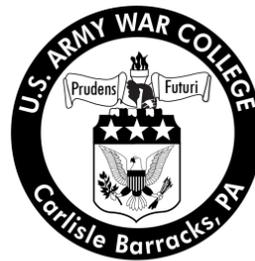


The Center Must Hold: Avoiding Grand Strategic Failure

by

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United States Army War College
Class of 2012

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE CENTER MUST HOLD:
AVOIDING GRAND STRATEGIC FAILURE**

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ABSTRACT

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This paper will examine the collapse of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union in turn, positing that those failures were due to the lack of a coherent grand strategy in each. The paper will then outline the current strategic environment for the United States, drawing parallels between the two Russian catastrophic state failures and present circumstances, and suggesting that without a more coherent grand strategy, the United States faces similar systemic risk as an enterprise. Finally, the paper suggests some needed reforms before crafting a coherent grand strategy for the United States in the Information Age.

THE CENTER MUST HOLD:
AVOIDING GRAND STRATEGIC FAILURE

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned. . . .*

—William Butler Yeats¹

The present is marked by the throes of a world in transition between the Industrial Age and the Information Age. Markers of the Information Age are all around us, and markets have clearly shifted to operating on the basis of real time globally accessible information. Still, many institutions of the Industrial Age remain, and are fighting to survive, and to retain their power. In the midst of this struggle, the United States struggles to find a firm foundation for its own security in a world no longer characterized by a bipolar struggle with the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union is no longer a threat, as it no longer exists. Just as the ideological vanguard of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) swept aside the three-century-old Russian Empire in a storm of revolution and civil war in 1917, in much less violent fashion reformers within the constituent republics of the USSR caused a once great superpower to evanesce some seventy-two years later. Both caused great hardship and dislocation, and reset global politics on the world stage.

There are troubling trends at work globally and in the United States, just as there were for the Russian Empire and the USSR before their demise. The 2008 financial crisis caused a recession with lingering structural problems, to include protracted high unemployment and underemployment.² At the same time, federal tax receipts have sharply declined while federal expenditures have continued to grow, resulting in

unprecedented deficits in a time of peace, and a public debt that has now surpassed 100% of annual gross domestic product.³ Just as both the Russian Empire and USSR did before their demise, the United States over the past ten years has fought two expensive and protracted wars that arguably have undermined the legitimacy of national political institutions.⁴

In contrast to present circumstances, in the 1990s the United States reaped a large peace dividend, balanced its federal budget, and enjoyed an economic boom fueled by a combination of low taxes, divided government, and a surge of investment activity centered on the internet and electronic commerce.⁵ However, extreme growth came to an end with the bursting of the dot com bubble in early 2000, followed by Al-Qaeda's attacks on September 11, 2001.⁶

Those attacks brought about a great change in the security posture of the United States, as well as great economic dislocation due to the attacks themselves.⁷ Less than one month after the attacks, special and general purpose forces began operating against Al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan, and interagency efforts ramped up to target and cut off the funding for Al-Qaeda.⁸ After a short campaign, Al Qaeda and the Taliban fled to sanctuaries in Pakistan, and there was a palpable lack of strategic direction for the United States to prosecute the so-called 'War on Terror,' and how to secure its security interests globally.

This lack of strategic direction was nothing new, and has become the normal mode for the operation of the United States' foreign policy and national security machinery since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Up until that time, the United States had had a grand strategy that had endured for more than 40 years, having been

outlined in NSC-68 in 1950.⁹ The need for a coherent grand strategy, however, remains, and its lack poses some significant danger.

This paper will examine the collapse of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union in turn, positing that those failures were due to the lack of a coherent grand strategy in each. The paper will then outline the current strategic environment for the United States, drawing parallels between the two Russian catastrophic state failures and present circumstances, and suggesting that without a more coherent grand strategy, the United States faces similar systemic risk as an enterprise. Finally, the paper suggests some needed reforms before crafting a coherent grand strategy for the United States in the Information Age.

At present, real time information is more readily accessible than ever, yet counter intuitively, trends are highly unpredictable, and inflection points are very difficult to predict. So-called Black Swan events seem to be coming with greater rapidity, and greater impact.¹⁰ Recent examples include the currency crises in southeast Asia in 2006, the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, and the recent wave of changes in governments in the Middle East and North Africa as a result of the Arab Spring. In all three of these instances, there was an abrupt change in individuals' perception of a market or political situation, resulting in great institutional dislocation.

Two other such Black Swan events occurred in the more distant past: the fall of the Romanov dynasty's hold on Imperial Russia in 1917, giving birth to the Soviet Union, and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Let us examine each in turn.

The Russian Empire

Ultimately, Romanov Russia succumbed to revolution in 1917 because its grand strategy was not feasible. However, before delving into that grand strategy, the historic context for that strategy's formulation must be established. The Romanov dynasty, going back to its roots in the early 17th century, was thoroughly autocratic. The Romanovs, uniquely among European royalty, continued to envision themselves even at the beginning of the twentieth century as rulers by divine right, the Tsar holding all of Mother Russia as an unfettered autocrat, owning all of Russia's land and unaccountable to the people.¹¹ The Reformation of the Catholic Church, the Glorious Revolution in England, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the revolutions of 1848 had all largely passed Russia by, leaving it as an *ancien régime*, despite its participation in the Napoleonic Wars.

What the Napoleonic Wars did do, however, was expose Russian officers and soldiers to the better quality of life outside Russia, as well as expose them to the ideals of the French revolution. The radical egalitarianism of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" was co-opted by the Tsar to fire the morale of those fighting for Mother Russia. Upon their return home, there was great disparity between wartime slogans and peacetime practice.¹²

After the war, the Tsars of the 19th century relied on an extensive formal bureaucratic system that went back to Peter the Great. This bureaucracy was largely made up of the nobility, along with meritorious and educated commoners; however, it "never really became an effective tool in the hands of the autocracy."¹³ In the mid-19th century, limited reforms were undertaken by Alexander II, in response to calls for reform

by some career bureaucrats. “[T]hey called for greater openness in the work of government, what they termed *glasnost*, as a public check against the abuse of power and a means of involving experts from society in debates about reform.”¹⁴ This effort foreshadowed Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms of the 1980s. However, as members of the intelligentsia pushed even harder, the autocratic impulse kicked in, and those calling for further reforms were persecuted, and the educational institutions from which they had come were repressed.¹⁵

Romanov rulers, time and again, did not edify Russia’s institutions, but rather attempted to keep them weak, so they could not compete with the ruling royal family. Hand in glove with this effort, the Romanovs violently repressed the free exchange of ideas, and drove political expression underground.¹⁶ Russia’s rulers saw the need for reform from time to time, particularly at points of objective failure, such as strikes, uprisings, and even battlefield defeat. However, despite occasionally seeing the need for institutional reform, they took an incremental approach to reform while doubling down on repression. When the end came, it became apparent that the regime had become alienated, with very few friends among its own people and institutions.

Feudalism in Russia lasted much, much longer than anywhere else in Europe. Tsar Alexander II promulgated the terms of emancipation for serfs from the land in February of 1861, whereas serfdom in much of Europe had been extinguished decades if not centuries before.¹⁷ During the 19th century, after the defeat of Napoleon, there was an enormous *sturm und drang* between, on the one hand, students, intellectuals, and disaffected members of the gentry (to include junior military officers), and on the

other, the royal family and agents of the Romanov regime, who were trying to suppress nascent revolt and reform.

In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, most of Western Europe's monarchies became constitutional monarchies, with parliaments providing checks on monarchies and their bureaucracies. No such liberalization occurred in Russia, and the storm continued. At the time when Alexander II announced the emancipation of Russia's serfs, there was a move afoot in Russia amongst the intelligentsia to push for a national assembly to legislate and provide a political outlet for the people to chart their own course. However, as had happened previously in Russia, the effort was met with the repression of intellectuals, and the prosecution and persecution of individuals.¹⁸

The Russian peasantry, which made up the vast majority of Russian people, was the ground upon which the seeds of Marxism and revolution were planted, and those seeds ultimately bore fruit. Both before and after serfs' emancipation in the 19th century, agriculture was the livelihood and subsistence for nearly all of Russia's peasantry. Russian peasant agricultural technology, however, had not advanced much since Roman times. Despite this, the peasant birthrate remained high, causing peasants to pay ever higher cash rents to gentry for land to farm for food. When prices on products climbed, the gentry withdrew land from leasing, and commercially farmed it using mechanized implements. Both leasing to peasants and mechanization decreased the demand for peasant agricultural labor, and ultimately drove many off the land and into towns or cities. These displaced peasants often went to work in large factories in the cities, and became ripe targets for radicalization there by organizers.¹⁹

The famine of 1891 was a seminal event pointing toward future revolution. A cold, dry winter was followed by a severely dry summer, causing grain yields to plummet. At first, the regime forbade newspapers from mentioning “famine,” but later essentially conceded the situation by belatedly prohibiting the export of grain. When the famine began, the bureaucracy was completely incompetent. The famine united the intelligentsia of disparate ideologies (*inter alia*, Social Revolutionaries, populists, and progressives), and watered the seeds of Marxism.²⁰ “Even the young Lenin only became converted to the Marxist mainstream in the wake of the famine crisis.”²¹ Thus, not only at the national level, but in the minds and lives of key individuals, the famine played a key role in setting the stage for eventual revolution.

Later, in 1899, originally nonpolitical student demonstrations were violently repressed by the Tsar’s Cossack cavalry, followed by arrests and imprisonment. The result was radicalization of the students, and sympathy from the gentry and middle classes from which the students came. Students then began to organize with a view toward revolt, and even to move against the regime by assassinating officials.²² By this time, the regime found little sympathy among any elements of the populace, and the revolution of 1905-06, on the heels of Russia’s defeat by Japan, soon followed.

Less than a decade later, Russia entered World War I against the Central Powers. Mobilizing huge quantities of men and materiel, Russia launched an offensive on two fronts against the Central Powers, but was utterly unprepared to fight a protracted industrial war. Faced with catastrophic defeat of the army in the field and bread riots in the capital, the revolutionaries struck, ultimately forcing the Tsar’s abdication on March 2, 1917.²³

When finally the Tsar's regime was swept away in 1917, a host of evils descended upon Russia. Despite their minority status, the Bolsheviks seized power, and civil war broke out and raged for years. Rule of law went by the wayside, and individuals were subject to arbitrary detention, torture, and execution. The ruble became virtually worthless, banks closed, inflation rampaged, starvation stalked the land, and property was subject to confiscation by Party officials.²⁴

All of these dire consequences, with untold deaths and destruction over decades, were a direct result of failed grand strategy. That grand strategy spanned the reigns of both Alexander II and Nicholas Romanov, and was *status quo* oriented, aiming at: (1) maintaining the Russian Empire as a great power among the European nations sharing power on the Continent; (2) reforming internally only in the most minimal fashion Russian national institutions (educational, political, legal, economic); and (3) continuing a medieval social structure of peasantry, gentry, clergy, and nobility, with the Tsar wielding absolute power over all through a ruling bureaucracy.

The Tsar's grand strategy in its internal organizing principles failed the ultimate test of being able to stand against the tides of history. "Ideally, a state's grand strategy should be based on *empirically grounded hypotheses* that explain why a particular set of actions will produce greater security."²⁵ (emphasis added) The Tsars' internal grand strategy suffered from a number of patently false hypotheses. First, the Tsar and his agents were not able to adequately repress information and technology, and thereby prevent liberal ideas and a taste of consumer culture from reaching the masses in Russia's urban areas. Second, the weak bureaucracy, ruling by arbitrary fiat rather than by the rule of law, did not dispense either justice or adequate government services to

the population it was to administer. Third, confronted with a restive and revolting population, the Russian security apparatus was not up to the task. The army was incompetent at both state-on-state conflict with Germany and internal security, due to poor leadership, internal revolt and mutiny.²⁶

The Soviet Union

Seven decades later, the Soviet Union saw the seeds of its eventual destruction sprouting as its centralized, state-planned economy began to fail. As with Tsarist Russia, it was the Soviet Union's grand strategy's internal incoherence that led to its downfall. For the post-World War II era, the Soviet Union's grand strategy was aimed at waging ideological war against the West, using all of the elements of power, and often working through allies and proxies worldwide. At the same time, as its predecessor the Tsars had done, it brutally repressed dissent within its sphere of influence.

Economically, the Soviet Union nationalized all industries, and centrally planned an economy which relied on heavy industry and agriculture, with only minimal consumer goods production.²⁷ In keeping the Warsaw Pact together, the Soviet Union used both economic carrots to bind its allies to itself, as well as the stick of military occupation and potential intervention.²⁸

The incoherence of the Soviet Union's grand strategy, however, was fundamentally economic. There was a hard-wired ideological bias toward the state controlling the means of production and planning the economy.²⁹ This system was simply not capable of responding with the same flexibility a market economy could. F. A. Hayek observed that information needed to make efficient economic decisions—across a vast expanse of territory, in varying circumstances, for millions of individual

transactions—simply could not be amassed and managed by state planners.³⁰ Despite this fundamental handicap, for the first couple of decades in the rebuilding after World War II, the Soviet Union largely kept pace with Western Europe's quality of life. Over time, though, the West's market economy responded to consumer demand in a way that a centrally planned economy simply could not.³¹

For much of the Cold War, it was not apparent that the West was going to prevail. Again and again, Western analysts viewed the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies as economically viable and militarily formidable. It was really only in the 1980s that fissures in the monolith began to become visible: the failure of Soviet arms in Afghanistan, the need for grain shipments from the West to feed Soviet citizens, and the desperate need for injections of Western capital to prop up the state economies.³² At the same time, the lagging standard of living gap in the East's state-run economy, with its heavy weighting toward heavy industry as opposed to meeting consumer demand, highlighted further failure of the communist system.³³

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary, Soviet citizens had an understanding that their quality of life was falling behind the West's, and that they were much less politically free. At the same time, official Party organs continued to spout agitprop that bore little relation to objective reality. The Communist Party annual yearbook for 1990 (covering the calendar year of 1989) made no mention whatsoever of the fall of the Berlin wall. However, to its credit it did mention both *perestroika*, styled as "orientation towards the full restoration and further development of the Leninist principles of intra-Party democracy," and *glasnost*:

"The Party's course towards democratization is most vividly manifested today in broad glasnost. Critical assessments of urgent problems which

involve millions of people are made in the Soviet press, at congresses of public organizations and at various meetings.”³⁴

Under Gorbachev’s *perestroika* reforms and the increased transparency of *glasnost*, stories which discussed the Soviet Union’s problems were allowed to go into print and over the airwaves. Previously banned books were allowed to be published openly, and Western broadcasts were no longer jammed.³⁵ Much like the Tsar’s reforms of the 1860s, these initiatives illuminated the failures of Communism as practiced in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries, as well as the moral and economic bankruptcy of the Party and its ideology. Unlike the Romanov Tsars, however, Gorbachev did not react with repression to political developments reflecting alienation from Soviet true faith.

Gorbachev was the author of the accelerating centrifugal forces liberalizing the USSR and Warsaw Pact. Just after succeeding to the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, Gorbachev addressed the assembled Eastern Bloc leaders just after his predecessor’s funeral: “I told them they should take more responsibility for the situation in their own countries.”³⁶ At first Gorbachev was not taken seriously, as they had heard similar sentiments from his predecessors. Gorbachev, due to his position as head of Soviet agriculture in the Kremlin, had been aware that the Eastern Bloc nations were an economic drain on the USSR. However, he was not aware of the extent of the drain on the USSR’s finances until he became General Secretary. When he did, however, Gorbachev in November of 1986 called a Warsaw Pact economic summit where he informed the leadership of the Eastern Bloc that they must pay global market rates for imports from the USSR, and that the USSR would not guarantee the loans that they had taken out with Western banks.³⁷

As the Soviet Union wound down its military venture in Afghanistan in the latter half of the 1980s, dissidents within the Warsaw Pact pushed for greater liberalization. In Czechoslovakia, disaffected youth held concerts that turned into political rallies, and were met with repression that caused greater sympathy in the population at large. Solidarity again waged widespread strikes in Poland, bring the military government at last to negotiations, spurred by economic conditions and Gorbachev's encouragement. And in East Germany, Erich Honnecker agreed to allow older East Germans with family in the West to depart on temporary exit visas for family visitation.³⁸ These liberalizing reforms took on a life of their own and gained momentum as both rulers and people across the East realized that the Soviet Union was not going to repress revolt à la Czechoslovakia in 1968. That process culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989, the fall of Communist governments across Eastern Europe, and in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself.³⁹

Gorbachev had sought to reform the USSR and its allies, but instead, his reforms brought the contradictions of Soviet ideology into the light of day. He inherited a grand strategy that at its core counted on the economics of Marxism prevailing over capitalism. The Soviet Union's communist grand strategy counted upon economic vitality when the Party controlled the means of production, military supremacy, and ruthless repression both internally and among allies by the security apparatus. Gorbachev was forced to take economic reforms to place the entire Eastern Bloc on a more market-driven footing in the international marketplace, and refused to intervene in the satellites when economic problems translated into widespread political instability and dissent. In the end, the Soviet grand strategy, much like the Soviet Union itself in

1991, transformed rapidly from an Iron Curtain to a fog that burned off as the economic and political temperature rose.

The United States

For the United States at present, the situation does not appear to be, in the near term, as dire as that of the Romanov regime in the period 1891-1917, or the period of 1985-1991 for the USSR, but there are trends that are troubling, and they may spell great difficulty for the nation's future if they hold over time.

One dire trend is that of widening fiscal deficits and greatly declining revenue, with resulting federal debt now exceeding 100% of gross domestic product. For fiscal year 2011, spending exceeded 24% of GDP, the third highest level in the past 40 years. The fiscal year 2011 deficit was 8.7% of GDP, the third highest level in the past 40 years. Overall revenues were similarly low, coming in at 15% of GDP, the third lowest level in the past 40 years. Debt held by the public came in at 67% of GDP, the highest level in 40 years.⁴⁰ Perhaps most troubling about the growing pile of public debt is that it has been fueled at least in part by so-called quantitative easing of the money supply by the federal reserve system, a move which some have likened prosaically to simply printing money to avoid government default on debt service.⁴¹

The United States has apparently abandoned the long tradition of "avoiding debt when there was no war or other national emergency and quickly reducing the debt that was accumulated during such times."⁴² Even as the war in Iraq has wound down, and we are preparing to withdraw all combat forces from the war in Afghanistan, there is no apparent taxation and spending compromise in the offing that will lead toward solvency. The Congressional Budget Office projects the deficit for fiscal year 2012 will be over

\$1.3 trillion, and it projects deficits of no less than half a trillion dollars per year through fiscal year 2022.⁴³

This unsustainable fiscal trend poses perhaps the greatest present systemic risk to the United States, particularly if the amplifying trend continues. Extrapolated, the United States could find its currency no longer accepted internationally as the basis of trade, and that would be a great step toward going the way of the Weimar Republic. What is most troubling is other nations have made noises recently about just such a sea change: moving away from the dollar as an international reserve currency.⁴⁴

The second trend is termination of military initiatives without apparent victory, despite high costs in blood and treasure. Just as the Soviet Union experienced an unsatisfactory end in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq recently ended very quietly, without a decisive victory. Some would see parallels between the last convoy rolling into Kuwait from Iraq, and the last Soviet troops crossing the Termez bridge into Uzbekistan in 1989. In Afghanistan, the current trajectory of the war for the United States seems to be on a similar arc, and President Obama has stated that the U.S. combat mission will terminate in Afghanistan by 2014: “Our mission will change from combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security.”⁴⁵ This trend is both somewhat positive—if it prevents further military adventurism—but also negative in that it may encourage potential adversaries to exercise freedom of action contra to the United States’ security interests.

As noted previously, the United States has not had a coherent grand strategy since the end of the Cold War. The United States is not alone in flailing to find a viable grand strategy. “[T]hose who have developed successful grand strategies in the past

have been much the exception.”⁴⁶ Perhaps the supreme challenge of statecraft is crafting a coherent grand strategy, and it demands that a great nation look beyond its immediate challenges to consider the longer term future. While the United States had a successful grand strategy for the Cold War period, as reflected in NSC-68, there has been no apparent agreement on grand strategy since the fall of the Soviet Union. The difficulty in crafting a grand strategy at present is perhaps all the more daunting because there is no unified threat to the United States, even in the post 9/11 era, as the U.S.’s war in Iraq has just concluded without clear victory, and the war in Afghanistan appears headed in much the same direction.

Creation of a grand strategy is hindered by several factors. Ideologically and economically, the United States is in a difficult position. The two major political parties appear to have much less in common than they did in previous years. This is especially true in terms of domestic economic policy. During the first three years of the Obama administration, the federal government has intervened significantly in the financial markets, bailed out two major automobile manufacturers, announced new rules for student loan repayments without Congressional sanction or consultation, and passed comprehensive health care reform legislation. These efforts appear to be in pursuit of a federal government-centered economic policy based upon Keynesian and social justice animating principles, but may have done damage to the rule of law within the United States.⁴⁷ Several commentators have indicated that these executive actions have created uncertainty for investors, and kept capital on the sidelines during the recovery from the recent recession.⁴⁸ These actions illuminate sharp ideological divides between

unlimited government fiat, and limited republican government, and between the operation of the free market and a state-controlled economy.

In terms of social structure, there is also significant fracture between the views of the two political parties. The family, the basic institution of society, has itself become a political battleground, as advocates for and against the right for gay couples to marry contend in courtrooms and state legislatures, and to a lesser extent in national political institutions.⁴⁹ Additionally, there has been a battle ongoing over the legal status of corporations, and whether they enjoy the right to freedom of speech in the same way that natural persons do.⁵⁰ Both of these issues are intensely political and fractious, and relate in a fundamental way to the United States' identity as a nation.

Public policy regarding how information is treated and transmitted in society is similarly polarized. One area of contention is the so-called 'net neutrality' rule, a set of federal regulations that prevent internet providers from using their infrastructure to limit or block content, devices, and competitive services from their customers. The current legal situation is somewhat murky, with federal regulating bodies issuing rules apparently at cross purposes with an appellate court ruling.⁵¹ Perhaps more problematic in a society dependent upon the free flow of information for political discourse and commerce, the Stop Online Piracy Act is currently pending in the U.S. House of Representatives, with corresponding legislation pending in the Senate.⁵² Among other things, the bill would make unauthorized internet publication of copyrighted content a felony, and would allow the Department of Justice and private citizens to seek court orders that would cut off allegedly violating websites from access to the internet and internet commerce. Given the often uncertain nature of copyright law,

there is concern that this legislation, if passed, could greatly impinge lawful free speech and commerce on the internet.⁵³

One common thread running across the political spectrum, across government and the private sector, is the view that technological advancement is greatly needed and desired, with very few restrictions. Technology's spread is seen as a general societal good, with some caveats for technology amenable to military exploitation, but to a certain extent the United States expects its adversaries to eventually obtain its technological secrets. Current Cold War-era export restrictions on munitions and so-called dual use technology are under review, with a view toward making U.S. concerns more competitive in the international marketplace.⁵⁴ Domestically, technological advancement is seen as increasing the productivity of individuals, and "disintermediating" middle men who sit between producers and consumers, such as record companies which stand between musicians and fans who comprise musicians' customers.⁵⁵

All of these debates create disharmony that spills over to the search for policy compromises needed to plot a path toward fiscal solvency, but there may be even more serious problems. Recent polling of the electorate in the United States indicates that the federal government is largely viewed as illegitimate by the electorate.⁵⁶ Note that this is irrespective of party. How the citizenry may choose to act on this determination is as of yet unknown. Some legal scholars have advocated for working within the bounds of Article V of the Constitution to call a convention to propose amendments.⁵⁷ More likely, however, is the possibility of a general increase in lawlessness by subordinate political entities, either overtly or covertly resisting federal action. The second and third order

effects of such lawlessness are at present unforeseeable, but if unchecked pose great systemic risk to the United States.

Thus, the United States is riven by competing visions of ideology, economic philosophy, social policy, and treatment of information. These dichotomous political ends are inhibiting greatly the formation of a new national grand strategy.

Before determining exactly what the outline of a new grand strategy might be, it may be productive to inquire what the components of grand strategy are, besides the aforementioned ‘empirically grounded hypotheses that explain why a particular set of actions will produce greater security.’ Williamson Murray states:

Above all, grand strategy demands an intertwining of political, social, and economic realities with military power, as well as a recognition that politics must, in nearly all cases, drive military necessity. It must also rest on a realistic assessment and understanding not only of one’s opponents but also of oneself.⁵⁸

Murray goes on to state that grand strategy must be grounded in an understanding of the past, adequate to deal with present circumstances, and set upon a lodestar of a future goal or set of goals to be attained. Grand strategy must also take into account geographical position. In the modern age, it will necessarily encompass an ideology as its animating spirit. Further, leaders of vision, intellect, character, and adaptability must both formulate and then reformulate grand strategy as circumstances dictate. A successful grand strategy will incorporate alliances with those of coincident interests. Finally, it is possible for a state to execute a grand strategy that will allow it to “maintain dominance over the international scene for sustained periods of time.”⁵⁹

Although much easier to note than to make happen, before a grand strategy beyond securing the status quo ante may be cobbled together, a number of reforms are needed. First, the federal government must get its fiscal house in order. Taxes must be

raised, and expenditures—defense, other discretionary, and entitlements—must be lowered. Without taking this vital first step, both the means to effect a strategy, and the United States as an enterprise, may be jeopardized. Ultimately, it was the inability to underwrite the financial burden of its empire that caused the Soviet Union to evaporate like a mist in 1991.

Second, the political institutions of the United States must again find common ideological ground, and so gain legitimacy from the electorate. Elections alone will not over the long run automatically confer legitimacy if politicians act in their own individual and partisan interest, rather than that of the nation as a whole. Common ground must be established based upon the United States' long-standing civic virtues, and views of the roles of government, rather than wholesale reinvention. Simply because technology has progressed and markets have transformed does not mean that the American people have abrogated a view that government is to execute the principles found in the Constitution and long-standing political traditions. The political class runs great risk if they abandon the people they are elected to serve, and instead act as demagogues to serve their own political interests. Political insularity and self interest: that way went the Romanovs.

Until the United States' internal house can be brought into order, crafting a coherent grand strategy at a time of political, social, and economic disunity and malaise is likely an exercise in frustration. When there is no common core of identity and ideology as a nation, any grand strategy crafted is likely to be whipsawed with the whims of the electorate, as expressed at the ballot box. At a minimum, an effective grand strategy must provide for economic prosperity and security. A solvent government

and a common identity as a nation together are *sine qua non*, conditions precedent to the formation of a viable national grand strategy.

As we have seen, Tsarist Russia failed because its grand strategy ultimately was not viable internally: it did not adequately address the political, social, and economic environment that Russia faced. The Russian people, while sharing national identity, did not share a core national ideology. Faced with an unaccountable and autocratic regime that did not have the consent of the governed, the people revolted. The Tsar relied on state security organs that in the end failed to contain their own internal revolution, following the failure of government institutions to adequately service the population in times of economic hardship.

For the Soviet Union, its grand strategy also failed internally, in that it was no longer able to maintain the political and economic security of its allies and constituent republics. Thus, it became terminally irrelevant vis-à-vis any Soviet empire, and was without recourse to bind up the political ties that had previously bound it together.

The United States is attempting to muddle through present difficulties, as all nations must do who lack a coherent grand strategy. Present times of economic hardship and ideological strife present perhaps greater dangers than any extant external threat. Without reaching an inflection point that leads toward solvency and some measure of political unity, the United States marches down a path toward hardship and ruin, and perhaps extinction as a political entity. This systemic risk is exacerbated by a political class that does not appear to recognize its own fundamental lack of legitimacy. The only feasible way forward to the sunlit uplands of former glory is

solvency, and a renewal of the social compact between the government and the governed.

Endnotes

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¹¹ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 6-7.

¹² Philip Pomper, *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1970), 11.

¹³ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ Pomper, *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia*, 80-81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 86. E.g., the signers of a resolution calling for a national assembly in 1862 were arrested, some being drafted into the army, and others being sent into internal exile in Siberia. Note that the emancipation of Russia's serfs by the Tsar in 1861 caused great economic hardship to landowning gentry. Figes, *People's Tragedy*, 47.

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²² *Ibid.*, 166-167.

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