

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**POKER, BLACKJACK, RUMMY, AND WAR:
THE FACE OF AMERICAN STRATEGIC CULTURE**

by

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ABSTRACT

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The concept of strategic culture is a useful tool for better understanding the behavior of nation-states. Strategy has many dimensions, one of which is culture. Understanding a nation's strategic culture is important because it helps to explain core questions about the roots of, and influences upon, strategic behavior. The American strategic culture is an amalgam of beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, habits, patterns, and preferences of behavior that, over time, has created a distinctive national strategic style. Because of the importance of culture, one can ask the question, what does the American strategic culture tell others about U.S. behavior? Perhaps more importantly, one should also ask, what might a potential adversary think and how might they act because of America's strategic culture? This paper examines contemporary American strategic culture and makes recommendations for future policy consideration in light of how adversaries might view American strategic culture.

POKER, BLACKJACK, RUMMY, AND WAR THE FACE OF AMERICAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

Understanding a nation's strategic culture is important because it helps to explain "core questions about the roots of, and influences upon, strategic behavior."¹ When nation-states formulate strategy it is not done with a "completely open, or blank, mind on strategic ideas, but rather with values, attitudes, and preferences" in mind.² Nations filter information in ways which influence their strategic courses of action. These filters are values, attitudes, and preferences, as well as other influences such as geography and an ability or inability to handle complexity. Such filters evolve from national experience over time.³ Strategic thinkers have been defining the concept of strategic culture and interpreting its utility for understanding strategic behavior for more than 30 years. Combining the relevant aspects of their insights yields an explanation of strategic culture that is useful for practitioners of strategy. It offers insights into the sometimes oscillating nature of the American strategic mindset and to the strengths and weaknesses of American strategic thought so the U.S. strategist can use or compensate for them. Perhaps equally important, it suggests what a potential adversary might think and how they might act because of their interpretation of America's strategic culture. This paper examines the phenomenon of American strategic culture and makes recommendations for future policy consideration in light of how adversaries might view contemporary American strategic culture.

Strategic Culture Study as a Discipline

Strategy, as Clausewitz suggests, is much like a game of cards. It has rules but is influenced by both chance and skill.⁴ If it were only chance, the skill of a player would not matter. But since playing cards involves more than chance, the player's preference for holding and playing cards is a critical aspect of the game. When a new strategic deck is unwrapped all the cards are available for play and when you enter the game the first thing to do is understand the rules. The second thing is to understand your adversary's strategic theory which has been defined elsewhere; strategic culture explains how the player prefers to apply the rules.

Over the last several decades strategic thinkers have been defining the concept of strategic culture and interpreting its utility for understanding nations' actions. Scholars have outlined three generations of work on strategic culture. Alastair Iain Johnston in "Thinking about Strategic Culture" (1995) outlines these overlapping cohorts of strategic thinkers and places them in generations.⁵ First generation efforts in the 1970s focused more on Soviet policy and strategic theory. The early literature on strategic culture is now considered more "workmanlike than truly scholarly."⁶ The most notable example is perhaps the work of Jack L. Snyder, "The

Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations” (1977).⁷ Scholarly, ground-breaking analysis on the study and interpretation of strategic culture is attributed to Ken Booth in *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (1979).⁸ Strategic thinkers often cite his work as a benchmark for any thorough comprehension and analysis of strategic culture.⁹ This generation’s real contribution was to alert the profession to the existence of strategic culture and its utility in knowing the adversary.

Second generation scholars have been characterized as those in search of the “cunning coded messages behind the language of strategic studies” while further developing the discipline in the 1980s.¹⁰ This generation includes such touchstone efforts as Colin S. Gray’s “National Style in Strategy: The American Example” (1982); *Strategic Studies: A Critical Assessment* (1982); and “Comparative Strategic Culture” (1984). His further study and generational overlap includes *Modern Strategy* (1999), in which he continues to develop his thinking on the subject.¹¹ Carnes Lord credits first and other second generation thinkers and brings unique perspectives to the study of strategic culture with his widely read 1985 work, “American Strategic Culture.”¹² The second generation refined the field into a discipline by articulating principles and concepts that were generally applicable to the study of any strategic culture.

Third generation work has an orientation towards the application of theory. There are many important elements to this generation’s work. Michael C. Desch, for example, identifies four dominant lines of thinking: organizational, political, strategic, and global.¹³ More recently Lieutenant Colonel Anita Arms’, “Strategic Culture: The American Mind” (1999) adds a noteworthy perspective on the subject in which she explores several deep-seated influences on American strategic culture.¹⁴ This generation finished the work of the second generation by offering well developed theories in support of the discipline.

Shuffling the Deck: Defining the Elements of Strategic Culture

Strategy springs forth from a nation’s strategic culture. Strategic culture shapes the ends sought, the concepts preferred, and the means used. Only through a comprehension of national purpose and an understanding of the origin of strategic culture is it possible to begin to discern strategic behavior. Any nation’s strategy process starts with the country’s national purpose.¹⁵ The national purpose embodies a people’s enduring cultural values, beliefs, and ethics and represents the legal, philosophical, and moral basis for the continuation of a national system—the state, which in this case is the American nation.

The American strategic culture is the result of the unique American experience over the past three centuries. It is an amalgam of beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, habits, patterns, and preferences of behavior that over time have created a distinctive national strategic profile. This combination yields a uniquely American strategic culture which may enable other nations and groups to interpret American strategic behavior in particular situations.¹⁶ The modern U.S. national purpose and values of Americans are derived chiefly from the Judeo-Christian heritage, Anglo-Saxon legacy (to include the Reformation, the Renaissance, the philosophies of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others, and the principles rooted in the American Revolution), the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. These historical signposts define the fundamental values of America, its interests, and global role.¹⁷ These markers from the national experience underpin the foundation of the nation's strategic culture and represent the starting point for understanding the strategic behavior of the United States.

Strategic Culture and the American Mind

Anita M. Arms offers a contemporary summary of America's historical experience which provides an excellent synthesis of the foundations of U.S. strategic culture. Her work is broad in context and addresses a variety of audiences, not solely national security professionals. In this third generation strategic cultural perspective she illustrates that there are six particularly noteworthy influences on American strategic culture: fortuitous geography, political ideology, educational fervor, capitalist values, Protestant ethics, and technological prowess. These influences provide America with the basis for social, political, and moral positions and decisions. While these are not the only influences in the American historical experience, these major forces led to the synthesis of the core American cultural beliefs and values which "continue to shape the nation's domestic and international outlook and mold its exercise of political and military power."¹⁸ Purposefully omitting a discussion of capitalist values in the interest of brevity, Arms' analysis helps one to understand how a potential adversary may view U.S. strategic culture and ultimately discern American strategic actions.

The fortuitous geography of isolationism, discussed by Arms, provides America with abundant natural resources, favorable climate, room for expansion, and the important strategic advantage of protection provided by the vast oceans to the east and west of the continent. This geographic advantage afforded America the opportunity to develop a unique identity safe from invasion or meddling by foreign powers. Geographic advantage along with the other elements associated with U.S. national purpose contributes to American exceptionalism in international relations. The result of this geographic advantage was the belief over time that "the need to fight

a war was a decision to be made, not an inevitability to be faced. The American historical experience illustrates this.¹⁹ Put another way, other than the few times in which it has been directly attacked or war amongst its populous has occurred on the U.S. mainland, fortuitous isolationism created a cultural perspective of conflict as “wars of choice.”

No major conflict has been waged on U.S. soil since its Civil War. The two world wars of the 20th century did not touch American soil in the savage ways they did in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Prior to the experience of September 11, 2001 American strategic culture was shaped by an American historical experience which largely “teaches that war is episodic, waged abroad...and that there is not a constant, high level of menace in the external world.”²⁰ The American experience in both world wars remains a shaping force for U.S. strategic culture. U.S. world war experience combined with the fact that no major war has ravaged the U.S. mainland since the 19th century is relevant when one considers the short-lived American attention span for involvement in conflicts that are perceived as far away from America.

“To Americans war was an aberration, a disturber of normalcy. War and peace were viewed as distinct and separate episodes, and American tradition in war has been first to declare, then to prepare.”²¹ Based on the experience in the First World War, during World War II the U.S. approach was to “hold off as long as possible, enter only long enough to thrash the bully or bullies who started it, get the boys home, and then try to remain uninvolved in European affairs as before.”²² The campaign to defend Saudi Arabia and remove the Iraqi Army from Kuwait in 1990-1991 came in a tidy cultural package for Americans; one which had clearly defined installments of diplomacy and war. When diplomacy stopped, war began; when the fighting was over, diplomacy and a separate episode of post-conflict resolution began. Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm were updates to the conventional perception that the American experience with war was more a deviation from the norm; these military actions were viewed as abnormal episodes from something defined as *peacetime*.

The peculiarity of war being something that occurred at a distance from the American homeland led to, among other things, the development of an isolationist tendency during certain periods in the course of the American political ideological dialogue. Yet throughout America’s history, brief bouts of isolationism have yielded to ideas of engagement such as containment of the Communist sphere and American primacy. America’s war on terrorism in the 21st century has its roots in an attack on the U.S. homeland by a fanatical adversary which traversed the fortuitous distance of geography to attack America with scant resources. For a brief moment it seemed as if the terror attacks on 11 September erased the notion of the U.S. engaging in war at a distance from the homeland. But strategic culture prevailed. If the Islamic radicals in

Afghanistan concluded that the U.S., because of an isolationist tendency on the part of the Bush Administration, would not strike back at them from half a world away, they seriously miscalculated by missing this important element of American strategic culture. As the preference for waging war far from the U.S. homeland manifest itself, the Taliban learned, as in rummy, some cards trump others.

The early phases of the U.S.-led war on terrorism illustrate how United States' strategic culture influences behavior and additionally reinforces conventional wisdom of how America views war in general. For the U.S., there has been a measure of comfort following 11 September:

...it helped draw clear lines in an otherwise muddy confrontation with a ubiquitous and mysterious enemy. War is a national energizer: it reinforces one's internal cohesion, gives direction and sense of purpose to one's leadership.²³

The placement of war as a national energizer within the U.S. strategic cultural experience means that wars tend to unify the national experience. Arms illustrates that most U.S. wars were won after being fought at great distance and at a comparatively lower cost than that of most other countries which have a living memory of war as an experience of ultimate suffering, if not disaster.²⁴ Wars have also been, in America's experience, moral clarifiers.

...America's great wars have been all-out wars against adversaries, to be treated as criminals and pursued until their total destruction. Largely devoid of chivalry; the adversary has been as much morally vilified as fought against.²⁵

Now as the war on terrorism progresses in time, so too has the U.S. strategic cultural perspective advanced in what is required to defeat terrorism, revealing important similarities as well as differences from past U.S. experiences with war.

Following the experience of September 11, 2001, an American primacy-oriented strategic outlook emerged along with a leaning towards pre-emptive actions to defeat threats away from U.S. shores. If American strategic culture has tended to view war as an aberration or something "over there," policy makers must consider whether pre-emption is consistent with American strategic culture and how others view the U.S. course of pre-emptive action. Adversaries will filter information in ways which influence their strategic courses of action. When adversaries begin to think that the American strategic perspective of the war on terrorism is a U.S. inclination towards pre-emptive action away from its own shores, these adversaries may infer that this is a vulnerability. If the stronger cards are played elsewhere, adversaries may plot to strike much closer to U.S. shores.

Arms aptly points out that U.S. political ideology, borne in large measure from the safety that oceans provide, enabled the founders of America to build a national identity separate from

the United Kingdom and Europe. Over time this national identity fostered an ideology that was viewed by the U.S. as a new beginning for mankind. In addition, since the new Americans did not share a common heritage, this fresh ideology was used to replace the traditional roles of national and ethnic traditions. This ideology tied persons of all heritages and backgrounds together; it espoused democratic and capitalist principles. Thus, the founding fathers' value of the individual formed a new, single national identity. To be American was to be defined politically, which meant to not be tied to a particular place of birth, language, tradition, or ethnicity. "It seems quite natural that this narrow definition of 'American' tied only to political symbols, would become synonymous with patriotism" in a uniquely American way.²⁶ When conflicts need to be fought they are fought for patriotic reasons to defend the American way of life. U.S. political ideology, national identity, and attitude connect with American geography, political ideology, and educational experience as well.

The U.S. education process resulted in the development of a "chauvinistic, ethnocentric view of the world" by Americans.²⁷ The wealthiest nation in the world with a rich diversity of cultures and national, linguistic, and capitalist traditions also developed into one of the most ethnocentric in the world. American education served to further reinforce the notion of American strategic uniqueness and exceptionality. From a young age school children are taught about the exceptional nature of the American experience and national purpose. As morality and religion are added to the American educational experience these additional elements further intensify the self-perceived uniqueness and ethnocentricity of the United States. It is important that U.S. policy makers consider the origins and effects of American ethnocentric ideas on the construction of strategy and potential adversaries' ability to predict U.S. actions. An adaptive adversary will certainly learn to view American strategic choices through the American cultural prism. Such an adversary would then be more likely to determine American strategy and take action to foil it or to preempt it adversely. Hence, if strategy is viewed as a game of cards both the player and his adversary must be aware of preferences for building certain hands.

A significant result of the predominant role of religion, particularly Protestant ethics, in American strategic culture is the forging of relationships between morality and politics as first noticed by the celebrated French observer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville, more than 150 years ago. Debates over morality seem to gravitate toward center stage during discussions of strategic issues. The Constitution spells out the separation of church and state in America, yet religious ethics exert significant influence on the country's cultural and political discourse on what is right and necessary.²⁸ Humanitarian relief, human rights, and the moral arguments for waging the war on terror illustrate the impact of Protestant ethics in American strategic culture.

The “morality” card can be a key card when played appropriately but it can also be forced into a bad play by an adept adversary.

Arms views the impact of technology as another card in the strategy deck. For the most part, American technological prowess has always been oriented toward the future. “The newness of the American experiment, the lack of common ethnic bonds, and the absence of a homogenous heritage all contributed to a perspective based on the future instead of the past.”²⁹ It is well known that the importance of technology began to take hold early in the American experience and continues to the present. The much larger strategic issue, perhaps even beyond the current debates on technologies required for 21st century force transformation, is what this reliance on technology says about American strategic culture and thinking in time.

This hunger for newness and technology permeates American life, usually at the expense of tradition. As a result, the United States has become a throw-away society. Americans are fascinated by newness, have institutionalized change and raised the short term view of the future to an art form. While they may not always enjoy change, they probably accept it more readily than many other cultures. Their love of newness and technology points to that conclusion, as does their apparent acceptance of a lack of permanence in their lives. In practice, Americans eschew time as a continuum, rarely looking to the past and, when looking ahead, viewing only the near term, not the distant future. They act in almost every facet of life as if time were the enemy.³⁰

America generally looks to the near-term in its strategic outlook, failing to look back and continuing to fail to look ahead at long-term consequences. During times of electoral polarization, the focus on the near-term seems even more prevalent. Yet, American strategic planning has not always focused on the here and now. One only needs to review the largely bi-partisan application in policy of NSC-68 over the course of several decades to contain and eventually defeat the Soviet Union during the Cold War as an example of long-term strategic commitment. Unfortunately a key characteristic in the post-Cold War decades has been strategic uncertainty and lack of concrete assumptions about the global security environment. This current environment is marked by

...considerable turbulence.... The international system will be so fluid and complex that to think intelligently about military issues will mean taking an integrated view of political, social, technological, and economic developments. ... In short, we have entered an age in which many of the fundamental assumptions that steered us through the chilly waters of the Cold War require rethinking...³¹

For the U.S. strategist, avoiding a near-term strategic focus is one of the traps to evade. The strategic cards must be played in such a manner as to win the game, not just the hand. For an adversary this cultural tendency to favor a near-term strategic perspective represents an opportunity, one which can be exploited in a “long war” to win the strategic game.³²

Arms concludes that the American historical experience ultimately reveals “certain dichotomies in American strategic culture” and offers hope that these foundations prove a strength in strategy.³³

...mainly as the effects of the interplay of these influences in shaping the nation’s psyche, traditions, habits, and values. That some of these values have proven to be contradictory in strategic applications suggests the power of this new combination of diverse influences and points to a complex social culture able to deal with inconsistency.³⁴

Some Cards are Preferred Over Others: The Zone of Ideas

Colin S. Gray has been defining, analyzing, and interpreting American strategic culture for more than two decades. Gray differs from Arms in part because he focuses more directly on the national security professional. What is important about Gray’s work is his belief that a nation’s strategic culture provides the context as well as a guide to action for events.³⁵ He articulates principles and concepts which are applicable in studying strategic culture. His efforts offer one of the most mature and well developed theories for using strategic culture to study national security behavior.

Gray views the use of strategic culture as a “zone of ideas” that has a significant role to play in determining a nation’s actions and strategy.³⁶ Gray emphasizes that strategic culture is inescapable:

The policy maker, the military professional, and the concerned citizen cannot approach contemporary challenges in a strategic cultural void. Human beings are encultured as people who live in communities, and because, alas those communities are communities for security, humans have no choice other than to undergo a process of strategic enculturation. Not only do they behave strategically under cultural influence. In addition, human beings are agents of culture, helping to shape their environment according to such of their cultural preferences as circumstances permit. Thus are cultural agent and cultural influence woven together as total context.³⁷

Gray argues that behaviors of the human and organizational “agents of culture(s)” in American strategic culture can be best understood with respect to six non-exclusive categories of strategic cultural discrimination: the roles of nationality; geography; service branch, weapons and functions; simplicity-complexity; and generational aspects.³⁸ The model of the zone of ideas is a useful tool for understanding the role of strategic culture.

The “nationality” which comprises the security community of a state is based on a distinctive historical experience. This experience tends to enculture peoples more or less differently. As security information is received, for instance, it is coded culturally and strategic choices and decisions are made and carried out by people and organizations equipped with

these “cultural lenses.”³⁹ As Gray postulates, similar to Arms but somewhat different, these lenses have been ground by a distinct historical experience of the nation and its national security organizations.

The characteristics of a geographical environment yield noticeably distinctive strategic, military, and cultural attitudes and beliefs. Gray underscores the importance of this point.

[T]he connotation of the word ‘strategy’ is not the same to the soldier as to the sailor or airman. The reason for this is elusive but very real. It has to do with the environment in which the conception is set. Where the sailor or airman think in terms of an entire world, the soldier at work thinks in terms of theaters, in terms of campaigns, or in terms of battles. And the three concepts are not too markedly different from each other. This state of mind in which the soldier derives his conception of the strategic scene is brought about primarily by the matter of geography.⁴⁰

Gray separates the views of the armed services as having either a global, theater, or battle orientation in terms of relation to geography. Here he suggests that there is sub-culture interplay in a larger strategic cultural context. Service branch, weapons, and functions of the armed forces are extremely important in understanding strategic culture. Separating the armed services unique views of the world is important to understanding U.S. strategic culture as well as the various sub-cultures operating within the larger strategic culture.

The branch, weapons, and functions of America’s Army, Air Force, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard, as well as the other components of the U.S. military, all have an orientation and each yields a cultural influence of its own. In addition to being a Marine, this individual is also an infantryman, logistician, naval aviator, communications specialist, artilleryman, or one of a hundred different occupational specialties within the Corps. Even further, each specialty possesses a unique culture; a sub-culture of the larger Marine Corps culture. Special operations forces provide distinct functions for the armed services and also work jointly with the other branches. They tend to have an unconventional cultural mindset. All the services defer to a cultural quality unique to their service, systems, and utility to the larger military sub-culture.⁴¹ Such analyses suggest preferences depending on who the leadership is and what beliefs, values, ideas, and preferences of behavior they choose. Thus an astute adversary will likely seek to take advantage of these predilections.

Simplicity-complexity is an important influence upon strategic culture. Commentators commonly refer colloquially to Washington, D.C. as a *one crisis town*, meaning that the U.S. government prefers to handle crises in a simple, sequential manner, rather than simultaneously. The cultural preference for strategic crisis management is to handle one big thing at a time. In its most rudimentary form, this is what Gray refers to as simplicity-complexity. Strategic cultures

can be categorized according to their attitudes towards simplicity and complexity. This categorization further divides into “monochromic, one-thing-at-a-time cultures, and polychromic, everything is interconnected cultures.”⁴² The U.S. reputation as having a one-crisis-at-a-time outlook is founded on outdated U.S.-Soviet strategic cultural analysis. More study is needed to determine if the Washington, D.C. perceived preference for one crisis at a time is an element of U.S. strategic culture.⁴³

Certainly there are many complex strategic challenges confronting policy makers today in both international and domestic environments. The war on terrorism, the enterprises in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the response to Hurricane Katrina are a few of the many examples of enormously complex strategic challenges in which the U.S. is currently engaged. Overthrowing the Hussein regime, jump starting the Iraqi economy, and establishing a democracy in the heart of the Middle East are the most ambitious foreign enterprises in over a generation. The complexity associated with this undertaking alone promises to reverberate for a generation or more. Add to this list of multifaceted strategic projects other imperative concerns such as U.S.-China relations, Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues, and efforts to repair America’s international image, and one quickly sees how managing crises becomes compounded. How well Washington D.C. will manage this degree of complexity remains to be seen. Simplicity and complexity is certainly an element of American strategic culture that warrants further study. It is perhaps also overrated as an element of American strategic culture. Consider simplicity-complexity like a wild card in poker. The complexity card has several values and can be played to advantage by friendly strategists or used to disadvantage by adversaries but is not the only card. The key point is for strategists to not overplay any one card or hand.

Generational aspects of strategic culture cannot be ignored. Different generations have attitudes shaped by strategic events and historical experiences. The age of a person may determine his or her strategic world view based on particular historical experiences. When looking back from the present to World War II or the Great Depression, it is easy to forget that nearly all policy makers and strategic military leaders of that period were veterans of World War I. They learned about warfare in World War I. Today’s strategic leaders learn from the study of history and experience in such conflicts as Vietnam, Beirut, Operation Desert Storm, Somalia, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. They are also shaped by the challenge of confronting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and are influenced by a national strategic vision with an inclination toward preemption and prevention of strategic threats. It is only natural for U.S. leaders to focus on their experience. Gray is careful to caution, however, that this is not to say that matters of age affiliation overwhelm or negate other aspects of strategic culture. He

means to say “that a dominant strategic culture will be reintegrated by each generation in light of its own distinctive experience. Culture evolves because of different strategic experiences and historical events.”⁴⁴ In a card game, players react differently to various circumstances based on past experiences but tend to learn and adapt as they win or lose. U.S. strategists must learn to recognize new circumstances and not allow adversaries to gain advantage or profit by predicting how the U.S. will react.

What Does the American Strategic Culture Tell Others About U.S. Behavior?

Two decades ago Carnes Lord asked a series of questions with the aim of better understanding American strategic culture. He pondered whether there was a distinctive American way of war, and if so, to what extent is it (both the way of war and strategic culture) rooted in the American democratic experience. Perhaps most importantly, he asked, “what is the significance for understanding the problems facing the military and political leadership in the United States today” because of the American strategic culture.⁴⁵ Lord believes that the study of strategy is itself part of the strategic culture of a nation, and must be expected to share in a “not inconsiderable measure in its parochialism.”⁴⁶ The ethnocentric aspect of strategy, which has proven virtually invisible, is in reality an argument for its pervasiveness, especially in American and western democracies. He believes that within this pervasiveness there are vital and timely lessons for studying a nation’s strategic culture.⁴⁷

Lord lists the seven principal factors that determine a nation’s strategic culture as: the geopolitical setting; international relationships; political culture and ideology; military culture—military history, traditions, and education; civil-military relationships and bureaucratic organization; and weaponry and military technology. These factors are both similar and different from Gray’s and Arms’ analyses as the ensuing paragraphs demonstrate. What is important from Lord’s work is that he concludes that discerning particular patterns and behaviors in U.S. strategy is possible as a result of these factors. Lord offers some elements of an answer toward the main question at issue: what does American strategic culture tell others about U.S. behavior?

Lord focuses on four major elements, which are distinct but closely interrelated, in answering this question. These elements are: (1) the role of the offensive; (2) approaches to land warfare; (3) the concept of deterrence; and (4) the process of strategic planning and decision. As with the Gray and Arms analyses, Lord summarizes each element above in sufficient detail for one to understand the particular U.S. strategic behavior of two decades ago.⁴⁸

Similar to Arms' argument, Lord suggests that when viewed in total, the American strategic cultural experience has fluctuated over time. Much as Clausewitz has notably used the analogy that a nation's strategy is affected by the interplay of chance and uncertainty, Lord views the instability in American strategic culture as being characterized by the tendency to oscillate between extremes, and that such oscillation is in fact something which distinguishes U.S. strategic culture.⁴⁹ Lord points out that U.S. geographic isolationism and the distinction between periods of war and peace in American attitudes toward war lend solid support to this thinking. The argument can be made that American strategic behavior has been characterized by contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities over time. The strategic "excursion" in the 1960s and 1970s in Vietnam reflects these dynamics - oscillating between support for the war and alienation from it.⁵⁰ In retrospect, this seems an appropriate observation since Lord further observed a checking and reversal of the oscillations, as well as many attitudes and practices of the strategic excursions earlier when he wrote in the 1980s. Both Arms and Lord see this as posing a problem for adversaries, thus representing a back-handed strength for U.S. strategic culture.

Perhaps most prescient of Lord's analysis is his conclusion that an adversary might indeed be able to challenge the U.S. because of deficiencies in Americans strategic culture. He states:

...Debates over technology, budget levels, and arms control continue to usurp the place of strategy, within as well as outside the defense establishment. It may well be that this reflects the most fundamental and enduring level of American strategic culture—an outlook whose deficiencies can never be adequately made up by improved education of the American political and military leadership. If that is indeed the case, prognostication of the outcome of the secular struggle between American liberal democracy and an adversary better prepared to put that struggle to the test of arms must remain uncertain.⁵¹

One certainly must further explore the line of thinking about what an enemy of America perceives when that adversary views the American strategic culture in total from three centuries ago through today. A follow-on subject to probe would also be whether or not America's strategic culture is suited to waging "a long war" against terrorism as effectively as it has waged wars of short duration in its past history.⁵² In the view of the jihadists, for instance, war is not an aberration as Americans have come to perceive; it is a perpetual condition. As Osama bin Laden put it in his state of Islam address in January 2003: "This clashing began centuries ago and will continue until Judgment Day."⁵³ Lord's discerning analysis deserves due consideration in light of the current war on terrorism and the adversary's well-known orientation on a hundred-year struggle.

While not explicitly using the term strategic culture, Russell F. Weigley's comprehensive work, *The American Way of War*, details many of these same influences outlined above in forming the American strategic culture. He outlines a unique American approach to strategy and military operations owing to the U.S. historical experience. He succinctly states that a nation does not easily escape its strategic history.⁵⁴ His emphasis on a nation's strategic history, as well as the contributions of others, is vital to the understanding of what American strategic culture tells others, especially adversaries of the U.S. about the American strategic viewpoint.

What is Really Important: Being Ahead at the End of the Game

It is clear from the analysis that the amalgamation of a nation's historical experience produces a strategic culture. American strategic culture is a combination of such things as its fortuitous geographic isolation; sub-cultures; Judeo-Christian heritage; ability to handle simplicity-complexity; and even generational aspects that impact culture among other influences. These influences have contributed to a unique American strategic perspective. "Above all else, strategic culture should be approached as the context that provides understanding of what behavior means."⁵⁵ An understanding of U.S. strategic culture tells other nations and groups what American behavior embraces, as well as informs U.S. leaders about their own predilections.

Acquiring an understanding of a nation's strategic culture is important because it helps in explaining the central questions about the basis of, and influences upon, strategic behavior.⁵⁶ Keeping these influences in mind, several areas need further elaboration to understand the consequences of American strategic culture. These amplifications are important because they affect the quality of strategic policy formulation. Policy recommendations that appropriately consider these factors will be well served. Three areas in particular deserve further development because they are strategic vulnerabilities in the Global War on Terrorism and are susceptible to exploitation by an adaptive adversary: (1) The "American way of war" for fighting and winning conflicts quickly; (2) the ability to handle more than one crisis at a time; and (3) a perceived disinclination to long-term strategic outlook. As a card shark plays a hand, so does a nation devise strategy in pursuit of its interests. The faces of the players and the preference for cards tell something about what the character of the game, in this case strategic behavior, may be.

As pointed out above, Gray determined that a culture can indeed change over time. He stated that, "a dominant strategic culture will be reintegrated by each generation in light of its own distinctive experience."⁵⁷ Culture does indeed evolve. Although it is probably too soon to discern a lasting change in American strategic culture based on strategic pronouncements and

events since 11 September, nonetheless, U.S. strategic culture has been evolving throughout all of U.S. history. America may or may not return to its most basic experiences that have so dominated American strategic thinking in the past; on the other hand it is unlikely these experiences will be ignored while waging a global war on terror. This begs the question of how should the U.S. view the Global War on Terror?

Fighting and Winning Quickly in the Long War

The word "war" makes Americans set a goal of discernible victory—somebody surrenders, signs a document, an evil empire collapses, a wall comes down, a villain bites the dust, and life returns to normal. . . ."Combating" terrorism, the term used 32 years ago when President Nixon created the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism, implies an enduring task. It has largely disappeared from the vocabulary of American officials. Wars are to be won, not waged indefinitely.⁵⁸

Owing to the fortuitous position of geography and other factors discussed previously, the American experience in war has been one in which victory is often measured by winning quickly, decisively, and by using overwhelming firepower. At least that is the perception by many Americans and consequently part of the American strategic culture. Most national security professionals can recite America's involvement in major wars such as the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and World Wars I and II. But few Americans can speak authoritatively about its role in small wars such as the Barbary Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, or the occupations of Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. These small wars played fundamental roles in the U.S. rise to superpower status over the last two centuries.⁵⁹ The U.S. has a long history with enduring smaller conflicts. This seeming contradiction with the predominant strategic cultural perception of winning decisively in major wars is a significant part of American strategic culture, yet is often overlooked. American strategists will most often rely on the facts from the major war experience—winning quickly by massing large numbers of soldiers and machines which are backed-up by overwhelming industrial might- to develop strategy options.

Although America has a remarkable small war tradition and experience, those wars were by and large looked upon as aberrations, necessary to further developing American economic and international standing, but not war proper. These police actions, undeclared wars by the U.S. Constitutional definition, were essential to the welfare of America and the promotion of U.S. values and interests in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Commitment of relatively small numbers of troops and resources were required for these wars and more contemporary U.S. conflicts, such as the interventions in the Balkans, Horn of Africa, and Haiti. These commitments continue to confront policy makers. These wars fall under the category of important national

interests versus vital to national survival. Wars of national survival such World War I and II, imparted the strategic outlook of overwhelming force through massive industrial capacity to ensure victory. The necessity to win a war quickly and decisively became a near permanent fixation. America's rich small wars history and culture were lost. Vietnam is now perceived as a war in which the nation ignored its small war tradition, opting instead to fight a conventional war. The preference of waging major wars, and the reality of small wars, creates an underlying tension in U.S. strategic culture that is not easily escaped by strategists. Not repeating the mistakes of Vietnam is a must for future interventions.⁶⁰ Recognizing the true nature of the Global War on Terrorism is essential for a successful strategy. It is a "small war" on a global scale. To be clear on this point, it is important for American strategists to comprehend that the U.S. must be capable of playing the cards they are dealt, despite preferences for certain cards or behavior.

How Much Can One Town Handle?

The simplicity-complexity dimension which Gray speaks of is critical to the war on terror. It manifests itself in numerous ways such as the distinctiveness of war, sequential strategies, and reliance on technology. While there is little empirical data to prove a simplicity-complexity model one way or the other, perhaps a brief review of a few American historical experiences with complex strategic challenges is helpful.

The American tradition has largely been to "view war and peace as distinct and separate episodes."⁶¹ As noted earlier, based on the experience in the First World War, the U.S. approach during World War II was to "hold off as long as possible, enter only long enough to thrash the bully or bullies who started it, get the boys home, and then try to remain uninvolved in European affairs as before."⁶² U.S. interventions overseas have always been and may continue to be characterized by the domestic tension of when to bring the troops home. One might also consider attempts by administrations to handle both foreign war and domestic political concerns simultaneously. The Johnson administration's *guns and butter* approach attempted to handle simultaneous, complex challenges at both home and abroad. Considering the eventual demise of the Johnson Administration over the Vietnam War, one might consider the attempt to build a great society and fight a foreign war as contributing factors to the one-crisis town metaphor for Washington, D.C. On the other hand, it clearly indicates America's problems in managing a "peacetime" economy and a "war." Yet, a "long war" as postulated in the global war on terror requires just such a complex ability to multi-task.

One of the most crucial collective decisions during World War II was to prioritize the effort to win in Europe *first* and *then* achieve victory in Asia. Unity of allied effort, resources, capacity to wage decisive war, as well as a host of other factors played out in the determination to win in Europe first. While this was the decision agreed upon by the allies early in the war, the underlying assumptions and realities were that strategic, sequential ordering of actions and garnering of resources were required. This sequencing of strategic objectives during World War II was not unlike other major war experiences with which these leaders, particularly American, were familiar. The Civil War and World War I were largely sequential and consumed the singular focus of strategists in Washington during those periods. The U.S. national purpose, with its Anglo-Saxon and European heritage also comes into play; many European theories of war and strategy such as those of Napoleon and Clausewitz remain in place even today in U.S. thinking and practice. Sequencing strategic objectives, taking on one-crisis at a time in contemporary colloquial terms, is part of the American strategic culture. Yet today, the world is infinitely more complex and sequential strategies less effective. The war fighting and numerous other objectives must be pursued simultaneously: maintaining economic prosperity, sustaining allies, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, for example.

The U.S. reliance on technology has created an attachment for things new and futuristic.⁶³ The confidence in technology in American strategic culture is also capable of carrying over to strategic decision-making. If culture is found in all places you find people, especially strategic leaders, you will also find the cultural influences that comprise that convention. Reliance on new technology can also be viewed as symbiotic with reliance on solving problems quickly and in simple, direct terms. This reliance further leads to solving problems sequentially vice simultaneously. In the war against terrorism technology is essential, but is not a singular solution. As the current administration has learned, Phase IV operations must be planned before the war fight.

Disinclination to a Long-Term Strategic Outlook

While scholars of strategic culture have cited the American disinclination to long-term planning as an element of U.S. strategic profiles, this assertion belies major successes in long-term commitments in American history. A perceived aversion to long-term orientation may be true in times of uncertainty and ill-defined strategic horizons, but it has not always been the case in the U.S. experience. Post-U.S. Civil War reconstruction was planned and implemented over several decades; the Marshall Plan restored Europe to economic prominence over the course of a full generation; the leading U.S. role in the United Nations and at Breton Woods served global

interests that continue today; and, of course, NSC-68 and the U.S. commitment to containment of the Soviet Union and communism are all examples of long-term American strategic vision and commitment. Even the decade-long U.S. effort to land a man on the moon can be seen as a marriage of fondness for newness, technology, and grand vision which runs counter to the perception of a weakness for near-term outlook. America has certainly been able to envision sweeping, generational strategic visions in its past, aligning grand strategic ends with pragmatic ways and the means to achieve those interests and objectives. This offers hope that a clear strategic vision for the Global War on Terrorism will emerge.

A potential adversary who seeks to take advantage of a perceived U.S. aversion to thinking in long terms may in the process mis-judge what the U.S. is actually attempting to accomplish. At the same time the U.S. must understand what is important itself. Ultimately, in a poker game, as well as in the course of a successful strategic outcome, it is not how many hands you win, but how much you are up at the end of the game. The global war on terror is a long game.

Conclusion

Strategy, like poker, blackjack, and rummy is about how the hands are played and who is ahead at the end of the game. Good card players read their opponent's preferences and style and adapt their game, even as they are aware of their own. Strategic culture, like preferences and style in cards, influences what strategists and policy makers may choose to do and how, where, and when they do it. The American amalgam of beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, habits, patterns, and preferences of behavior over time has created a distinctive national style. From this style springs certain strengths, weaknesses, and preferences which adaptive adversaries may discern from a study of U.S. strategic culture. Consequently, contemporary U.S. policy makers and strategists must remain aware that reliance on any one influence may cause them to become prisoners, unable to break free of cultural forces which affect strategic behavior. There have always been contradictions and paradoxes in the American strategic culture and choices have always mattered. Policy and strategy, like poker, blackjack, and rummy, requires that you use your experience and play your cards against the adversary of today. This is especially important, perhaps now more than ever, as the U.S. wages the Global War on Terrorism.

Others have made the case before for the value of unpredictability in strategy and card playing:

In short, absolute, so-called mathematical, factors never find a firm basis in military calculations. From the very start there is an interplay of possibilities,

probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry. In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards.⁶⁴

The contemporary strategic environment demands an approach to strategic culture that is adaptable and able to take advantage of the opportunities. What ultimately matters is how much one is ahead at the end of a long game. America must recognize the game it is in and play every card it holds to maximum advantage.

Endnotes

¹ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129.

² *Ibid.*, 130.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 86.

⁵ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19: 4 (Spring 1995): 32-64.

⁶ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 131.

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⁹ Carnes Lord, "American Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 5: 3 (1985): 289.

¹⁰ Gray, 129.

¹¹ Colin Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example," *International Security* 6: 2 (Fall 1981): 35-37; *Strategic Studies: A Critical Assessment* (Portsmouth: Greenwood Press, 1982); "Comparative Strategic Culture," *Parameters* (Winter 1984), 26-33; and "The Dimensions of Strategy," and "Strategic Culture as Context," in *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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¹³ Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security* 23: 1 (Summer 1998): 141-70.

¹⁴ Anita M. Arms, "Strategic Culture: The American Mind," in *Strategy and Its Theorists* (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College 1999), 329-57; from Thomas C. Gill, ed., *Essays on Strategy IX* (National Defense University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ U.S. Army War College Department of National Security Policy and Strategy, "Guidelines for Strategy Formulation," *National Security Policy and Strategy Course Directive* (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 2005), 112.

¹⁶ Jennifer J. Deal and Don W. Prince, *Developing Cultural Adaptability* (Greensboro: Center for Creative Leadership, 2004), 8. Deal and Prince discuss the aspect of other cultures interpreting shared behavior while observing another culture.

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¹⁹ Ibid., 330.

²⁰ Ibid., 330-331.

²¹ Maurice Matloff, "Allied Strategy in Europe, 1939-1945," in *Makers of Modern Strategy* ed., Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 679-680.

²² Ibid., 679-680.

²³ Giles Andréani, "The 'War on Terror': Good Cause, Wrong Concept," *Survival* 46: 4, (Winter 2004-05): 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 35.

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Arms, 332.

²⁷ Ibid., 333.

²⁸ Ibid., 335.

²⁹ Ibid., 337.

³⁰ Ibid., 337-338.

³¹ U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, *New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century* (September 1999), 57.

³² John Abizaid, General, U.S. Army, "A Long, Hard Fight," *U.S. News.com*, February 22, 2005; available from <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/050228/28military.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 October 2005.

³³ Arms, 329.

³⁴ Ibid., 329.

³⁵ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 130.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁵ Lord, 269.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 269-270.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 269-93.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵¹ Lord., 289.

⁵² Abizaid.

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⁶² *Ibid.*, 679-680.

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