



**Tactical Success**  
**vs.**  
**Strategic Victory**



# A Winning Strategy

COMBINE MILITARY FORCE WITH GOOD GOVERNANCE

**KORI SCHAKE**

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Edmund Burke in 1776 best characterized the nature of the problem we now face: “The use of force alone is but temporary; it may subdue for a moment but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again—and a nation is not to be governed that must perpetually be conquered.” It only adds poignancy to the reflection that the “nation” about which Burke spoke comprised Britain’s thirteen rebellious North American colonies. In his “Speech on Conciliation with America,” Burke appealed to his government not to rely on military means of suppressing the uprising, but instead to improve the quality of governance Americans were experiencing. Gaining the voluntary acquiescence of those Britain would rule was the right frame of reference for Britain’s strategy. He considered military force “a feeble instrument” for that purpose.

The United States used military force as the principal means of state power in its conquest of Indian tribes as American settlers spread across the continent and in the Hawaiian Islands; but the government’s objective was the extinction of the indigenous way of life. In lands Americans would not inhabit, Burke’s approach was repeatedly proven both more effective and cheaper than predominant reliance on military force.

Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, propounded during the Venezuelan debt crisis of 1905, expanded the writ of American intervention in the Western Hemisphere, taking onto the United States the responsibility for Latin American government payment of commercial debts to European creditors. In essence, we indemnified Europeans against governmental default on loans extended by their businesses in order to remove any pretense for European colonial or neocolonial usurpation of local control.

Dearth of infrastructure—railroads, canals, roads, telephone networks—necessary for economic development coupled with profligate spending and corruption



by *caudillo* governments precipitated a bevy of American interventions in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Guatemala when those governments threatened default (often, after a military coup a *caudillo* would attempt to repudiate the debts of his predecessors). It was in these occupations that the American government came to appreciate Burke's approach.

The Marine Corps's 1940 *Small Wars Manual* was the doctrinal result of the military's extensive experience in such interventions (the Marine Corps alone landed troops 180 times in thirty-seven countries from 1800 to 1934). It describes small wars as those "wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation." The manual cautions that "the solution of such problems being basically a political adjustment, the military measures to be applied must be of secondary importance and should be applied only to such extent as to permit the continuation of peaceful corrective measures. The difficulty is sometimes of an economical, political, or social nature and not a military problem in origin."

During the sixty-three years after 1934, the United States lost its proficiency in wars where "diplomacy has not ceased to function and the State Department exercises a constant and controlling influence over the military operations." The overriding importance of major wars crowded out expertise of this kind in both the civilian and military leadership. Only when tactical successes in Afghanistan and Iraq failed to produce victories did the mainstream of civilian defense analysts and the military institutions return to hard-won knowledge of small wars. The patterns of thought from the *Small Wars Manual* can be clearly seen in the development of counterinsurgency doctrine and the concepts that drove the 2006 "surge" campaign in Iraq.

What unfortunately did not change, and which continues to be the catalyst of American failure in the wars we are fighting, is the inability of our government's non-military agencies to contribute in the ways and at the level necessary to develop coherent strategies in which military force provides the security—the time and space—for non-military means to capitalize on tactical gains to change



the political, economic, and social dynamics necessary to produce strategic (and therefore sustainable) outcomes. We are settling for what Edmund Burke cautioned 239 years ago is the temporary use of force.

America's hegemonic moment gave us such a wealth of power that we were afforded, and took, the opportunity to be sloppy in the conduct of our national security. We declined to put our federal spending on a sustainable footing that would keep the economy growing and retain discretionary space for higher defense expenditures. We allowed our diplomatic power to atrophy and transferred ever larger amounts of inherently civilian activity into the military instead of bringing the State Department up to a standard of performance adequate to its responsibilities. We reduced our means of inspiring those who are our natural allies by shuttering the US Information Agency and other governmental propagations of American ideals and culture—and also by being thoughtless of the impression our behavior was having. We shackled our military with a dysfunctional weapons procurement system and a thick adipose layer of administrative requirements and social policies that impede its ability to fight. We declined to hold our political leaders accountable for winning our wars. As Shakespeare has Henry V accuse Scrope, “You have been reckless with our royal person.” We ought to consider our country very, very fortunate that enemies have not emerged better able to take advantage of our self-imposed difficulties.

Blame for the failure of strategy in our current wars rests first and foremost with the elected political leadership. It is the responsibility of the president of the United States to protect and advance our national security. The last two presidents have been in thrall to our strength and to our weakness, respectively. Instead of the healthy prudence that strategist/author Colin Gray instructs is the basis of the practice of strategy, the last two presidential administrations have not been scrupulous in examining the potential consequences of their major national security choices. President Bush defined political end states for Afghanistan and Iraq that were not achievable by the means he was willing to invest. President Obama gave primacy to ending American involvement in the wars irrespective of the political end states. What both failures have in common is an inability to marry ends and means. Since strategy consists of matching those two things, it is axiomatic that neither president acted strategically.



Strategy, so often reified as a high priestly undertaking, is defined simply by Sir Lawrence Freedman, a professor of war studies, as “the creation of power.” It is the creative use of available means to improve on the outcome you would otherwise have attained. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has failed to deliver outcomes commensurate with, much less improved on, the outcomes we ought to have attained.

Washington is practically papered over with pious entreaties for “whole-of-government operations,” which is merely another way of saying that we should not rely only on our military if we expect to achieve sophisticated outcomes. But notice how rapidly policy debates about any national security issue telescope down to whether or not to use military force, and how much. This reductionism is an illustration of the paucity of strategic thinking we are allowing in our government.

Even when the government understands it needs a more rounded approach, it signally and repeatedly fails to produce it. The surges of troops to Iraq in 2006 and to Afghanistan in 2009 were both ostensibly to be accompanied by a “civilian surge.” In neither case were the non-military agencies able to develop a feasible plan for civilian components of operations, deliver qualified people in numbers required by their plans, or conduct their activities in tandem military operations. In both cases, military operations far outpaced what civilian activity there was. In both cases, grandiose plans for civilian leadership never materialized and were eventually shelved.

It is illustrative that State Department claims to leadership in the 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review weren’t even mentioned in the 2014 QDDR. But America needs State and the other civilian agencies to become much more proficient, and for our political leaders to integrate their abilities more fully into our planning for not just the wars, but for all our engagements with the world. If we are to improve on current outcomes, we must strengthen the performance of our civilian agencies: the Department of State, the Department of Treasury, the US Agency for International Development, the Department of Agriculture, the Commerce Department, the Export-Import Bank.

That reinforcement is not only, or even principally, a funding issue. In the case of the State Department, institutional culture is a much bigger impediment to

proficiency than is money. The State budget has increased substantially since 2001 and the size of the Foreign Service has doubled, but the problems of personnel management that prevent it from becoming the peer of the Department of Defense have not been addressed. The Foreign Service has the luxury of being as selective as Stanford University: it has sixteen qualified applicants for every Foreign Service officer it hires. And yet, by its own admission, it does not have people with the skills it needs. It doesn't hire the right people, it keeps them all, and it doesn't teach them anything. The last three secretaries of state (Powell, Rice, and Clinton) all provided funding and personnel slots for State to develop a program of professional education. In all three cases, State diverted the money and people to increase staffing at embassies. It is a recipe for institutional failure, abetted by managerial inattention.

If we are to arrest the atrophy of our national security strength, our political leaders will need to become knowledgeable again about strategy, so that they design America's engagement with the world relying not narrowly on the instrument of our military's power to intimidate, but on the much wider orchestra of our country's ability to influence and inspire. Political leaders must learn to become orchestrators of a multiplicity of instruments, and pace the music such that they work together.

The United States of America is a country good at so many things, and most of them are outside the reach of our own government. We have the world's finest universities and its most dynamic generators of technological innovation. We deserve political leaders who will reach beyond the narrow levers the government can control to engage the involvement and creativity of means beyond government control. It is those "soft powers" with which the United States shapes the international environment, and which prejudice most countries and most people in the world not to oppose what we are seeking to do. We have underestimated for the past twenty years how much that goodwill drives down the price of what our country attempts to do in the world.

Our failures are not the result of intervening in the wrong places. While we can choose whether and how to intervene, the universe of activity is defined by where the problems are. What makes interventions succeed or fail is the quality of thinking that has gone into determining the nature of the problem and crafting a plan for engaging it.



Our failures are the result of growing lazy at the practice of strategy. Even in the post-9/11 world of terrorist organizations armed with weapons to produce large-scale damage with little or no warning, the United States has such a wide margin of error that our political leaders are able to get by without developing proficiency in the prudential use of our national strengths. We are—so far, at least—able to lose our wars yet retain our primacy. But it is a costly way to do the nation's business, both financially and morally.



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Kori N. Schake is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. During the 2008 presidential election, she was senior policy adviser to the McCain-Palin campaign. From 2007 to 2008 she was the deputy director for policy planning in the State Department. During President Bush's first term, she was the director for Defense Strategy and Requirements on the National Security Council. Projects Schake contributed to include conceptualizing and budgeting for continued transformation of defense practices; the most significant realignment of US military forces and bases around the world since 1950; creating NATO's Allied Command Transformation and the NATO Response Force; and recruiting and retaining coalition partners for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

## Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

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