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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**A NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY IN PLAID:  
THE NSS AS A POLITICAL DOCUMENT**

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# Report Documentation Page

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provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and Secure the Blessings of Liberty to Ourselves and our Posterity,

The Clinton Administration's National Security Strategy for a New Century of May 1997, hereafter referred to as the NSS, is an artful political document, sweeping in its objectives and attuned to the public sentiment of what constitutes the national interest. Whether it qualifies as a viable and rigorous national security strategy in the classic sense is another question. One could argue that it meets a number of the criteria for a successful strategy as defined by Professor Terry Diebel in his September 4 lecture to the War College: it is broad-gauged, long range, and most certainly purposeful. Indeed, in its breadth and its sense of purpose lies its political appeal. But ultimately this is a political document for public consumption, issued by an Administration that is, after all, elected. Its objectives are only slightly more controversial than love for mom and apple pie. By invoking the preamble of the Constitution in its opening lines, the Administration reassures the American people that we are setting out to do what our forefathers had in mind, much as good Muslims turn to the hadith, the stories and sayings associated with the Prophet Mohammed, to justify their current actions. At the same time, there are no tough choices for the American people, no fixed priorities against which limited resources must be weighed. But can or should we expect anything different, given our democratic system?

The NSS, as a public document, is printed in a color to suit all tastes, what one might call a political plaid, recalling the timeworn joke. Its beauty from a bureaucratic

viewpoint -- my own -- is that it allows great room for strategic action within broad and necessarily vague parameters. And, as Ambassador Gallucci so correctly pointed out in his August 13 convocation address to the War College, albeit in reverse order -- policy should be public, strategy may be secret. Nonetheless, it is in determining how those broad policies will be implemented that the great bureaucratic battles ensue, the tug of war between the Executive and Legislative branches in establishing how we, the Government, shall secure the common good. It is not in the broad pattern of the NSS that one finds room for disagreement, rather it is in the tailoring of the strategic suit, so to speak, in the matching of its seams. Thus, this largely hortatory document may be the best one can hope for in a modern, democratic, participatory republic. That is not necessarily a bad thing.

In assessing the success of the NSS as a strategic plan, I have used David Abshire's "agile strategy" as a point of comparison. I have done so because the drafters appear to have been heavily influenced by Ambassador Abshire's thinking in his Spring 1996 essay of the same name, and indeed his approach to NATO expansion was prescriptive for the Administration.<sup>1</sup> Abshire argues that we are in a "strategic interregnum" and therefore it would be a mistake for U.S. decision makers to become locked into rigid formulas, strategies or doctrines that would rule out certain outcomes. An "agile strategy" allows for flexibility of approach. It does not propose any locked in ideas, while based on the realistic foundation

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Abshire, *U.S. Global Policy: Toward an Agile Strategy* | *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1996, 19-2, pp. 41-61.

of strong alliances with other pillars of international strength. The elements of this strategy involve

- recognition of complex, non-linear challenges of post-cold war era,
- clear definition of national interests,
- a long-term vision,
- renewal of national strength,
- application of key elements of U S power to carefully chosen commitments and interventions,
- commitment to get the U S financial house in order to ensure freedom of action

The NSS “succeeds” to the extent that, while firmly rooted in the realistic school of support for traditional allies, it takes into account the complexity of the modern world and the variety of issues and threats that must be addressed. It purports to take a long view, and perceives the “new strategic landscape” in all its fluidity and unpredictability, economic and environmental issues and “transnational” threats are accorded first tier status. But at this point, the framework erodes and the NSS manifests its true nature as a mere political document designed to give the Administration the broadest possible cover for its policy endeavors, as opposed to laying out a formal strategy for achieving them. It neither establishes priorities nor makes demands of the general populace, requiring, for example, that Americans increase savings and limit consumption. Nor does it define the limits of American involvement due to resource constraints. This, of course, would be politically

unwise. How could the President say we would not intervene in Haiti in the face of a Randall Robinson, who in fact provided the Administration the needed lance for that political boil? But where the NSS really takes a turn from the Abshire approach, and in so doing blatantly declares itself an Administration propaganda effort, is when it treats areas of bipartisan agreement, such as drugs, crime and terrorism. Here the NSS offers tough and confrontational language, in contrast to its more "agile" approach to bilateral relations with China, for example.

Indeed it is precisely in those clearly bipartisan areas that the NSS ceases to guard its policy options with nuance and departs from the Abshire model. Abshire, pointing to the history of military strategy, draws a comparison between an approach of "maneuver, mobility, and direction" often adopted by military geniuses having inferior resources, and one of "attrition," designed to wear down the enemy through frontal, direct pressures. He notes that the United States has a tradition of employing the latter tactic (the great exception, of course, being our own Revolutionary War<sup>1</sup>) and argues for the adoption of a grand strategy based on classical principles of maneuver. When it comes to confronting "terrorism," however, the NSS resorts to old school battle cries of containment and confrontation, not the school of wit and maneuver proposed by Abshire. We may be addressing a new, and particularly unsettling threat, but the language is strictly cold war, and a war of attrition at that.

Our policy to counter international terrorists rests on the following principles: (1) make no concessions to terrorists, (2) bring all pressure to bear on state sponsors of terrorism, (3) fully exploit all available legal mechanisms to punish international

terrorists, and (4) help other governments improve their capabilities to combat terrorism. We further seek to uncover, reduce or eliminate foreign terrorist capabilities in our country, eliminate terrorist sanctuaries, counter state-supported terrorism and subversion of moderate regimes through a comprehensive program of diplomatic, economic and intelligence activities.<sup>2</sup>

Change the word "terrorism" to "communism" and this all sounds oddly familiar

Of course "terrorism," like "communism," is neither monolithic nor sui generis. Most acts of terrorism take place within a political context, most often in connection with a struggle for national identity or political recognition. But the NSS chooses to remove "terrorism" from the context of, for example, U.S. support for Israel and places it in its own, uncontroversial category as an evil devoid of political context other than an irrational desire to harm the United States, or the larger West, an evil which must be addressed with vigor. And this because the potential for acts of terrorism, particularly those perpetrated by dastardly Middle Easterners, such as the World Trade Center bombing, taps into a reservoir of deep national fear. But just what is this "terrorism" we are combatting? And how can we engage this enemy? Ironically, it is where the language of the NSS is the most forceful that we are perhaps the most impotent as a government to act.

A cynic (this author?) might suggest that, despite the accepted wisdom that democracies do not go to war against each other, we do seem to require an "enemy," an Other to give us something out of which the "pluribus" can become "unum." It is the job,

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<sup>2</sup> A National Security Strategy for A New Century, The White House May 1997 p 10

indeed the duty, of politicians to do so, while also identifying the broader goals that inspire us. In this regard, the NSS is highly successful – who could argue with its goals or dispute its threats? And what more can be expected? Walter Russell Mead declared that “the most difficult task for a democratic republic (is) imposing clear limits and strategic direction on government action.”<sup>3</sup> He is right. And so, too, is Alexander Nacht when he writes “Like it or not, events drive analysis, and it will take a new defining moment – political, military, economic, or cultural – before we know where we’re headed.”<sup>4</sup> Alas

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Russell Mead, “An American Grand Strategy: The Quest for Order in a Disordered World,” World Policy Journal, Vol. X, No. 1, Spring 1993, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Nacht, “U.S. Foreign Policy Strategies,” The Washington Quarterly, 18:3, Summer 1995, p. 210.