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STRATEGY IN A MURKY WORLD

Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro

Making national strategy is a byzantine business in the best of times. When dramatic events happen, when the international arena is complex and changing, when threats and opportunities are uncertain, leaders struggle to understand and react effectively. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the attacks of 9/11 opened vistas that were unfamiliar and complicated. How did U.S. leaders manage those transitions?

In this conclusion, we aim both to clarify and analyze what the United States did and how it fared during the momentous years that followed the end of the Cold War. First, we sketch the evolution of strategy from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the onset of the Obama presidency. We then attempt to identify the accomplishments and failures of U.S. planning under uncertainty. Finally, we explore some of the key impediments to effective strategy-making in times of uncertainty and outline what we might learn from the record so that we can do better in the future.

Recovering the trail of U.S. strategy is no simple task. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the complexity and uncertainty of the international landscape confounds our retrospective view. We cannot fully re-create the cognitive and emotional mind-sets of U.S. officials. Judgments rest on counterfactuals (“things could have been different”) that presume a grasp of alternative outcomes that are unknowable. So we move forward aware of our own limitations and recognizing that we benefit from hindsight. We summarize in broad thematic strokes and attempt to glean what we can from the mix of insider information and scholarly analysis.

Reviewing U.S. Strategy

Despite their limited visibility, U.S. leaders struggled to come to grips with the challenges and opportunities created by the collapse of the Wall and the attacks on 9/11. What is notable is that the focal point of U.S. strategy did change dramatically from the end of the Cold War to the onset of the Obama administration: failed states and internal governance eclipsed the fears of great powers. As dangers and opportunities were reassessed, U.S. officials also reappraised their ideas about power and their attitudes toward prevailing international institutions. They developed a growing appreciation of the threats that might accompany the march of globalization and open borders.

It has not been easy for U.S. policymakers to think about strategic challenges in nontraditional ways. From the time Washington assumed a major role in the international arena after World War II, the main threat had been another state (the Soviet Union), its lethal capabilities (nuclear weapons), and its hostile communist ideology (“we will bury you”). The crux of American strategy was to contain or roll back the Soviet Union, co-opt and integrate former foes (Germany and Japan), and win friends among newly emerging nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In a world that was undergoing dynamic change as a result of decolonization and revolutionary nationalism, in a world that had few rules and that was infused with ideological conflict, Soviet capabilities seemed like the greatest danger to the United States.

America’s hope during the Cold War was that growing economic interdependence, the attractions of a marketplace economy, and the spread of human rights and democracy would win adherents to the American way of life and create a more stable international order along liberal and capitalist lines. To the extent the free movement of goods, money, ideas, and people could be encouraged, there was an opportunity to foster a different kind of world. The postwar development of Germany and Japan provided a comforting precedent; so did the growth of Western European integration and the dynamic advances of South Korea, Taiwan, and other Asian tigers, as they were once called. U.S. officials hoped that one day perhaps even the Soviet Union or China would follow this same path.

The American view in the Cold War was binary: threats emanated from the ideological-political-military realm of the major Communist powers; opportunities stemmed from the productivity of the American economy, the strength and reach of U.S. military forces, the latent appeal of open trade, the impact of the communications revolution, and the lure of consumer capitalism. After 11/9 and 9/11, policymakers again hoped to capitalize on these opportunities; they wanted to persuade other powers to embrace an American vision for the international order. Yet they had to grapple with the dangers stemming from the globalization of trade, capital, people, and ideas.

1989

The immediate challenge facing the United States after the fall of the Berlin Wall was familiar to U.S. leaders: they needed to achieve a political settlement in Germany (and Eastern Europe), one that would satisfy the major powers in Europe and win approval from their citizens. It was a formidable task, and the U.S. response to “1989” represents one of the most notable tactical success stories in the history of U.S. diplomacy. Mary Sarotte says it was a “punctuational moment,” a time when rapid change takes place and the decisions made shape events—in ways intended and unintended—for years afterwards. Robert Zoellick incisively recounts how, notwithstanding the pressures of rapidly moving events and the demands of constituencies across many countries, the United States was able to achieve an outcome unimaginable even one year before: a united Germany within NATO. In his chapter, William Wohlforth highlights the magnitude of the accomplishment. Most nongovernmental experts, he notes, were critical of the policy because they expected that rapid change favoring one side’s preferences would produce conflict, but it did not occur.¹

Who was responsible for this victory? Paul Wolfowitz argues that Ronald Reagan was the prime agent. He established the conditions that made rapid progress possible “when the Cold War ice cracked.” Wolfowitz also praises the team of George H. W. Bush and James Baker for skillfully handling the inter-allied diplomacy, ensuring that the Cold War ended in peaceful and advantageous ways for the United States. But success depended on initiatives that went well beyond the agreements over the future of Germany and the accords on strategic and conventional armaments. Zoellick usefully underscores these other dimensions of U.S. foreign policy—specifically foreign economic policy. Major progress was made to promote the free flow of goods and capital—setting the parameters that would lead to NAFTA and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group. These efforts, Zoellick asserts, nurtured domestic support for international engagement and encouraged liberalization of the international economy. Although this trajectory had long been characteristic of U.S. policy, officials responded to the new uncertainties in the world arena after the Wall came down by accelerating their efforts to promote economic interdependence and to spur the pace of globalization.

But it is not clear that foreign economic policy was integrated in a purposeful way with either the security architecture of Europe or a post-Cold War military strategy. Zoellick rightly emphasizes the consensus among U.S. officials on the desirability of economic integration. They believed that integration would foster economic growth, stability, and democracy (as it had in Western Europe). Policymakers in the Pentagon, such as Wolfowitz and Eric Edelman, shared these views. But security and economic planning after 1989 nonetheless moved on two different tracks in response to different pressures and events.

Officials also faced a clash between long-term opportunities and immediate demands and risks. U.S. decision makers after 11/9 passed on opportunities to create new international institutions that proponents thought would be better suited to deal with the evolving nature of international politics. They did so because they believed that prevailing institutions such as NATO could help absorb and anchor a united Germany, preserve America's role in Europe, reassure allies, and allow the United States to manage the immediate aftermath of 11/9. Although this orientation seemed wise in 1989 and 1990, it appeared less so with the passage of time. After 1991, reforming and enlarging NATO mostly exacerbated relations with Russia, a formidable former enemy whose partnership was now desirable in order to build a Europe whole and free as well as to manage other problem areas such as the Middle East and Central Asia.

John Ikenberry, a well-known political scientist, has argued that after major victories and in times of flux it is in the interest of the United States to remake existing institutions.² Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth have asserted that the United States could and should have used its position of primacy to be more activist in creating and shaping international rules.³ These views echo the words of Douglas Hurd (foreign secretary of Great Britain from 1989 to 1995) who noted that after 1991 the United States forfeited an ideal opportunity to “remake the world, update everything, the UN, everything.”⁴

In chapter 1, Mary Sarotte reiterates this viewpoint. She points out that the United States made a conscious choice to preserve existing Cold War institutions rather than create new ones, as leaders had done after 1945. The United States might have tried to integrate the Soviet Union into the West, perhaps through a collective European security architecture. Failure to do so, Sarotte maintains, had serious consequences. Citing the *9/11 Commission Report*, she identifies the rigidity of Cold War institutions and thinking as one of the causes of U.S. vulnerability to the terrorist attacks in 2001.

Of course, at the time, the advantages of alternative approaches were not self-evident. Zoellick notes that new institutions—especially “third way” ones—might not have been popular or efficacious in the rapidly evolving international landscape after 1989. Yugoslavia began to unravel, and vicious ethnic conflict threatened to destabilize Europe. And at the same time, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Suddenly, the attention of Bush 41 officials gravitated to questions of internal governance in failing states and to regional stability. They had to decide whether to assume the burdens of nation-building in the Balkans and the Middle East, whether to use their counterattack to defeat Saddam's army, march to Baghdad, and tackle the problems of an ethnically and religiously divided Iraq. Bush and his advisers hesitated to do so. They were not ready to reshape societies they knew little about or abandon the tried-and-true mechanisms like NATO that had served the United States so well for so long.

The Aftershock of 1991

The repercussions of the Persian Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 revealed an ill-defined U.S. architecture for global affairs. The American people clamored for cuts in the military budget and for relief from the onerous obligations of the Cold War. Improvising as he went along, Bush 41 heralded a “new world order” and tried to act collaboratively with other countries. In thwarting Saddam Hussein, he opted to go to the United Nations for approval for the war, worked closely with the Soviet Union, put together a huge coalition including major Arab nations, and decided not to seize Baghdad or seek total victory. He was trying to foster principles such as multilateral cooperation, partnership with the Soviet Union, and great power self-restraint.⁵

The main strategic planning effort that occurred after 1991 was the crafting of the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG). As Eric Edelman and Paul Wolfowitz recount, this was an attempt to anticipate the emerging post-Cold War world and adjust to it. Their final report, “Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy,” delineated the many requirements to meet the new enemy—President Bush called it “unpredictability.”⁶ The authors of the DPG emphasized the need to safeguard U.S. primacy in international affairs and the importance of configuring forces to meet uncertain but inevitable crises that would erupt in regions of the globe deemed vital to U.S. interests. They also stressed the significance of integrating former Communist countries into a community of democracies, the benefits of free trade, and the salience of a U.S. “forward presence” to thwart the possibility of nationalism and militarism reemerging in Germany and Japan.⁷

Although Wolfowitz and Edelman vigorously and insightfully rebut many of the clichés that have surfaced about the DPG, the planning exercise highlighted a dilemma that confronts leaders in time of uncertainty: how to deal with well-known threats from the past and at the same time identify new ones lurking in the unfamiliar international landscape. In fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, new threats in the altered strategic environment were not identified, especially the dangers emanating from failed states and nonstate actors. Planners focused on state threats—especially from countries with significant power potential in regions of vital importance—and worried about the eventual reconstitution of Russian power. In writing the DPG, they displayed more concern with states that had power, even if they had good intentions and were U.S. allies (Germany and Japan), than with nongovernmental actors who wanted to harm the United States. Wolfowitz and Edelman, in fact, make an important contribution to our understanding of the DPG when they stress that U.S. planners believed that sustained defense spending was needed in part to dissuade Japan and Germany from remilitarizing. Nonetheless, Edelman acknowledges

that “the document can be faulted for not sufficiently anticipating the danger of Islamic extremism, state failure, and terrorism.”⁸ The same can be said about their Democratic successors.

U.S. policymakers not only had to deal with a rapidly changing international landscape, but also with a volatile domestic political scene. The salience of domestic politics was highlighted when James Baker resigned from his position as secretary of state and became White House chief of staff in August 1992 in order to manage George H. W. Bush’s presidential reelection campaign. Zoellick describes how Baker tried to forge a campaign plan that “linked America’s foreign engagement with domestic interests.”⁹ He failed: voters focused on the domestic economy and Bush 41 was defeated.

The end of the Cold War sundered whatever bipartisan consensus still remained on foreign policy.¹⁰ Thereafter, vicious partisan conflict hindered the ability to plan coherent national strategy. The opportunity to forge new global principles, treaties, and organizations compatible both with American traditions and new global realities was lost.

Democrats in Charge, 1993–2000

For the incoming Clinton team, “the world looked remarkably benign in January 1993.”¹¹ But in an era marked by unipolarity and globalization, the international environment presented enticing possibilities as well as formidable challenges. The new administration decided to assign priority to encouraging democracy in Russia. In his chapter, Walter Slocombe recounts how the linchpin of Clinton’s strategy—America’s relationship with Russia—was really an effort to shape its internal political character. The goal was to encourage Russia to become a market democracy that would be a congenial and reliable international partner.

This objective, however, clashed with another U.S. priority, one that was also related to internal governance and geopolitics: the enlargement of NATO and the democratization of Eastern Europe. Many Russian leaders deeply resented the extension of NATO membership to former Warsaw Pact countries. They saw it as a violation of agreements signed at the end of the Cold War—a claim that was not inscribed in any legal document, but that was understandable in view of the conversations that had taken place in February 1990 between Baker and Mikhail Gorbachev and between Gorbachev and German chancellor Helmut Kohl.¹² The United States and Russia also parted company over the intensifying conflicts in the Balkans.

The Clinton administration in effect was adopting the basic strategy developed after the fall of the Wall. This policy was designed to help Russia’s leaders as long as they acquiesced to U.S. preferences in world politics. The Clinton team

wanted to avoid a Russian nationalist backlash against that policy. Yet the pursuit of a winner-take-all diplomacy and the existence of a populist tide within the newly democratic Russia ensured strategic failure. Conditions ripened for an entrepreneurial Russian politician to exploit popular passions and resentment against U.S. policy. Vladimir Putin, an intelligence service bureaucrat, became that politician. By pursuing a total victory after 1989–90, the United States sowed the seeds of confrontation that would take root and grow over the next ten years.

As Slocombe notes, Clinton's Russia strategy was coherent. The president was personally engaged and he assigned resources to its achievement. Moreover, the strategy helped sustain a number of diplomatic successes, including the enlargement of NATO and the resolution of the Balkan wars. Yet, ultimately, the difficulty of reforming Russia's internal governance, the clash over NATO enlargement and democracy promotion in Eastern Europe, and the unreliable Boris Yeltsin undermined the central goal of the administration: a long-term strategic partnership with America's former foe in pursuit of a Europe whole and free.

9/11

By the time George W. Bush was elected president, his advisers were beginning to recognize that political instability abroad, even in smaller states, was a major challenge for the post-Cold War era. As Philip Zelikow recounts, in the summer of 2001—before 9/11—National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice began drafting a national strategy with the premise “that in a globalized world where great power rivalries were fading, the main problems would come from states imploding from within.”¹³ This, of course, was a distinct change from the “no nation-building” rhetoric of the campaign as well as from Rice's summary of Bush's campaign philosophy in her 2000 *Foreign Affairs* article in which she had emphasized the need to focus on great power rivals and the importance of alliances. But in July 2001 she was not yet grappling with strategies to reconstitute failed states. Even today, these many years after 9/11, U.S. officials are still struggling to design capabilities and policies to deal with this challenge, for example, the development of counterinsurgency forces within the military establishment and the design of governance-building capabilities within the State Department.

The attacks on September 11, 2001, like the fall of the Berlin Wall, shattered expectations and impelled new thinking. The international landscape, however, was no longer one of geopolitical possibility (like after 11/9), but fraught with peril emanating from nonstate actors. Suddenly, a problem that had been simmering, but had not been embraced as a top challenge by the George W. Bush administration, now shaped its entire global outlook. In Rice's 2000 article, “terrorism” was

mentioned only three times, all minor asides. But she was not alone in slighting this threat. Subsequently, the 9/11 Commission would call this neglect a “failure of imagination”—an inability to think beyond a Cold War mind-set in a new environment.¹⁴

Bush and his advisers effectively managed the immediate aftermath of the attack. Even as they struggled to make sense of what occurred, comfort the bereaved, reassure the public, overcome their own humiliation, and seek revenge, they successfully identified al Qaeda as the key source of the 9/11 attack. They admonished the Taliban government in Afghanistan that it must expel the terrorist organization from its territory or face war. When it refused, U.S. officials quickly took action, routed the Taliban forces, and sent al Qaeda members fleeing for safety. As Zelikow notes, this reactive effort was at times chaotic and ad hoc, but it worked.

The record of the United States’ medium- and longer-term approach to the post 9/11 world, however, was more mixed. On the positive side, the United States continued to expand trade and promote economic liberalization, themes of all post-Cold War administrations, but goals that could easily have been sublimated in response to fears about globalization in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Zoellick shows how those efforts in the Americas, in Asia, and elsewhere served U.S. interests.

In political-military terms, however, many of the scholars here argue that U.S. officials erred. Policymakers attacked Iraq without first addressing the unstable situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan and without preparing effectively for the management of a postconflict Iraq. John Mueller contends that Bush administration officials (like their predecessors during the Cold War) exaggerated the threat and clumsily framed the problem as a “war on terror.” Odd Arne Westad says that they learned the wrong lessons from the past. Bruce Cumings believes that they could not escape their hardened mind-sets.

Pathologies of Uncertainty

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the chapters in this book demonstrate that the United States effectively shaped and adapted to parts of the new environment spawned by 11/9 and 9/11. Real achievements and partial successes should not be ignored: the reunification of Germany within NATO; the rollback of Saddam’s armies in the Gulf War; the reorientation of strategic thinking; NATO enlargement; an end to conflict in the Balkans; and the defeat of the Taliban. But there were shortcomings as well: opportunities were missed to create and reform international institutions; political, military, and economic initiatives were not well

coordinated; the dangers emanating from failed states, nonstate terrorists, Islamic fundamentalists, and Russian revanchists were not sufficiently understood.

How can we account for the failures or inadequacies of strategic planning? Insightful recommendations for the future depend on analysis of past problems and achievements. Extrapolating from the chapters in this book, we can group the main impediments to high-quality planning into five categories: nearsighted vision, faulty assumptions, domestic priorities, bureaucratic infighting, and procedural shortcomings.

Nearsighted Vision

Overall, U.S. policymakers did reasonably well in responding to the immediate challenges faced in the wake of both 11/9 and 9/11. This is true in two senses. First, desirable outcomes were achieved, at least initially: Germany was unified peacefully within NATO and the Taliban and al Qaeda were defeated in Afghanistan. Second, as Wohlforth points out, actions by government officials were different than those proposed by knowledgeable nongovernmental experts and the outcomes were better than many independent scholars predicted.

The record for the medium term and longer term is less impressive. Although we see things more clearly after the fact, there was too little focus on and analysis of emerging and foreseeable problems such as a revanchist Russia, the fallout from failed states, the rise of terrorism, and the tribulations of postwar Iraq. Outside experts (who generally have a bad track record on short-term choices and consequences) displayed a much better understanding of these matters.¹⁵

How can we account for this variation in outcomes? Wohlforth suggests that information and cognitive style make a difference. The pace of change in Europe was startling in the fall of 1989 as were the pressures to respond to the 9/11 attacks. Wohlforth's analysis proposes that U.S. officials may do better adjusting to immediate dangers and opportunities because they have fresher and more complete information than their counterparts in other countries (and more than nongovernmental experts). When officials plan for the long term, however, they face more uncertainty and, therefore, immediate access to information and resources are less decisive. It may also be that the scholarly experts' hedgehog style of deductive reasoning is more appropriate for designing longer-term strategy than for handling immediate crises.

Another possible explanation for the difference is that short-term success has a blowback effect that impairs longer-term results. Immediate success leads to overconfidence, dangerous risk-taking, and insufficient attention to newly emerging problems. Gorbachev's willingness to go along with U.S. desires, for example, may subsequently have encouraged American policymakers to believe

that the Russians would bend to U.S. determination. Likewise, in the Bush 43 administration, the early success in Afghanistan, according to Zelikow, became “a stimulant to action” that “loosened inhibitions about experiments with new ideas.” This dynamic encouraged the United States to invade Iraq, an operation that had previously been deemed too risky.¹⁶

Sarotte raises another possible answer. Perhaps it is the case that governmental leaders need to react to immediate challenges and, having done so, those choices make it much harder to go in a different direction at a later time, even if it seems desirable to do so. Bets have been made, reputations staked, and conditions no longer invite big changes.

In these accounts, government officials, in effect, may behave like corporate leaders: the desire for short-term returns may crowd out optimal longer-term strategy.

Faulty Assumptions

Several of the contributors believe that the problems the United States encountered were due to assumptions from U.S. culture or lessons derived from experience that diminished the U.S. ability to read situations accurately. In his analysis of why the Iraq War went so poorly and why the United States got mired in Afghanistan, Westad argues that American leaders “misinterpreted the societies into which they intervened and overestimated the U.S. capacity for forcing change.”¹⁷ They were wrong, in Westad’s view, because U.S. decision makers operated according to a set of lessons about interventions and political change that came from the Cold War in Europe, but did not apply to the situations in Iraq and Pakistan. If U.S. officials had assessed the conditions on terms appropriate to the cultural and geographic context of Southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf, they either would not have intervened (Iraq) or would have done so differently (Afghanistan/Pakistan) and with better results.

Lack of understanding, Slocombe argues, is not always the problem and was not the central cause of the Clinton administration’s troubles in its Russia policy: “Knowledge of Russia was greater than that of the Balkans, the Arab world, North Korea, or Afghanistan.” If there was a flawed understanding at work, it was a general one about how easy it would be to influence another country’s internal political and economic order in an era of American dominance. “It is very hard for outsiders to shape a basic transformation in attitudes and practices in a foreign society and culture.”¹⁸

Bruce Cumings also believes that the ways policymakers encounter an uncertain world are bounded by systems of axiomatic presuppositions that skew their understanding and action. If states respond to crises with “what is on the

shelf,” then leaders respond to crises with what is in their head.¹⁹ Both Acheson after World War II and Bush 41 after the Berlin Wall came down were driven by an uncritical belief in the importance of an open, liberal world economy for U.S. well-being; the interventions after 9/11 were molded by flawed presuppositions from the post–World War II era about the appeal of freedom, the efficacy of force, and the success of military occupation (in Germany, Japan, and South Korea); and estimates of North Korea’s demise have been consistently wrong because they are not based on an understanding of Korean history and culture.

A clear vision of the future demands an unbiased analysis of current and emerging conditions. Such an analysis, according to Cumings, is impossible. U.S. officials cannot help but err; success is accidental. Westad’s analysis is more hopeful. Intelligent extrapolations, he suggests, are possible if situations are better understood.

John Mueller describes a different phenomenon that has haunted U.S. strategy in times of uncertainty: the need to conjure an existential threat. In his view, the United States goes in “quest of monsters” that do not exist. After 1945, it was global communism; after 1989, it was proliferation of nuclear weapons; and, after 9/11, it was global terrorism. In all cases, the threat was exaggerated beyond realistic proportions, causing a pervasive and unnecessary sense of insecurity. In this view, the U.S. approach to uncertainty is addicted to threat mongering and war making except in rare circumstances when the adversary’s toughness (for example, Vietnam) chastens policymakers (and the American people)—until they forget.

Domestic Priorities

When the international arena is opaque, domestic political priorities can loom large in the making of U.S. strategy. From the day the Berlin Wall came down, domestic opinion figured prominently in shaping the actions of U.S. leaders.

Bush 41 immediately recognized that in the aftermath of the Cold War new dangers loomed: the U.S. public might no longer support large defense expenditures and the United States “forward defense” strategy might have to be reversed. The specter of American isolationism reared its ugly head once again. Bush’s solution was to embed the newly unified Germany inside NATO, an institution that required a continued U.S. presence in Europe.²⁰

In chapter 2, Robert Zoellick notes that a motive for the U.S. pursuit of regional cooperation in Asia in 1989 was “to counter a potential resurgence of U.S. economic isolationism.”²¹ Successful strategy, he stresses, had to be “connected to the ‘Home Front.’”²² The American people needed to be shown that U.S. international activity helped further U.S. jobs, competitiveness, and values. “Without

public support, any U.S. administration will not be able to maintain a strategy of global American engagement.²³

Concerns about domestic support not only revolved around foreign economic policy; they were focused on the heart of U.S. power abroad: the defense budget. As Wolfowitz and Edelman recount, the original impetus for the Defense Planning Guidance process was to provide the United States with a compass in the wake of the Cold War. But they also stress that the planning document was an effort to fend off calls for even greater cuts in the defense budget by legislators who no longer saw dangerous threats in the world.²⁴

When the Clinton administration had to choose between the possibility of alienating Russia through NATO enlargement and the certainty of alienating domestic constituencies with ethnic roots in the countries of Eastern Europe or in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the president and his advisers decided to assign priority to enlargement. They did not want to lose voters who were critical to reestablishing and preserving a Democratic coalition that the Republicans had undone in the 1994 congressional elections.²⁵

John Mueller's chapter does not explore deeply why threat exaggeration occurs. To the extent it does happen, leaders may be attempting to mobilize against imminent threats that they believe would not be countered effectively in the absence of public alarm.²⁶ But leaders may also be manipulating threats to increase their domestic political popularity and to achieve their domestic political agendas, as many allege Bush 43 tried to do and as often was the case during the Cold War. In other words, strategy under uncertainty may be shaped as much by domestic politics as by the evolving international landscape.

Bureaucratic Battles

From the view of Washington insiders there is one central factor that shapes the way that the United States responds to the external world: the struggle for influence among competing bureaucracies and policymakers. Such dynamics haunt the dreams of those who aspire to integrate national strategy.

Differences in opinion across bureaucracies, leaks to sabotage plans, hesitancy to voice opinions, and enmity among top decision makers shaped the ways in which the United States adapted to the post–Cold War and 9/11 worlds. Even in the Bush 41 presidency, an administration renowned for its relative cohesiveness, the Defense Planning Guidance was almost gutted by a leak that revealed a preliminary and yet to be vetted draft. Edelman calls it “particularly vociferous bureaucratic infighting” that in part was fueled by a policy dispute, examined by Wolfowitz, between Defense and State over Ukraine leaving the Soviet Union.²⁷

Philip Zelikow recalls that the start of the Bush 43 administration was “fractious” and encouraged “factional rivalry.”²⁸ Bush’s style was that of the business manager who allocated authority to particular bureaucracies depending on the issue. Decisions were made in different subunits with limited coordination. The vice president handled some matters, Defense others, and the State Department had its portfolio. But there were poisonous relations among top officials, and incessant interlopings across bureaucratic boundaries. Secretary of State Colin Powell and CIA director George Tenet struggled to preserve the autonomy and influence of their organizations while National Security Adviser Rice tried to safeguard her special relationship with the president. The famous National Security Strategy of 2002, in fact, was drafted by Rice, assisted by Zelikow working as an outside consultant, and had little input from the neoconservatives in the administration.

Zoellick’s integrated strategy was not coordinated across the bureaucratic landscape of Washington. It was coherent in his own mind but he was not inclined to lay it out in a strategy statement. Pragmatic, experienced, and skillful bureaucratic players such as Baker and Zoellick were not prone to spend their time writing elaborate strategy papers, nor was it part of the culture of the State Department to generate a fully worked out strategic plan for a new world order.²⁹

In all these cases, the response to complex rapid changes in world politics was molded by intragovernmental bickering and maneuvering. In most cases, bureaucratic conflict was a formidable impediment to integrated strategy.

Distorted Process

Scholars can imagine an ideal scheme for how U.S. strategy should be made in changing and uncertain circumstances. The president convenes a group of the nation’s top foreign policy officials such as the heads of the NSC, State, CIA, Defense, and Treasury. They are tasked to gather information and formulate a set of options across policy domains (economic, military, diplomatic, intelligence, and so forth). A well-greased interagency process then reconciles divergent views. After weighing costs and benefits, risks and opportunities, officials present the president with alternative strategic options. The president then selects the most effective overall strategy for immediate and continuing challenges. This strategy is communicated to the bureaucracy, the country, and the world (as needed) to guide the various efforts (departmental, regional, functional, international, and so forth) that constitute the nation’s foreign policy.

In reality, U.S. foreign policy often strayed considerably from this ideal as leaders confronted tumultuous times and faced a murky international arena after

11/9 and 9/11. The record reveals a planning process that involved both rational routine and ad hoc artistry. The actual day to day policymaking was at times coherent and well managed, as seemed to have been the case during Brent Scowcroft's tenure as national security adviser during the Bush 41 administration.³⁰ Managing day-to-day policy, however, is different than long-term strategic planning, which requires presidential input, good personal relationships across bureaucracies, excellent intelligence assessments, and visionary thinkers as well as policy entrepreneurs who are able to seize the opportunity and guide issues in one direction or another.

In the period after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the core of governmental planning was a group of decision makers in the State Department under Secretary Baker and in the NSC under Brent Scowcroft. People such as Zoellick, Robert Blackwill, Rice, Robert Hutchings, and Zelikow mapped out the options. They had thought about alternative scenarios. Some contingency planning for the breakup of the Soviet Union seems to have been done in a secret task force headed by Rice (who was in charge of Soviet and Eastern European affairs for the National Security Council) in the fall of 1989.³¹ Laggards in the process included Cheney in Defense and Robert Gates at the CIA, both of whom were skeptical about the quick deal making with Gorbachev. The administration, however, decided to increase the pace of diplomacy in order to bolster Gorbachev's stature inside the Kremlin, but also to prevent him from seizing the initiative.³² Close relationships between Bush and Scowcroft and Bush and Baker enabled officials in those organizations to shape short-term outcomes in timely and competent ways.

Longer-term planning in the Bush 41 administration, to the extent it occurred, took place in the Pentagon. The president and his national security adviser were not inclined toward strategic thinking. As Edelman writes, they "lacked the inclination to engage in speculative 'grand strategy' or the 'vision thing' . . . they had minimal interest in the debate over a new strategy."³³ Spurred by the Persian Gulf War, Bush and Scowcroft did reflect on general principles for a "new world order." They wanted to act in ways that fostered cooperation with the Soviet Union, enhanced the legitimacy of international institutions and rule of law, and preserved old and new alliances and coalitions (for example, by not marching to Baghdad to overthrow Saddam).³⁴ But they had little patience or interest in putting their ideas on paper in a systematic way and communicating them to the bureaucracy and the world.

In the meantime, officials in the Defense Department went to work on a document that would provide direction for the contraction, reconfiguration, and use of U.S. military forces. Their plan, as described by Edelman, was more than simply military guidance. It incorporated the same "geoeconomic" assumptions that were

then shaping Zoellick's thinking in the State Department, but the ideas of State and Defense officials were not joined in a single document.³⁵ As Wolfowitz notes, "the Regional Defense Strategy was not a grand strategy."³⁶ Department of Defense officials were not inclined to share their work with other departments. When it was leaked, it caused consternation in the White House. The final draft of the DPG was never championed by the White House. It was released by Secretary of Defense Cheney at the very end of the Bush 41 administration in January 1993.

The Clinton administration lacked a strong strategic focus. To the extent it conducted grand strategy, it did so out of the White House. Clinton wanted an overall approach to the world, but he was not disciplined enough in his own thinking and leadership style to make it happen, and the world was too complicated.³⁷ Slocombe shows that the administration did have a strategy at least in one area—Russia. Again, the development of this strategy built not on institutionalized process but on circumstances surrounding the fact that the president was a college friend of his main Russia adviser, Strobe Talbott, the deputy secretary of state. Otherwise, Clinton and his aides embraced much of the military strategy and many of the same geoeconomic assumptions of their Republican predecessors.

Bush 43 was intent on avoiding the critique of his father for lacking "the vision thing," but floundered until the attacks of 9/11. He possessed a different approach to policymaking than his father. The president's preferred CEO management style positioned his key advisers like "the heads of the subsidiary companies seeing themselves less as part of a team, more as executives with their own responsibilities to discharge." Although Bush may have been seeking a "team of rivals," he encouraged unruly competition. Effective strategic planning in such a framework was impossible for Rice to orchestrate.³⁸ The immediate response to 9/11 was generated by an ad hoc group dominated by officials in the Defense Department, the CIA, and the Office of the Vice President (at least insofar as Afghanistan was concerned). This group remained at the heart of efforts that would lead the United States into Iraq, but, paradoxically, this was not the group that authored the notorious 2002 National Security Strategy statement.

Zelikow describes how that long-term strategy was developed within the National Security Council under Secretary Rice and her outside consultants (especially Zelikow himself). The coordination between the war planning for Iraq and the overall strategy was not tight. Nonetheless, the immediate demands of the situation (the desire to remove Saddam Hussein) shaped the drafting of the broader National Security statement, for example, the emphasis on preemption versus prevention. The strategy statement was a relatively consistent and coherent vision of overall strategy, but Zelikow also argues that it reflected the exigencies of the moment.

The record indicates the absence of a standard process for interpreting dramatic change and reacting to it. Although administrations were configured similarly, officials came together in different ways depending on the predilections of the president, the expertise and inclinations of his chief advisers, and the relationships among them and their subordinates.³⁹ The classic model of hierarchical and integrated policymaking captures only a partial picture of what actually occurred. Instead, different bureaucratic actors competed as much as they collaborated. Strategy was often highly segregated and responsive to domestic political pressures and priorities. Overall there appears to have been little coordinated political-military-economic strategy in the U.S. government in the post-Cold War period.

Managing the Murky Future

In many ways, we are still in the post-11/9 and 9/11 eras. Barack Obama introduced his administration's first national strategy statement in May 2010 by highlighting that the world is in a moment of transition, "a time of sweeping change," which the United States must seek to shape.⁴⁰ The United States still struggles to perceive the future of a shifting and complex world in which there are, as John Mueller quotes, "many snakes to slay, but no dragons." As terrifying as the prospect of nuclear war was during the Cold War, the Soviet threat had the advantage of providing an overarching focus to governmental foreign policy, a dominant threat around which to focus, and particular opportunities to pursue when possible.

The priority that should be assigned to different dangers and opportunities as we look ahead is much less clear. The United States must make sense of how threats from nation-states compare with dangers from terrorists; how the spread of nuclear weapons technologies rates in relation to the rise of global warming or the movement of deadly viruses; and how many resources should be devoted to building international institutions or alternative energy supplies versus building effective institutions within troubled countries abroad—or even at home. Officials must also avoid fostering Mueller's "self-licking" threats that misrepresent the actual danger.

The authors here are agreed that how the United States plans for the future affects its competence in the world arena. The policymakers—Zoellick, Wolfowitz, Edelman, Zelikow, and Slocombe—believe that the United States often responded effectively to the dramatic changes in the world over the past twenty years. They are certainly right in noting some achievements such as German unification, the expansion of NATO, and the growth of a global economy based on more open

markets and freer enterprise. The academicians, on the other hand, see flaws that have produced costly losses of treasure and lives at home and abroad. They, too, are right. The record has been mixed, and, to their credit, all the authors point in varying degrees to both achievements and mistakes in U.S. performance.

Looking across the chapters, patterns emerge. U.S. leaders have tended to deal with short-run challenges well, but have had more difficulty in managing longer-term feedback and change. They often have relied on outdated and faulty assumptions. In the absence of pressing external demands, they have allowed domestic political pressures to skew policy; they have not effectively managed bureaucratic infighting; and they have not always organized an efficient policy process. Most of these maladies are endemic and enduring; each deserves attention.

There are no absolute cures, but partial remedies are possible. Awareness of the pathologies is an important step in itself. If policymakers understand what can go wrong (and right), they can avoid pitfalls and can inspire efforts to take compensatory actions. For example, an administration that shares Zoellick's vision of an integrated policy could design a process that does a more effective job of coordinating the different policy domains. Organizational changes may also foster that sort of planning. Zelikow, while advising Condi Rice, was worried about the lack of attention to long-term planning in government. He recommended that an office be established within the NSC to help bring a longer-term perspective to planning.⁴¹

In the midst of our contemporary angst, we should not ignore some instructive lessons from the record of U.S. planning since the end of the Cold War. Planning is not always the key source of effective action and entails its own set of risks. Lengthy reviews can be undermined and gutted, as seen in Bush 41's initial strategic review of 1989, a review that Secretary of State Baker called "mush."⁴² Others note the dangers of big planning exercises. Paul Wolfowitz concludes that "large interdepartmental reviews inevitably tend to kill innovative ideas."⁴³ Edelman contends that "any document that must go through the bureaucratic maw ends up being dumbed down to the lowest common denominator."⁴⁴

Yet it is also clear that improvising the nation's foreign policy cannot endure for long. Focused forethought, alternative scenario consideration, and contingency planning are necessary. As seen in the work of the small Rice group in the fall of 1989, in the labors of those crafting the Defense Planning Guidance between 1990 and 1993, and in the efforts of those designing the National Security Strategy of 2002, top decision makers require strategic planning, and policy outcomes in the long run depend, at least in part, on the quality of such efforts.

Strategy is important for developing governmental capabilities and communicating purpose to audiences both within and outside of the national government.

Wolfowitz points out that planning is absolutely essential for making resource decisions to shape U.S. military capabilities.⁴⁵ And Zoellick argues that articulating a coherent policy has a potent public affairs function since success may depend on public support both within the United States and abroad. This was the case with the Bush administration's diplomacy in 1989–90, which needed the support of citizens in the two Germanys as well as from those in other Central and Eastern European countries.⁴⁶

Of course, the key to strategy in any U.S. administration is the president and other top officials who have the ability to organize and invest in a system that manages complexity and change in ways that mitigate the pathologies above. Leadership is a critical component of effective national planning. Leadership necessarily involves quick and decisive action, but, as Wolfowitz counsels, it must also allow time for strategic thinking, debate, and reflection.

Finally, U.S. planning under uncertainty may benefit from studying the experience of other countries. There is no question that the United States is in some respects a unique country as a result of its preponderant global power, particular democratic political system, and geographic location. Yet there are still useful things planners may learn from other nations in at least two respects. The first involves the organization and process of planning. Other nations also have to deal with uncertainty—indeed, in many cases, countries that are smaller and possess less control over the external world face even more unknowns and risks. Examining how they have organized themselves to deal with that complexity may be useful to the United States as it is increasingly intertwined with other countries and shaped by external factors. U.S. policymakers using intergovernmental networks could explore these comparative dimensions for useful insights relatively quickly.

The United States might also profit from studying how other nations extrapolate strategy from their planning processes. Countries around the world have had to deal with the threats and opportunities of a globalizing world. They too have had to transition away from a long-ingrained Cold War pattern of thought and decision making. Have some countries done better at this than others? Russia, the members of the EU, China, and Japan have clearly made different choices in terms of their emphasis on military development, the integration of security and economic decision making, and the priority accorded to energy and environmental factors. To what extent have these choices been effective and how have they been shaped by planning efforts? Looking beyond the American experience might usefully benefit future American competence. This is a longer-term task that is perhaps particularly suited to scholarly research.

Strategy requires moving from the knowns to the unknowns and back again. We know that the United States today faces a world that is uncertain and complex.

We also know that there will be events that will occur that we cannot foresee but that will cause further confusion and uncertainty.

Our hope is that a better understanding of how the United States has reacted in the past will help illuminate the way forward—that has been the goal of bringing together the views of former policymakers and scholars. In this book the personal recollections of key decision makers add significantly to the historical record of strategic adaptation—in ways that are both reassuring and troubling. The chapters by scholars provide critical analysis. Both former officials and non-governmental experts have a role to play in improving future performance in a changing world fraught with peril and opportunity.