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Culture Counts:

Cultural Bias in the National Security Strategy

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The May 1997 document entitled *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* offers an ambitious international agenda for an epoch which has thus far been marked by domestic concerns about the costs of maintaining a powerful U.S. presence around the world. Funding for the conduct of diplomatic operations has plunged almost 50 percent in real terms over the past 15 years, and the end of the Cold War brought a one-third cut in defense spending. Meanwhile, *A National Security Strategy* identifies many new challenges and potential threats to U.S. national interests. None assumes the magnitude of the vanquished Soviet threat or implies the expenditures the U.S. incurred in countering it. But, collectively, they demand that more resources be devoted to national security than either the American body politic or our national leaders have thus far seemed inclined to commit.

It would be tempting to dismiss *A National Security Strategy* as a collection of insubstantial platitudes intended for public consumption and to ask for a copy of the “real” strategy. But such an approach would ignore the genuine views that underlie this blue-jacketed document and the extent to which it is likely to frame the terms of debate – both in public and within the Administration – over how and with what means the strategy should be implemented. Instead, this outline of strategy should be taken at face value and its explicit and implicit content analyzed rigorously, so that appropriate resources and means may be applied to the attainment of priority goals and objectives.

Assumptions are critical, if often implicit, elements of any strategy document. They form the foundation upon which the strategy’s analytical framework is built. If important assumptions are erroneous, the validity of the entire strategy is called into

question. This brief essay will examine one apparent implicit assumption and discuss its implications for the overall feasibility of *A National Security Strategy*.

From the inception of the Republic, Americans have viewed representative democracy as superior to other forms of political organization. According to James Madison,¹ a republican democracy could prevent the debilitating effects of factional conflict, and fellow Federalist John Jay argued that it could reduce the frequency of war.² Today, the terms "democracy" and "representative democracy" are essentially synonymous in public discourse, and we ascribe additional benefits, for ourselves and for others, to democratic systems.³

However, representative democracy is a part of Western culture. The rebellious colonists of North America could cite their lack of representation with good effect to justify calls for independence from the U.K. only because the U.K. had a parliament. Fundamental concepts of democracy flowed from the Athenians and were modified by European theorists, such as Locke and Rousseau, to address the realities of emerging nation-states. Over the eight generations between the founding of the United States and the end of the Second World War, most European states experimented – some more successfully than others – with democratic systems.

Representative democracy has much shallower roots in other parts of the world. Many African ethnic groups integrated democratic elements into their political systems

¹ James Madison, "The Federalist No. 10," in Cooke, Jacob E, ed , *The Federalist* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 61

² John Jay, "The Federalist No. 3," in Cooke, *op cit*, pp. 16-17

³ "Underpinning U.S. international leadership is the power of our democratic ideals and values. In designing our strategy, we recognize that the spread of democracy supports American values and enhances our security and prosperity. Democratic governments are more likely to cooperate with each

before the advent of European colonialism, for example. However, colonial political and economic structures precluded democratic practice on a nation-state scale until shortly before independence in most cases. Their experiences often did not compare favorably with that of Weimar Germany. Other concepts, such as nearly complete freedom of the press and free market economies, are often linked to democratic political systems but are not necessarily precluded by other forms of government. However, they, too, are Western concepts that do not necessarily resonate with non-Westerners. Kishore Mahbubani, a top official of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, once commented:

The greatest myth that an American journalist cherishes is that he is an underdog, the lone ranger who works against monstrous bureaucracies to uncover the real truth, often at great personal risk. I never understood this myth when I was in Washington. Cabinet secretaries, senators, ambassadors and generals promptly return the phone calls of journalists and cultivate them assiduously. None would dare tell an American journalist on a major paper to go to hell. A key assumption of the American Constitution is that unchecked power leads to irresponsibility. It is therefore puzzling that many American journalists assume their unchecked power will do no fundamental harm.⁴

Mahbubani also questions more generally the American emphasis on individual "rights", arguing that too much freedom may be inimical to the society as a whole.

After reviewing statistics on crime, divorce and out-of-wedlock births, he remarks:

An outsider must conclude that the seductive notion that any social obligation is only a diminution of individual freedom has played a key role in undermining the family as an institution.⁵

Mahbubani stresses that he and "most East Asians have no desire to see the United States fall off a cliff." In more ways than one, the American presence has been "immensely civilizing" for East Asia, opening "East Asian minds to the most generous

other against common threats and to encourage free and open trade and less likely to wage war or abuse the rights of their people," *A National Security Strategy*, p. 2

⁴ Kishore Mahbubani, "Go East, Young Man," in *The Washington Quarterly* (Vol. 17, No. 2), p. 13

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 11

aspects of Western civilization.” The purpose of his article is to warn the United States that it “is approaching a cliff of which it seems as yet blissfully unaware.”⁶

Certain parallels can be drawn between the circumstances of the United States today and of the Roman Empire at the outset of the *Pax Romana* nearly two millennia ago. The Romans had succeeded in pacifying and promoting their values and ideals within most of the Classical world. In their view, what lay beyond was uncultured, barbarian and not worthy of significant attention beyond a need to protect imperial borders from occasional incursions. This parallel should not be overdrawn; the U.S. has extended its cultural reach over far more of the planetary surface than the Romans ever did, and the Romans probably knew less of the potential threats beyond their borders than U.S. policymakers know of the challenges that face America today. Nonetheless, “American hegemony is receding.”⁷ Unlike the Romans, who confronted essentially every challenge within their sphere, the U.S. does not wish to (and practically cannot) take action or cause others to take action against every challenge that arises within the much larger sphere of the entire planet. Oddly, however, *A National Security Strategy* implies that the U.S. can successfully confront almost every identifiable challenge to its national security.

Cultures are particular ways of accomplishing the things that make life possible—the perpetuation of the species, the transmission of knowledge, the absorption of the shocks of change and death. Cultures differ in the relative importance they attach to time, noise, safety, cleanliness, violence, thrift, intellect, sex and art. These differences in turn imply differences in social choices, economic efficiency, and political stability. Cultures compete (and) happy endings are not guaranteed in all cultural encounters.⁸

⁶ *Ibid*, p 6

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p 91

⁸ Thomas Sowell, *Migrations and Cultures. A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), p 379 and pp 384-385

The modern strategist plays down culture and mindset at significant risk. As a member of my committee noted in his critique of NATO expansion, "The West simply cannot, overnight, undo Russian thinking that has existed for fifty years."⁹

Culture counts, and not all ideals are universal. Some cholesterol is required for cells to reproduce, but too much can be most unhealthy. A measure of faith in the rightness of the American way of life and values is appropriate and may even be necessary in light of the American tradition of demanding "morality" of its security policy. But *A National Security Strategy* is suffused with an unhealthy level of enthusiasm for American culture – an implicit assumption that our way of life is so universally attractive that all will hearken to it. Such an approach may draw in and engage many readers, but it may also conceal obstacles to attaining strategic goals.

As we enter the twenty-first century, we have an unprecedented opportunity to make our nation safer and more prosperous. Our military might is unparalleled; a dynamic global economy offers increasing opportunities of American jobs and American investment; and the community of democratic nations is growing, enhancing the prospects for political stability, peaceful conflict resolution and greater hope for the people of the world.¹⁰

Underpinning [U.S.] international leadership is the power of our democratic ideals and values¹¹

The conviction that American society, for all its flaws and blemishes, is the best society in the world runs deep in the American soul. So, too, does the conviction that American society need not contemplate fundamental changes in the new global era.¹²

A fundamental difficulty with *A National Security Strategy* is the extent to which it subsumes under "democratic values" aspects of American culture – such as a woman's "right" to "reproductive freedom" or the media's "right" to disseminate false information

⁹ Robert Smith, LTC, USAF, Untitled and Unpublished Paper for Course One at National War College, p 1

¹⁰ *A National Security Strategy*, preface, p 1.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 2

about public figures as long as it does not do so with malicious intent – which are not perceived in many other cultures to be fundamental, ineluctable components of any democracy. Huntington points out that early leaders of Pakistan, Singapore and Sri Lanka played down their training at elite British universities and appealed to traditional cultural values to motivate people and win their support.¹³

As Western power declines, the ability of the West to impose Western concepts of human rights, liberalism, and democracy on other civilizations also declines, and so does the attractiveness of these values to the [target] civilizations¹⁴

All nations – not just the U.S. – engage in national security strategy development. Because the U.S. looms large in the world, many of these countries often devote great resources to understanding America and Americans. We must take similar steps. U.S. national security strategy cannot be developed in isolation from an understanding of how and from what perspectives other states view us and our culture, because there is an inevitable feedback loop. In the “global village” there will be many houses, and they will not all have the same floor plan or furnishings. If the U.S. is to remain secure and to prosper in this era, our policymakers must recognize differences in national and sub-national cultures and account for how these differences affect a country’s interaction with the rest of the world. To the extent that we assume that all peoples are basically alike and that most of them want to be like us, we run a serious risk of oversimplifying the challenges to our national security, underestimating the costs of addressing them, and overestimating our prospects of doing so successfully.

¹² Mahbubani, *op cit*, pp 5-6

¹³ Huntington, *op cit*, p 93

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 92