one time, the source of law above law was seen as divine in origin and much of natural law philosophy was viewed as Catholic in derivation. But it is not necessary to see it thus.¹⁰ The essential nature of natural law, or its argument, might be grasped in trying to address the question of whether slavery is lawful and just or not. If a positive law argument holds, then the American Constitution as written in 1787, which backhandedly accepted slavery and led to a legal regime protecting it, legalized slavery and thus it was not subject to challenge, at least not on any moral ground, since a clearly legitimate authority with lawmaking power and the ability to make it binding had judged slavery to be lawful and therefore just. Similarly, there can be no universal claim to human rights, certainly none that would justify any putative obligation to intervene in other countries so long as there is competent authority in place to make and enforce law as it sees fit. Localized genocide cannot be the subject of an objection, and final solutions are permitted.

The point here is not to delve into this tricky philosophical playground but to draw upon an analogy: that strategy, like law, is not self-referential but must respond to sources of justification beyond it, not subject to its judgments and requirements. If strategy is not to be defined as what strategists do, or what generals do, then it must derive its meaning from sources other than itself. This should be fairly clear from our present situation. We do not lack for strategists and generals. We do not lack for battalions of strategies marching to the horizon. We do not lack for complex mechanisms, legitimately constituted, with the authority to generate strategies and train up generals and strategists. Despite this, we seem not to believe that any of these meet the need. We have strategies without a strategy. How very odd, as Alice might say.

This gap is not the result of the want of definitions of what strategy is or is not. Pick up any recent piece of scholarship or government-derived statements on the subject and definition abounds. Virtually all of this revolves around the same Trinitarian unity—ends, ways, and means. But there it ends. Take for example this, by no means unique, contention: ‘Nevertheless, the evolution of the term “strategy” itself must be our starting point, not least in order to understand why there is so little agreement on the use of the term, and why it has changed so much over time.’¹¹ As an analytical subject, the whole subject is fuzzy. It would be tempting to conclude, therefore, that the current sense of having no strategy is a semantic or definitional artifact arising from the fact that we cannot agree on what the term actually means. Tempting but inadequate and unsatisfying. And should the happy day arrive that there is general agreement on how to define strategy, it is totally irrelevant to the case in hand, that of having a strategy. This is not a definitional problem.

The basic problem now is that what passes for strategy is actually serial operational and tactical plans that do not arise from a strategic cultural capable of providing the legitimizing context for what might be a strategy. A strategy cannot provide its own meaning. Yet, that is now the basic reality. We have process and mechanism without content or the means to develop it.

¹⁰ Intimations of the idea can be traced to Aristotle whose focus on the ‘good’ prescribes that laws can be bad and that a state under the rule of law, should those laws be bad, was thus a bad state for all the formalities of legal process. It was also a theme in Sophocles’ *Antigony*.

¹¹ Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), p. 4.

We lack the strategic culture, and now the means to reconstitute it, necessary to give strategy the context and content it must have. Strategy is now an unnatural act. Hence, a lament.

Wm. J. Olson is a professor at the Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense or any US government agency.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)