ROLE OF MILITARY HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

"Best Practices" in Crafting National Security Strategy—Reflections and a Case Study

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We ought not to go jogging along improvident, incompetent, waiting for something to turn up, by which I mean waiting for something bad for us to turn up.

—Winston S. Churchill

INTRODUCTION: A RETURN TO BASICS AND A CASE IN POINT

Wars and threats of war have driven major democracies to rethink their national security strategies. France, Germany, Britain, the European Union, South Korea, and Japan have all revised theirs. Several of these nations have already assembled teams for further revisions.[1] President Trump has rejected prior administrations' thinking, but has not yet, so early in his term, publicly clarified a new course.[2]

The democracies' quest for fresh thinking has spurred the search for "best practices" governments might pursue to craft long-term strategies.[3] Few doubt the urgency. Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine, Iran's multifront proxy war and enduring quest for a nuclear arsenal, and China's rapid military rise and gray-zone aggressions along the Pacific Rim reflect dangerous ambitions. Risks grow as Russia, China, and Iran increasingly concert their policies.[4]

These autocracies are often credited with pursuing long-term strategies, while many commentators maintain that democracies lack the capacity, will, and consistent leadership to do so. They see today's swirling currents of rapid technological change and complex geopolitics as defying democracies' attempts to steer a way ahead—problems compounded by democracies' entrenched bureaucracies, headline-driven media, divided elites, inward-looking electorates, and leadership swings. Accordingly, these commentators declare democracies' efforts at long-term strategy a mug's game.[5]

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The alternative, steering 10 degrees to port or starboard as winds change, is common fare for officials and pundits alike; but there are times when the old heading and conventional wisdom are dangerously off course. When new challenges loom, institutional efforts to reexamine assumptions and think more broadly may attune policymakers to changing interests, risks, and opportunities. President Dwight Eisenhower's famous assertion that "plans are worthless, but planning is everything" suggests flexibility, but not abdication.[6]

Identifying "best practices" for governmental efforts to craft strategy poses additional problems. Successful grand strategies arose in the past by various paths. Today's major democracies differ greatly in their institutions, circumstances, cultures, and challenges. Personalities and personal capabilities still matter.

Accordingly, this paper reflects first on generic challenges that commonly confront governments seeking to craft long-term strategies. From these it may be possible to reverse engineer processes tailored to suit various countries, organizations, and challenges.

To make these musings more concrete, the remainder of this paper discusses an American case in point. Scholars generally note only a handful of major institutional efforts since World War II that successfully recrafted American strategy.[7] In 1989, as the Warsaw Pact collapsed, America undertook one of these: a prolonged and determined effort to craft a long-term, post–Cold War national security strategy. Notable scholars and practitioners have commended the effort's thinking and, most importantly for present purposes, the underlying processes.[8] Whatever the readers' assessments, the efforts undertaken are worth examining for the ways they addressed common strategists' challenges.

ELEMENTS OF CRAFTING GRAND STRATEGY

THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

The first hurdle: Key personnel at various levels need to embrace difficult inquiries to generate information, insights, concepts, and priorities that may challenge set beliefs and embedded interests. Leaders then need to crystallize these insights into a strategy and display the skill, courage, and determination to guide their administrations' overall pursuit of strategic priorities through bureaucratic, domestic, and geostrategic crosscurrents. In democracies, this requires leaders to persuade or legally enforce their will while securing at least periodic public support; autocracies lighten these burdens through terror. Finally, leaders are wise to reassess their course, at least privately, as events unfold.[9]

Henry Kissinger emphasizes the importance of leadership. "Ultimately there is no purely organizational answer" to directing a better way ahead, he writes. "It is above all a problem of leadership. Organizational remedies cannot by themselves remove the bias for waiting for crises and for the avoidance of long-range planning."[10]

Former French President Charles de Gaulle echoes that bureaucratic skills and institutions have never "at any time or in any sphere been able to compensate for the irremediable infirmity of a leader."[11]

Churchill underscores that weak leadership is not just a contemporary problem, but a persistent societal and institutional one. In May 1935, Churchill found: "Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history."[12]

Modern democracies may be particularly susceptible to kicking hard problems down the road until the costs of recovery are high, but the failing stretches more broadly. When President Ronald Reagan decried the tendency toward denial and delay, he was adapting a point made by Churchill, which Churchill likely took from mid-eighteenth-century British Prime Minister William Pitt, Pitt likely took from French theorist Montesquieu, Montesquieu took from sixteenth-century Italian pragmatist Niccolò Machiavelli, and, as a classicist would no doubt recount, Machiavelli took from the ancients.[13]

In 1775, with many in the American colonies resenting British imperial restrictions, patriot Patrick Henry similarly chided his fellow colonials to face the risks ahead: "It is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the [siren's] song."[14]

In more recent times, the former director of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and then-director of defense research and engineering Charles Herzfeld used to cite with a chuckle what he called "Libby's Law."[15] That law held, only half jokingly, that as warning time increases, the likelihood that America will have the political will to make use of that time decreases.[16]

The importance of leadership to forging a new path does not excuse institutional efforts but sets the framework for their tasks. Offices developing analysis and insights need in the end to influence or support particular leaders and key advisors. American presidents and their aides, for example, vary greatly, as the world may have surmised. The best approaches to informing or persuading them vary depending on how each approaches complex challenges. Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan, for example, approached determining and implementing grand strategies differently. I suspect the same could be said of David Ben-Gurion, Churchill, de Gaulle, Margaret Thatcher, Shinzo Abe, and Lee Kuan Yew. Thoughtful and courageous leadership merits its due.

When leaders are unreceptive, face unscalable political redoubts, or favor different priorities, the world does not stop evolving. The laborious and quiet work required to develop information, analyses, and insights needs to continue then in the shade. If strategists have judged the strategic environment correctly, odds are that anticipated changes or a geopolitical shock will

create space for new thinking. Given the importance of the task, analysts and planners must ever push their boulder back up the hill. Then, good ideas may return to the light.[17]

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF REALITY AND DISCERNING A WAY AHEAD

In the light or the shade, successfully crafting a way ahead requires a foundation of sound strategic thought. The famed American strategists Herman Kahn and Andrew Marshall have noted the requisite linear and nonlinear tasks, arguing that it is important to develop knowledge and draw on experience, but that the complexities of assessing reality and looking to the future mean that policymakers must in the end draw heavily as well on judgment, insight, and intuition.[18] From Japan we hear a similar emphasis on the heavy-lifting linear, and the insightful nonlinear. "Great strategies, like great works of art or great scientific discoveries, call for technical mastery in the working out, but originate in insights that are beyond the realm of conscious analysis."[19]

De Gaulle invokes analysis and judgment. As a young man, he described two foundational tasks strategists face if they wish to anchor their thinking with "a taste for the concrete, a sense of proportion, and an eye for realities": "Information intelligently collected and shrewdly analyzed limits the problem, makes it possible to establish various hypotheses, and so, to some extent, to provide judgment with that solid substratum of fact which it needs to work on."[20]

De Gaulle's twin tasks merit closer attention.

INFORMATION COLLECTION AND SHREWD ANALYSIS

Developing an eye for realities is a task that institutions with resources can tackle. A statesman, young de Gaulle wrote, must consider "the *actual* circumstances and the *actual* enemy, his intentions and means."[21] Strategists need to gauge the long-term strengths, weaknesses, sensitivities, and possible directions of potential foes, friends, and their own country in projected circumstances.

In short, crafting grand strategy for the long term presents empirical challenges.[22] These are hard enough in assessing near-term competitions, and become harder still as political factions may respond over years to evolving, real-world dynamics of what Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously called "known unknowns and unknown unknowns."

The challenge therefore is to devote the substantial time and resources needed to cast a wide net and to avoid premature conclusions as to what's unlikely or unimportant. Institutional pressures or predilections sometimes discourage the breadth of inquiry and analysis needed. Political-military bureaucracies tend to focus on the political-military parts of the metaphorical elephant. They may have excessive faith in their own expertise. They may lack the ability to see through other lenses or adversaries' eyes.

Among other challenges, technical and doctrinal surprises may rapidly upset political-military calculations. Consider the unexpected course of the early-2022 war in Ukraine.

To quote one of Germany's great military thinkers: "Since this century, war has been refined; new and deadly uses have made it more difficult. It is right to review these in detail, so that, having carefully examined the system of our enemies and the difficulties they present to us, we may choose proper means to overcome them.[23]

That was Frederick the Great in 1758. As he wrote, Frederick had won great battles; but he had suffered strategic defeats nonetheless in three straight military campaigns. He had mistaken the Austrian army in the late 1750s for the one he had fought a decade earlier. The Austrians in the interim had improved their equipment, forces, tactics, and concepts of operations. They would not conform to the war Frederick wanted to fight. What would I do, Frederick once famously asked a subordinate, if I were in my enemy's position? A wise inquiry, but Frederick might also have asked, how does the enemy think differently than I do? At year's end, Frederick reflected on his failures and completely changed his political-military strategy as a result.

In the early Cold War, American strategists looked beyond political-military analysis to understand adversaries and challenges at a broader level. They turned to cultural anthropologists, organizational behavioralists, ethnologists, physicists, demographers, historians, and psychologists, among other disciplines. President Nixon decried that CIA analyses lacked any understanding of practical politics. History is all about geopolitical forces, journalist Robert Kaplan observes, "until it becomes all about Shakespeare."[24]

Biases occlude what we "know." Eighty years ago, George Orwell lamented that "nearly all Western thought . . . , certainly all 'progressive' thought, has tacitly assumed that all humans desire nothing beyond ease and security."[25] In the decades since, we have been startled repeatedly by the unexpected force of fervent grievances, autocrats' ambitions, and religious-fueled hatred.

As celebrated American strategists such as Andrew Marshall and Herman Kahn have observed, the task requires tapping the best thinking across a range of disciplines—not just the best thinking in an organization, but the best thinking in a country or an alliance.[26] This likely requires rigorous and repeated efforts within and beyond normal bureaucratic expertise and resources.

PROVIDING HYPOTHESES AND JUDGING THEM

Analytic efforts can "limit the problem" and so "to some extent" reach toward the "solid substratum" of understanding needed for de Gaulle's second task: to provide hypotheses and judge them.[27]

Offices properly led can devote substantial manpower and expertise to developing, testing, and judging interpretations of events, trends, and alternative futures. They can consult other parts of the government and beyond for additional insights.

National security professionals in government, like those outside, develop views about what goals are sensible, what approaches work, what risks they deem remote or acceptable. Their

views can improve administrations' thinking, or—held strongly enough—lead to Dean Acheson's complaints of slighting elected officials' guidance. Policymaking sometimes requires choosing between bad alternatives. Bureaucratic portfolios may affect their "sense of proportion," in de Gaulle's phrase, causing them to judge risks differently from each other or the president.[28]

From such causes, institutions may fall prey to limiting the scenarios they contemplate, or their expertise may slant their judgments. From Gaza in 2023, to Egypt in 1973, to France in 1939, to Britain in 1754, history is replete with misjudgments of adversaries and probable events. A maxim often attributed to American strategist Fred Iklé holds, "History has more imagination than all the planners in the Pentagon."[29]

Quality people from a range of disciplines may prove a salve, although not a cure, for providing analysis and options that can challenge these common afflictions. Yet the very best people skilled in various disciplines and open to new thoughts, if otherwise available, are often directed or misdirected to tasks arguably less important but politically more urgent.

Even when adequate resources are applied, governments often have trouble judging when to wrench themselves onto a costly new course. Incentives are often misaligned. Officials who prioritize the near-term risks of action to issues in their portfolio may discount the longer-term risks of inaction across national interests. Bureaucracies tend to reward incrementally steady performance and occasional innovations that fall within institutional norms. They tend to look askance when judging officers offering alternatives that are at odds with entrenched views.

After the fact, the world acknowledged the wisdom in Churchill's warnings in the 1930s; but officials at the time, "though free from wickedness or evil design," decried the policy and its costs. The "delight in smooth-sounding platitudes, refusal to face unpleasant facts, desire for popularity and electoral success irrespective of the vital interests of the State . . . lack of intellectual vigor" that troubled Churchill, are not unknown in other times.[30] Had his advice been followed and dangers curbed or delayed, many would no doubt have later blamed him for steps they could claim were unnecessary or provocative. After the Soviet Union fell, many deemed it inevitable, questioned costs incurred, and sought immediate deep reductions in defense with only brief study of longer-term consequences.

These observations have implications for institutions that span a range of strategic cultures, but they also return us to the challenge of leadership. As noted, crafting sound strategy requires a level of analysis for what can be known, but insight must fill out the picture—which, frankly, is the bulk of the canvas. The further from the present that the strategist reaches, the more he or she must rely on how fundamental forces and probabilities may affect events. A sense of history helps broaden the aperture through which policymakers may view future possibilities and guide their imagination, but neither intuition nor analysis of current events, let alone of unknown futures, can be proven with mathematical certainty to those intellectually, bureaucratically, or politically opposed. This affects what can be expected by way of consensus from intra-agency or interagency debates among offices with different views or interests.

Historians Melvyn Leffler and Jeffrey Legro assert that "long-term strategic planning . . . 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." By contrast, they highlight that scholars may imagine a perfect interagency process for crafting strategy. In this model, presidents convene agencies that develop ideas and alternative strategies that they then reconcile or from which the president selects.[31] The historians observe that reality "often strayed considerably" from these ideals in the postwar era they examined. They point to top officials who lacked the taste or endurance for crafting long-term strategy, citing President George H. W. Bush, Secretary of State James Baker, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, and the Clinton administration as examples.[32]

Even when officials are more inclined to undertake the difficult tasks of crafting strategy, intelligence about the present, let alone the future, often comes to policymakers well hedged and inconclusive, and at times proves inaccurate. Top figures in bureaucracies often wrangle and stick resolutely to their personal or organizational priorities. For many routes ahead are plausible, future costs debatable.

Consequently, interagency gumming frequently improves near-term policy options but often produces long-term strategic mush.[33] Future uncertainties fall in the range of intuition more than provable propositions that can be reliably resolved through interagency debate or forcefully instilled in others.

To such real-world concerns may be added a variation of de Gaulle's maxim: Top government posts are held by *particular* people. They may have risen because they are loyal, highly intelligent, and skilled tactically, but they may not be inclined to think long term or may cling to wrong assumptions. It took Iran's seizure of the American embassy and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to convince President Jimmy Carter in his last year in office that he had dangerously misjudged his adversaries. Churchill said of British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, "Occasionally he stumbled over the truth, but hastily picked himself up and moved on as if nothing had happened."[34]

The veils guarding the present and future do not relieve a responsible leader from weighing different views and then choosing the crucial insights and the way ahead, but this then only shifts attention to the challenges of implementation. Leaders must overcome lingering disputes or resistance within their administration. Otherwise, leaders risk more bureaucratic gridlock and strategic drift.

Estimating an administration's capacity for timely adoption and consistent pursuit of a strategy in the face of expected and unexpected developments ranks among strategists' difficulties. Churchill laments that leaders need only decide and pursue what is best, while the number-two or -three policymaker must calculate whether the leader will grasp their vision and whether numbers four, five, or six will disrupt favored strategies as they unfold.[35] Critics revive at every obstacle. In Washington, Reagan administration Secretary of State George Shultz observed, no debate ever ends.

Finally, even when a leader can drive his administration on a common course, strategists must address broader political will. As noted above, publics may jump precipitously from complacency and considering action "too early" to considering it provocative and "too late." Having adopted a course, democratic leaders in particular have to lead supporters to bear, over time, the costs that attend to countering risks and seizing opportunities.

Behind this maze of analyses, conjecture, and the challenges of implementation, ever hovers uncertainty. Voltaire contended, "Doubt is not an agreeable condition, but certainty is absurd."[36] Unexpected strategic shifts frequently mar expectations. Wise strategists seek a wide margin for error.

A CASE STUDY: THE 1990 REGIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

Of what importance is experience if not digested by reflection?

—Frederick the Great, "Réflexions sur la tactique"

To make these musings more concrete, it may be worth considering a prolonged Department of Defense (DOD) process to revamp American strategy after the Berlin Wall fell.[37] In the fall of 1989, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney called in Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz and Joint Chiefs Chairman General Colin Powell. The Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact military alliance had crumbled and the Soviet Union itself seemed in retreat.[38] Cheney said he would present that winter one last Cold War defense budget. However, before presenting the next one in February 1991, DOD needed to peer ahead and craft a new strategy that would tailor America's forces for times ahead.[39]

Cheney had launched what would become, in Ambassador Eric Edelman's words, "a rare example of officials attempting to step back and think strategically about the nation's future at a very dramatic turning point in its history." Edelman compares the effort to Truman's NSC-68 and Eisenhower's Solarium study from the early 1950s.[40] Looking back today, a key to success lay in Cheney's and Wolfowitz's early commitment to meet the moment's strategic significance. They proved willing to buck political tides and DOD's entrenched "iron pots" of service preferences.

Wolfowitz assigned the laboring oars to an office he had just created: the principal deputy under secretary for policy (strategy and resources) (hereafter, "S&R"). Months earlier, Wolfowitz had requested an experienced national security hand, James Roche, and the author of this paper to consider how the various offices and resources under his direction (DOD's "Policy" cluster) could improve the department's ability to craft strategy and policies.[41] Wolfowitz sought to correct four deficiencies. First, no Pentagon office considered the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states holistically. Many focused on aspects of Soviet forces, but none, for example, on internal Soviet and Warsaw Pact dynamics.

Second, Policy's analysis of allies and friends was similarly limited to particular military concerns, rather than considering them more broadly, including their internal and regional dynamics and possible future evolution.

Third, Policy's planning functions had historically omitted concrete budget and force structure implications, which rendered Policy recommendations less responsible and impactful.

Fourth, civilians had largely been excluded from reviewing war plans that affected not only forces, budgets, and alliance relations, but also the possible conduct and outcome of wars. In particular, Wolfowitz foresaw contingencies that the military slighted—an insight soon validated when Iraq invaded Kuwait.[42]

Wolfowitz's midsummer decision to combine these functions under one office "devoted to strategic planning" would help in developing the new strategy Cheney requested that fall. Wolfowitz kindly writes that he "persuaded . . . Libby to return to government and lead that division as principal deputy undersecretary for strategy and resources."[43] But the cracking ice of the Cold War and the wide writ of the office he created spoke well to the opportunity. We divided S&R's staff into functional and regional offices, carefully picked their leadership, and set them on their strategic tasks.

ANALYSIS: FALL 1989–SPRING 1990

With Cheney's fall 1989 challenge in hand, Wolfowitz and I considered which topics could inform us as we sought to discern a new strategy for times ahead. I assigned small teams within each S&R office to analyze specific questions suited to them. The teams were given free rein to assess current realities and plausible futures. However, the inquiry as a whole proceeded on a close-hold basis solely within S&R to reduce bureaucratic obstacles, compromises, and leaks.

Small S&R teams, for example, looked at trends within and among allies and adversaries in regions of the world that might prove critical to America's future. The teams were assigned to assess key actors' strengths, weaknesses, and possible directions in light of their histories, likely internal developments, and perceived interests. These inquiries were to go beyond traditional diplomatic, intelligence, military, economic, and demographic concerns and consider less-tangible elements of leadership, organizational capabilities, and national inclinations. The teams considered courses countries might pursue, including dynamic responses to alternative actions and strategies the United States or others might pursue. Other S&R teams looked at the galloping "military-technical revolution" and potential future clashes.[44] They considered how overseas deployments and basing—forward presence—and crisis response requirements in one or more future scenarios might be altered to fit changing alignments and times.

I encouraged all S&R teams to tap other DOD offices, intelligence agencies, and outside experts on specific topics. Our frequent reliance on intelligence and official sources in day-to-day operations could not disguise fresh evidence that they had proven far off the mark on important questions. For example, as former senior official and CIA stalwart Robert Gates acknowledges, "Truth be told, the American government, including the CIA, had no idea in January 1989 that a tidal wave of history was about to break upon us."[45] CIA estimates of the size of the Soviet economy and the burden of the Soviet defense budgets—topics to which the agency had devoted years of major efforts—had been far less accurate than assessments by, for example, lead economists at the

RAND Corporation. Efforts to look into an unknown future only increased the need for a variety of viewpoints, including those of outside experts.

As our impressions began to coalesce, an important part of S&R's efforts included Wolfowitz's insistence on a close examination of force structure and budget implications of the demands and forces required for problems anticipated under alternative futures being considered. S&R's contingency planning office, led by a retired lieutenant general and former head of planning for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, considered what forces might be realistically required under different strategic considerations for possible regional contingencies, for recommended overseas basing and future forward-presence operations, and for enduring strategic force requirements. They then weighed the likely costs of such projected forces against reasonable budget assumptions. These close ties between strategy alternatives and affordable forces tied Policy's recommendations to reality.

During the first six months of these efforts, I instructed S&R offices to spend half of their time pursuing their studies. This was a substantial commitment of time and resources, particularly considering the other challenges S&R then faced—including policy shifts to adjust to the newly emerging Warsaw Pact states, struggles within the Soviet Union, congressional testimonies, post–Tiananmen Square relations with China, Japan's economic bubble, and widespread challenges to DOD programs. Wolfowitz devoted much of his time as well, resulting in substantial guidance, revisions, and considerable improvements. In all—setting aside time devoted by others in Policy—S&R staff alone devoted roughly fifteen man-years of effort.[46]

While this analytic work proceeded, Wolfowitz recommended to Secretary Cheney a series of lengthy Saturday seminars and studies that featured the thinking of America's leading outside experts. Secretary of State George Shultz, for whom Wolfowitz had worked, had used such seminars to avoid the "tyranny of the in-box" and to balance the needs of action with reflection. Cheney readily agreed, and S&R prepared lengthy seminars that considered, for example, dynamics in key nations and Soviet republics.[47] He and we regularly absorbed official reporting but also attended closely when other experts' views differed.

Wolfowitz also invited me to participate in informal working sessions with his National Security Council and State Department counterparts on how the United States should think about the rapidly changing international environment.[48] These meetings tapped the unofficial thinking of key interagency players to assess where US interests lay and what courses might be possible.[49]

As we proceeded, Cheney directed that we be explicit about how alternative futures might arise, what warning signs to look for, and the potential consequences for national interests and DOD force requirements. Accordingly, we envisioned both responsible, forward-leaning drawdowns and "off-ramps" that would slow or reverse reductions in specific forces should events warrant additional prudence.

During this period, we drew heavily on preexisting analyses and insights developed in Policy's Office of Net Assessment (ONA). Its legendary director, Andrew Marshall, had developed and

funded over years extensive outside expertise on the Soviets, selected regional challenges, technological disruptions, military balances, economic influences, competitive strategies, and lessons from historic geostrategic competitions. For example, in the mid-1980s ONA had already begun serious efforts to consider China's future direction and capabilities. These insights, ONA's ways of looking at the problems, and the bench of experts ONA had developed had enormous impact on our strategic thinking.

CRAFTING AND PRESENTING THE STRATEGY, 1990–1991

As these analytic efforts proceeded, my small front office staff and I studied the analyses, sought patterns and discontinuities among them, and began to see how they might be drawn together. We examined earlier strategists' works and the twentieth century's record of anticipating strategic shifts.[50] We found the failures frequent, dramatic, and sobering. Among the topics discussed were America's record on addressing strategic changes and possible developments that might affect our future strengths, weaknesses, and national interests.

Wolfowitz and we recognized multiple complications, but early on some main observations and themes emerged. During the Cold War, an overwhelming Warsaw Pact threat loomed on short notice to overrun Western Europe's meager conventional defenses. NATO expected to be able to resist for only a short while before resorting to tactical nuclear weapons. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact had pushed that threat hundreds of miles eastward. A weakening Soviet Union seemed less capable of mounting massive attacks and, over time, of matching our military's high-quality forces and technological advantages. Other major states of the world were likely to remain our allies and friends, and the newly freed Central European states sought to join the West. No hostile alliances threatened us. No critical region of the world that could generate major conventional threats to us was at risk, but regional challenges could arise.

In short, we had won great geographic, military, and diplomatic depth to our strategic position. Our consideration of key regions suggested that we could, at reasonable costs and risks, preserve or enhance this strategic depth. For this, we would require strong alliances, continued forward presence of our forces, quality forces capable of responding to regional crises far from our shores, and research and development programs to enhance our technological edge. These elements could reassure allies, attract new friends, and dissuade challengers. We could secure our future at a lesser cost without squandering advantages as the United States had done so often in the past.

That winter of 1990, without rushing to judgment, DOD began to reveal agreed-on elements of our still-developing thinking. This did not quiet domestic critics seeking an enormous "peace dividend" but helped to prepare the battlefield of ideas.[51] For example, in early February Secretary Cheney revealed before an open session of the Senate Armed Services Committee that DOD was looking at questions related to a new strategy and major force cuts.[52] He previewed some of these, highlighting "enduring elements" of our thinking, elements such as strong alliances. Later that month, in remarks before the Defense Science Board and the Senate Armed Services Committee, I noted potential regional risks, including, for example, of

the unfolding "military technical revolution" and of the Kremlin seeking to reassert control in former Soviet territories. I invoked America's historic efforts to safeguard our interests by preserving the strategic depth essential for freedom to flourish.[53]

Ultimately, in line with Cheney's guidance and insights, Wolfowitz and we completed a draft strategy. It drew on analyses and insights derived over months of reflection. The strategy (summarized toward the end of this article) envisioned a way ahead for the long term, with flexibility for unexpected developments. It had realistic resource constraints, as it was paired with S&R's notional base force and anticipated defense budgets.

In late May 1990, Wolfowitz officially presented the proposed new, regionally oriented defense strategy to Cheney and top DOD officials at the Defense Planning and Resources Board (DPRB).[54] Chairman Powell's subsequent presentation of the Joint Chiefs' independently developed "base force" recommendations comported well with the notional force structure S&R had envisioned under the proposed new strategy. Both recommendations countered political forces calling for much greater retrenchments in strategy and forces. Cheney and senior DOD leadership endorsed the Policy and the Joint Chiefs' work.

In an Oval Office briefing shortly thereafter, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Powell presented the new defense strategy and force structure to President George H. W. Bush. He adopted the proposals and at once directed preparation of a major speech, curbing prolonged interagency debate.[55]

On August 2, 1990, at Aspen, Colorado, the president announced America's new regional defense strategy and calculated reductions in US forces.[56] Ironically, this was the very day Saddam Hussein invaded Iraq, underscoring the strategy's focus on post-Soviet contingencies threatening regions of the world critical to US interests.[57]

By late 1990, all elements of the new defense strategy and base force had been presented publicly multiple times by the president and DOD officials. These 1990 speeches and pronouncements, while refined at the margins over the next two years, formed the core of the subsequent documents and pronouncements on the new defense strategy by the president and department.[58]

In early 1991, in the midst of the Persian Gulf War, Secretary Cheney prepared to present the first post–Cold War defense budget. He directed S&R to prepare lengthy congressional testimony about the new defense strategy to accompany the submission—the challenge he had set more than a year earlier. His testimony covered at some length the new regional strategy and tied it to dramatic but measured cuts in spending and forces.

The next morning, to drive his thinking into all corners of the department, Cheney gathered DOD's senior staff. He required them to "read and use" his congressional testimony. "It sets the course we are charting," Cheney declared. The strategy underlaid many subsequent DOD policy decisions, including those regarding major defense program reviews, overseas basing, and defense relations with other states.

In fall 1991, after the Gulf War, President Bush gave a second major address that reaffirmed his administration's continued support for the regional defense strategy and applied its reasoning to future force structure decisions.[59] The following year, to spread broader understanding and acceptance, the strategy was presented publicly in multiple addresses to foreign policy–oriented audiences and repeated testimonies at multiple levels before congressional committees.

Remarkably, as the 1992 national elections approached, the Democratic-led Senate Armed Services Committee reported: "The committee has been pleased with the greater involvement of the USDP in the formulation of strategy and contingency planning and in the better linkage between strategy and resources. Much of this effort has resulted from the creation of the office of the Principal Deputy Under Secretary (Strategy and Resources)."[60]

Over these years, Wolfowitz and S&R continued to test analyses and insights related to the new strategy. These turbulent times often raised strategy-related challenges to US strategic depth, alliance relations, and regional contingencies. They included, for example, defense relations with former Warsaw Pact states and former Soviet republics; German unification; new arrangements for reduced nuclear deployments; and major defense program reviews.[61]

Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait raised the first test of the new strategy's charge to preserve strategic depth in regions critical to the interests of America and its allies. The war tested, for example, capabilities needed for distant regional crises, implications of precision weapons for current and future expeditionary operations, alliance burden sharing, and readiness for handling proliferated chemical or biological weapons. After the war, S&R wrote the congressionally mandated "Conduct of the Persian Gulf War Report" that evaluated the challenges of coalition warfare and examined in detail the performance and future possibilities of old systems and new technologies and doctrine.[62] These efforts drew from and enriched DOD's consideration of themes of the new strategy.

For example, the Gulf War proved that, even absent a looming Soviet global threat, the United States had the will and capacity to lead coalitions effectively in distant regional crises. Initial military planning suggested that the US and its coalition could incur heavy casualties if it launched an offensive campaign to drive Iraq's large and battle-tested army from Kuwait. As Cheney recounts in his autobiography, Policy had first proposed and S&R had done the preliminary analytic work on an innovative, surprise "left hook" (or "western excursion") ground campaign that, combined with airpower, could force Saddam's retreat. As ultimately developed and skillfully executed by US Central Command (CENTCOM), air attacks and the left hook spearheaded an unexpectedly quick coalition victory with far fewer US and coalition casualties than many experts had otherwise predicted.[63] Wolfowitz's summer 1989 insistence on adding a civilian contingency planning capability within S&R had proven its value dramatically.

The Gulf War also tested the strategy's call for greater alliance burden sharing. Reversing Saddam's aggression was critical for many states. These included not just Kuwait, which had been overrun, but Saudi Arabia, whose rich oil fields lay within Iraqi striking distance just south

of Kuwait, and nations such as Japan that were heavily dependent on Middle East energy. US and allied diplomacy helped to persuade dozens of states to assist the effort in ways that had become conventional in the Cold War world, such as providing forces and overflight and basing rights.

These forms of burden sharing were significant, but in S&R's view fell short of the contributions from allies that the new era permitted and the new strategy sought. In a prewar interagency meeting on easing the war's burdens on small debtor nations, Policy's highly capable Assistant Secretary Henry "Harry" Rowen first raised the notion that the United States, then (and now) the world's greatest debtor nation, should also receive up to $2 billion in relief. As Policy considered the war's likely burdens, I noted that defeating Iraq's ambitions in any reasonable time frame was only possible because of years of US investments in defense. The US was also risking the bulk of the troops in the operation. I recommended that it would better fit the new strategy for financially capable allies and friends who shared America's interests in the region's security to bear more of the considerable financial costs America would incur in ejecting Saddam from Kuwait. This would be burden sharing that fit the new strategy.

At Cheney's and Wolfowitz's direction, DOD's superb comptroller, Sean O'Keefe, worked closely with S&R to estimate US costs.[64] In the end, with the help of talented Secretary of State James Baker and Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, two diplomatic trips (dubbed Tin Cup I and II within DOD) raised more than $50 billion from allies to cover most of America's total operational costs in the war.[65] Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait contributed more than two-thirds of this amount. The large sums raised also helped greatly to strengthen congressional and public support for liberating oil-rich Kuwait.

The strategy's emphasis on shaping the future in part through stronger alliances also called, for example, for furthering defense relations with new democracies in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, including Poland, today's Czech Republic, and Ukraine.[66] Secretary Cheney's approval of my early 1990 trips to those ends into Central European capitals put DOD at odds at times with other parts of the administration.

Moving farther east, the Soviet collapse during early months under the new strategy raised the possibility of reducing US deployments, including those of theater nuclear forces. Arms control enthusiasts envisioned opening new US-Soviet negotiations leading to binding arms control agreements. However, the new strategy projected both the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to third countries and uncertainty about future foes and contingencies. To keep faith with that strategic thinking, I suggested, as Wolfowitz recounts, that America should unilaterally reduce whole classes of its forward-deployed weapons and challenge the Soviets to do the same.[67] This would circumvent lengthy negotiations for arms control treaties that might unwittingly tie down America in facing future proliferated threats or Kremlin revanchism. Bush, Wolfowitz, and Cheney artfully pushed this approach. Presidential Nuclear Initiatives I and II brought quick and nonbinding US and Soviet reductions and proposed limited defenses against "ballistic missiles strikes—whatever their source," fitting the new strategy's focus on flexibility in facing an uncertain future.[68]

Taken together, these and other early, real-world experiences added texture to DOD thinking but did not fundamentally alter the analyses and insights developed or the strategy crafted in 1990–91.[69]

Public and departmental presentations of the new strategy continued in winter 1992 congressional testimony, in DOD's February 1992 *Annual Report*, in the classified Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) issued in mid-1992, and in the unclassified Regional Defense Strategy of January 1993.[70] Consistency and congressional acceptance advanced the strategy's implementation and impact, which many scholars conclude affected elites' thinking and administrations' directions for a decade or more.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE REGIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY AND ITS IMPACT

The current focus on processes that may advance crafting of successful strategies slights the content and impact of the 1990 strategy. In a nutshell, from early 1990s congressional testimony through the subsequent Regional Defense Strategy, DOD asserted that the end of the Cold War left America with strong alliances, receding threats, and a military-technological edge that provided significant depth to its current strategic position.[71] However, the new era "had not eliminated age-old temptations for nondemocratic powers to turn to force or intimidation to achieve their ends," and it would remain important to preclude them from "dominating critical regions that could generate a significant threat to our security."[72] Accordingly, America could replace containment, where global competition with the Soviets forced involvement in many areas, with a more tailored Regional Defense Strategy. It called for forward presence and crisis response capabilities to reassure allies and friends by deterring adversaries, particularly in key regions. It provided for strategic forces and defenses to discourage nuclear threats to America, and, acknowledging the unpredictability of events, called for capabilities for timely reconstitution of our forces should major threats emerge.

The strategy identified and discussed the critical regions and other particular concerns. It warned, for example, that an undemocratic regime could reemerge in Russia and remilitarize to regain lost portions of the Soviet empire; that relations with China must be set on a realistic basis to preclude destabilizing military rivalries and threats to freedom of the seas that could endanger our key political and economic interests in Asia; and that a rejuvenated Iraq or a rearmed Iran could move in the future to dominate the Gulf and its resources. While emphasizing threats of major regional warfare that drove the majority of defense needs, the strategy also anticipated risks from and the need to counter the spread of weapons of mass destruction and to address, in the strategy's terms, "low-intensity conflict, which includes terrorism, insurgency, and subversion."

Many leading figures of that time proffered threat-based strategies that, in their view, justified deep cuts to reflect the passing of the Soviet threat.[73] The Regional Defense Strategy saw broader purposes for US forces.[74] Most notably, it emphasized the importance of US

capabilities and leadership to enhance cooperation with and contributions from current and future allies. Alliances, the strategy emphasized, were a strategic American advantage, essential to augmenting US strength and decreasing US burdens. Among other advantages, deepening and broadening alliances would help to avoid excessive renationalization of foreign forces, including those of allies, which many scholars expected after the Soviet threat passed.

The strategy's approach varied also from voices at the time that emphasized America's "unipolar moment" or "sole superpower" status. These risked making defense investments seem like a matter of status or ego, rather than a tool for protecting important US interests. They undercut the new strategy's firm contention that US alliances were an essential element of the strategic depth we had won and of securing the future. Sole superpower pronouncements also risked the public underestimating the importance of shaping critical regions before they became greater problems and overestimating US capabilities in challenging regional contingencies. Being a sole superpower did not mean we could easily win regional fights against determined foes at acceptable costs. The essence of the new strategy was to avoid historical patterns in which complacency cut hard-to-rebuild defense capabilities while allowing new threats to emerge.

To these broad ends, then, the strategy prioritized enhancing alliances, ensuring quality US personnel, advancing our technological advantages, maintaining maritime superiority, and ensuring that America held sufficient forces, forward presence, munitions, spares, lift, and production capabilities to preclude or resolve crises favorably. Recognizing possible political costs that would challenge our will and capabilities in important regional operations, the strategy called not just for alliance burden sharing but for "capabilities that minimize the need to trade American lives with tyrants and aggressors who do not care about their own people."[75] As noted earlier, the strategy carefully weighed its requirements against anticipated challenges and resource constraints well below Cold War levels.

Protecting freedom would never come without costs, but the strategy asserted that "America and its allies now have an unprecedented opportunity to preserve with greater ease" our interests through uncertain times.[76] While DOD's work formally guided defense strategy, it noted its service to broader US international and domestic goals.[77] It included, for example, thinking in line with the geoeconomic strategy then being developed in the State Department.[78] In short, while not strictly presented as a grand strategy, it had clear implications for the broad reach of US policy.

Scholar Hal Brands describes DOD's thinking as outlining a "holistic approach to post–Cold War strategy." He contrasts its endorsement of continued American leadership, recommended most clearly by DOD, with widespread notions in the late 1980s and early 1990s that sought American restraint or withdrawal to avoid American overreach, renationalization of major states' forces, or bandwagoning against America. Brands and Edelman find that the Cheney strategy better judged that American power and engagement could avoid these undesirable outcomes.[79]

Brands concludes that the concepts laid out in the Regional Defense Strategy were "broadly affirmed by the [Bush] administration" including during its final months.[80]

> As Bush's tenure expired, the *National Security Strategy* explicitly endorsed the approach laid out in the Regional Defense Strategy, and even echoed—verbatim—concepts including the importance of "strategic depth" and the democratic "zone of peace." The lessons of the new era, the 1993 *National Security Strategy* argued, were already clear:
>
> > that we cannot be sure when or where the next conflict will arise; that regions critical to our interests must be defended; that the world must respond to straightforward aggression; that international coalitions can be forged, though they often will require American leadership; that the proliferation of advanced weaponry represents a clear, present, and widespread danger; and that the United States remains the nation whose strength and leadership are essential to a stable and democratic world order. To this end, the document endorsed the retention of critical power-projection capabilities and overweening military power.[81]

Brands determines that "with a quarter-century of hindsight," some of the key premises of the strategic thinking laid out most clearly by DOD and contained in the regional defense strategy held up relatively well over time and "seem fairly incisive."[82]

As shown above, there was a direct line from DOD's 1990 thinking, through Bush's August 1990 Aspen speech announcing the new regional defense strategy and his fall 1991 speech reaffirming that strategy, through Cheney's and other DOD leaders' congressional testimonies in early 1991 and early 1992, and through the final Defense Planning Guidance and its unclassified counterpart, the January 1993 Regional Defense Strategy.[83]

Former Yale professor Donald Kagan and his coauthor, American Enterprise Institute senior fellow and director of its Critical Threats Project Fred Kagan, both historians, considered the strategy as set forth in Cheney's testimonies to be "impressive strategic thinking at an unusually high level." They note its "clear . . . exposition of the true lessons of the past at such a critical time."[84]

The thinking and force structure that lay behind the Regional Defense Strategy, as James Mann and others have found, became generally mainstream, consensus US foreign policy views over the next decade. Mann describes the Defense Planning Guidance as "one of the most significant foreign policy documents of the past half century." Its impact carried over through the Clinton years and into Bush 43.[85]

Finally, some fault the 1993 Regional Defense Strategy as not sufficiently anticipating the threat of Islamic terrorism as it emerged with the attack of 9/11. As noted above, the strategy did cite the threat of terrorism, the dangers posed by proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the risks of critical regions, including the Middle East, falling under the control of hostile powers. These same concerns spurred subsequent administrations' fight against terrorist

groups of global reach that sought, among other ends, to topple Saudi Arabia and regional governments, as well as five administrations' efforts to reduce the risks of a rogue regime in Iraq holding weapons of mass destruction. Capabilities envisioned under the Regional Defense Strategy did include ways to strike terror groups when they could be found. Finally, the Regional Defense Strategy urged the development of counterinsurgency doctrine and capabilities, an approach that was woefully absent from US policy, most notably in Iraq until the successful surge announced in early 2007.[86]

Nonetheless, it remains true that the strategy could have spent more time on the Islamist threat and counterterror and counterinsurgency capabilities; considered more fully how the expanding WMD threat would enhance areas of concern; addressed how to handle conundrums posed by rising regional states; and voiced greater concern for investing more heavily in biological defenses. The latter shortcoming, especially, remains true to this day. Ideally, the strategy would have been followed by efforts to develop and revise over time substrategies for each of the critical regions and challenges. This approach might have been pursued had there been a second George H. W. Bush term.

CONCLUSION

Institutional efforts at crafting long-term national security strategies may help democracies steer successfully through the swirl of contemporary events, but they require determined leadership at various levels, rigorous analysis of the real world, and insights to pierce an ever-uncertain future. These elements are not readily achieved, especially given democracies' historic predilection to focus on immediate issues and kick down the road efforts at heading off future problems. However, properly led and resourced offices have the potential to tap into and advance a nation's best thinking. Such efforts can analyze trends and test hypotheses about alternative futures, always granting unpredictability its due. They can provide the "solid substratum of fact," in de Gaulle's terms, for sound judgments about a range of futures and—allowing a healthy margin for adjustment—the best strategic course to pursue. Having such a strategy in hand can, in turn, help steer policy through the buffeting of troubled times and unexpected developments.

A thousand challenges lie beneath these general observations when crafting strategy for a real-world competition. Scholars commonly cite a handful of major institutional efforts at crafting long-term strategies in the early Cold War. This essay has examined such an effort at the end of the Cold War to show one way in which such challenges have been addressed.

From 1989 to 1993, a compartmented effort within the US Defense Department undertook to analyze the future security environment and to develop a new strategy and defense posture for the post–Cold War era. This effort and the resulting Regional Defense Strategy ranked among the most thorough such studies and most dramatic revisions of US strategy in forty years.

World-changing events, Secretary Cheney's vision, and Under Secretary Wolfowitz's insights and 1989 reorganization of Policy offices to allow more holistic planning enabled this effort.

President George H. W. Bush's quick 1990 endorsement and successive reiterations empowered the thinking and helped to embed it in plans and forces to come. Along the way, the Regional Defense Strategy and the thinking that underlaid it helped policymakers through such difficult challenges as weighing strategic priorities in various regions of the world, gauging international commitments, choosing among alternative future force structures, assessing efforts at alliance burden sharing, and weighing ways to achieve international arms reductions.

Dedicated institutional efforts underlaid this effort's significant shift in US strategy. Substantial resources and various practices, including closely held small-group taskings and tapping of outside expertise, led to a "solid substratum" of understanding about the current and alternative future security environments. These practices suited Cheney and Wolfowitz. They enabled leaders at various levels to develop analyses and insights that advanced consideration of alternative futures and allowed them to craft and implement a strategy that matched the times.

Noted scholars contend that the Regional Defense Strategy guided US thinking well into the following decade. Whether that strategy ultimately fell short in the twenty-first century, or whether it was abandoned or improperly pursued in later years, is a subject for separate inquiry.

Regardless of such assessments, the efforts undertaken to develop the strategy, including in particular the prolonged efforts that stretched from 1989 into early 1991, merit some attention. They may inform the kinds of tasks that future long-term strategists consider in crafting a way ahead. In this new era of great-power competition, the processes followed and cautions raised by the Regional Defense Strategy three decades ago retain fresh relevance.

NOTES

1. See, for example, "Overview: Best Practices in Grand Strategy Design," Johns Hopkins SAIS–Hertie School conference on Best Practices in Grand Strategy Design, April 23–25, 2025, Berlin, Germany.

2. US administrations generally do not develop and announce details of new strategies until much later in their tenure, if at all.

3. For example, the Johns Hopkins SAIS–Hertie School conference cited above was attended by national security experts from North America, Western Europe, Central Europe, and Asia, as well as by the author of this paper.

4. America's insistence on greater burden sharing has heightened concerns among allies inured over four generations to slighting formulaic American demands, but it is the aggressors that spur democracies' fears.

5. A longer view might suggest that our era is not so different in kind from earlier times in which wise statesmen crafted a successful way ahead.

6. For example, despite dismissing plans, Eisenhower prepared and conducted over several months one of the most extensive and admired efforts at crafting strategy for the long term, the 1953 Solarium exercise. Solarium helped the Eisenhower administration set in place a new American approach to the long-term competition with the Soviets.

7. The first two, NSC-68 under Harry Truman and Solarium under Eisenhower, were completed in the early 1950s around the opening phases of the Cold War. They altered the form of a policy of containment, which may be said to have derived from a maverick foreign service officer rather than a prolonged institutional effort. A number of major shifts in US strategy tended to derive largely from views presidents held before taking office, rather than institutional efforts that accounted for analyses, insights, and strategic thinking that underlaid the strategies' origins. The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy may present a mixed case, as described by one of its prime authors, Dr. Nadia Schadlow, then–deputy national security

advisor for strategy. Dr. Schadlow explains that she and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster began by integrating the main America First themes from Trump's campaign and presidential speeches into an outline of themes that fell under four pillars. She and her four-person National Security Council (NSC) staff drew on interagency working groups, NSC directorates, and outside experts to examine questions arising under the outline. Schadlow observes that the eight-month effort helped develop ideas and spread their acceptance, but that it is important "not to let process overcome substance." Another case meriting closer study is the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which was intended to nest under and finish after McMaster's national strategy. The Department of Defense (DOD) devoted a substantial team to the project and drew on others in the development of the defense strategy. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis oversaw the effort and took a strong hand in integrating the ideas and readying the final text. See, for example, Sandy Winnefeld, host, *Intelligence Matters*, podcast, "The National Security Strategy: Lead Author Nadia Schadlow on Its Origins and Impact," CBS News, December 18, 2018, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-national-security-strategy-lead-author-nadia/id1286906615?i=1000426112614; Clifford D. May, host, *FDD's Foreign Podicy*, podcast, episode 196, "Schadlow's Strategies," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, December 29, 2023, https://www.fdd.org/podcasts/2023/12/29/schadlows-strategies/; and author's interview of Nadia Schadlow, June 5, 2025.

8. See, for example, commentary and sources cited in Eric Edelman, "The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance," in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (Cornell University Press, 2011), 73–75, 77, et passim.

9. See, for example, Douglas Feith, "Strategy and *War and Decision*," Hertog Foundation remarks, July 15, 2024. Feith's book *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (HarperCollins, 2008) covers in illuminating detail multiple instances in which US government officials debated how to develop strategies for the War on Terror and the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

10. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Little Brown, 1979), 39.

11. Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope: Renewal and Endeavor*, vol. II (unknown binding, 1970), 306.

12. Winston Churchill, statement before the House of Commons, May 2, 1935, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1935/may/02/foreign-office#S5CV0301P0_19350502_HOC_289.

13. For Reagan, see Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan in His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (Free Press, 2001), 483.

14. This passage was part of his famed March 23, 1775, "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech in the Virginia House of Burgesses, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patrick.asp.

15. Herzfeld's distinguished career also included service on the Defense Science and Defense Policy Boards. His comments came in the early 1990s.

16. See, for example, Lewis Libby's address to the Defense Science Board (chaired by Herzfeld), US Department of Defense, Defense Science Board Session, *Address of Lewis Libby, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense*, February 7, 1990, 3.

17. For instance, George Kennan circulated his initial conception for containing the Soviet Union months before it was accepted. The Truman administration turned to a containment strategy as its third choice, after its first two approaches proved their shortcomings. As another instance, Secretary of State Dean Acheson's and Paul Nitze's famed NSC-68 strategy, despite weeks of preparation, lay unfavored on Truman's desk until North Korea invaded South Korea. Only then did Truman adopt it.

18. See, for example, Mie Augier and Andrew W. Marshall, "The Fog of Strategy: Some Organizational Perspectives on Strategy and the Strategic Management Challenges in the Changing Competitive Environment," *Comparative Strategy* 36, no. 4 (2017): 275–92, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01495933.2017.1361196; Herman Kahn, "The Use of Scenarios," in Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Wiener, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (Macmillan, 1967), 262–64 (Kahn writes on 263–64: "Imagination has always been one of the principal means for dealing in various ways with the future."); and Herman Kahn and Irwin Mann, *Ten Common Pitfalls*, RAND Research Memorandum RM-1937 (RAND Corporation, 1957). See also Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, *The Worlds of Herman Kahn—The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War* (Harvard University Press, 2005), Chapter 6, "Faith and Insight in War-Gaming," et passim.

19. Business strategist Kenichi Ohmae, *The Mind of the Strategist: The Art of Japanese Business* (McGraw Hill, 1991), cited in T. Irene Sanders, *Strategic Thinking and the New Science: Planning in the Midst of Chaos, Complexity, and Change* (Free Press, 2010), 86.

20. Charles de Gaulle, *The Edge of the Sword*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (Criterion Books, 1960), 86, 101 (first published as *Le fil de l'épée*, 1932).

21. De Gaulle, *Edge of the Sword*, 17.

22. A point Department of Defense strategist Andrew Marshall often emphasized. Marshall and his friend Herman Kahn noted the difference between model-oriented scholars and those focused more on often-messy realities.

23. Frederick II, King of Prussia, "Réflexions sur la tactique et sur quelques parties de la guerre, ou Réflexions sur quelques changements dans la façon de faire la guerre," December 27, 1758, in *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand* (R. Decker, 1856), vol. XXVIII, 154 ("Depuis son siècle, la guerre s'est raffinée: des usages nouveaux et meurtriers l'ont rendue plus difficile. Il est juste de les détailler, afin que, ayant bien examiné le système de nos ennemis et les difficultés qu'ils nous présentent, nous choisissions des moyens propres pour les surmonter.").

24. Aaron MacLean, host, *School of War*, podcast, episode 198, "Robert D. Kaplan on Crisis," May 20, 2025, on the human dimension of history, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/school-of-war/id1589160645?i=1000709117537&r=1214.

25. George Orwell, "Review of *Mein Kampf* by Adolph Hitler," *New English Weekly* (March 21, 1940), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 2, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

26. See, for example, Augier and Marshall, "Fog of Strategy"; see also Kahn and Mann, *Ten Common Pitfalls*.

27. De Gaulle, *Edge of the Sword*.

28. See, for example, Feith, *War and Decision*, xiv, 35–36, 48–49.

29. Paul Wolfowitz put this maxim to work twice when working at the Pentagon, first in the late 1970s when arguing for the Maritime Prepositioning strategy that was adopted in President Carter's last budget and that ultimately, in summer 1990, provided early US armor capabilities to bolster the defense of Saudi Arabia against Iraq; and then in late 1989 when successfully contesting the desire of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to drop a land confrontation in Southwest Asia from defense planning scenarios. Wolfowitz had set aside intelligence estimates that discounted chances of such Iraqi aggression and turned to the historical record of Iraq's 1960 threats to invade Kuwait and three Soviet invasions of Iran. See also Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 49.

30. Winston S. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 89.

31. Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 191, 192.

32. Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 191, 192, 193. As other scholars have pointed out, while Bush may have been skeptical of addressing "the vision thing," his rapid acceptance of the strategy that Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney had developed lent direction to his administration's defense and foreign policy efforts.

33. See, for example, Wolfowitz and Edelman comments in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 46, 76, 195; and author's interview of Nadia Schadlow, June 5, 2025.

34. Steven F. Hayward, *Churchill on Leadership: Executive Success in the Face of Adversity* (Forum Books, 1998), 4–5.

35. Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 15.

36. Voltaire to Frederick II of Prussia, from Ferney, November 28, 1770, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 12, part 1 (Chez Th. Desoer Libraire, 1817), 704 ("Le doute n'est pas un état bien agréable, mais l'assurance est un état ridicule.").

37. In America's system, Defense tends more toward long-term planning than other departments. Historians Leffler and Legro assert it is not a "part of the culture of the State Department to generate a fully worked out strategic plan for a new world order." They add that "longer-term planning in the Bush 41 administration, to the extent it occurred, took place in the Pentagon." Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 191, 192; see also Edelman comments, 76. There are multiple reasons for this. Developing weapons systems, forces, and operational concepts takes years, so DOD leaders must decide well ahead of time what America's long-term interests will be, what kinds of conflicts might lie ahead, and what forces might be needed. Mistakes can be costly, meriting serious efforts to get things right.

38. The alliance then included Central European states Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Romania.

39. The effort Cheney ran in fall 1989 until 1993 should not be confused with the George H. W. Bush administration's winter 1989 interagency effort (National Security Review 12) to craft a new strategy. By wide acknowledgment, that effort produced little new or useful.

40. Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 77.

41. Roche, a decorated US Navy captain, went on to become secretary of the Air Force. While working with the legendary defense strategist Andrew Marshall, Roche had helped develop innovative strategies against the Soviet Union. Marshall frequently called Roche the most talented officer with whom he had worked. Officially, Wolfowitz's effort fell neatly under the authority of National Security Review 11 (Defense Management Review), but he had previously initiated a review of how best to organize and assign tasks to the cluster of offices and resources falling under him as under secretary of defense for policy. See Defense Science Board, *Address of Lewis Libby*.

42. In summer 1989, the Joint Chiefs had sought to remove a land war in Southwest Asia from scenarios used for defense planning guidance. Wolfowitz had disagreed, instructing S&R to oppose the proposal. Wolfowitz's position prevailed with Cheney, which proved fortunate when Iraq invaded Kuwait only months later. See also Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 191, 192.

43. Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 49.

44. The term "military-technical revolution," Soviet in origin, was how we spoke then about the issues. Later, to avoid crediting the Soviets, others Americanized it into "the revolution in military affairs."

45. Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's View of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (Simon and Schuster, 1984), 449.

46. Many of these officers merit particular note, including General Dale Vesser (contingency planning and force structure); Ambassador Eric Edelman (Warsaw Pact and Soviet Republics analysis); Alvin Bernstein, Abram Shulsky, and later, Zalmay Khalilzad (policy planning and regional affairs); and Admiral Scott Redd from Secretary Wolfowitz's front office. Navy Captain Larry Seaquist, Army Colonel George Raach, and Carol Kuntz (analysis review and strategy development) in S&R's front office provided invaluable insights and improvements, and possessed remarkable endurance.

47. Experts included in these meetings varied but included such leading Sovietologists and scholars as Stephen Sestanovich, Jeremy Azrael, Richard Ericson, Paul Goble, Marshall Goldman, Rose Gottemoeller, Arnold Horelick, Peter Reddaway, S. Frederick Starr, and Francis Fukuyama, as well as the CIA's George Kolt and Fritz Ermarth. These discussions helped Cheney anticipate the extraordinary changes in the Soviet Union and appreciate earlier than his cabinet colleagues the importance of Boris Yeltsin and the strength of the demand for change in Russia and other Soviet republics. Edelman and the Office of Net Assessment's Andrew Marshall played important roles in developing this effort. Author's interviews with Secretary Wolfowitz and Ambassador Edelman, multiple dates, Washington, DC; see also Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 48–49, 56–57.

48. These private sessions were modeled on similar sessions Wolfowitz had inspired when working on East Asia at the State Department in the first Reagan term.

49. Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 49–50.

50. See Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 67.

51. On the peace dividend, see, for example, Molly Moore and Patrick E. Tyler, "Secretary Cheney, Still the Skeptic, Grim View Complicates Task of 'Building Down' Defense," *Washington Post*, March 20, 1990, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/03/21/secretary-cheney/f4a7dd10-2faa-4254-9fe1-b60fd73d004f/.

52. Senate Armed Services Committee, *Hearings Before the Senate Armed Services Committee in Connection with the FY 1992–93 Budget for the Department of Defense*, 101st US Congress, 2d session (February 1, 1990), Statement of Secretary Richard B. Cheney, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense.

53. Defense Science Board, *Address of Lewis Libby*, 5, 6. See also Libby's citing Dean Acheson's assertion in *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), that American strategy has long sought to "safeguard the highest interest of our nation" by "maintain[ing] as spacious an environment as possible in which free states might exist and flourish," House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Military Construction, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee in Connection with the New Defense Strategy*, 101st US Congress, 2d session (February 21, 1990), Statement of Lewis Libby, Principal

Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, 5–7, 9. See also House Armed Services Committee, *Hearings Before the House Armed Services Committee Defense Policy Panel in Connection with the New Defense Strategy*, 102nd US Congress, 1st session (March 12, 1991), Statement of Lewis Libby, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, 4–7, 9, 11–13, 18.

54. The name "Regional Defense Strategy," used internally, was not applied officially until later. The DPRB presentations were the key first step for DOD decisions on forces and budgets. Cheney's and the board's interest in the strategy and its underlying analyses and insights drove the session well past its anticipated length and into a second session. This began the lengthy process of adopting and spreading this strategic approach through the department's leadership.

55. Contemporary comments of Secretary Cheney and Under Secretary for Policy Wolfowitz, who were present for the Oval Office session and received the instructions for the major address.

56. George H. W. Bush, "Remarks at the Aspen Institute Symposium in Aspen, Colorado," August 2, 1990, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2128.

57. In addition to other aspects of the region's strategic importance, the US relied heavily in this period on energy imported from the Middle East.

58. See, for example, Edelman comments in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 67–68.

59. George H. W. Bush, "Address to the Nation" on the national defense strategy and reducing United States and Soviet nuclear weapons, the White House, September 27, 1991, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-reducing-united-states-and-soviet-nuclear-weapons.

60. US Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee Report 102-113, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993, "Title IX-Department of Defense Organization and Management," 226.

61. On nuclear deployments, see, for example, Wolfowitz, "Shaping the Future," in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 44–62, et passim.

62. US Department of Defense, "Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress, Pursuant to Title V of the Persian Gulf Conflict Supplemental Authorization and Personnel Benefits Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-25)," Washington, DC, April 1992.

63. In a White House Situation Room briefing on October 11, 1990, Central Command presented its plan to liberate Kuwait. It recommended that massive allied forces attack to the north in a line reaching to the Kuwaiti coast. This would launch US forces directly into prepared Iraqi defenses. CENTCOM acknowledged that this would risk significant US casualties. Cheney wanted a better plan and had in mind one Policy had proposed.

Two months earlier, Policy's assistant secretary for the region, Henry "Harry" Rowan, had noted that in World War II a British column had advanced from Jordan in the west across hundreds of miles to halt a coup in Baghdad. Rowan wondered if a US advance from Jordan might force Saddam to withdraw his troops from Kuwait to defend his capital or give the US Iraqi territory to trade in peace talks. Wolfowitz and I believed that, in addition to other complications, the US should not approach Baghdad, as we were not intending to go into the city if Saddam did not withdraw from Kuwait. However, we believed the coalition could avoid Iraqi defenses and flank their forces occupying Kuwait by launching a surprise "left hook" attack from Saudi territory south and west of Kuwait City. This attack could arc to the northeast into southern Iraq, threatening to isolate Iraqi forces in Kuwait. The head of S&R's contingency planning office, retired Lt. Gen. Dale Vesser (who was also a former head of the Joint Chiefs' planning office), undertook a detailed and closely held study of the proposed left hook. His work suggested that, despite challenging terrain, the "left hook" was workable if additional equipment were available in theater.

Cheney recounts presenting Policy's work to the Joint Chiefs on October 23. The Joint Chiefs and CENTCOM ultimately developed and improved the left hook. In spring 1991, this flanking attack, animated by the skill and courage of US and coalition militaries, forced a panicked Iraqi army retreat to the north, liberating Kuwait. Dick Cheney with Liz Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (Threshold Editions, 2011), 199–200, 203–4.

64. O'Keefe later served as secretary of the Navy, head of NASA, president of Louisiana State University, and university professor at Syracuse University's Maxwell School.

65. US leaders ultimately decided that we should not seek contributions to cover certain costs such as troop salaries.

66. In 1990, Czechoslovakia included today's Czech Republic and Slovakia.

67. Wolfowitz, in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 54.

68. Bush, "Address to the Nation."

69. See, for example, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Hearings in Connection with Defense Strategy*, 102nd US Congress, 1st session (April 11, 1991), Statement of Paul D. Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 21; and Eric Edelman, "The Strange Case of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance," in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 68.

70. The final 1992 Defense Planning Guidance should not be confused with an early staff-created draft that an anonymous source described or leaked to a *New York Times* reporter. That staff draft, which was supposed to track with DOD's repeated congressional testimony and public statements, inappropriately varied in places. The leaked draft had not been seen by Cheney, Wolfowitz, or Libby (see, for example, Wolfowitz and Edelman and *Washington Post* reporting, cited in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 66). *The New York Times* hyped discussion of the staff draft's variations from DOD statements and grossly misdescribed other parts of the document, as others, such as *Washington Post* reporter Bart Gellman, ultimately found (see, for example, Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 66–67). The hyped *New York Times* reporting led to a brief public flap as political rhetoric ramped up in advance of an election year. When the staff draft reached Libby, it was revised by him to comport with the department's long-established thinking and public statements, as always intended. Cheney and Wolfowitz promptly approved the revisions, and this version was then approved by the White House with minimal adjustments and issued by Cheney as the classified 1992 Defense Planning Guidance. Congressional and public concerns about the final DPG quickly quieted.

In January 1993, Cheney published for public use the unclassified "Regional Defense Strategy," which comported with departmental thinking as reflected in the final 1992 DPG, as well as in the earlier DOD pronouncements, as discussed above. Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy* (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1993), available through National Technical Reports Library, https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/ADA268979.xhtml.

The strategy's terms and its impact have also been addressed at some length in various studies. See, for example, citations of various works contained in essays on the strategy by Wolfowitz and Edelman in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, chapters 3 and 4.

71. See, for example, Department of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, February 1992, vi.

72. Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s*, 1, 3.

73. A common theme of such threat-based approaches was to drastically reduce US conventional forces, arguing that they had been built to meet the vanishing Soviet threat and must therefore far exceed any forces needed for other threats. While reductions were due, this analysis was flawed in that allied conventional forces in the Cold War relied on rapid allied escalation to tactical nuclear forces, which might well then escalate into global nuclear war. America's European allies, in particular, had not wished to invest in conventional forces adequate to counter a Warsaw Pact invasion. The Soviet collapse would allow conventional responses to regional threats without reliance on nuclear escalation; however, assessing the necessary force levels required a close examination of likely future foes, not simply a broad cut from force levels in the Soviet era that were, in fact, inadequate for that threat. Accordingly, while the president in 1990 announced deep cuts in defense based on DOD's detailed assessment of forces needed for likely future contingencies, the threat-based school often argued for far deeper cuts without providing detailed analyses to support them.

74. See the discussion in Wolfowitz, "Shaping the Future-Planning at the Pentagon, 1989–93," in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 58: "Working closely with Scooter Libby and myself, Cheney developed four principal arguments against [House Armed Services Committee Chair Les] Aspin's narrowly 'threat-based' strategy."

75. Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s*, 15.

76. Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s*, 1; see also 4.

77. Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s*, 3.

78. See, for example, Edelman in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 69, noting work by then-State Department official Robert Zoellick at Secretary Baker's direction.

79. See Edelman in Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 71–73, 76–77.

80. Hal Brands, "Choosing Primacy: US Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (March 2018): 11.

81. Passages relating to Brands's observations may be found, for example, in *National Security Strategy of the United States*, the White House, January 1993, 5, 6, 13, http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-1993/.

82. Brands, "Choosing Primacy," 32–33.

83. Brands's analysis of the ideas contained in the Regional Defense Strategy and final DPG remains useful, even though his account of the processes that produced the strategy proceeds, as he admits, "primarily by examining newly declassified documents" from 1992. To his credit, Brands asserts in his 2018 article that "there has yet to be a comprehensive examination" of how that strategy emerged. Accordingly, Brands, like some others, slights discussion of the strategy work begun in 1989, endorsed in President Bush's major defense strategy speech at Aspen in August 1990, and continuing through the next two years that accounted for the content of the final 1992 DPG and 1993 Regional Defense Strategy. These sources fail to cover, as discussed above in this article, multiple secretarial and Office of the Secretary of Defense public statements and testimony in 1990 and 1991, as well as discussions in Cheney's 2011 book *In My Time* and the University of Virginia Miller Center book *In Uncertain Times*, cited above. Brands, for example, describes President Bush's August 1990 Aspen speech in the context of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait as a regional threat and the base force structure, but does not delve into the speech's broader adoption of DOD's new regional defense strategy as developed that winter and presented to the president that spring. That and subsequent speeches and testimony prepared for the next two budget cycles drove the thinking ultimately captured in the final DPG and, as Brands demonstrates, much of the White House's 1992 National Security Strategy.

84. Donald Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), 292, 294.

85. See, for example, Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 72–73, 75, 76–77. Multiple scholars cite the Clinton and Bush 43 administrations as basically following the Regional Defense Strategy. For example, Leffler and Legro note that, along with hoping to integrate Russia into a Western order (a goal Cheney shared, although less optimistically), the Clinton administration largely followed the Bush 41 military and geoeconomic strategy. Leffler and Legro, *In Uncertain Times*, 193.

86. Prewar and in mid-2003, Regional Defense Strategy authors Wolfowitz and Libby had called for a different approach to post-Saddam Iraq. This approach included prewar planning for early reconstitution of Iraqi forces and, in early summer 2003, adoption of a counterinsurgency strategy. Tragically, these positions were not pursued until President George W. Bush approved, at Cheney's urging, General David Petraeus's proposals in late 2006.

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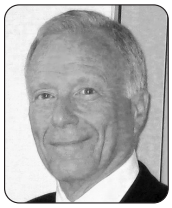

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Lewis Libby has held several high-level national security positions in the White House, serving as national security advisor and chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney and assistant to President George W. Bush, and in the Defense and State Departments, including as principal deputy under secretary of defense.

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