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# THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF GRAND STRATEGY

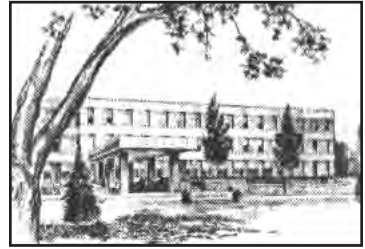
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Hal Brands

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## **External Research Associates Program Monograph**

# **THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF GRAND STRATEGY**

**Hal Brands**

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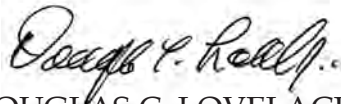
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## FOREWORD

Present debates about national security issues often revolve around the question of what type of “grand strategy” the United States should have. Yet, “grand strategy” itself can be a rather nebulous concept, and discussions of the issue can thus confuse more than they clarify. In this monograph, Hal Brands offers a thorough analysis of what grand strategy actually is, why it is so important, and why we often find it so challenging to design and implement. To do so, he draws on some of the classic strategic texts, as well as the history of two key moments in modern American grand strategy: the “golden age” of grand strategy during the Truman years at the outset of the Cold War, and the era of détente and triangular diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China during the Nixon-Kissinger years. Dr. Brands closes by offering a series of useful ideas for how American officials might approach the challenges of grand strategy in the 21st-century political and security environment.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this monograph as a useful contribution to the continuing debate over America’s role in a changing world.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute



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HAL BRANDS is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and History at Duke University. He previously worked at the Institute for Defense Analyses outside of Washington, DC. In 2012, he was named a member of the RAND Corporation's Grand Strategy Advisory Board. He is the author of *Latin America's Cold War* (2010) and *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (2008), as well as numerous articles on grand strategy, U.S. foreign policy, Latin American politics and diplomacy, and other international security issues. Dr. Brands holds a Ph.D. in history from Yale University.





## SUMMARY

This monograph offers a critical examination of the idea and utility of “grand strategy.” The concept is very much in vogue these days, with commentators of all stripes invoking it in one way or another. But what the term actually means often remains unclear, and discussions of the issue too often muddle or obscure more than they illuminate. The purpose of this monograph, therefore, is to provide a more precise understanding of the meaning, importance, and challenges of American grand strategy – not to recommend any single grand strategy that the U.S. Government should follow, but to illuminate the promise and limitations of grand strategy as a national endeavor.

To this end, the monograph addresses three principal tasks. First, it offers a general discussion of what grand strategy actually is, and why it is simultaneously so essential and so difficult to do. Second, it further fleshes out these issues by revisiting the doing of grand strategy at key inflection points in the history of U.S. foreign policy – during the Harry Truman years of the early Cold War, and during the Richard Nixon/Gerald Ford/Henry Kissinger years between 1969 and 1977. Third, this monograph offers several basic suggestions for how U.S. policymakers might approach grand strategy as an intellectual and geopolitical pursuit.



# THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF GRAND STRATEGY

## INTRODUCTION

“Grand strategy” is very much in vogue these days. In the 2 decades since the end of the Cold War, politicians and pundits alike have consistently proclaimed the need for a new American grand strategy, and they have just as consistently flayed their opponents for failing to deliver one. Academics, journalists, and public figures have authored books and articles advocating particular grand strategies; major publications like *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* carry pieces discussing the concept in one way or another. In 2008, the House Armed Services Committee even held hearings on the subject of “A New Grand Strategy for the United States.” “The United States,” one prominent author has proclaimed, “is a superpower in search of a strategy.”<sup>1</sup>

But what exactly is “grand strategy?” Why is it so important and, it would seem, so elusive? Grand strategy, it turns out, is one of the most slippery and widely abused terms in the foreign policy lexicon. The concept is often invoked but less often defined, and those who do define the phrase do so in a variety of different, and often contradictory, ways. The result is that discussions of grand strategy are often confused or superficial. Too frequently, they muddle or obscure more than they illuminate.

The purpose of this monograph is to provide a more precise understanding of the meaning, importance, and challenges of American grand strategy. The aim is not to recommend any particular grand strategy that the U.S. Government should follow, but rather to

illuminate the promise, perils, and limitations of grand strategy as an endeavor. To this end, the remainder of this monograph is divided into four sections. The first section offers a discussion of what grand strategy is, and why it is simultaneously so essential and so difficult to do. The second and third sections further flesh out these issues by revisiting the doing of grand strategy at key inflection points in the history of U.S. foreign policy: during the Harry Truman years in the late-1940s and early-1950s, and during the Richard Nixon/Gerald Ford/Henry Kissinger years between 1969 and 1977. The fourth section offers several basic suggestions for thinking about present-day grand strategy as an intellectual and geopolitical pursuit.

## UNDERSTANDING GRAND STRATEGY

“The primary purpose of any theory,” wrote Carl von Clausewitz, “is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled. Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply and expect the reader to share one’s views.”<sup>2</sup> This maxim offers an appropriate point of departure for an investigation of grand strategy. Grand strategy is a notoriously ambiguous concept. The term is often invoked but less often defined; those who do define the phrase do so in a variety of different ways. It is thus useful to begin by explaining how grand strategy is conceptualized in this monograph, so as to clarify the analysis that follows.<sup>3</sup>

There is no single, universally accepted definition of grand strategy. The British military historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart popularized the term during the mid-20th century, and most subsequent definitions of

the concept have been based, in one way or another, on his insight that grand strategy involves synchronizing means and ends at the highest level of national policy.<sup>4</sup> From here, however, concepts of grand strategy diverge considerably. Some analysts argue that the term applies mainly to wartime decisionmaking or military planning; others define it so broadly as to make it virtually identical to the concept of foreign policy as a whole. Some observers associate the idea of grand strategy with systematic planning and the promulgation of explicit “doctrines”; others contend that most grand strategies are more implicit and assumed than formally enunciated. Definitions of grand strategy are thus manifold, as are analyses that invoke the term without defining it.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that there are so many competing conceptions of grand strategy should probably tell us that the concept is subjective and ambiguous enough to defy any singular definition. The best an analyst can do is to strive for a definition that is, in the strategic theorist Colin Gray’s phrasing, “right enough.” That is, the definition “does not have to meet any and every objection, but it must highlight the core of its subject, and it must not mislead.”<sup>6</sup>

In this monograph, grand strategy is defined as the theory, or logic, that binds a country’s highest interests to its daily interactions with the world. Policymakers who are doing grand strategy are not simply reacting to events or handling them on a case-by-case basis; they are operating in accordance with a more structured and coherent idea of what their nation is out to accomplish in international affairs. Dedicated grand strategists should have a clear understanding of their country’s most essential interests, the primary threats to those interests, and the extent and limits of

the resources available to ward off these threats and advance core interests. From this intellectual calculus flows policy, the various initiatives—diplomacy, the use of force, and others—through which states interact with foreign governments and peoples. At its best, then, grand strategy represents an integrated conception of interests, threats, resources, and policies. It is, in this sense, the intellectual architecture that gives structure to foreign policy and helps nations find their way in the world.<sup>7</sup>

For the sake of clarity, several aspects of this definition bear further elaboration. The first is that grand strategy is not any one aspect of foreign policy, nor is it foreign policy as a whole. Foreign policy is the sum total of a government's interactions with the outside world. It is expressed through initiatives ranging from diplomacy to foreign aid to the use of military force. Grand strategy, in contrast, is the conceptual logic that ensures that such instruments are employed in ways that maximize the benefits for a nation's core interests. Grand strategy inevitably shapes a nation's foreign policy—and thus its military policy, its diplomacy, and other subsidiary components of foreign policy—but the concepts are not one and the same.

Second, grand strategy provides the link between short-term actions and medium- and long-term goals. As noted above, grand strategy should flow not from mere reactions to day-to-day events, but from a judgment of those enduring interests that transcend any single crisis. As Dean Acheson once put it, the task of the strategist is “to look ahead, not into the distant future, but beyond the vision of the operating officers caught in the smoke and crises of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to come and outline what should be done to meet or an-

ticipate them.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Acheson’s comment also implies that grand strategy is not just about setting medium- and long-term goals, but also about determining how to achieve those goals via the day-to-day conduct of foreign policy. In other words, grand strategy involves figuring out how to get from here to there; how to make today’s policies bring about tomorrow’s desired end state.

Third, as Liddell Hart argued several decades ago, grand strategy is preoccupied with the relationship between means and ends. Power is inherently multidimensional. It stems not only from a nation’s military might, but also from its economic strength, internal cohesion, ideological appeal, and other factors. Accordingly, grand strategy involves combining all aspects of national power to accomplish important objectives. Yet, nations, even great powers, exist in a world of limited resources, where capabilities are never sufficient to exploit all opportunities and confront all threats. To avoid overreach, states must determine which interests are truly vital and which threats and opportunities most urgent, and deploy their resources accordingly. Grand strategy is therefore a discipline of trade-offs: it requires using the full extent of national power when essential matters are at stake, but it also involves conserving and protecting the sources of that power.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, grand strategy is as much a process as it is any single principle. When Americans think of grand strategy, they often think of terms like “containment,” the organizing principle that guided American policy for decades. But, as John Lewis Gaddis has pointed out, containment was not a single grand strategy but rather a string of several distinct grand strategies that took varying approaches to taming Soviet power. As

circumstances changed, American grand strategy also evolved.<sup>10</sup> Such is the case with grand strategy in general. Grand strategy occurs in a world where almost nothing sits still, so while its overall goal may remain constant, its various subcomponents—decisions on how best to allocate resources, for instance—must inevitably shift as well.

These first four points lead to a fifth, which is that grand strategy operates no less in peacetime than in wartime. To be sure, the need for grand strategy is most painfully evident in war, when threats are most severe, interests most imperiled, and resources most obviously stretched. Yet, the key premises of grand strategy—that states must link long-term interests to short- and medium-term policies, that they must prioritize among competing threats and often-contradictory goals—apply no less to the realm of peace than the realm of war.

A sixth point concerns the issue of whether grand strategy has to be formally enunciated and defined to qualify as such. The answer, in a word, is “no.” The term “grand strategy” is a relatively recent one, and the notion that states should explicitly articulate their grand strategies—whether in public or in private—arose more recently still.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while some statesmen do deliberately set out to construct, piece by piece, a logical chain running from interests to threats to policies, foreign policy is often made in a less systematic manner.

Yet, regardless of whether or not a country’s leaders seek to lay out a formal grand strategy, they inevitably engage in grand strategy nonetheless. All countries must make trade-offs between competing interests and priorities. All leaders—consciously or unconsciously, on the basis of reasoned analysis,



pure ideology, or something in between—make judgments about which goals are most important and which threats are most deserving of attention. “All states have a grand strategy,” notes Edward Luttwak, “whether they know it or not.”<sup>12</sup>

All states thus do grand strategy, but many of them do not do it particularly well. “Those who have developed successful grand strategies in the past have been much the exception,” writes noted historian Williamson Murray. “Wars begun with little or no thought of their consequences, assumptions unchallenged in the face of harsh reality, the possibility of second- or third-order effects casually dismissed with the shrug of a shoulder, and idle ignorance substituted for serious consideration have bedeviled the actions of statesmen and generals over the course of recorded history.”<sup>13</sup> This brings us to two additional points about grand strategy: that it is essential to effective statecraft, but it is also immensely challenging to pull off.

### **Why Is Grand Strategy So Important?**

A coherent grand strategy is fundamental to successful statecraft for several reasons. The first of these has to do with the inevitable gap between resources and interests. When it comes to foreign policy, there are simply never enough resources to go around. Money, troops, intelligence assets, time, and other resources are always insufficient to neutralize every threat and exploit every opportunity. Nor are great powers exempt from this dilemma. Expanding interests come with new opportunities and new threats, and even the most powerful countries the modern world has ever seen—the British Empire at its peak; the United States in the wake of World War II and after the Cold

War—frequently struggled to meet the multitude of demands imposed upon them. The prioritizing function of grand strategy is thus essential. If statesmen are to avoid overreach and eventual national decline, they must maintain a clear conception of their core interests and deploy their resources accordingly.<sup>14</sup>

Second, even if great powers can avoid this resource dilemma, the diversity of their interests risks exposing them to distraction and confusion. Great powers—superpowers especially—often have interests in nearly every region of the world, and find themselves dealing with dozens of foreign policy issues from day to day. Even if it were possible to address all of these issues on a case-by-case basis, the various solutions would inevitably come into conflict with one another. For governments lacking a firm grasp of core interests and priorities, there is thus a danger that policy will wander according to the crisis or fashion of the moment. Statecraft will go in multiple, contradictory directions; leaders will succumb to “theateritis”—the tendency to neglect the broader geopolitical significance of a given problem.<sup>15</sup> A coherent grand strategy, by contrast, offers what one scholar calls a “conceptual center of gravity,” an ability to keep fundamental interests squarely in view in dealing with a range of complex and often contradictory demands.<sup>16</sup>

These first two points are closely related to a third, which is, that grand strategy provides statesmen with the “heuristic power” needed to address the insistent demands of global diplomacy.<sup>17</sup> The nature of foreign policy is that it confronts statesmen with challenges for which they have not adequately prepared, or which they have not even considered. In many cases, these challenges must be addressed in days or hours rather than weeks or months—in other words, there is no op-

portunity for prolonged reflection on all aspects of the matter. No grand strategy can offer ready-made solutions to these crises, but performing the intellectual tasks involved in doing grand strategy – defining and prioritizing interests and threats, understanding the extent and limits of a state’s capabilities – can provide statesmen with the basic conceptual backdrop against which to formulate a response.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, grand strategy is crucial because it is so difficult to compensate for flaws and shortcomings therein. Effective statecraft is not just a product of competent grand strategy: it requires efficient execution by the soldiers and diplomats who occupy the lower levels of foreign policy as well. That said, states with a well-crafted grand strategy may be able to overcome or correct mistakes in the daily conduct of military or diplomatic policy, while those with a fundamentally deficient grand strategy will be hard pressed to preserve their core interests over the medium and long term. If statecraft flows from an incoherent grand strategy based on misperceptions of fundamental interests or flawed calculations of what a state’s resources will allow, or if diplomacy and military force are allowed to proceed without guidance from these higher-level assessments, even brilliant tactical performance may ultimately be for naught.<sup>18</sup>

The most notorious example of this phenomenon is Wilhelmine Germany. Before and during World War I, Germany pursued a number of policies that made sense in narrow tactical or operational terms, but neglected larger grand strategic considerations that eventually proved ruinous to the higher interests of the state. The construction of a fleet of blue-water battleships made Germany a leading sea power, but

also ensured the enmity of the one nation—Great Britain—whose naval expenditures Berlin could not hope to match. The Schlieffen Plan was designed to meet the challenge of a two-front conflict with France and Russia, but by requiring German troops to violate Belgian neutrality, it ensured that a wavering Great Britain would enter the struggle as well. The decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in early-1917 was meant to resolve this dilemma by starving Britain into submission, but it was also virtually certain to bring the United States into the conflict. In each case, the imperatives of prudent grand strategy—the need to minimize the number of one’s enemies, the need to ensure that military strategy conformed to the larger purposes of the state—ceded pride of place to lower-level considerations. The consequences were ultimately disastrous.<sup>19</sup>

### **Why Is Grand Strategy So Difficult?**

In many ways, the challenge of grand strategy flows directly from its meaning. As defined in this monograph, grand strategy is an inherently difficult endeavor that will tax the abilities of even the most capacious leader. It requires a holistic view of interests, threats, and resources, as well as an understanding of the multidimensional yet finite nature of power. Grand strategy demands the ability to make sense of a multitude of complicated and confusing international events, and an awareness of how a country’s responses to these events may complement or contradict one another. Doing grand strategy also necessitates the vision to link today’s policies to a country’s highest and most enduring interests, and the willingness to make hard decisions about priorities and trade-offs. In sum,

grand strategy is not simply a struggle against one enemy or another; it is a fight against the complexity, disorder, and distraction that inevitably clutter the global scene. It is bound to be an exacting task, one full of potential pitfalls.

Indeed, if grand strategy is an important pursuit, it can also be a deeply problematic one. Grand strategy has been referred to as an ecological discipline, in that it calls for a holistic perspective on world affairs. Yet, it is also a reductionist discipline, because it impels leaders to impose a sense of order and coherence on a stubbornly complicated international environment. This tendency is unavoidable, of course, but when taken too far, it can also be pernicious. The world is far too complex to be reduced to any single organizing framework. There is thus a fine line between clarity and dogmatism, between a useful heuristic and a distorting myopia. As U.S. officials often found during the Cold War, in fact, too intense a focus on any particular principle or strategy can lock a country into inflexible interpretations of events that are inevitably idiosyncratic. This tension between coherence and rigidity is a constant in the making of grand strategy, even in the best of circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, grand strategy is rarely made in the best of circumstances. Rather, it must be forged by officials who operate under significant constraints and pressure, and who are prone to the same cognitive fallibilities that plague all humans. Like all people, statesmen operate in a world of bounded rather than perfect rationality.<sup>21</sup> Their decisions are shaped by the limits of their own intelligence as well as the potent mixture of values, experience, and ideology that make up their worldview.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, they make these choices in a world of imperfect information, and where conditions

can change rapidly and unpredictably. “The greater our involvement in the world, the more the railroad train which always seems to be coming down the track toward you is likely to hit you,” Henry Kissinger once remarked. “And while the chance that the train will hit you is growing enormously, your ability to deal thoughtfully with issues is of course declining.”<sup>23</sup> Grand strategy cannot, in these circumstances, be a product of pure rationality and total awareness; it derives from a mishmash of cognitive influences and an incomplete understanding of world affairs.

Simply devising a coherent grand strategy is thus challenging enough for most policymakers. Unfortunately, conception represents only half the battle, for there are numerous stumbling blocks to implementation as well. One such obstacle is the bureaucratic system through which any grand strategy must be executed. Bureaucracies are designed to provide expertise and routinization – both of which can be quite helpful to foreign policy. Yet, in the American system as in other systems, bureaucracies can also be ponderous, resistant to change, and hostile to policies – however wise or foolish those policies may be – that seem detrimental to their own organizational interests. As a result, what is desired by a policymaker and what is actually implemented by the bureaucracy can be two very different things.<sup>24</sup> Conflict *between* different bureaucracies within a single government can similarly hinder the formulation and execution of policy. Finally, even if the bureaucracy seeks to implement a leader’s policy faithfully, the process of transmission between the high-level officials and planners who craft a grand strategic concept and the diplomats, soldiers, and other lower-level individuals who carry it out brings with it the risk of distortion. “Even if we

had the most excellent conceptual foundation for an American foreign policy and the greatest mastery of diplomatic method in our external relations," George Kennan once remarked, "I feel we would still find ourselves seriously hampered, as things stand today, by the cumbersomeness of our governmental machinery."<sup>25</sup>

Grand strategists also have to contend with the characteristics of the American political system. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, it is far too simplistic to see democracy solely as an impediment to purposeful statecraft. Walter Russell Mead, for instance, has compellingly argued that democracy is good for the long-term health of grand strategy, because it provides mechanisms for aggregating interests and correcting flawed policies. Similarly, democracy and grand strategy must always go together in the American system, for the simple reason that the highest purpose of the latter should be the preservation of the former.<sup>26</sup>

But even so, the push and pull of democratic politics is very much a mixed blessing when it comes to grand strategy. The diversity of interests within a large nation like the United States can make it difficult to identify a single "national interest."<sup>27</sup> Even if such an interest is defined, the routine features of democratic rule—partisan wrangling, legislative-executive discord, the state of public opinion—can throw the entire process off kilter. Democratic governance may reward statesmen for placing acceptability above effectiveness, and it may punish them for making more enlightened choices.<sup>28</sup> To the extent that a successful grand strategy requires secrecy and surprise, it may prove even more challenging to execute in a system that prizes openness and transparency.

Internal obstacles aside, grand strategy must be implemented in the same tumultuous international environment in which it is formulated. Rarely do events conform to the expectations of even experts on international affairs. More commonly, implementation of policy will be buffeted by a range of surprising and unwelcome developments. A country's actions can be frustrated by those of its enemies; they can also produce blowback in the form of unpredicted (and perhaps unpredictable) third- or fourth-order reactions. Clausewitzian friction is a constant; what that Prussian officer wrote about war is no less applicable to grand strategy:

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war. . . . Countless minor incidents—the kind you can never really foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal.<sup>29</sup>

At best, then, the doing of grand strategy is a daunting task that requires flexibility, resilience, and a capacity for adaptation. The end point of a grand strategy may remain constant, but the route between here and there will have to be adjusted as new threats and opportunities arise. This being the case, grand strategy places a premium not just on leadership and a willingness to look ahead, but on the judgment and wisdom needed to determine whether perseverance, adaptation, or some mixture of the two constitutes the proper route forward.

Yet, this is undeniably a tall order—so tall, in fact, that any number of U.S. officials have questioned whether consistent, purposeful grand strategy is even



possible. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance put the issue squarely in the late 1970s. "Policy is baloney," he said—better to simply deal with world events on a case-by-case basis.<sup>30</sup> Some 15 years later, President Bill Clinton explicitly rejected the notion that grand strategy was a useful concept. "Strategic coherence," he told one adviser, "was largely imposed after the fact by scholars, memoirists and 'the chattering classes'."<sup>31</sup>

These critiques of grand strategy may say as much about the limitations of these particular officials as about the limitations of the concept itself. Still, the fact remains that the dilemmas of grand strategy have long perplexed even the most geopolitically minded and competent of American presidential administrations. Both the importance and the difficulty of this process are evident from a brief examination of the experiences of two such administrations: the Truman administration in the late 1940s and early-1950s, and the Nixon/Ford administrations 2 decades later.

## TRUMAN AND THE "GOLDEN AGE"

The Truman years (1945-53) are often thought of as the golden age of American grand strategy, a time when a determined President and a group of talented subordinates laid down enduring policies for containing Soviet power and stabilizing a shaken global order. Dean Acheson famously (and immodestly) titled his account of these years *Present at the Creation*, while Clark Clifford, another of Truman's advisers, later opined that "we saved Europe, and we saved the world."<sup>32</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, pundits and policymakers alike have similarly described the Truman era as a time of unmatched grand strategic foresight and innovation, and invoked it as a refer-

ence point in debates on present-day foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> A brief review of this period can thus be useful in illuminating the full messiness of Truman-era grand strategy, and in clarifying the insights for our own era.

The basic grand strategic problem of the Cold War flowed directly from the outcome of World War II. The defeat of Germany and Japan opened up massive power vacuums in Europe and East Asia, while also advancing Soviet influence deeper into these regions than ever before. Hopes for continued superpower cooperation soon faded amid a series of bilateral disputes, and by early-1946, U.S. officials were confronted with the prospect of a geopolitical struggle against a ruthless totalitarian regime that seemed well-positioned to exploit the instability of the postwar world. "We have here," wrote George Kennan in his famous Long Telegram, "a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the United States, there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure."<sup>34</sup>

Kennan's Long Telegram, and his later "X Article" in *Foreign Affairs*, laid out the intellectual rationale for the containment policy that would guide the United States for the next 4 decades. The Kremlin was determined to seek the "total destruction of rival power," he argued, but was in no hurry to do so. Badly weakened by World War II, and conscious of the superior overall power of the United States, the Soviets would retreat when met with determined resistance. War could thus be avoided; it should be possible to check Soviet advances through "a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unal-

terable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world." Over the long term, in fact, such a policy would reveal the falsity of Marxist-Leninist dogma, exacerbate the inner rottenness and decrepitude of Kremlin rule, and thereby bring about "either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power."<sup>35</sup> Through calm and patient statecraft, the United States might transcend the Soviet challenge altogether.

Kennan's writings helped crystallize the incipient Cold War consensus in Washington, and provided an intellectual backdrop for a series of moves designed to thwart the spread of Soviet influence—whether actual or merely feared—in 1946 and early 1947. Among other things, the Truman administration confronted the Kremlin over the presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran, lent strong diplomatic support to Turkey in a dispute over Soviet access to the Dardanelles, and took steps to prevent Moscow from participating in the occupation of Japan or gaining control of the entire Korean peninsula. When the cash-strapped United Kingdom (UK) terminated support to Greece (whose government was under assault by communist guerrillas) and Turkey in early-1947, the Truman administration pledged to fill the void, with the President declaring, in universalistic terms, that the United States must henceforth "support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures."<sup>36</sup>

Containment had thus become the organizing principle for U.S. foreign policy. Even into the first months of 1947, however, this determination to hold the line against Moscow had not yet been translated into a coherent grand strategy for attaining that goal. Neither the Long Telegram nor the X Article went be-

yond vague generalities in describing what a policy of containment should actually look like. Means and ends were badly out of alignment, as fears of inflation and pressures from a retrenchment-minded Congress led Truman to slash military expenditures just as his administration was piling up commitments along the Eurasian periphery. "We were spread from hell to breakfast," Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett later recalled, "all around the world."<sup>37</sup> Bureaucratic disarray and interservice rivalry compounded the problem, preventing the emergence of any unified scheme of priorities in the struggle with Moscow. "There has been a notable lack of any central planning on American policy," noted Secretary of the Navy (later Secretary of Defense) James Forrestal in April 1947.<sup>38</sup>

A grand strategy did gradually begin to take shape in 1947-48, primarily under the leadership of Secretary of State George Marshall, Forrestal, Kennan (now head of policy planning at the State Department), and a collection of other second-tier officials. The administration first responded to a dramatic deterioration of social and economic conditions in Western Europe by launching the Marshall Plan in June 1947. The European Recovery Program (ERP), as it was formally known, aimed to use an infusion of U.S. aid to revive self-confidence and economic growth in the region, rehabilitate and reconstruct the western zones of Germany, and thereby avert the prospect of communist gains in the region. In early-1948, Kennan's Policy Planning Staff (PPS) oversaw a similar shift in U.S. policy toward Japan. U.S. authorities largely ended the punitive aspects of the occupation, focusing instead on restoring economic growth and political stability under a conservative, anti-communist leadership. In both cases, the overriding goal of U.S. policy was to

restore a stable global balance by revitalizing forces of resistance in the major industrial areas of Eurasia. Kennan concisely summarized this grand strategy in 1948. "Any world balance of power means first and foremost a balance on the Eurasian land mass," he said. "That balance is unthinkable as long as Germany and Japan remain power vacuums."<sup>39</sup>

As this comment indicates, the grand strategy that developed during 1947-48 was rooted in a determined effort to establish priorities and derive maximum utility from limited resources. As it focused on Western Europe and Japan, the administration also sought to scale down its commitment to exposed or untenable positions, reducing support for Chiang Kai-Shek's corrupt regime in China in late-1947-48 and eventually withdrawing U.S. troops from South Korea as well. It was necessary, Marshall said in 1948, "to conserve our very limited strength and apply it only where it was likely to be most effective."<sup>40</sup> In the same vein, the administration placed primary importance not on rearming to compensate for the Kremlin's conventional superiority in Europe and the Far East, but on using political and economic measures to foster long-term stability in these areas. "The United States had everything which the world needed to restore it to normal and the Russians had nothing – neither capital nor goods nor food," said Forrestal. Provided that the United States retained superior overall power, it could therefore emphasize economic and political reconstruction in the key areas of Eurasia and tolerate otherwise-intimidating asymmetries in the conventional military balance. "As long as we can out produce the world, can control the sea and can strike inland with the atomic bomb, we can assume certain risks otherwise unacceptable," Forrestal commented. "The years

before any possible power can achieve the capability effectively to attack us with weapons of mass destruction are our years of opportunity.”<sup>41</sup>

Over the long term, the benefits of this approach would be substantial. Historians generally agree that the Marshall Plan played a key role in breaking bottlenecks, stabilizing trade, encouraging regional integration, and catalyzing the economic recovery that took hold in the late 1940s and 1950s. The “reverse course” in Japan had a similar effect, acting as the indispensable first step toward decades of growth and stability.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, and in a broader sense, the decision to avoid the high costs associated with a major rearmament campaign lessened the chances of a political blowup at home that might have undercut Truman’s internationalism before it even got off the ground. In this respect, a key advantage of the administration’s grand strategy was that it minimized the pain—economic and political—of American globalism in the crucial early period of the Cold War.

It would take some time for these advantages to become apparent, however, because in early-1948, the geopolitical situation looked as threatening and tenuous as ever. The Marshall Plan would eventually put Western Europe on the road to recovery, but in the short term, it actually touched off a new set of crises. Launching ERP had required Western European governments to take risky steps, like evicting communists from their own governments and acquiescing in the economic revival of West Germany. Not surprisingly, these measures raised tensions with the Soviets, antagonized powerful communist parties in Italy and France, and exacerbated feelings of insecurity throughout Western Europe. Anxieties ran high, essential economic reforms stalled, and the future of

the continent looked ominous indeed. European fears only intensified in 1948, with the Soviet-backed coup in Czechoslovakia and the onset of the Berlin blockade. The Europeans, Marshall told Forrestal and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), were "'completely out of their skin, and sitting on their nerves,' and hope must be recreated in them very soon."<sup>43</sup>

The crisis in Europe showed that while the overall goals of American grand strategy remained sound, the tactics needed adjustment. The Truman administration had not initially planned to make a formal military commitment to Western Europe; the expectation was that economic aid would be sufficient to restore stability. Yet, it was now becoming clear that economic and political reconstruction could proceed only in the climate of security that an American defense guarantee would provide. The crux of the matter, wrote one official in 1948, was that "neither ERP nor military support . . . can achieve success without the other."<sup>44</sup> As a result, the administration found itself assuming a new set of obligations in Europe. It launched a major military assistance program for the region; more significantly still, it agreed to full U.S. participation in a transatlantic military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and pledged to defend Western Europe at the Rhine in case of war. The idea, as Charles Bohlen put it, was to "instill that sense of security in the people which they felt so essential if recovery was to go forward."<sup>45</sup> If it took the nation's first peacetime military alliance to do this, so be it.

Meanwhile, American responsibilities in Asia were also expanding during the late 1940s. With resources stretched thin, U.S. officials had little desire to undertake major commitments on the Asian mainland, but remaining aloof from the area quickly proved impossi-

ble. Revitalizing the Japanese economy meant finding markets for its exports and raw materials for its industries, and Southeast Asia in particular loomed large as a source of both. Japan was "the natural workshop for the Far East," Kennan noted in 1949. "You have the terrific problem of how then the Japanese are going to get along unless they again reopen some sort of empire toward the south."<sup>46</sup> This imperative, in turn, led the Truman administration to become increasingly preoccupied with the prospect that the communist-led Vietminh might come to power in French Indochina. The result was as logical as it would ultimately be tragic. By 1949, the United States was firmly committed to the survival of the French-backed monarchy in Saigon; by the early-1950s, the United States would be paying most of the costs of Paris's war in Indochina. Truman's grand strategy emphasized defending the core industrial areas of Eurasia, but it led to questionable commitments along the periphery as well.<sup>47</sup>

While the liabilities of U.S. involvement in Indochina would become apparent only with time, other strategic dilemmas facing the administration were far more immediate. As America's responsibilities had accumulated in 1948-49, its capabilities had not kept pace. In Western Europe, the administration had pledged to defend the Rhine in wartime, but because Truman was determined to hold military expenditures down, the United States possessed nothing like the conventional military capabilities necessary to fulfill this obligation. "The trouble," Marshall pointed out as early as February 1948, "was that we are playing with fire while we have nothing with which to put it out."<sup>48</sup> American officials continued to believe that the atomic monopoly provided an insurance policy of sorts, but they were aware that this was an increasingly thin reed



to lean on in the event that war broke out by miscalculation or design. As Truman acknowledged, "We have the atomic bomb; but we must recognize the present limitations of our strategic methods for delivering it, and the vast problem of subduing a sprawling empire stretching from Kamchatka to the Skaggerak [sic] with this weapon."<sup>49</sup> Looking back on the period, Acheson (Marshall's successor at State) put it even more bluntly: "Mr. Truman's period of retrenchment in 1948 and 1949 . . . put means out of relation with ends."<sup>50</sup>

The political foundations of American grand strategy were also shakier than they appeared. Between early-1947 and mid-1949, the Truman administration had been blessed with a remarkable degree of bipartisan support for its major policy initiatives. That support owed partially to the administration's assiduous courtship of leading Republicans like Senator Arthur Vandenberg, and also to its use of highly ideological and even Manichean rhetoric to market the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO at home. "The only way we can sell the public on our new policy," wrote one official in early 1947, "is by emphasizing the necessity of holding the line: communism vs. democracy should be the major theme."<sup>51</sup> Such rhetoric served its immediate political purpose, but it also limited the administration's subsequent ability to control the domestic debate. As one scholar has recently noted, "Much of the rhetoric used in the service of ratifying the Marshall Plan—often hyperbolic, apocalyptic, and brazenly anti-Communist—became woven into the cultural milieu, largely to the dismay of American policymakers."<sup>52</sup>

It was in this uncertain climate that the United States absorbed two geopolitical shocks in late 1949. The triumph of communist forces in China in October

had long been anticipated by the Truman administration; yet, it nonetheless had a jarring effect on policy-makers and the American public. Having earlier touted the “communism vs. democracy” line, Truman and his advisers now found it difficult to explain why the “loss” of the world’s most populous country was not a major setback in the struggle against Moscow. Sensing weakness, Republican critics savaged Truman’s China policy, severely limiting his flexibility in dealing with the new regime in Beijing.<sup>53</sup> No less problematic, the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet treaty of friendship and alliance several months later led U.S. officials to fear that China might become a launching pad for efforts to destabilize the entire region. “From our viewpoint,” Acheson commented, “the Soviet Union possesses position of domination in China which it is using to threaten Indochina, push in Malaya, stir up trouble in the Philippines, and now to start trouble in Indonesia.”<sup>54</sup>

More unsettling still was news of the first Soviet atomic test in August 1949. Most U.S. officials believed that Moscow still desired to avoid war, but they worried that an emboldened Joseph Stalin might launch limited probes around the periphery or seek to intimidate Western Europe and Japan into distancing themselves from the United States. “As the Soviet military potential increases relative to that of the United States and its allies,” one intelligence estimate predicted, “the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] will doubtless be willing to take greater risks than before in pursuit of its aims.”<sup>55</sup> The potential for “blackmail,” the JCS told Truman, was “tremendous.”<sup>56</sup> The United States had lost a key strategic advantage, and the policy of limited rearmament now seemed unacceptably dangerous.

These developments thus set in train another key shift in U.S. strategy. In early-1950, Truman approved the development of thermonuclear weapons, and called for a comprehensive review of national security policy. The result, known as National Security Council (NSC)-68, endorsed the overall goals of American policy, but it argued that the United States could secure a favorable balance of global power only through the sort of comprehensive rearmament program that Truman had so far avoided. "Without superior aggregate military strength," wrote Paul Nitze, the primary drafter of the document, "a policy of containment . . . is no more than a policy of bluff."<sup>57</sup> The United States needed the capabilities to make good on its proliferating global commitments, and to confront the Kremlin with superior strength at every turn. "The United States and the Soviet Union are engaged in a struggle for preponderant power," he later wrote. "To seek less than preponderant power would be to opt for defeat."<sup>58</sup> To achieve this level of power, Nitze estimated, defense expenditures would have to rise roughly threefold from their current level of less than \$15 billion annually.

Truman initially hesitated to endorse this amount of defense spending, but his reluctance was overcome by the onset of the Korean War in June 1950. U.S. officials had not considered the defense of South Korea to be a vital interest in the period prior to the invasion; American troops had been withdrawn in 1949, Pentagon war plans envisioned the abandonment of the peninsula in the event of global conflict, and Acheson had placed Korea outside the U.S. "defensive perimeter" in the Pacific in his speech to the National Press Club in early 1950. Yet, given the streak of Soviet successes in the run-up to Korea, Truman and his advisers

feared that a failure to act would have disastrous psychological consequences around the world. "We must draw the line somewhere," said JCS Chairman Omar Bradley.<sup>59</sup> Truman agreed, dispatching U.S. forces to meet the invasion. Amid an unexpected crisis, the administration found itself recommitting to a position it had earlier sought to discard.

The Korean War also cleared the way for the approval of NSC-68 and a variety of measures meant to achieve the preponderant power that Nitze sought. Defense spending soared from an expected \$13.5 billion to over \$48 billion during fiscal year 1951. NATO became an integrated military structure, as Truman named Dwight Eisenhower supreme commander of the alliance and made preparations to send at least four additional divisions, with accompanying tactical airpower, to Western Europe. The administration also began to seek West German rearmament under NATO auspices, took steps toward a peace treaty and security alliance with Japan, increased its aid to the French in Indochina, and used naval forces to neutralize the Taiwan Strait and ensure the survival of Nationalist forces on that island. The basic ethos of U.S. policy was best captured by Acheson in late 1950:

It would not be too much if we had all the troops the military want. If we had all of the things that our European allies want it would not be too much. If we had a system for full mobilization it would not be too much. Secretary Acheson said that how we get there he doesn't know, but he feels that the danger couldn't be greater than it is.<sup>60</sup>

As Melvyn Leffler observed, U.S. grand strategy had come to emphasize waging limited war in Korea while seeking what Acheson called "situations of strength" in Europe and other key theaters.<sup>61</sup>

In the overheated climate of mid- and late-1950, however, the administration made a major geopolitical blunder. Truman, Acheson, and other top officials understood that the United States should not risk a wider war in Korea before the military buildup associated with NSC-68 had taken full effect. Yet following Douglas MacArthur's dramatic success at Inchon, Korea, in September, Truman nonetheless permitted his field commander to seek the destruction of enemy forces and the reunification of the peninsula rather than a return to the status quo ante. Anything less than full victory, administration officials feared, would represent "a policy of appeasement" at a time when McCarthyism was in full flower, and would constitute a forsaken chance to deal a sharp blow to world communism. "If this is not done," wrote one State Department official, "the people of Korea will lose all faith in the courage, intelligence, and morality of the United States. And I, for one, would not blame them."<sup>62</sup> The upshot was a massive Chinese intervention in November 1950, resulting in one of the worst military setbacks in American history and leading to fears that nuclear—even global—war might be in the offing.

The Truman administration's response to this setback demonstrated both the promise and perils of its grand strategy. Truman, Acheson, and Bradley wisely rejected MacArthur's call to expand the war into China, instead focusing American energies on a slew of initiatives to strengthen the broader U.S. geopolitical position. "We should not think in terms of Korea alone," Acheson insisted, "but in world-wide terms and what we face around the world, principally in Europe."<sup>63</sup> The administration pushed ahead with plans for German rearmament, expanded NATO to include

Greece and Turkey, and signed defense pacts with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. The U.S. Army grew by nearly 1 million personnel and 10 divisions; the Navy added some 450 ships and over 400,000 sailors; the Air Force roughly doubled in size; the Marine Corps grew from 74,000 to 246,000 personnel. The U.S. atomic arsenal increased from 299 weapons at the end of 1950 to 841 by 1952, giving Washington a 17-to-1 advantage in nuclear arms.<sup>64</sup> By early 1953, Truman had assembled a position of great geopolitical strength and effectively ensured that the key geostrategic regions of Western Europe and East Asia would remain tightly linked to the United States.

Yet, the price of all this was significant. Truman's policy of limited war left the United States mired in a bloody conflict that placed great strain on American resources. Korea, commented Marshall (now Secretary of Defense) in 1951, was "a great inconvenience . . . a very heavy drain on us." There were also questions as to how long the United States could afford the massive military buildup prescribed by NSC-68. "Our resources are not inexhaustible," Truman lamented in 1952. "We can't go on like this."<sup>65</sup> Nitze and Acheson disagreed, but most scholars have since concluded that the combination of high taxes, wage and price controls, and budget deficits that NSC-68 entailed would have been economically unsustainable over the long run. In any case, they were politically unsustainable in the short and medium term. Eisenhower called for a balanced budget and defense cuts upon taking office in 1953, and Truman left the White House as one of the least popular Presidents in modern history. The "golden age," in other words, did not appear so golden at the time.<sup>66</sup>

So what can all of this tell us about Truman-era grand strategy, and about the broader challenges of grand strategy as a national endeavor? First, it is clear that there was real creativity, wisdom, and purpose in American policy during the Truman years. Relatively early on, the administration came to two fundamental grand strategic insights that made up the intellectual core of containment: the realization that there was a middle ground between appeasement and war, and the idea that checking Soviet advances meant, first and foremost, establishing a favorable balance of power in Europe and East Asia. The United States subsequently constructed that balance through seminal initiatives like the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the rehabilitation of former enemies in West Germany and Japan. It then defended that balance through the rearmament program and political-military initiatives undertaken in response to the Korean War and NSC-68. In this sense, grand strategy did its job: it provided the intellectual ballast that allowed Truman to navigate the dangers of the early-Cold War.

Yet, Truman-era grand strategy was also a messy affair, and in some cases a deeply problematic one as well. Containment did not spring forth fully formed from the pen of George Kennan; it was an idea whose practical implications had to be worked out amid the myriad crises and shocks of the day. That working-out process, in turn, could be quite vexing for the Truman administration. The President and his advisers continually struggled to reconcile America's growing military and political commitments with its limited capabilities, and to mobilize domestic support without overheating the Cold War climate. They occasionally found it difficult to maintain a sense of proportion in meeting the challenge of the moment — as their short-

sighted expansion of the Korean War illustrated – and, no less so, to contain the Soviet Union without taking on losing propositions like a colonial conflict in Indochina. The Truman era was indeed a period of grand strategic innovation and purpose, but it was also one of frequent frustration and difficulty.

This critique of Truman’s grand strategy should not be taken too far, for the administration made real strides toward accomplishing its most essential goal – the creation of an advantageous configuration of power in Eurasia.<sup>67</sup> What these issues suggest, rather, is that grand strategy was in the 1940s and 1950s what it remains today – a disorderly, iterative process that is never easy and demands frequent recalibration if it is to work at all. It is a process that may originate in a flash of geopolitical insight *a la* Kennan, but those insights must then be translated into action amongst the disruptions, fears, and crises that perpetually characterize both domestic and foreign affairs. This was something that Mr. X himself understood. “The purposes of foreign policy will always be relative to a moving stream of events,” he wrote in 1948. “Thus, any formula for U.S. foreign policy objectives can only be an indication of direction, not of final destination.”<sup>68</sup> It was an apt description of Truman-era grand strategy, and of the difficulties of grand strategy writ large.

## **THE HEROIC STATESMAN: GRAND STRATEGY IN THE KISSINGER YEARS**

If the Truman administration is generally credited with building the postwar order, the Nixon and Ford administrations had the misfortune of governing as that order was coming undone. Containment was in



crisis in the late 1960s, with the Soviets approaching nuclear parity and Communist China emerging as a great power in its own right. Instability was rampant in the Third World, and many of America's alliances were under strain. On top of all this, there was the Vietnam War, which by 1969 had laid bare the limits of American power and caused a massive crisis of authority at home. The "problem we face," wrote National Security Adviser (and later Secretary of State) Henry Kissinger, was "the generally deteriorating strategic position of the United States during the past decade."<sup>69</sup>

It was, in many ways, a situation nicely tailored to Kissinger's own ambitions. From 1969 to 1977, Kissinger served as the driving intellectual force behind American grand strategy.<sup>70</sup> He was guided in this task by geopolitical instincts honed from nearly 2 decades of studying the major problems of Cold War foreign policy, and by an abiding faith in the power of inspired statesmanship. Kissinger believed that great leaders need not simply react to the crises they confronted or watch as their nations sank into decline. Through bold and creative policies, they could transcend these trials and seize hold of the course of history. "Anyone wishing to affect events must be opportunist to some extent," Kissinger observed in 1968. "The real distinction is between those who adapt their purposes to reality and those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes."<sup>71</sup> This, in Kissinger's view, was the essence of grand strategy—not simply matching means to ends, but waging the more profound struggle to "shape the currents of our time in the light of our values."<sup>72</sup>

Guided by this ethos, the Nixon and Ford administrations thus pursued something that was very much

a *grand* strategy. As Kissinger envisioned it, the United States would use innovative diplomacy to draw its chief rivals into a more advantageous triangular balance, devolve responsibility while maintaining credibility, and ultimately position itself as the pivot of a more stable global order. The challenge, he commented during the 1970s, was “to build a new building while tearing down the old beams and not letting the structure collapse.”<sup>73</sup> Through dynamic statecraft, America would transcend its moment of relative decline.

The cornerstone of this grand strategy was to be a revamped relationship with the great powers. With respect to the Soviet Union, Kissinger and Nixon did not so much abandon containment as modify it. They believed that, in an age of growing Soviet power, the key to dealing with Moscow was to provide it with a mixture of positive and negative inducements for behaving with restraint. This was the logic behind the policies collectively known as “*détente*.” Strategic arms talks would satisfy Soviet desires for nuclear parity while also imposing limits on the Kremlin buildup. Negotiations over superpower flashpoints like Berlin would reduce tensions and lower the potential for crises. Offering Moscow trade credits and most-favored-nation (MFN) status would give Kremlin officials reason to behave well and pave the way for Moscow’s eventual integration into the global economy. Tying these policies together was the concept of “linkage,” or the idea that the United States would demonstrate progress on any one of these issues contingent on across-the-board Soviet restraint. The Soviets “cannot expect to reap the benefits of cooperation in one area while seeking to take advantage of tension or confrontation elsewhere,” Kissinger explained.<sup>74</sup> The relative

power balance might be shifting, Kissinger believed, but a precise structuring of Moscow's incentives could still allow the United States to exert great influence over Soviet behavior.

The counterpart to U.S.-Soviet détente was a parallel opening to China. During the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969, the administration made clear that it would not condone a larger Soviet war against China, and Nixon and Kissinger subsequently began diplomatic overtures to Beijing. These maneuvers were based on a straightforward calculation that it would be disastrous to allow Moscow to again dominate the international communist movement, and also on the more subtle and ambitious thesis that a triangular balance of power — featuring the United States, the Soviet Union, and China — would be more stable and advantageous for the United States. As long as Washington maintained decent bilateral ties with China and Moscow, both communist powers would have to contemplate an American partnership with a dangerous rival, and both would therefore need to make their own arrangements with the United States. “In a subtle triangle of relations between Washington, Beijing, and Moscow,” Kissinger had written in 1968, “we improve the possibilities of accommodations with each as we increase our options toward both.”<sup>75</sup> In an age of limited resources, the United States would shape the international environment through non-ideological diplomacy rather than raw power.

Kissinger brought an equally creative approach to the second aspect of his grand strategy — getting out of Vietnam. Kissinger and Nixon understood that Vietnam was a strategic disaster, but they also believed that a precipitous withdrawal would be devastating to U.S. credibility. “In the conduct of long range Ameri-

can policy throughout the world," Kissinger commented, "it was important that we not be confounded by a fifth rate agricultural power."<sup>76</sup> Between 1969 and 1972, the administration thus conducted a phased withdrawal from South Vietnam, while using great-power diplomacy and displays of American military might to encourage Hanoi to agree to a compromise settlement. In Beijing and Moscow, Kissinger told his interlocutors that they must push Hanoi toward a peace deal or endanger their incipient *détentes* with the United States.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, the administration employed sharp, unpredictable military action to punish North Vietnam and signal to Beijing, Moscow, and Hanoi that the war might spin out of control. The bombing and eventual incursions into Cambodia and Laos fit this mold; so did Nixon's decision to bomb Hanoi and mine Haiphong harbor in 1972. By synchronizing negotiations with tactical military escalation, Kissinger and Nixon hoped, the United States might still find Hanoi's "breaking point" and salvage an acceptable outcome in Southeast Asia.<sup>78</sup>

The war in Vietnam was closely related to the third component of Kissinger's grand strategy, which consisted of efforts to decrease America's burdens along the global periphery without endangering the overall stability of the international order. As in Vietnam, the administration took a two-pronged approach to this task. On the one side, Nixon and Kissinger (and later Ford) used military sales, economic assistance, and other indirect support to cultivate anti-communist "regional sheriffs"—Israel, Iran, Indonesia, Brazil, and others—who could assume greater responsibility for policing the Third World.<sup>79</sup> On the other side, they used sharp, sometimes dramatic action to demonstrate that the United States would not allow the

international order to unravel completely. The United States had to retrench, Kissinger believed, but it also had to “prevent a complete collapse of the world’s psychological balance of power.”<sup>80</sup>

This latter consideration underlay a series of provocative, even aggressive policies in the Third World. Beginning in 1970, the administration sought to overthrow Salvador Allende’s elected socialist government in Chile, on grounds that a failure to do so would be seen “as indifference or impotence in the face of clearly adverse developments in a region long considered our sphere of influence.”<sup>81</sup> More dramatic still was U.S. policy during the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. If Egypt and Syria – two Soviet clients – were allowed to defeat America’s ally Israel, Kissinger commented, it “would have disastrous consequences not only there but elsewhere, and would encourage adventurism on a global scale.”<sup>82</sup> The U.S. response to the Arab surprise attack was striking in its scope and risk. After first providing Israel with a massive military resupply, and then encouraging it to press the advantage against battered Arab armies (even to the point of violating a United Nations-sponsored ceasefire), the administration ordered a global nuclear alert to deter Moscow from interceding. At a time of global transition and U.S. retrenchment, Kissinger believed that a bold—even dangerous—approach to crisis management was essential.<sup>83</sup>

Tying all of these policies together was a fourth and final component of Kissinger-era statecraft—its emphasis on extreme secrecy and centralization of power. Kissinger and Nixon believed that their grand strategy could not succeed unless they were able to operate outside the normal constraints of the American system. “The bureaucracy is the curse of the mod-

ern state," Kissinger commented in 1970.<sup>84</sup> "One cannot put a negotiation before 45 members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee," he said on another occasion.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, he and Nixon sought to keep many of their most significant moves—the opening to China, the destabilization of Chile, the bombing of Laos and Cambodia—hidden from public view. They disdained and even obstructed congressional oversight of foreign policy, instructing subordinates to stonewall on issues like human rights. Finally, they conducted high-level talks with the Soviets, Chinese, and North Vietnamese through backchannels kept secret even from the State Department, and attempted to shut out many of the administration's most senior officials—Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Richard Helms, the JCS—from the policy process. "Dr. Kissinger alone enjoys both the intimate day-to-day contact and confidence of the President," one JCS staffer commented ruefully in 1970.<sup>86</sup> In the Nixon administration, policy took on a conspiratorial tone.

For a time, this grand strategy produced impressive results. Triangular diplomacy was particularly well-suited to the climate of international politics in the early 1970s. As Kissinger and Nixon had hoped, Chinese insecurity vis-à-vis the Soviet Union facilitated Sino-American ties, leading to a rapprochement that dramatically improved an overtaxed U.S. global position. While Kissinger later exaggerated the degree to which the "China card" had influenced U.S.-Soviet relations, Moscow did hasten to achieve its own détente after it learned of the American opening to Beijing.<sup>87</sup> The United States was "building a new strategic alignment of forces in international politics in Asia and

in the world as a whole," Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin noted in early 1972, and Moscow needed to keep pace.<sup>88</sup> By mid-1972, Nixon and Kissinger had finalized the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) and Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) agreements with the Soviet Union, concluded an accord that removed Berlin as a superpower flashpoint, and inked another that laid the basis for expanded East-West commerce. With respect to great-power relations, Nixon and Kissinger's grand strategy looked to be well on track.

The regional-sheriff policy also paid some initial dividends. This approach worked well in the Persian Gulf, as the Shah's Iran kept pressure on the Soviet-backed regime in Iraq and used U.S.-supplied military equipment to stifle a leftist revolt in Oman. "The Shah is a tough, mean guy," Kissinger told Ford. "But he is our real friend."<sup>89</sup> The situation was similar in Latin America, where Brazil's military government advanced U.S. interests by targeting leftist movements at home and abroad. In 1971, the Brazilian military conspired with Bolivian conservatives to overthrow the left-leaning government in La Paz, and stationed thousands of troops on the Uruguayan border in case a popular front organization took power via elections in that country.<sup>90</sup> Following the U.S.-backed coup in Chile in 1973, Augusto Pinochet quickly emerged as another loyal ally in the region. As Kissinger had hoped, friendly dictators combated regional instability and relieved the strain on American resources.

Kissinger scored an even-more-striking success in 1973, during and after the Yom Kippur War. By strongly supporting Israel while also keeping an open line with Egypt, the Nixon administration put itself in a strong position to shape the postwar settlement. Although Nixon himself was increasingly consumed

by Watergate, Kissinger subsequently used this opportunity to excellent effect. Shuttling between Jerusalem, Cairo, and Damascus, he gradually produced agreements that achieved the disengagement of Israeli and Arab forces, initiated the process by which Egypt and Israel would eventually make peace, and – most important of all – rendered Moscow largely irrelevant to regional negotiations. The accords cemented Kissinger’s reputation as a master of international diplomacy, and served for him as confirmation that the gifted statesman could indeed see beyond the curve of history and impose his own purpose on events. “If one studies our tactics carefully and thoughtfully,” he told Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, “one must come to the conclusion that our way of dealing with a crisis is to try to judge the crest of the crisis and try to anticipate the events that are happening and thereby dominate them.”<sup>91</sup>

The methods of Kissinger’s grand strategy – particularly secrecy and the centralization of power – played a key role in many of these accomplishments. As Dobrynin later attested, the existence of a secure backchannel was essential in developing détente and bringing SALT to a conclusion. “Without that channel,” he later wrote, “it would hardly have been possible to reach many key agreements in a timely manner or to eliminate dangerous tensions that arose periodically.”<sup>92</sup> Similarly, even Kissinger’s critics acknowledged that secrecy and personal diplomacy were crucial to moving toward accommodation with Beijing without exposing the process to interference by actors – the Taiwan lobby, U.S. allies in Asia, Soviet experts in the State Department – with an interest in disrupting it.<sup>93</sup> Finally, Kissinger’s ability to act with “quasi-presidential” authority in 1973-74 allowed him



to tie together the various implements of American power in managing the Yom Kippur War and choreographing the delicate disengagement talks that followed.<sup>94</sup>

Yet, if these successes seemed to vindicate both the methods and concepts of Kissinger's grand strategy, other events threw those methods and concepts into doubt. For all their creativity, Nixon and Kissinger could not retrieve victory from defeat in Vietnam; the best they could do was to reach a deeply flawed peace agreement that quickly collapsed, taking South Vietnam with it. Kissinger struggled to master unexpected challenges that emerged during the 1970s, as issues like human rights and petro-politics tested his worldview. Détente was also on the rocks by mid-decade, with follow-on arms control negotiations stalled and the Soviets supporting Marxist revolutionary movements in Third World locales such as Angola. By the time Kissinger left office in early-1977, his grand strategy was clearly running out of gas.

These failures and disappointments reflected numerous factors, not all of which can be discussed in detail here. There was, however, a common theme that ran through many of Kissinger's travails. As noted above, Kissinger was taken with the "heroic" style of leadership. He believed that great statesmen could overcome the challenges their societies confronted through sheer creativity and brilliance, provided they were given the decisive authority necessary to turn wisdom into policy. As one biographer put it, "Kissinger's strategy depended on an almost mythic grandmaster. . . . He allocated to the statesman omniscient knowledge and initiative."<sup>95</sup> Kissinger was talented enough to make this approach work for a time, as his numerous accomplishments showed.

As the 1970s went on, however, it became clear that this performance could not be sustained. There were simply limits to what even creative statecraft could accomplish in a complex and dynamic world, and the methods of Kissinger's grand strategy eventually ran into resistance as well.

These problems confounded Kissinger in a variety of settings during the 1970s. In Vietnam, triangular diplomacy and tactical escalation did eventually make Hanoi more forthcoming in the secret peace negotiations, which eventually produced the Paris Accords of early-1973. But these tactics could not compel Moscow and Beijing to cease their vital material support for the North, which was essential if Kissinger's plan for success was to work. (As it happened, both the Soviets and the Chinese, worried about losing influence vis-à-vis one another, actually *increased* their aid to Hanoi during the crucial years in the early-1970s.<sup>96</sup>) Nor could these tactics resolve the two essentially insoluble problems the administration faced—the underlying weakness of the Saigon regime and the increasing war-weariness of the American people. Together, these factors ensured that Nixon and Kissinger continued to fight a losing battle in Vietnam, and they eventually acknowledged as much by settling for a “decent interval” between a peace agreement and the ultimate defeat of the regime in Saigon. “We want a decent interval,” Kissinger wrote on a briefing book for the 1971 trip to China. “You have our assurance.”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, the Paris Accords were sharply tilted against the long-term survival of the Saigon regime—among other things, they allowed North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops to remain in place in the South—as the subsequent course of the war soon showed.

Détente ran into similar problems as the 1970s went on. Détente was premised on the idea that the United States could use a precise balance of carrots—particularly, trade incentives—and sticks to regulate Soviet behavior. Yet, maintaining this balance required keeping firm control of the policy process, and by the mid-1970s congressional opposition had made this impossible. Kissinger was partially to blame for this, as his condescending attitude toward Congress did him no favors, and his “consultation” with key congressional figures was often late and superficial. No less problematic, the cleavages caused by Vietnam and Watergate shattered the domestic consensus behind détente and spurred a full-fledged revolt against the very executive authority that was so central to the administration’s grand strategy. The consequences of this atmosphere became clear in 1974-75. A group of neo-conservative senators led by Henry Jackson scuttled a major U.S.-Soviet trade agreement that Kissinger had viewed as a key pillar of détente, and then a bipartisan majority in the House terminated funding for a covert operation meant to thwart Soviet- and Cuban-backed rebels from winning a civil war in Angola. “We are being deprived of both the carrot and the stick,” Kissinger lamented.<sup>98</sup>

Détente also struggled because Kissinger overestimated the degree to which he could influence the Soviet Union. Contrary to what he had hoped, the Brezhnev government was not willing to accept the key premise of linkage: that Moscow had to show restraint in all areas in order to gain American cooperation in any. At a time when Soviet power was on the rise, Brezhnev and his aides perceived détente not as a guarantee of the global status quo, but as a way of achieving international legitimacy, limiting the dan-

gers of war, and paving the way for advances in other areas—particularly the Third World. The sense in the Kremlin, one official later recalled, was that “the world was turning in our direction.”<sup>99</sup> The result was that the mid-1970s saw Moscow become more, rather than less, assertive in trying to shape the outcomes of Third World revolutions, even as it negotiated with the United States on arms control and other issues. With the global balance shifting, it was beyond Kissinger’s power to set the terms of world order.

In many ways, in fact, the events of this period showed how difficult it could be for even the most astute statesman to stay ahead of the curve in international affairs. Kissinger considered the handling of the Yom Kippur War to be one of his great triumphs, but an unforeseen consequence of that episode was the Arab oil embargo, which led to a fourfold rise in prices and severe economic distress in the West. While petro-states like Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and Iran enjoyed unprecedented profits and a new sense of global influence, the United States and its major allies experienced high inflation and depressed growth. The crisis upended Kissinger’s assumptions about the sources of global power, and left him scrambling to devise a response. “I’m convinced that the biggest problem we face now is possible economic collapse,” he said, “fall of the western world.”<sup>100</sup> In the end, the consequences were not as dramatic as Kissinger feared, but they nonetheless illustrated how unexpected challenges can buffet even a carefully crafted grand strategy.

The same could be said of Kissinger’s dealings with the growing human rights movement during the mid-1970s. By 1974-75, U.S. ties to Pinochet, the Brazilian generals, and other authoritarian rulers had come under fire from human rights activists and liber-

al congressmen and senators. Viewing human rights as a distraction, Kissinger essentially sought to ignore the problem, insisting that it was improper for the legislative branch to interfere with productive diplomatic alliances. "My position . . . [is that] I don't yield to Congress on matters of principle," he said.<sup>101</sup> At a time of growing congressional assertiveness, however, this high-handed stance was counterproductive. Representative Donald Fraser and his allies passed legislation that linked foreign aid allotments to human rights performance, compelled the State Department to issue reports on rights abuses in countries that received American assistance, and reduced or terminated U.S. aid to Santiago, Buenos Aires, and other capitals.<sup>102</sup> By late-1976, Kissinger's Third World partnerships were increasingly difficult to maintain.

As the course of *détente* and the rise of the human rights issue demonstrated, the methods of Kissinger's grand strategy became steadily more problematic as the Nixon-Ford years went on. As discussed previously, Kissinger reaped enough success to show that his secretive *modus operandi* had its utility. In the end, though, the conspiratorial style of grand strategy caused as many problems as it solved. It created a thoroughly dysfunctional climate within government, as Kissinger and Nixon waged a permanent campaign against the agencies that were meant to serve the President. It led to a sort of low-intensity warfare between Kissinger and other Cabinet heads—particularly Laird and his successors, James Schlesinger and Donald Rumsfeld—who resorted to leaks, intentional delays, and other methods of obstructing the decisionmaking process. It also deprived top officials of expertise and information from the bureaucracy. This liability repeatedly marred Kissinger's

er's dealings with Southeast Asia between 1969 and 1971, when he and Nixon shut out State Department and intelligence officials who might have warned that attacking Laos and Cambodia would do little to improve the military situation but much to destabilize these countries.<sup>103</sup>

Finally, the reliance on secrecy eventually became self-defeating in a political sense. As noted previously, Kissinger's methods alienated congresspersons and senators whose cooperation he needed. His style was also badly out of sync with the national mood in the mid-1970s. During a period when many Americans were determined to rein in the executive secrecy and power that had contributed to the disasters of Vietnam and Watergate, Kissinger and the Presidents he served seemed to be replicating — indeed, intensifying — these practices. Sure enough, when certain of the administration's secret pursuits — the bombing of Cambodia and the destabilization of Chile and other countries — came to light through news media reports and congressional inquiries, they fed a growing disillusionment with American policy. As Jimmy Carter charged during the 1976 campaign, Kissinger was pursuing “a kind of secretive, ‘Lone Ranger’ foreign policy, a one-man policy of international adventure.”<sup>104</sup> By the time Kissinger left office in early 1977, both his methods and his policies had come under severe strain.

There are many insights to be drawn from Kissinger's experience, but two principal ones stand out. The first is that seeking to skirt the domestic and institutional constraints on grand strategy is inevitably a double-edged sword. Concentrating power and avoiding public oversight permitted great boldness and dexterity during the Kissinger era, and these techniques were central to some of the Nixon administration's greatest achievements. But the level of secrecy

and concentrated power that Kissinger and Nixon desired could not long be sustained, for it clashed too sharply with the way that the American system was meant to operate. The result was an eventual backlash both within and outside of government, and a growing sense – nicely captured by Carter during the 1976 presidential campaign – that American policy had come loose from its democratic moorings. When it comes to grand strategy, working within the strictures of the American system can be quite difficult. As Kissinger discovered, however, trying to circumvent or ignore those strictures can also be deeply problematic.

The second and related insight is that there is inevitably a limit to what even a bold and audacious grand strategy can accomplish. Kissinger's experience was, in some ways, a testament to the potential of grand strategy, for it showed what purposeful statecraft could achieve, even at a time of relative national decline. In the end, though, Kissinger's concepts too often ran up against domestic political constraints, the actions of opponents and rivals, and the general stubbornness and unpredictability of a world in which U.S. power was no longer unchallengeably ascendant. Grand strategy, then, was no panacea. In a difficult global environment, even innovative ideas and extraordinary cleverness could take Kissinger only so far.

## **IMPLICATIONS: GRAND STRATEGY AS A NATIONAL ENDEAVOR**

The Truman and Kissinger eras represent only a small slice of the history of U.S. grand strategy, but they nonetheless suffice to show both the importance and the difficulty of that undertaking. As we look

toward the future, there is little reason to think that grand strategy will become either easier or less imperative. The United States now confronts an increasingly fluid international environment in which there is no overarching threat to focus its energies, but rather a variety of lesser but still intimidating challenges—international terrorism, the rise of China, nuclear proliferation, instability in the greater Middle East, the prospect of economic exhaustion, and others—that compete for attention and resources. Those resources, in turn, seem far scarcer than they did just a decade ago. These factors will both demand and complicate the doing of grand strategy; the fact that this task will have to be performed in a highly polarized political climate at home will only add to the challenge. The United States will certainly need a coherent grand strategy in the coming years, but whether it can produce and sustain one remains to be seen.

What follows are six very basic suggestions for how American leaders might approach that task. These suggestions are not intended to provide answers to specific policy problems, or to advocate any particular grand strategy. They are meant simply as a set of guidelines for thinking about present-day grand strategy and the challenges it poses.

## **1. There Is No Good Alternative to Grand Strategy.**

Given the growing complexity of the global order, a number of prominent observers have suggested in recent years that grand strategy is itself an anachronism. In an era in which there is no single, obvious theme around which to organize American policy, they contend, grand strategy has become a quixotic and even pernicious pursuit.<sup>105</sup> This argument has



some merit. As discussed above, the difficulties and drawbacks of grand strategy are undeniable. Moreover, the past few years have been replete with events that have challenged longstanding assumptions, upended existing policies, and sent strategic planners back to the drawing board—the Iraq war, the Arab Spring, the continuing world economic crisis, and others. “Given the divisions and uncertainties of the contemporary environment,” notes Stephen Krasner, “it is impossible to frame a responsible grand strategy.”<sup>106</sup> Given that Krasner is a former director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, his skepticism is all the more striking.

Krasner may be right, but it is hard to imagine that deliberately avoiding grand strategy offers a better alternative. “Strategic nihilism” will not, after all, allow the United States to avoid the dilemmas that make grand strategy so difficult; it will only exacerbate the confusion and contradictions within American policy.<sup>107</sup> And even if it is impossible to formulate and fully implement a coherent grand strategy, doing the leg-work associated with this task will still be rewarding. As Dwight Eisenhower liked to say, “The plans are nothing, but the planning is everything.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, the simple *doing* of grand strategy can itself serve a variety of purposes. It can give policymakers a firmer understanding of priorities and interests. It can force them to think systematically about what American resources will and will not permit. Most important, doing grand strategy can provide an overall sense of direction, a sort of intellectual anchor amid the geopolitical storms. None of this will obviate recalibration and even improvisation. But it can increase the chances that these adjustments will be made intelligently, in ways that are more congruent than not with longer-term national objectives. Policymakers would be wise

to be skeptical about grand strategy, but they would be foolish to dispense with it altogether.

## **2. Start with First Principles.**

Grand strategy can only be valuable, however, only if policymakers are willing to begin with the basics. It is a truism that grand strategy is about setting priorities and differentiating between the essential and the merely important. In practice, however, this often proves surprisingly difficult to do. “Vital” interests tend to expand along with a state’s power; expanding interests, in turn, bring new threats and temptations. It is easy, in these circumstances, for hierarchies of interests and threats to become blurred or collapse altogether. This was the problem that the Clinton administration ran into in dealing with an uncertain international environment during the 1990s. “We do have a set of priorities that have been established by Presidential Decision Directive that basically looks at the world and says that there are 10 or 15 things that matter most to American security,” Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 1997. Tenet (and presumably Clinton) neglected to consider that having 15 top priorities was probably equivalent to having zero top priorities, and this confusion was often evident in the Clinton-era foreign policy.<sup>109</sup>

The need for prioritization has become far more pressing since Clinton’s time in the White House. As Leslie Gelb has written, American leaders “must either choose or lose.”<sup>110</sup> The past decade has shown that even hyperpowers have to deal with resource constraints, and in light of current fiscal and political realities, it seems likely that spending on national security programs will contract in the coming years.

If American grand strategy is to be effective in these conditions, U.S. officials will have to go back to first principles. They will need to consider whether American security can be ensured only through a strategy of global primacy, or whether a more parsimonious approach like “offshore balancing” can do the job. More fundamentally still, officials will need to confront hard questions about which interests are truly vital and what threats demand most attention, and they will need to use these priorities as a guide in deciding how – and whether – to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. To do otherwise is to risk geopolitical exhaustion and domestic disillusionment, neither of which will be conducive to prudent policy over the long run.

### **3. Think of Grand Strategy as a Process, Not an Unalterable Blueprint.**

None of this is to say that grand strategy should be thought of as an immutable blueprint from which policy must never deviate. In public parlance, grand strategy is too often associated with the promulgation of official “doctrines,” pronouncements that lay down – in advance – what the American response will be to a specified set of circumstances.<sup>111</sup> Doctrines certainly have their uses – they signal national resolve and provide domestic and international observers with an easily understandable expression of U.S. goals – but grand strategy should be something different.

Because foreign policy deals with a dynamic world, recalibration and adaptation are essential to any good grand strategy. As we have seen, the “golden age” of American grand strategy was characterized by repeated reassessments of what mix of means and commit-

ments was required to contain Soviet power, even as that overarching goal remained unchanged. Similarly, Eisenhower – another President known for his grand strategic competence – had his administration’s major planning papers revised almost annually to ensure that U.S. policies remained consistent with his over-all goals and priorities. As Eisenhower understood, grand strategy required a firm sense of purpose, but significant tactical flexibility as well.

The same is true today. “Real strategy,” note two observers, “is made in real time.”<sup>112</sup> Grand strategy should start with systematic planning, the setting of goals and priorities, and the outlining of a realistic course of action for realizing those objectives. The time is ripe for a new Operation SOLARIUM-style exercise, a broad-based examination meant to tackle just these issues. But as was the case with the original Operation SOLARIUM, the subsequent progression of events will inevitably require that the initial road-map be revised, assumptions reconsidered, and new routes plotted for getting from here to there.<sup>113</sup> Grand strategy must therefore be seen as an iterative process, one that involves processing feedback and correcting course when necessary, all the while keeping core interests in view.

#### **4. Bring Planners and Operators Together.**

As much of the foregoing indicates, one of the central difficulties of grand strategy is linking the long-term goals set by planners to the short- and medium-term actions that operators can reasonably take to deal with the crisis of the moment. As Kennan and other dedicated planners often discovered to their chagrin, short- and long-term imperatives do not always align

perfectly, and planners and operators have different institutional incentives to address this tension.<sup>114</sup> There is no way to eliminate this problem, for it lies at the very heart of grand strategy. Yet, it may, perhaps, be somewhat mitigated by bringing planners and operators together at every stage of the process. Bringing operators into the planning stages of grand strategy can help sensitize planners to the nearer-term requirements of good policy; bringing planners into operations can help provide a longer-range perspective that is sometimes missing from the management of day-to-day affairs. None of this will resolve the underlying dilemma, but it might ease—if only by a degree—the bureaucratic disconnects that often exacerbate the problem.<sup>115</sup>

## **5. Embrace the Democratic Messiness of Grand Strategy.**

The question of whether democracies can conduct a policy that blends thoughtfulness, strategic consistency, and tactical flexibility has long perplexed American officials. Kissinger, Nixon, and their intellectual brethren were certainly right in arguing that the vicissitudes of democracy and bureaucracy can have deleterious effects on foreign policy, and the present political climate often seems downright hostile to reasoned strategic debate. But just as there is no good alternative to grand strategy, so there is really no good substitute for embracing this messiness and making the best of it. It has yet to be shown that authoritarian regimes are consistently better at grand strategy than are democracies, because personalized rule and centralized power bring about their own pathologies.<sup>116</sup> More to the point for American purposes,

the experiences of those who sought to resolve this problem by dramatically centralizing power in the White House—read Kissinger and Nixon—have usually ended in grief.

This hardly means that there is no place for secrecy or decisive executive action in foreign policy, for U.S. laws and the American political tradition provide room for both. Nor does it mean abandoning presidential leadership and doing a least-common-denominator foreign policy. What it means is that there is a crucial political aspect to grand strategy, one that requires as much attention as the diplomatic, military, and other aspects. Making any grand strategy work requires building consensus both within and outside an administration. Within the executive branch, Presidents would be well advised to involve the key bureaucratic players—military, intelligence, and diplomatic—early enough in the planning process so that they do not feel that they are simply being confronted with a *fait accompli*. Outside the executive branch, there is no substitute for persistent efforts to explain and sell an administration's grand strategy once it is formulated, and for early, real, and regular consultation with the congressional leaders whose cooperation will be necessary to turn ideas into action. All this, in turn, will unavoidably entail bargaining, compromise, and the frustration that comes with them. This is never going to be a pretty or entirely satisfying process, but there is no good way around it.

## **6. Keep Expectations Realistic.**

All of these suggestions point to a final imperative: the need to limit one's expectations as to what grand

strategy can accomplish. George Kennan, who is often thought of as America's archetypal grand strategist, was fond of discussing the limitations of that concept—and of human foresight more broadly—in his famous talks at the National War College in Washington, DC, during the late-1940s. As he put it in his valedictory lecture prior to leaving the Policy Planning Staff at the end of 1949:

It is simply not given to human beings to know the totality of truth. Similarly, no one can see in its totality anything so fundamental and so unlimited in all its implications as the development of our people in their relation to their world environment. . . . I sometimes like to think of the substance of human knowledge as a sort of sphere, and at the center of that sphere there must lie a core which is absolute truth. We keep charging into that sphere from various angles, knowing that we are always going to be deflected at tangents, like moths off the light bulb, before we get to the center.<sup>117</sup>

When it comes to thinking about grand strategy as a national endeavor, the same basic point still holds. Too often, grand strategy is thought of as a transformative project to remake the global order, or as a panacea that will wipe away the complexity of world affairs. Both of these aspirations are simply begging for disappointment. In view of the experience of the past decade and the current economic troubles, the United States will probably not be able to undertake any grand transformative schemes in the near future. Nor can any amount of planning or strategizing allow American policy to transcend the complexities of a changing international environment. At best, grand strategy can provide an intellectual reference point for dealing with those complexities, and a process

by which dedicated policymakers can seek to bring their resources and their day-to-day actions into better alignment with their country's enduring interests. Achieving this would be enough; expecting more would be quixotic.

## ENDNOTES

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8. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, New York: Norton, 1969, p. 214. See also Daniel W. Drezner, ed., *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2009.

9. On these subjects, see Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 2001; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, New York: Vintage, 1989.

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11. In the United States, the demand for a public articulation of grand strategy became pronounced when the end of the Cold War led to some confusion—both within and outside government—as to the central purpose of American policy. See Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad*, chaps. 2-3.

12. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 409.

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64. Allan Reed Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, New York: Free Press, 1984, p. 491; Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, chaps. 10-11.

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66. See particularly Aaron Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 70-71, 117-123.

67. The point is best made in Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*.

68. "Comments on the General Trend of U.S. Foreign Policy," August 20, 1948, Box 163, Kennan Papers, SMML.

69. Kissinger to Nixon, undated (late-1969), *FRUS 1969-1976*, I: Document #39.

70. Nixon and Ford were, of course, ultimately responsible for that grand strategy, and Nixon in particular played a key role in shaping foreign policy until the Watergate scandal left him politically and emotionally crippled. As Jeremi Suri and John Lewis Gaddis have made clear, however, Kissinger provided the overarching intellectual framework within which many of those policies were lodged. See Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, chaps. 9-10; Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, chaps. 4-6.

71. Kissinger, "The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck," *Daedalus*, Vol. 97, No. 3, Summer 1968, p. 910.

72. Henry Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961, p. 8.

73. MemCon between Kissinger and TIME Editorial Board, November 11, 1974, Box 26, Henry A. Kissinger (HAK) Records, RG 59, NARA. See also Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, chap. 5.

74. Nixon to Laird [letter drafted by Kissinger], February 4, 1969, Box 220, NSC Files, Nixon Presidential Materials (NPM). See also Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, chap. 9.



75. Quoted in Evelyn Goh, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the 'Soviet Card' in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971-1974," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, No. 3, June 2005, p. 475.

76. MemCon between Kissinger and Schumann, August 4, 1969, NSA.

77. MemCon between Nixon, Kissinger, and Dobrynin, October 20, 1969, Box 489, NSC, NPM; Jussi Hanhimaki, *Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 216-217.

78. The "breaking point" comment is from Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 246. These initiatives are described in greater detail in Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998; Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*, New York: Touchstone, 2002.

79. Kissinger Background Briefing, February 16, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, I: Document #58. See also Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third-World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 200-201, 211-212.

80. Editorial Note on a Conversation between Kissinger and Nixon, December 9, 1971, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XI: Document #256. See also Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 300-301.

81. Kissinger to Nixon, November 5, 1970, Box H-29, Meetings File, NSC, NPM. As historians have noted, there were various motives behind the decision to seek Allende's overthrow. Nonetheless, it is clear that the desire to avoid looking weak was what crystallized this policy and lent it its urgency. See Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 148-150.

82. MemCon between Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, November 11, 1973, NSA.

83. MemCon between Kissinger and Golda Meir, May 7, 1974, Box 7, Henry A. Kissinger (HAK) Records, Executive Secretariat, RG 59, NARA. See also Secretary's Staff Meeting, October 24, 1973, Box 1, Secretary's Staff Meetings, HAK Records, RG 59, NARA.

84. MemCon between Kissinger and Stanford Faculty and Students, May 6, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, I: Document #65.

85. MemCon between Kissinger and Various Congressmen, January 28, 1975, Box 22, HAK Records, Executive Secretariat, RG 59, NARA.

86. Asaf Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 63-64. On the human rights issue, see Barbara Keys, "Congress, Kissinger, and the Origins of Human Rights Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, No. 5, November 2010, pp. 823-851.

87. Vladislav Zubok, "The Soviet Union and Détente of the 1970s," *Cold War History*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 2008, pp. 435-436; Hanhimaki, *Flawed Architect*, p. 152.

88. Telegram from Ambassador Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry," March 8, 1972, *FRUS: Soviet-American Relations*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007, Document #267.

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90. Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 158.

91. MemCon between Kissinger and Meir, May 2, 1974, Box 7, HAK Records, RG 59, NARA. On the war and disengagement, see Salim Yaqub, "The Weight of Conquest: Henry Kissinger and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," in Frederik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 227-248.

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94. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, p. 1060; Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, chap. 6.

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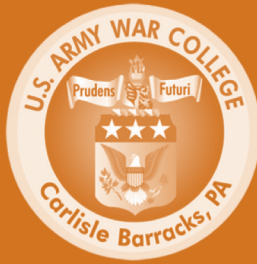
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