

# Op-Ed: A National Strategic Narrative and Grand Strategy for the 21st Century

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Former U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Gordon L. Sullivan, when commenting on his program for the Louisiana Maneuvers, which were designed to help define Force XXI and the Army's role in modern warfare in the information age after Operation DESERT STORM, once remarked "that if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there," wryly noting that "hope is not a method." Yogi Berra provided similar wisdom by counseling us, "When you get to a fork in the road, take it!"

That kind of ambiguity was absent in the wake of the Allied victory in World War II when there was moral and physical clarity about the U.S. role as the leader of victory and the Western world. Traditional Republican insistence on isolation gave way to full post-war American engagement and leadership in every aspect of the international community. The National Security Act of 1947 established the structural basis of our national security system. George Kennan's "Long Telegram" from Moscow, his "Mr. X" article, and NSC-68 established the intellectual framework for converting our industrial and economic might into a grand strategy of containment of the Soviet Union. President Eisenhower's Project Solarium translated the grand strategy of containment into an actionable strategy based on ends, ways, and means that relied first on mutual assured destruction and then on flexible response.

Our strategic narrative was grounded in the belief that the United States was the leader and defender of the free world against communist aggression, and that we would invest our national treasure and resources in containing the Soviet Union, thereby limiting the expansion of communism while building a dynamic economy and a just and prosperous democratic society at home. As a nation, we believed that given the choice, people around the world would choose the American model of democracy. This strategic narrative served to maintain a bipartisan national consensus regarding national security based on the twin pillars of defense and diplomacy for 40 years.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War created a strategic vacuum that was filled with revolutions in population, resource management, technology, information and knowledge, economic integration, conflict, and governance as issues that embodied both risk and opportunity for the United States.<sup>1</sup> With containment of the Soviet Union no longer the *raison d'être* of our national security system and the rise of competing major economic powers, achievement of America's strategic goals of prosperity and security would now have to be realized in a world of competition and cooperation in many nontraditional domains linked globally in realtime, where many of the domains of true power lie beyond the purview of the traditional national security focus on defense and diplomacy.

Since 1991, we have experienced the traumatic shocks of the USS *Cole*, Kobar Towers, the American embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, early attempts on the World Trade Center Towers in New York in 1993, 9/11, and more recently, but equally as devastating and far more pervasive and corrosive to our national spirit, the financial meltdowns and economic

crisis of 2008. No longer can we afford to view national security through the narrow lenses of military security and diplomacy against a background of state-to-state relations as we did during the Cold War. The dimensions of national security now include the global issues of economic security, environmental security, homeland security, pandemics, networked transnational terrorism and its appealing narratives, failing and failed states, rising states such as South Sudan, regional instability, cyberterrorism, and the potential use of weapons of mass destruction by state and nonstate actors.

The United States is dependent on a networked global information grid and supply chain that is increasingly vulnerable to catastrophic attack. Actions of a single actor in the global economy, governmental or nongovernmental — e.g., Standard & Poor's or Moody's — can and do have significant and immediate global impact. Transnational nonstate criminal and ideological organizations, leveraged by technology and the exploitation of ungoverned spaces, have found new and increasingly sophisticated means of attack. These entities have established both the networks and the competing, and to many, compelling narratives to attract supporters to their causes. Global climate change, demographics, and rising global demand for finite resources raise serious concerns over the availability of food, water, and other resources that threaten economic and political stability around the world and require new transparent, strategically agile and integrated “whole-of-government” institutional responses to preserve our national security and prosperity.

And, if this bewildering complexity of “wicked” problems weren't enough, we are faced with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an “Arab Spring” spurred by social networking — which to many is a hopeful confirmation of our long-held belief that all people yearn to be free and self-governing — a “quasi” military intervention in Libya, enduring and increasingly explosive issues in the Middle East, and a stagnant economy at home. Americans want to know where the United States is going in the world. Was Paul Kennedy<sup>2</sup> right when he presaged the decline of the United States in 1986, even before the end of the Cold War? Are we now well on the way to that predicted decline, losing all of the things that made us great as a nation and headed down the same road as the last two great colonial empires (Britain and France) after World War II?

In short, the key questions facing us are: What are our new strategic narrative and national grand strategy and how are they informed? Our new national narrative and grand strategy must reflect major transitions in the global ecosystem referred to earlier. The recent article, “A Strategic Narrative,” by Mr. Y<sup>3</sup> is a welcome first step toward establishing the necessary national dialogue that must lead to a new strategic narrative and grand strategy built upon the premise that we can only sustain our enduring national interests within a changing and dynamic global “strategic ecosystem” where challenges, risks, and threats must be balanced by opportunities and hope. Key transitions in strategic thought identified by Mr. Y include the following: <sup>4</sup>

- From control in a closed state-based national security environment linear system through deterrence, defense, and domination of the international system, to credible U.S. influence in an open system in which we influence events as they arise;
- From containment of an ideological and military-based threat, to sustainment by focusing on building our strengths to underpin credible influence rather than economic and military dominance;
- From deterrence and defense, to civilian engagement and competition through investment in a security complex that includes all domestic and foreign policy assets and a willingness to compete with others as a way to make ourselves stronger and

better;

- From zero sum, to positive sum global politics and economics; and,
- From national security based on the twin pillars of defense and traditional diplomacy, to a national security based on national prosperity and security.

The search for our new national narrative and grand strategy must be far greater than the current “gunfight at the OK Corral” that characterizes the ongoing and increasingly bitter partisan disputes about how to regain our financial and economic balance in the tradeoffs between cutting defense and entitlement spending and raising taxes as the price for raising the national debt ceiling. It is also broader than the piece-part solutions for different elements of national security reform offered up by many of the think tanks staffed by practitioners of our legacy Cold War national security system.

We must define our strategic future and tell our national story in a compelling way — and jointly embrace that common narrative in both the executive and the legislative branches of the federal government. Unlike the closely held “Long Telegram” and the classified NSC-68, this discussion must be truly national, one that focuses on how we can achieve both security and prosperity grounded in our enduring national values in the global environment of the 21st century. Only then can we truly begin to define the ends, ways, and means that integrate all of the elements of our national power to achieve that future — these are the roads that we must take and the informed strategic decisions that displace hope that we must make at each and every fork in the road that we encounter along the way.

Defining our strategic narrative and grand strategy are issues worthy of national debate, and they should be the central focus in our presidential and congressional elections in 2012. We should not squander the opportunity to have that informed debate, openly in an increasingly networked society and global ecosystem, forcefully and responsibly. Our differences should not be in the strategic narrative or grand strategy, but rather on the ways and means to achieve them. In the globally networked world of the 21st century, our strategic narrative and its derivative grand strategy matter more than ever — and we must get it right or risk losing our influence, prosperity, and security to more compelling narratives that challenge our very existence.

## Endnotes

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[1.](#) Erik Peterson, *Seven Revolutions Initiative*, Washington, DC: The Global Strategy Institute, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007.

[2.](#) See, for example, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1986; and “American Power is on the Wane,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2009.

[3.](#) Mr. Y, “A National Strategic Narrative,” with preface by Anne-Marie Slaughter, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 2011.

[4.](#) Anne-Marie Slaughter, op. cit., pp 1-3.

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