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The Intellectual Roots of American Strategy

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Executive Summary

More than in many states, the American people's connection with their nation is based neither on bonds of ethnicity nor religion nor blood. The "American spirit" as politicians like to call it is a mixture of conventional patriotism and an unusual dose of attachment to the principles and resultant practices of a political regime based on ideas. For example, Americans contribute a large amount of money to charity. In 2009 they gave \$300 billion dollars to religious, educational, health-related, and multi-purpose foundations. According to one organization that maintains statistics on charitable giving the annual contribution of a single American equals what three Frenchmen, seven Germans, and 14 Italians give to charity in the same year.¹

Americans also take a very active role in their communities. They volunteer to coach their children's soccer teams. They volunteer to serve in parent-teacher associations. They spend their weekends walking in large rallies to raise money to cure breast cancer or diabetes or other afflictions. Giving generously to charity and volunteering are two sides of the same phenomenon, a powerful and animating belief in the *idea* of the individual—

¹ American Charity Statistics for 2009: <http://veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2009/12/19/american-charity-statistics-for-2009/>

rather than the government's—ability to make a positive difference in society. Civil society in the U.S. is a direct result of the principles of the American founding that look upon government as an instrument of protecting individual freedom. Americans see and use this freedom in many useful ways—to encourage organized religion which has a pronounced effect on moral character, to improve their communities which they believe they understand better than distant government bureaucrats, and to organize when sufficiently agitated to generate political change. They also use the freedom described in the Declaration of Independence and safeguarded in the Constitution to invent things, start businesses, and increase their prosperity. To make money, simply put.

The American founding documents protect not only property and its acquisition, but life and liberty. Indeed, government itself exists to preserve men's natural impulse to live, to be left alone, and to enjoy a comfortable existence. These ideas have shaped American attitudes from their participation in their communities, to their views on the proper relations between civil society—including business—and government, to their ideas about foreign policy, national security, and the conduct of war.

War—at least until the end of conscription during the Vietnam War—deprived those who were drafted of their liberty. It exposed all on the battlefield to death and killed many of them. And it consumed wealth as national resources were diverted to conduct it. War is profoundly opposed to the benefits that American government was established to protect. The counter-argument is that where war is necessary to preserve the principles that the government protects, it must be fought. Out of the tension between these two apparently opposite poles American grand strategy developed. This paper examines how the particular characteristics of American grand strategy—advanced technology, massive force, enormous logistical capacity, continental alliances, and forward defense—developed from the nation’s fundamental principles. The paper looks in particular at how principle and geography combine to produce the underlying grand strategic theme of American national security, seapower.

Introduction

The basis of American grand strategy remains today where it took root in colonial times and was subsequently codified by the founding documents of the United States, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. All the founders agreed on the objectives of government, the preservation of

natural rights that the European Enlightenment thinkers argued were the true basis of legitimate political authority.

Alexander Hamilton, in particular, argued that Americans would use their liberties to become a great and powerful state sustained by increasing commerce and trade, requiring a central government sufficiently vigorous to defend the nation in its infancy and to advance its principles and interests as it matured. John Adams also understood his countrymen's talent for commerce and saw its protection as fundamental to American strategy. This required seapower. Since then, seapower in the form of a once robust merchant marine but most visible today in naval combat power has been central to American grand strategy in combination with, and as a complement to, continental forces. Current American strategy, however, appears to be changing and seems to have left the intellectual moorings that once anchored it in the understanding of its leaders and in the conception of its strategic thinkers. Deep reductions in American seapower since the end of the Cold War, the change in the U.S.'s position from lender to debtor, future economic choices that promise either significant reductions in national government spending or more profound decreases in America's global economic position, and the rise of potential peer competitors,

especially at sea, are occurring simultaneously. These issues raise difficult questions about the future of American global leadership, the health of American seapower, and ultimately, the U.S.'s future as a great power. These form the central issues of the thesis.

Thesis Objectives and Research Questions

This dissertation attempts to examine and explain the intellectual roots of American grand strategy. It seeks to use history as a guide to understanding the development of American seapower and its place in American grand strategy. The paper aims as well to understand the role that American grand strategy, insofar as it rests on seapower, supports the international system that exists today and to grasp the implications of America's possible retreat from the defense of that system. The dissertation asks how other states have reacted to the possibility of a diminishing American presence particularly in the regions of the world's greatest current and likely future economic growth. It examines the role and relevance of globalization to American grand strategy and seeks to place in as broad a strategic context as possible the acknowledged and growing connectedness of global economies, information networks, and such adverse effects as the ease with which criminal organizations and terrorists are increasingly able to operate. The

dissertation's objectives also include an explanation of the growth of a potential strategic competitor to American seapower and an examination of the consequences, regionally and globally. It attempts to understand how the strategic element of American seapower has diminished, what its prospects for revival are, and the relationship of such a revival to the likely future American political atmosphere including the nation's serious economic challenges. Having inquired into the causes and consequences of decay and possible future challenges the dissertation concludes with the effort to understand what specific remedies and options could allow the U.S. to restore to health the most basic element of its strategic foundations and thus return to the intellectual roots on which American grand strategy rests.

Contribution of the Thesis

The thesis is intended to contribute a greater understanding than now exists of the relationship between the intellectual basis of American grand strategy and current American strategic thinking and planning. American strategic planning was as recently as the Eisenhower administration a subject of prolonged and careful consideration by the president himself. Since then, strategic planning has gradually been replaced by crisis management. This thesis, by its focus on the diversion of strategic thought from its origins,

aims to encourage a reconsideration of the principles that have guided American grand strategy since the nation's beginnings. The thesis will draw attention to a subject that continues to elude the attention and examination of most national security experts within and outside the U.S. As argued in the thesis, the perceived urgency of fighting armed radical jihadists, the large international military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan—and now Libya—as well as recent uprisings in the North African littoral states extending as far north as Syria and as far south as Yemen have focused attention on land conflicts and resulted in a sustained strategic indifference to the effect of seapower on the international balance of military force.

A derivative contribution is what can be understood from the thesis's comparison of alternatives to the current size, shape, and character of U.S. seapower's actual forces. Informed discussion of this subject has, up until now, been restricted to a small segment of the community of national security academic experts and research institute analysts. By looking in detail at the similarities and differences between the best-informed and most thoughtful proposals for changes in the disposition and character of current American seapower the thesis will help inform scholarly opinion and influence needed discussion of alternatives that are consistent with the

intellectual underpinnings of broad U.S. policy, future strategic requirements and, such practical limits as available national resources.

Methodology and structure of the dissertation

As the result of previous undergraduate and graduate education the candidate—i.e. the author of this dissertation—is familiar with the seminal documents of the American founding as well as the works of political theory that support them. These writings have been consulted at length and in detail in constructing the dissertation’s major premises. Because of professional responsibilities I am also conversant on a daily basis with expert analyses, congressional and administration reports, official government documents, and media coverage of U.S. national security, foreign policy, military force structure, alliance management, weapons technology, budget issues, and unclassified intelligence community estimates. As indicated in the footnotes I have relied on all these sources for facts, opinions, and important perspectives in preparing the analyses on which this thesis is based. Also on a daily basis I speak with and am consulted by officials of the U.S. Defense Department, defense contractors, former senior officials of previous U.S. administrations, and Members of Congress and their staffs. I maintain similar contact with active duty and

retired senior officers of the U.S. military. In organizing, researching, and writing this thesis the methodology has been to consult with these sources using interviews, their written work, personal discussions, and, in many cases, specific, directed questions. In addition I participate regularly in government-sponsored exercises that use particular scenarios to learn the range of likely U.S. and foreign reactions to likely events that affect international and national security. While I have not used any information derived from these exercises in writing this thesis, the questions raised in them have contributed to my thinking, and thus to the methodology, of this paper.

Finally, the methodology has included extensive reading in history. As is clear from the footnotes, I have looked in detail at relevant periods of Chinese, Roman, Venetian, Ottoman, British, and American history—in particular the connection between the rise and fall of some of these states and their success or failure in executing grand strategy based on their political foundations, national characteristics, and maritime geography.

Chapter 1 draws on the American founding documents to understand the intellectual bases on which the United States' grand strategy has evolved

since 1776. It contrasts the principled foundation of American strategy with the spirited character of ancient Rome's expansion and defense. It shows how the practical need to protect commerce directly rooted American policy in the beginnings of a strategic conception of the young state's national security, and how this strategy expanded almost without deliberation or debate to a global—although limited—presence. However, while commerce requires the exchange of goods over distance, successful enterprise also requires superior technology, innovation, and willingness to accept risk. The chapter relates these commercial characteristics to military power and then to strategy itself.

Chapter 2 explores Alexander Hamilton's influence on transforming the American founders' principles into a functioning state. It looks at the profound difference between the ideas of Hamilton and Jefferson about what kind of state the U.S. should become, and argues that Hamilton's conception of a commercial republic with robust central powers, a national bank, and an energetic chief executive established the existing American state. The chapter also argues that the important differences between Hamilton and Jefferson over the role of central vs. state government; industrial vs. agrarian societies; and political radicalism as represented for example by the French

Revolution helped establish the system of major political parties that is useful in democratic states as a means of expressing issues that represent fundamental interests of the electorate. Hamilton's reference to "empire" in Federalist #1 is among the American founders' clearest statements of their expectations that political self-rule would not begin and end with the U.S. but rather that large questions of future world governance rested with the fortunes of the new American state. Subsequent chapters of the dissertation argue that the issue of safeguarding democracy became a core issue of grand American strategy no less—and perhaps more—than the commercial character of the republic for which Hamilton also argued successfully.

Chapter 3 examines globalization and strategy. It uses historical examples to argue that globalization's effect on American grand strategy is more gradual than revolutionary. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the speed of communications, the inter-connectedness of financial and economic systems, and the increasing ability of terrorists and criminal organizations to move across borders are serious challenges that strategy must face and the chapter examines how to approach these questions, but concludes that the large strategic issues that face America in the form of serious economic problems, the rise of possible peer

competitors, and a decline in strategic thinking are more likely to shape America's international role than the various phenomena of globalization.

Chapter 4 looks in particular at the fortunes of American seapower. It uses official government sources to illustrate the recent and likely future contraction of the American combat fleet, and considers the strategic consequences of continued shrinkage. It examines how responsibility for global freedom of navigation transferred from Great Britain to the U.S. and how the transfer was ultimately accompanied by a parallel shift in responsibility for maintaining an international system based on principles of good order that facilitate trade, defend against piracy, and—in Great Britain's case—ended the slave trade in the early 19th century. Using current examples the chapter examines the strategic role of U.S. seapower today and asks what the world would look like absent such power.

Chapter 5 shows how seapower evolved as the critical arm of American grand strategy. It demonstrates how the international challenges that the U.S. faced beginning with the wars against the Barbary pirates resulted in a strategy that extended the reach of American power across the Atlantic first and then the Pacific. The chapter uses historical documents and

contemporary economic analyses to fit the American Civil War into the broader strategic context of the technological innovation that increasingly characterized American grand strategy. It traces the development of the intellectual arguments that were made at the end of the 19th century that connect great power status with the strategic use of seapower and shows how American strategy developed alongside the nation's path to international pre-eminence. The chapter summarizes the strategic role of seapower in the 20th century's world wars and the Cold War including Korea. It examines the successful maritime strategy that helped end the Cold War and discusses the adaptability of American seapower to the nation's changing strategic requirements.

Chapter 6 is a contemporary picture of the politics and financial realities that influence American national security today. It draws on current budget statistics, government economic forecasting, declared administration policy, and estimated future indebtedness to raise questions about defense as a national priority. It looks at a wide range of proposals for debt reduction, their effect on national security and the ability of national leaders to formulate and execute grand strategy.

Chapter 7 asks if U.S. grand strategy today has departed from its traditional understanding rooted in preventing the rise of hegemonic powers on the Eurasian landmass, continental alliances, and maritime strategy that allows communications with allies, helps uphold an international system that supports security and stability, and maintains American global presence. It asks whether the land engagements of the past two decades have upset the balance of continental and maritime strategy that has been a cornerstone of grand strategy since the U.S. achieved great power status. The chapter looks in detail at the effects of emphasis on counter-insurgency strategy as seen in officer promotions, stated U.S. Defense Department policy, and military education, doctrine, and training. It examines the effect on regional allies and alliances of America's increasing concentration on the Middle East and counter-insurgency and focuses in particular on reactions in East Asia as measured by an increase in defenses intended to protect against the possibility of increasing Chinese and diminishing American military influence in the region. The chapter considers how to restore balance in American grand strategy. It notes that the equal division of the defense budget among the three military departments is more a sign of political correctness than deliberate strategy, and considers policy recommendations

that would provide the increased resources that could be important in any strategic restructuring effort.

Chapter 8 considers China. It looks at the growth of Chinese seapower from a coastal defense during Mao Tse-tung's rule to the beginnings of the current Chinese navy under Deng Xiaoping's policy of modernizing the People's Liberation Army. The chapter includes a discussion of the Ming dynasty tributary system and its enforcement by strategic seapower and includes an examination of the highly advanced technology that enabled the Ming emperor to project power across the South China Sea through the Indian Ocean to the Arabian Peninsula and Africa's east coast. The chapter examines in particular current Chinese modernization of its navy and the related expansion of Chinese seapower into a force that can project power at increasing distances from the mainland. Subjects such as China's effort to deny U.S. aircraft carriers access to the Western Pacific, anti-satellite capability, and substantial increases in its submarine fleet are discussed in the context of China's broad effort to compete strategically with the U.S.'s current advantage in seapower. The chapter ends with a discussion of the character and risks of strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

Chapter 9 is a discussion of options. No useful goal is advanced by identifying problems without considering solutions. Using as sources the major studies that have been written in recent years about re-shaping American seapower, the chapter compares and contrasts the U.S. Navy's idea of its own future with significant alternative ideas. Besides describing the substance of these alternatives, the chapter looks at the large areas that unite them, in particular agreement about the importance of reducing building and operations costs, and increasing the number of vessels while reducing their size. Other areas of agreement include simplifying some technology, taking greater advantage of designs to allow inter-changeability of different combat systems among vessels of the same class, and the increased adaptability that would allow seapower to operate effectively close to the shore and on the high seas.

The concluding chapter looks at the American military's ideas about future maritime security and strategy. Based on interviews and public documents it identifies the U.S. national security establishment's difficulty in acknowledging the possibility that China will become a serious threat. The chapter also notes the areas in which U.S. defense policy is successfully adapting to likely future challenges. The chapter identifies the areas of

agreement that unite recent and highly-informed proposals about how to adapt the U.S.'s strategic requirement for seapower to changing political, financial, and technological circumstances. It concludes that these areas of agreement about some of the largest national security dilemmas that face the U.S. in the future offer reasonable hope that American grand strategy can continue effectively to protect itself and its allies.

Key Words

Grand strategy, strategy, foreign policy, defense budget, commerce, alliances, hegemony, seapower, economics, technology, China, security, intellectual roots.

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