



FROM THE ARCHIVE

The From the Archive section of this issue offers a 2006 study by National Institute co-founder Dr. Colin Gray. In it, Dr. Gray contends that strategic thought encapsulates “the engine of thought and behaviour,” noting that its “principal function is to make sense of the world for us.” He calls strategic culture “vitally important” to understanding the nature of both friends and foes and how “different security communities think and behave somewhat differently about strategic matters.”

Colin S. Gray, *Out of the Wilderness: Prime-time for Strategic Culture* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2006).

Summary

Strategic culture has come of age, at last. After years in the wilderness, the defense community has adopted it officially as an important concept with significant implications. There are some difficulties, however, in finding a methodology to study it and, indeed, in understanding just how it ‘works.’ In the spirit of Sun-tzu and Jomini, there is a danger that culture is in the process of being identified as the Philosopher’s Stone for policy and strategy; the magical element that will transform ignorance into knowledge. Also, there is some likelihood that culture is becoming fashionable. This means that it must also become unfashionable, after a period of prime-time prominence.

Scholars cannot agree on how to define strategic culture. This is rather foolish since there is general agreement on the content of the subject and, roughly, on how it functions. The principal disagreement is between those who include behavior within their definition, and those who exclude it. This is a burning issue for theory builders but otherwise is not really of any great significance. If we have resort to an educated common sense, a most un scholarly proposition, the difficulty evaporates. All people are ‘cultural creatures.’ Everything we think and do is performed in the context of culture, perhaps cultures. But culture need not dominate. It is an ever present potential influence, sometimes pressing hard, sometimes not. Its principal function is to make sense of the world for us. Some scholars misunderstand the nature and variable character of strategic culture and, as a consequence, they contrast ‘culturalist’ with realist approaches to security. This is wrong. All realists, including neorealists, are, to repeat, ‘cultural creatures,’ whether they like it or not.

Culture is of the utmost importance. It functions at, indeed as, the engine of thought and behaviour. Clausewitz tells us that war is a contest between two wills, and the will of a belligerent is the product of moral factors which can be summarized as culture. Sun-tzu was right in insisting on the importance of self knowledge and of knowledge of one’s enemies. Cultural comprehension meets that insistence.

But there are many perils and pitfalls in both cultural analysis and in an endeavour to apply better cultural understanding pragmatically. In summary form, culture: (1) may explain too much to be useful, since it is ubiquitous in our contexts; (2) has problems of evidence, it is a notoriously opaque, vague, concept; (3) can be misused as a panacea



solution; (4) may appeal to those who favor an essentialist view of the world, and who oversimplify thereby; (5) changes, it is not static, it can even change drastically under the impact of traumatic strategic shock; (6) is usually diverse, albeit under a broad national umbrella of assumptions; (7) is not exclusive, there are many cultural features common among national cultures; (8) can borrow and adapt from abroad; (9) does not guarantee victory, while greater understanding is desirable, someone has to operationalize and act upon cultural understanding; (10) will be diluted in its impact on decisions and actions by the fact that official behavior is always a negotiated outcome among competing interests; (11) and the excellent idea of cultural study all too easily loses its sparkle when it enters the methodological swamp in which professional theorists lurk. Perhaps Rumsfeld was right and it is a good idea to drain some swamps.

Strategic culture is vitally important. There are no persuasive arguments to the contrary. But, a little theory goes a long way in a highly practical field like strategic studies. And culture is no panacea. It is not the golden key that can transform military losers into winners. Cultural change happens, but it will not change suddenly by order from above. Finally, if strategic culture is indeed the concept of the moment, its lustre will soon vanish as it is replaced by the next fashionable wonder solution to our strategic problems.

Introduction: Eyes on ‘The Plot’

Scholars are rightly suspicious of, or disdainful and actually hostile to, common sense. After all, common sense is not really common, rather is it value-charged by culture, the subject of this paper. Nonetheless, we discard and despise common sense at our peril. Among other points, I will suggest that one can explain strategic culture and its associated concepts (public culture and military or organizational culture), what they are, how they work, and why they are important, both simply and accurately enough. Accurately enough for what? Accurately enough to grasp the essentials of ‘the plot’ concerning strategic culture. And that, after all, is all that a defense community needs to achieve. I might proceed further, if pressed, and argue that the bare outlines of ‘the plot’ are the most that can be achieved. By way of a thought provoking analogy, you might care to consider the practical inutility of the nearly 90 years of scholarship that have been devoted to that highly scholar-unfriendly subject, the causes of war. Just about everything that has been written on the subject with a view to developing a general theory of the causes of war, has been a thorough waste of effort. The reason is not hard to find. The job cannot be done. The relevant history is too complex, contexts are too rich and contingent. If you attempt the impossible, settle upon the wrong organizing question, you will accomplish nothing of much value, save by serendipity. I suspect that scholarship on strategic culture, albeit for a different reason, similarly is bound to fail when it ventures far beyond our culture-bound common sense and positivistically seeks a certain general wisdom. Strategy does not yield to the scientific method, and nor does the study of culture.

A powerful, even compelling, idea like strategic culture, easily is reduced to something far less compelling when it is adopted as the concept of the month, or even the period, by

scholars and soldiers and officials. Both groups have their professional biases, even their *deformations professionnelles*. For another analogy, a new religion will likely burst upon an astonished and delighted populace with a rather simple, yet powerfully persuasive, story. But once that story is interpreted and systematized into doctrine by professional theologians, much of the original message, the essential plot even, is apt to be watered down or lost. So, this paper has much to say, not all of it friendly, about the way strategic culture is being studied and prospectively employed. My purpose, though, is entirely constructive. I will endeavour to adhere to what I am calling ‘the plot.’ If you prefer, and with some apologies to Jeremy Black who for some good reasons detests this notion, I will always try to keep in mind a master narrative.¹ That narrative, or plot, explains what we are talking about and, by plain implication, at least, why we are talking about it.

This study advances first by specifying some general points on our subject. Next, it bows to convention and offers judgments on definitions and methodology, notwithstanding the criticisms that have been offered, and will be offered in more detail below, of scholars who overindulge in the heady delights of theory. The author cannot deny that he too is a theorist. The tale then proceeds to explore the reasons why culture matters greatly. Finally, since cultural analysis has become so popular, it is necessary to outline the principal perils and pitfalls that await the overenthusiastic culturalist. But, first, let us stake out a position, and perhaps fortify it a little, by way of registering some general points.

Some General Points

I will begin by anchoring the paper with, perhaps to, five general judgments. These are discussed and developed in more detail in later sections.

1. Culture comes of age: After decades wandering in the wilderness, the few scholars who wrote about strategic culture have recently been joined by, so it seems, just about everyone else. It seems as if the case for cultural analysis has been made and now is widely accepted. Exactly how such analysis should be performed, and on what, precisely, is another matter. Also, the anticipated benefits of cultural analysis remain somewhat uncertain. But, in the U.S. defense community you cannot keep a big, and possibly good, idea down; not once it has secured official adoption. When Army transformation documents refer to an intention to “transform its culture ...,”² you know that both the noun and the verb are words that are much in favor. Ever since 1973, I have been quoting two wonderful sentences from Bernard Brodie’s final book, *War and Politics*. He wrote: “Whether with respect to arms control or otherwise, good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology. Some of the greatest military blunders of all time have

¹ Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.1. For an opposing point of view, see Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (London: IISS, March 2006), pp. 22-6.

² U.S. Army, *Army Campaign Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3, Department of the Army, 12 April, 2004), p. 10.

resulted from juvenile evaluations in this department.”³ Brodie cited the deadly facts that both Napoleon and Hitler despised the Russians. Were he alive today he might well have cited the case of those who invade Iraq without understanding that the country—I speak loosely in that regard—is a multicultural society, which sometimes is controlled by a highly authoritarian central government.⁴ Destroy that central government and the country reverts to control by its enduring tribal power structure. When Brodie offered his advice on the value of anthropology and sociology in 1973, he was conveying a message that the strategic studies community had not been hearing. One would like to believe that today his claim is generally accepted, in principle, if not necessarily much in practice, as yet.

2. Methodology and understanding: Strategy is a practical business.⁵ Scholars who lack experience in government, let alone in war itself, are apt to forget this. Also, of course, Strategic Studies typically is regarded as a sub-field within the broad tent of International Relations (to mix my metaphors). International Relations, the multidiscipline, was kick-started as an academic pursuit in horrified reaction to World War I. What I am claiming is that Strategic Studies and its scholarly contextual master has always been intended to be useful to the society within which it is practiced and possibly to all humankind. It is not a fine art. Since all professions protect themselves with specialized language known only to initiates, it is not surprising that theorists of International Relations have invented their own code words and, like all bodies of theologians, have fractured into competing schools of belief. Should I lose sleep worrying about whether I am a neo-classical realist or a constructivist? Could I possibly be both? Does it matter? The reason for this seeming digression is that scholars of International Relations, most especially those of a marked social scientific bent, are now hot on the trail of that elusive quarry, strategic culture. So, their assumptions, methods and goals, are of some relevance to this paper. The trouble is, I suspect, that the industrious and methodologically innovative theorist is overreaching both what is possible and what is useful. For a helpful analogy, I draw your attention to an article written by Hedley Bull in 1968, “Strategic Studies and its Critics.” Bull addressed, and supported, a charge levelled by some strategists at their own profession. The charge was that in their pursuit of “technical rigor and precision”, many strategists have “lost touch with political variety and change.”⁶ This strategist, for one, cannot avoid the conviction that strategic cultural analysis sometimes is guilty of the same character of error that Bull identified. The demands of rigor and precision in theory construction are allowed to triumph over the substance of the subject. The writings of Alastair Iain Johnston on the strategic culture(s) of China are a classic example of what I mean.⁷ He cannot include

³ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 332.

⁴ See Montgomery McFate, “The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 38 (3rd qtr., 2005), pp. 42-8.

⁵ Brodie, *War and Politics*, p.453. “Strategic thinking, or ‘theory’ if one prefers, is nothing if not pragmatic. Strategy is a ‘how to do it’ study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently.”

⁶ Hedley Bull, “Strategic Studies and Its Critics”, *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No.4 (July 1968), p. 600.

⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

behavior in his definition of culture because to do so would torpedo his exercise in theory building. It would be difficult, not to say impossible, to assess the influence of strategic culture if it is both input and already is inherent in the output. I sympathize with him over his dilemma, though not with his solution. While a rigorous method is admirable, it ought not to take precedence over an inconvenient reality.

3. Jomini, Sun-tzu, and the Philosopher's Stone: Culture matters deeply, as is explained in a later section. But, it is not all that matters in strategy and security. Alas the spirit of Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini is alive and well and inhabits Washington, D.C. It was the spirit of his theory that gave us a technical and utterly apolitical understanding of strategic stability during the Cold War. Although Jomini said that strategy was an art, I doubt if he really believed it.⁸ Rather did he believe that there was a science of war, a science the mysteries of which he was the first to present coherently, if not to unlock. If you read liberal commentaries in opposition to ballistic missile defense or to the *Peacekeeper* (MX) ICBM, you will be in Jominian territory, intellectually. The Swiss colonel tells us in his best known book, *The Art of War* of 1838, "that there is one great principle underlying all the operations of war—a principle which must be followed in all good combinations."⁹ The maxims that follow are keyed to the principle of overwhelming an inferior portion of the enemy's army with a superior quantity of yours. In Jomini's words, "[e]very maxim relating to war will be good if it indicates the employment of the greatest portion of the means of action at the decisive moment and place."¹⁰ The confused, if not baffled, soldier of today, can hardly help but be cheered by Jomini's claim, advice is too weak a term, that "[c]orrect theories, founded upon right principles, sustained by actual events of wars, and added to accurate military history, will form a true school of instruction for generals."¹¹

But since Jomini's "one great principle" does not sit comfortably with the character of irregular warfare, our leading contemporary concern—for a while, at least—we can look to ancient China for a more suitable great principle. Not only do we find such help in Sun-tzu, we discover that it blesses cultural understanding. Indeed, it all but mandates cultural study. Despite its overfamiliarity, I am obliged to quote the well known formula.

Thus it is said that one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement.¹²

⁸ Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (1838; London: Greenhill Books, 1992), p. 321.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

¹² Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, Ralph D. Sawyer, trans. (ca.400 BC; Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 179.

Good advice, and it is at least half true. Self and other knowledge is important, even vitally so, but it does not guarantee success. There is a danger that Sun-tzu's excellent formula, reinforced by a Jominian spirit, will encourage the fallacious conviction that in understanding culture we have stumbled across the answer to, the correct great principle for, our strategic dilemmas. Thus, a secure grasp of the strategic cultures of friends and foes can serve as the Philosopher's Stone that transmutes the lead of mere information into the gold of a comprehension that is strategically usable.

4. Fashion rules, briefly: The American defense community has a history of intellectual, and even policy, capture by the big idea of the moment, perhaps even the decade. Not so long ago, the magic concept was RMA. RMA gave way to transformation, which, to be generous, one could interpret as the logical and practical consequence of RMA. Today it seems, at long last, culture either is, or is in serious danger of becoming, the big idea of the moment. In some ways this is good news. After all, this theorist, for one, has been advocating cultural analysis for 30 years. But, it is a law of life that fashion changes. It changes because American culture favors novelty and innovation, even if it is the rediscovery of the blindingly obvious, and because it is in the very nature of fashion to change. People, including defense theorists, get bored composing briefings on the same subject, time after time. Also, any subject eventually exhausts the imagination of theorists. Furthermore, as America's security problems shift, so does the focus of debate on suitable responses. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that when the current modest level of official enthusiasm for cultural understanding ebbs away, some nuggets of lasting value will be left on our intellectual and institutional beaches. To venture a speculative thought, the most likely reason why strategic culture will lack staying power as a potent idea in the U.S. defense community, will be because of its inherent difficulty.

Strategic cultural understanding is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to operationalize. The fact that it is an important concept, robust in its essentials against challenge, is irrelevant. The practical implications of the promotion of culture to intellectual and doctrinal leading edge status may well, indeed probably will, prove to be unduly demanding. For example, as the global superpower, determined to drain swamps anywhere in the global war on terror (GWOT, a now dated, but still attractive, acronym), America's need for cultural expertise is all but unbounded.¹³ It takes years, even decades, to grow a body of Americans who are truly local experts. All things are possible, but this strategic theorist is skeptical that culture, strategic and other, has the horsepower to stay the course in official U.S. policy focus, let alone in troop training and interagency cooperation. More to the point perhaps, it is by no means self evident that the job is doable.

It is useful to change the question when the original question can produce only a negative answer. In reply to the question, can we achieve good cultural understanding of most of our likely friends and probable foes, one is obliged to say, almost certainly not. So, let us change the question. In answer to the reframed question, can we achieve good

¹³ See Donald H. Rumsfeld, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 6, 2006), esp. pp. 21-2.

enough cultural understanding of some of our likely friends and most probable foes, we can say perhaps, albeit only with the application of a great deal of sustained effort. As much to the point is the issue of just how one uses cultural understanding. Who uses it, and how important is such use? That thought bears directly upon the core concern of this paper, the significance of culture relative to other influences upon decisions and behavior. If culture is a variable intervening between stimulus and decision and action, a conception that this author does not endorse, what else intervenes?

5. Culture matters: Given the critical tone and content of some of this section thus far, it is necessary that it be concluded on a strongly positive note. None of the criticisms levelled thus far and in the sections to come are intended to suggest that culture is of minor, let alone no, importance. This theorist has long been persuaded that culture is a significant, and can even be a determining, influence upon strategic decisions and behavior. The doubts expressed here pertain to the ways in which culture is conceptualized and, of much greater moment, to the practical difficulties that inhibit even culturally well educated performance.

What is Culture and What Does it Do?

This paper opened with an unscholarly endorsement of that old unreliable virtue, common sense. Unreliable though it is, it has much to offer to the would-be user of the concept, and perhaps the theory, of strategic culture. Before we delve into some of the dimmer and rococo regions of academic discourse, let us see if we can describe the essence of our subject in language that is simple and clear, yet which is not, as a consequence, misleading. When we refer to Russian strategic culture, for example, what we are claiming is that there is a 'Russian way' both of thinking about the threat or use of force for political purposes, and of acting strategically. In the latter regard, so this statement maintains, there is a Russian 'way of war.' This 'Russian way' is a distinctive product of Russia's history and geography, as interpreted for guidance by Russians. Stated thus, a host of critical questions beg for answer. Let me pre-empt at least a few of them. Whatever one's scholarly credo on research methodology, as I keep saying it is necessary not to lose the plot. The plot, please remember, the master narrative, is the disarmingly elementary, even commonsensical, idea, that a security community is likely to think and behave in ways that are influenced by what it has taught itself about itself and its relevant contexts. And that education, to repeat, rests primarily upon the interpretation of history and history's geography (or should it be geography's history?) My geopolitical friends favor the aphorism that 'geography is destiny.' Perhaps the dedicated culturalist will offer the rival dictum that 'culture is destiny.'

Let us clear some underbrush. However one chooses to define culture in general, and strategic culture in particular, those of us who wear the badge of the 'culturalist' are not claiming that culture is always, or even necessarily often, the prime determinant of decision and action. Strategic decision and behavior typically is influenced by many

factors, not least by those dynamics of executive action which ensure that outcomes are negotiated among competing interests. However, it is well to remember that virtually whatever the mix of factors that we believe have produced a decision and its consequent strategic behavior, all of the people and the organizations within which they function are more or less distinctively encultured. This fact is more than a little inconvenient for some would be theory builders. It would be helpful if one could postulate stimuli entering a decision making process, with culture expediently confined to the role of intervening variable, among other intervening variables, between stimuli and decision. Alas, the world is not like that. Culture is not an intervening variable. We are all encultured. But to state that obvious point is not to claim that culture, understood as preference, necessarily has the last word on our decisions or our actions. Culture doesn't usually program us to think and behave like automata, though one can find cases where an approximation to such a malady appears to have occurred.

After reading a few pages of tortuous scholarly theorizing one longs for a return to basics. Having come perilously close to scholarly pathology, I will now be as basic as I know how in describing our subject. Strategic culture is of interest because the concept suggests, perhaps insists, that different security communities think and behave somewhat differently about strategic matters. Those differences stem from communities' distinctive histories and geographies. We can, and should, add many caveats and qualifications to the basic statement just offered. But, what I have just stated in the spirit of back to basics, is the plot. It is deceptively simple. One would think that it is so elementary, commonsensical even, as to be banal. And yet, time after time, strategic history reveals belligerents who either believed that strategic culture was common and universal, or who simply chose to ignore the distinctive cultural dimensions of their adversaries. Of course, if one is ignorant of that dimension, it is difficult to do anything other than to assume that the enemy's strategic preferences will be broadly familiar.

I would like to suggest that there is rather less of substance, and of value, to some of the scholarly debate than meets the eye. We should not take our definitions or our theories too seriously.¹⁴ A little theory goes a long way; more often than not it goes too far. I commend to you this anarchic comment by the anthropologist Leslie A. White: "Culture is not basically anything. Culture is a word concept. It is man-made and may be used arbitrarily to designate anything, we may define the concept as we please."¹⁵ That is a little extreme, but his point is valid. Definitions are arbitrary and can be neither right nor wrong. Nonetheless, some definitions of culture are less defensibly arbitrary than are others. Rather than offering my own definition, I will endorse Jack Snyder's 1977 offering from the Rand study which triggered the modern debate about strategic culture. Snyder's definition is good enough to provide focus and to help keep us glued to the plot. Snyder wrote, with one minor amendment, for the changed strategic context:

¹⁴ For a useful guide to the scholarly debate, see Stuart Poore, "Strategic Culture", in John Glenn, Darryl Howlett, and Poore, eds., *Neorealism Versus Strategic Culture* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 45-71.

¹⁵ Leslie A. White, *The Concept of Cultural Systems: A Key to Understanding Tribes and Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 4n.

Strategic culture can be defined as the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to [nuclear] strategy. In the area of strategy, habitual behaviour is largely cognitive behavior.¹⁶

Although I have done scholarly battle with Alastair Iain Johnston over the definitional issue of whether or not strategic culture should be understood to include behavioral as well as ideational phenomena, I am less and less persuaded that that debate had, or has, any real significance.¹⁷ The ability of scholars to make a necessarily opaque concept like strategic culture even less penetrable is truly amazing. Of course, it is the professional drive of the social scientist for theory that is largely to blame. I admit that it is more than moderately difficult to design a theory of strategic culture if the elusive beast, culture, is both input and output, presumed cause and presumed consequence. But, so what! The sins of the would-be cultural theorists pale by comparison with the nonsense that we know as neorealism. That theory, family of theories, or approach—take your pick—is relevant to this discussion since it is often contrasted with culturalism. On a personal note, when I first encountered neorealism, back in 1979 in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, I thought it was so absurd that no one would, or should, take it seriously.¹⁸ Obviously, I was wrong, with respect to its popularity, but not to its merit. Defense professionals understand that defense policy, strategy, and force planning, are all made at home. Also, we understand that home differs radically from security community to security community. So the neorealist proposition that strategic history, past, present, and future, can be explained strictly by reference to the relations among political entities, with no regard paid to their domestic processes, is, frankly, preposterous. I thought this in 1979 and, being deeply conservative, I still think the same way today. A pure neorealist view of strategic history is as flawed as would be an unmodified belief in cultural dominance. I shall argue in this paper that culture must always be a potential influence upon decision and action. But that potential is not uniformly, or necessarily, realized.

Useful work has been done by scholars of recent years in sorting out different segments of our subject. Specifically, there is now widespread agreement that although strategic culture has long been, and remains, the umbrella concept, in fact we need to distinguish among: (1) public culture; (2) strategic culture; and (3) military (organizational) culture. Relatively little work has been performed as yet in attempts to connect the three. Among the many virtues of recognition of these minimal, but essential, distinctions, is the discouragement they should give to those who might be inclined to look for a neatly unitary strategic culture. There may be a body of strategic beliefs and attitudes to which, say, most Americans would sign up. But, the many organizational players in policymaking and policy

¹⁶ Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, R-2154-AF (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, September 1977), p. 8.

¹⁷ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 5.

¹⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

implementation will each have their unique take on how those common beliefs and attitudes should be expressed in actual strategic behavior. In effect, I am going back a decade even from Kenneth Waltz, to Graham Allison and the theory of bureaucratic politics.¹⁹ Remember the old maxim: “where you stand depends on where you sit.” I do not wish to reject one rational choice model only to endorse another. Nonetheless, to study strategic culture it is necessary to disaggregate the subject somewhat. In addition to identifying community-wide strategic nostrums and the like, it is necessary also to consider the institutional preferences of self-interested organizations with their career structures. It may make sense to think in terms of multiple cultural identities.

Where does culture come from? As indicated already, it comes from history and geography. However, one must qualify that general claim by noting that culture is not static. It can evolve, it can adapt, and it can even change radically if battered by traumatic shock. Isobel V. Hull, in her study of the military culture of Imperial Germany, observes intriguingly that, “[o]ne might say that militaries are in the trauma business.”²⁰ The First World War itself may not have changed public and eventually the strategic and military cultures of Russia and Germany. But it was the principal enabler of the cultural revolution wrought by the Bolsheviks. Also, with much assistance from the Great Depression, 1914-18 eventually bears a major responsibility for another cultural revolution, that effected by Hitler and his Nazis. Historians argue about whether the Third Reich was the culmination of, or the exception to, German history, and a similar argument occasionally flourished with reference to tsarist Russia and Stalin as the new Red Tsar. My point, simply, is that public and strategic culture can change dramatically. Unsurprisingly, the most usual cause of such change is the traumatic effect of war and its consequences.

We must insist that culture in its several identities—public, strategic, military-organizational—should consist of assumptions and ideas that are strongly held. Its roots may not be very deep, and the plant might be a recent development, but it has to be hardy to be worthy of the description, cultural. Culture does not refer to mere opinions, to fashionable attitudes, or to shifting patterns of behavior. However, to claim that it, this somewhat opaque, mysterious ‘it’ of culture, is more permanent than opinion is not to suggest that it is permanent; it is not. Culture changes, adapts, sometimes adapts poorly, and, as an effect of societal shock, can alter radically.

Like strategy, culture is a difficult concept to explain, let alone portray convincingly.²¹ You know you are in trouble when our culture specialists, the cultural anthropologists and sociologists, cannot agree on a definition. Culture is among the most contested of concepts. Fortunately, as sensible people, in desperation we are at liberty to enlist common sense in our column. Since culture, like love and honor, for other examples, cannot be captured and photographed directly, the best we can manage is to identify evidence, at least probable

¹⁹ Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971).

²⁰ Isobel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 96.

²¹ For an unrestrained and politically incorrect portrayal of the importance of culture, see Victor Davis Hanson, *Why the West Has Won: Carnage and Culture from Salamis to Vietnam* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

evidence, of its presence. In that respect, following the formula suggested by sociologist Raymond Williams, I look for culture in a community's ideals, in its ideas as revealed by its documents and other artefacts, and in its behavior.²² In order to outflank methodologically the long running scholars' dispute over whether or not behavior should be included in the preferred definition of culture, it is helpful to ask, 'what does culture do?'

Today, most, though certainly not all, strategic commentators and senior defense officials agree with the proposition that culture is important. That now popular, even fashionable, opinion, is broadly correct. Such doubts as I have, which are explained later in this paper, pertain not to the issue of culture's importance, but rather to finding useful answers to the quintessential strategist's question, 'so what?' In fact, culture is much easier to explain than it is to define. What does culture do? It enables us to make sense of our world. Culture provides us with the assumptions, largely unspoken and unwritten, that are the foundation for, though not the sole determinants of, our judgments.²³ Culture yields us the truths, small and large, that we know should guide our decisions and actions. In practice, we will often ignore those truths and behave expediently. Our strategic culture is likely to educate us with quite powerful preferences. But in a world that contains competing interests at home, in short a political process, and external menaces, we must do the best we can.

A culturalist perspective is not at odds with a realist one, at least it is not provided one thinks clearly and files some of the more theoretical literature somewhere appropriate. To quote Isobel V. Hull again, we are all "cultural creatures."²⁴ This insight has come as something of a revelation to the devotees of universal rational choice. And, as Keith Payne has argued convincingly with respect to deterrence, the principal pillars of modern Western strategic theory, which is to say the dominant theories of deterrence, limited war, and arms control, were all of them constructed on the false assumption of a common rationality.²⁵ Such an assumption is acultural. There may well be a fairly common rationality among security communities, in fact it is highly probable that all such communities make decisions and act upon them in a rational manner. The trouble lies with the content of that rationality, with its reasonableness in our encultured view, not with the process which purposefully connects means with ends. The suicide bomber is a rational person. But, to us, he or she is not a reasonable one.

Realism and culturalism are not in opposition, except in some fictional universe that should not detain us. Since we are all encultured, whether we like it or not, we are obliged to pursue our interests with our values and preferences as a more or less powerful influence upon our decisions and behavior. As often as not, our world is one of necessity wherein we must simply do our best to realize as many of our desires as the relevant

²² Raymond Williams, "The Analysis of Culture", in John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 56.

²³ I am indebted to Black, *Rethinking Military History*, pp. 13-22.

²⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, p. 329.

²⁵ Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

context permits. Culture need not imprison us and command us to behave in ways that are dysfunctional. Of course, it may do, in which case we risk entering a pathological decisionmaking and behavioral condition. I can conceive of behavior motivated by urges that are strongly cultural in origin, but scarcely at all 'realist' as that much abused term should imply. But, it is literally impossible for there to be behavior of a realist character that is utterly bereft of cultural influence. French statecraft, for example, is justly celebrated for its cynical and realistic expediency. Those useful characteristics are not acultural, rather are they integral to French public and strategic cultures.

The scholarly debate that contrasts realism with culturalism inadvertently encourages us to forget that we are encultured with strategic nostrums and other assumptions that derive from interpretation of our security community's historical experience. Culturalists do not need to be unworldly idealists, to be despised and ignored by allegedly hard-headed realists. To repeat: we are all cultural creatures. Moreover, strategic cultures are by and large functional, not dysfunctional, for their bearers. The dedicated owners of truly dysfunctional strategic cultures have a way of vanishing from the history books.

In common with its close relatives, public and military cultures, strategic culture is not an optional extra. All security communities have belief systems, assumptions, and preferences for behavior that play as one, among many, factor or dimension in their strategic histories. On many strategic issues, distinctive cultural influence may scarcely be a player, while on others it will all but command policy. One size in theory does not fit every historical case.

Why Culture Matters

Strategic culture and geopolitics are no rivals, and neither are strategic culture and *realpolitik*. While citing a caveat with respect to some religious contributions to the ideational, it is plausible to claim that culture is not free floating, offering a range of options to communities in need of a little guidance. Rather is culture grounded, even rooted, in the geopolitical history, the unique experience, of a people. When I say that strategic culture is grounded in the historical experience of a particular geopolitically located, if in some cases, mobile, people, I mean that it is that people's interpretation of their history. But, that claim, as just stated, should not be understood as endorsement of a pure version of the constructivist creed. It is not. Despite the many warnings about the perils and pitfalls that await the unwary culturalist that this paper specifies in the next section, let no one doubt that a close to maximalist claim for the importance of culture is going to be advanced here.

Do not forget the core of our subject; what we are really talking about. Regardless of the precise definition of culture, and strategic culture in particular, that you most favour, our subject functions on two levels. First, it can be the prime mover of thought, judgment, policy, and all that follows therefrom. Second, it must always be present as an actual, or potential, influence on our decisions and behavior. The reason, if, yet again, I dare restate the obvious, is that we are all 'cultural creatures.' In his recent Adelphi Paper, *The*

Transformation of Strategic Affairs, Lawrence Freedman makes much use of, and has interesting things to say about, the concept of “narratives.” In Freedman’s words, narratives are “compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn....”²⁶ I must register some, but only some, dissent from Freedman, though, when he claims that

[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events. They are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current.²⁷

That can be so, but it understates the role of culture. It is true to claim that culture, including strategic culture, can be molded purposefully into a narrative cunningly contrived for the purpose of popular persuasion. One thinks immediately, almost reflexively, of the powerful ideologies, indeed the political quasi-religions, of Marxism and Nazism. However, excepting such extreme cases which have been historical outriders of our subject, albeit outriders of extraordinary significance, communities do not deliberately construct their cultures, strategic and other. Those cultures emerge and change as a kind of natural phenomena. They are the ever evolving product of the many efforts people make to explain their past, understand their present, and anticipate their future.

So opaque is the concept of culture, so hard is it to capture and quantify for analysis, that it lends itself all too easily to exaggeration or near dismissal. I suggest that the problem lies not so much with the concept of culture, but rather with our failure to think with sufficient clarity about what it is and how it works. There is too much unhelpful binary analysis. Culturalism or realism, and so forth. Consider Hitler or Stalin, or possibly Osama bin Laden: dedicated ideologues, culturalists in the fullest meaning of the word. Those men simultaneously were (and are) sincere ideologues, yet were able to behave tactically in ways that appeared to contradict their deepest beliefs when it was expedient to do so. Hitler, of course, was far less adaptable than was Stalin. To hold firmly to a master historical narrative that explains the process of change, and who should be history’s winners and who its losers, does not disable one from being agile and adaptable as to means and methods. In practice, a distinguishable national strategic culture is likely to act as a holding company over a number of subsidiary military and other related cultures. Strategic culture will have a stronger or weaker influence from issue area to issue area. Also, the overall strategic culture should be considerably forgiving of those expedient and opportunistic decisions and behaviors which circumstances appear to command.

Despite the judgments just offered, it is well not to forget what our subject is about: what is the plot? If we think schematically and hierarchically, for the sake of this illustration, it is commonplace to postulate a significance tree that has political vision at the top, with the succeeding levels downwards comprising policy, grand strategy, military

²⁶ Freedman, *Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, p. 22.

²⁷ Ibid.

strategy, operations, and tactics. But whence cometh political vision? The answer, of course, is that it comes from what we call culture, strategic culture in this case. It is from our culture that we find the vision of the good or better life for ourselves and for our security community. And it is from that vision that policy draws what it is able, given real-world constraints. Truly, culture must reign, sometimes it rules, while it is ever present, so well integrated as to be unlabelled, in our thoughts and judgments, because we cannot prevent it being so.

There are many reasons one can cite in praise of strategic cultural analysis. I select just five among them to support my claim that such analysis is not only important, it is close to essential. One cannot quite claim that it is essential in the sense of being a *sine qua non* for victory or for the avoidance of defeat. The culturally ignorant can and do win wars. Also, the culturally educated will not necessarily be reliably victorious as a reward for their anthropological expertise. But those caveats are not of great significance. After all, as the Prussian grand master tells us, “[w]ar is the realm of chance.”²⁸ Nothing can guarantee victory. However, there are ways of loading the dice in one’s favor. Cultural comprehension is one such way. So, why does culture matter to the strategist?

Culture and Moral Factors

Culture matters greatly because it is the most important source of the moral factors that are central to the nature of war as well as to the character of wars. On its first page, *On War* declares, without equivocation, that “[w]ar is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”²⁹ And what is this “will”? Clausewitz informs us that “the will is itself a moral quality.”³⁰ He proceeds to explain that

... most of the matters dealt with in this book [*On War*] are composed in equal parts of physical and moral causes and effects. One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.³¹

The object in war is not usually to destroy the enemy physically, rather is it to subordinate his will to ours. It is not much of an intellectual stretch to argue that war, coercion and deterrence, are all intercultural struggles. They are contests between independent wills, the content and strength of which are very much, though not exclusively, the products of culture. But, deterrence, coercion, and war cannot be reduced conveniently simply to intercultural strife. The physical dimension matters also. The Germans and Japanese did not lack potent strategic cultures and the will to win in 1944-45.

²⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. (1832; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75 (emphasis in the original).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

Rather were they short of men, material, and sound strategy. However, few wars are waged for the proximate purpose of completely destroying the enemy's strategic strength. Rather are they usually conducted for limited purposes and by military and other means roughly proportional to those goals. The salience of culture is revealed most clearly with respect to deterrence. For deterrence to succeed, the intended deterree has to decide he is deterred. He has a choice. And success or failure in deterrence is never attributable strictly to presumed calculations of the material balance. Much, if not most, of the abstract modelling of stable deterrence in which defense analysts used to indulge, was, of methodological necessity, innocent of the vital ingredient of political velocity. Rational choice has difficulty with powerful feelings. Culture, cultural understanding or its lack, is apt to be the key to deterrence success or failure.³²

Know Yourself

As usual, Sun tzu was right. It is important to know ourselves. Unfortunately, it is extraordinarily difficult to know oneself in terms of strategic culture. In principle, we should perform far better, be more consistently successful, if we were able to look in the strategic mirror and see ourselves without significant distortion. In practice, of course, we tend to see ourselves as we would like to be. So deep is a security community's vested interest in its version of its own master strategic historical narrative, that one should not expect objective self assessment. Perhaps in the aftermath of strategic trauma, a measure of objectivity may creep in. The Germans achieved this under the inspired leadership of Chief of Staff Hans von Seeckt after World War I, with their 57 study committees.³³ After Vietnam, the Americans assuredly did not. The official U.S. response to the protracted disaster of the Vietnam project, was to ignore it for more than a generation.

It is necessary to emphasize that countries do not pick their strategic cultures at random, or because of intellectual or other fashion. Particular strategic cultures are adopted, accepted, and digested as "cultural assumptions" to quote Professor Black,³⁴ because they fit the characters and contexts of the relevant societies. It is true that they evolve, and that they can alter radically as a result of traumatic shock. But, it is not true that a strategic culture can be discarded by an act of will, at least not rapidly and thoroughly, save in circumstances of direst necessity. Remember that societies, security communities, do not choose their strategic cultures. Rather do their strategic cultures choose them. There is a marriage between a society's strategic need and the culture that seems best to meet that need. Of course, this is an oversimplification. However, the culture of a nation, the American for example, is not acquired by rational choice, certainly not by a

³² Payne, *Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*.

³³ See James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992). Despite this praiseworthy and probably historically unique exercise, it is interesting to note that the Wehrmacht revealed some lethal weaknesses in World War II that had a long history behind them and therefore may warrant ascription as cultural.

³⁴ Black, *Rethinking Military History*, p. 13.

single such choice. The country behaved in as strategically effective a way as it was able. That historical experience came to be all but codified in what today we are calling strategic culture.

Behind strategic culture is a historical record, past, present, and prospectively future, in which material relations among political entities are vitally significant. Strategic culture is likely to be a highly important factor, positive or negative, perhaps some of each, contributing to overall strategic effectiveness. A cultural paradigm is a construction, and as such it can be deconstructed and reconstructed, at least in theory. In practice, even a cultural paradigm that is having a dysfunctional influence upon decisionmaking and actual strategic behavior, may not be changeable. One might not recognize the problem with one's organizing assumptions, and even if one does, the requirements and implications of change may be unduly formidable. Strategic culture certainly can be adaptable, but it is not infinitely so. It is not acquired lightly and casually, and neither can it be discarded and replaced promptly at will from a catalogue of alternative strategic cultures. An interesting question that has yet to attract any noteworthy scholarship address, is the extent to which a security community is able to choose its strategic culture. In most regards we acquire our public, strategic, and military cultures, without any exercise of conscious choice. Given the pervasive influence of strategic culture, generally silent and invisible, it is not obvious that we would know how to go about changing it, even should we wish to do so. After all, culture is a part of us. As I have argued elsewhere, we inhabit a more or less distinctive strategic context, and we are a functioning part of the context.³⁵

There is probably some merit in Americans, Britons, Russians, and so forth, being more culturally self aware. But, we have to pose the classic strategist's question, 'so what?' Americans, Britons, and Russians, are what they are. While they are not locked into strategic cultures that are static and eternal in all respects, they are to an important degree captives of the cultures with which local interpretations of their distinctive histories have armed them. Even if you recognize some significant dysfunctionality in your strategic and military cultures, you may not be able to take effective corrective action. This is very much a live issue at present with respect to the official U.S. commitment to transform its armed forces, the Army most especially, of course, into an instrument of excellence in the conduct of irregular warfare of all kinds. Success is possible, but unlikely. If one compares what we used to call the traditional American 'way of war' with the style required for the countering of insurgency and terrorism, one discovers an almost perfect mismatch.³⁶

Better self-knowledge is desirable, but it can offer no magical solution to the problems of a maladaptive military instrument. Strategic culture is the product of a centuries-long dialogue between a people and its history. It is not going to yield readily, painlessly, and comprehensively to a would-be revolutionary drive from the policymakers of the moment.

³⁵ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, ch. 5.

³⁶ I have argued this thesis in *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War college, March 2006).

Know Others

Again, Sun-tzu was correct, at least he was substantially so. One cannot make a virtue of cultural ignorance. Before striking a cautionary note, let us endorse the commonplace belief that it is highly desirable to understand as much about the adversary as possible. Cultural intelligence is particularly valuable because it explains the intellectual and moral context within which decisions will be made. Needless to say, perhaps, it is far easier to count tanks and missiles than it is to grasp the cultural assumptions of an alien society, let alone comprehend the cognitive psychology of enemy leaders. How do their brains work? Physiologically like ours, of course. But, does our anatomical commonality conceal radical differences in values, preferences, and goals?

Sun-tzu makes much of the utility in understanding the enemy, and rightly so. However, his wise words need to be read with reservations. His good advice identifies a standard that is rarely met, and probably is rarely attempted. How seriously do belligerents strive to understand each other, let alone themselves? Far more often than not crises and wars erupt and one, perhaps both, sides have no choice other than to function in cultural ignorance as best they are able. The classic 'Principles of War' provide a partial solution to the perils of strategic cultural ignorance. At least they do if the object in the war is the complete overthrow of the enemy. One of those 'principles' asserts the utility of maintaining the 'initiative.'³⁷ In other words, keep the enemy dancing to your tune. Operate within his decision cycle, his OODA loop if you prefer, so that he is never able to wage the kind of war he might prefer.³⁸ In practice, this would-be solution to the problem of ignorance is not likely to be very fruitful. The reasons are because most wars are not conducted for unlimited goals, and most wars last long enough for military initiatives to run out of logistic steam, even if only briefly. Also, we know from experience as well as from Clausewitz, that friction, chance, indeed the whole 'climate of war', can embarrass even the wisest of nostrums and maxims.³⁹

Just suppose that the leaders of Imperial Japan understood themselves and, unimaginably, came also to understand the United States by, say, June 1944, the month of the fatal Battle of the Philippine Sea off Saipan. Such cultural comprehension would have been of zero value. Tokyo could not have used such anthropological insight to any strategic purpose. They were doomed. The United States was an implacable foe, totally untroubled in 1944-45 by considerations of collateral damage, and was still considerably ignorant of relevant Japanese culture. But it did not matter for the outcome of the war. Even had Americans grasped fully the importance of the Japanese notion of honor, they could not have used that understanding, save with respect to the vital importance to the enemy of the

³⁷ See John I. Alger, *The Quest for Victory: The History of the Principles of War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); and Anthony D. Mc Ivor, ed., *Rethinking the Principles of War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

³⁸ OODA: Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action. This formula for (tactical) victory was invented by Col. John Boyd of the USAF. It was inspired by his experience of jet fighter combat over Korea. See Grant T. Hammond, *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

³⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 104.

preservation of the Imperial office. On a much more constructive note, had Americans read their Thucydides carefully in 1940-41, they should have been impressed by the middle item in his famous tryptich of motives for war: fear, honor, and interest. U.S. efforts to coerce Japan posed lethal threats both to Japanese interests and, above all else, to its honor. On the Japanese side, had Tokyo studied American public and strategic cultures, it ought to have realized that the Imperial Navy's Pearl Harbor preference must guarantee the onset of a total war that it could not possibly win. Indeed, the only scenario that might yield success for Tokyo, would be one wherein Germany defeated the Soviet Union. However, even that happy, if increasingly improbable, prospect, would fall short of guaranteeing U.S. acquiescence in Japanese aggression. The mutual cultural misassessments of Japan and the United States in 1940-41, illustrate clearly just how important it can be to achieve cultural understanding of the foe.⁴⁰

The Perils and Pitfalls of Cultural Enquiry

In the judgment of this strategic theorist there is, and can be, no productive debate between those who favor study of the cultural dimension to war, peace, and strategy, and those who do not. The claim that cultural study has not yielded insights superior to those attainable by realist investigation, is misguided on several counts.⁴¹ It is wrong in that it postulates a realist project that is somehow, strangely, culture free. Frankly, that is absurd. Also, it flies in the face of an overwhelming weight of strategic historical evidence. Indeed, the case, not for a culturalist approach, but rather for the study of culture, including cognitive psychology, is so strong that the caveats cited in this section of the paper are only that, caveats not showstoppers.

Everyone will have their own favorite list of doubts and problems with cultural enquiry. Just 11 are cited here for brief analysis. Each could benefit from essay length treatment.

1. Explaining too much: Since all humans are encultured, most of us multiply so, culture begins to look like a theory of everything. Such a theory, alas, is a theory of nothing. If everything we think and do has to be influenced by culture, and is in a vital sense a cultural manifestation, inter alia, there is no non-cultural space at all. Since this peril has some empirical merit, theorists of culture need to consider it more seriously than they have to date. Scholars have to acknowledge that that which is theoretically inconvenient, is not necessarily, as a consequence, untrue. Commonsense can be of assistance.

2. The problem of evidence: What is the evidence? Well, it rather depends on how one defines culture. If we suppose, for the sake of argument that there are wholly extra-cultural influences on policy and strategy, such factors should not be considered outside of

⁴⁰ See Forrest E. Morgan, *Compellence and the Strategic Culture of Imperial Japan* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

⁴¹ As in Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies", *International Security*, Vol. 23, No.1 (Summer 1998), pp. 141-70.

their cultural context. The sensible culturalist does not assert that culture invariably rules. Rather is the claim to the effect that culture is usually, perhaps always, a factor, one dimension among many. Unpicking a decision, deconstructing a strategy and style in warfare, for clear evidence of cultural footprints, is always going to be a contestable endeavor. The somewhat irritating truth is that all of us, our institutions, and our processes of governance, have been shaped, at least influenced, by what we understand as culture. This claim is, I believe, methodologically devastating. Nonetheless, it is true. And it does not in any way detract from the proposition that cultural matters are vitally important.

3. Culture as panacea: Politicians and soldiers are problem-solvers. Truth is what works. Strategy, and strategic studies, is a pragmatic undertaking.⁴² As a consequence, defense communities typically are vulnerable to ambush and capture by almost any new sounding big idea which is touted as the solution to the overwhelming problem of the moment. Strategic culture is just such a big idea. It is ironic that it always was a good idea. It was good when this author and others wrote about it in the 1970s and 1980s, and when Sun-tzu praised its virtues 2,400 years ago. Better late than never, one should observe. Context is all. Culture has become popular, even fashionable, all of a sudden, because the United States and its allies today are engaged in transcultural warfare.⁴³ There is nothing whatsoever novel about transcultural warfare, but it does happen to be different from the rough symmetry that characterized the Soviet-American strategic stand-off for 40 plus years, as well as the two world wars. It is understandable that Washington will lend an ear, and provide some money, to almost anyone who is selling a patent medicine to cure its contemporary problems. 'Culture' is one such patent medicine, in the minds of many. This is unfortunate, because, as this paper has argued, there is an excellent case for cultural study. We can only hope that a sensible regard for the cultural dimension to war and strategy will not be tainted unduly by association with the belief that cultural mastery is the path to strategic salvation.

4. Cultural essentialism: One suspects that in most cases, most of the time, it is impractical to seek to distinguish the cultural from the unarguably non-cultural among the influences upon decisions. Indeed, as this paper has suggested tentatively and somewhat dangerously, it is not obvious that a meaningful distinction between the cultural and the extra-cultural can or should be drawn. A brute force way to bulldoze this difficulty is by having resort to the wonderful word, 'essentially.' The determined, not to say dogmatic, culturalist, scores with his or her great essentialist simplification. All the while, a nod is

⁴² "As in many other branches of politics, the question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work? More important, will it be likely to work under the special circumstances under which it will next be tested? ... *strategy is a field where truth is sought in the pursuit of viable solutions.*" Brodie, *War and Politics*, pp. 452, 453 (emphasis in the original). I must confess to being the person whom Brodie corrected criticised, by name, with his emphasis upon the pragmatic nature of strategy and strategic study.

⁴³ For an outstanding recent historical analysis of transcultural warfare, see Hew Strachan, "A General Typology of Transcultural Wars—The Modern Ages", in Hans-Henning Kortum, ed., *Transcultural Wars: from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), pp. 85-103.

given to other, lesser influences. The hunt for essential truth is never ending, as scholars strive to penetrate to the heart of the matter. Whether or not there is such an animal is a troubling question.

5. Culture can and does change: Culture does not change frequently or, usually, radically. If it did, it would not be culture. Definition has its uses. Culturalist enquiry is subject to the temptation to assume a relatively static character to strategic and military cultures. The same pathology afflicts those among us who write about 'the American (or other) way of war.' *Mea culpa*, I believe.⁴⁴ Strategic culture both evolves and can shift seismically if it is assaulted by a traumatic shock of sufficient awesomeness.

6. Culture is diverse: A security community may have more than one strategic culture, at least at the level of a traditional 'way of war.' Britain has been the exemplar of a maritime power, and for a long while it was the proud owner of a global empire acquired for profit and defended by maritime supremacy. But, strange to note, in the twentieth century, as in the high Middle Ages for England, Britain was as much, if not more, of a continental, than a maritime power. In World War I, after 19 August, 1915, Britain made an open ended commitment to continental warfare, a decision that eventually resulted in General Haig commanding a BEF of 60 divisions.⁴⁵ In 1939-40, Britain planned to contribute at least 40 divisions to a recreation of the Western Front, a development mercifully ambushed by the Germans' westward strike on 10 May, 1940. While, lastly, from the late 1940s until the end of the 1980s, aside from the campaigns of imperial devolution, and the domestic nuisance of the IRA, the British armed forces prepared assiduously for continental warfare on the North German plain. There was always a significant maritime dimension to British strategic thought and effort, how could there not be for an insular power. But, it is not much of an exaggeration to claim that the twentieth was Britain's continental century. The point of the British illustration is to suggest that reasonably well-led states have strategic cultures that are adaptable to changing, and often deeply unwelcome, political and strategic contexts.

Not only can strategic culture accommodate the diversity needed to meet unexpected threats, also, of course, it has more than one sword arm. Military culture will vary both among the geographically specialized services, and within those services among their separate branches. With some good reason, it may be argued that a country's strategic culture does exist and function as a cohesive whole, notwithstanding the diversity just cited. In fact, I believe this generally, though only generally, to be the case. For reasons of history and geography, to restate the mantra of this paper, communities do have preferred ways in defense preparation, and of war. Their three, or more, services will not be of equivalent combat prowess or national strategic importance. Most, if not all, countries will

⁴⁴ Colin S. Gray, "The American Way of War," in Mc Ivor, ed., *Rethinking the Principles of War*, pp. 13-40.

⁴⁵ Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The dilemma of British defence policy in the era of the two world wars* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), p. 57. Also see David French, *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), ch. 6.

be more formidable in some, rather than other, forms of warfare. The United States, for example, has been pre-eminent as an air power; indeed it has been the world's first such.⁴⁶

7. Strategic culture is not entirely exclusive: The largely American theorists who created modern strategic thought in the 1950s were unwise to assume that a common logic and rationality would inform Strategic Persons everywhere. Nonetheless, much of the lore of statecraft, strategy, operations, and tactics, is recognized universally as best practice, *ceteris paribus*. People will behave differently not only because they are culturally distinctive, but also because their circumstances will differ. To the best of my knowledge, there is no rule of strategic history or cognitive psychology which requires people to follow their dreams and desires, regardless of context. Culture is an influence, it is not a drug that produces all but mindless strategic behavior. There is a danger that in hunting for evidence of strategic and military cultures, scholars will both privilege the apparently eccentric and neglect the ideas and habits that communities share, especially if they occupy the same cultural space.⁴⁷

8. Strategic cultures borrow and adapt: If one is in hot pursuit of an elusive strategic culture, one is unlikely to be overly friendly to the ideas of cultural borrowing and adaptation. It is frustrating to succeed in corralling a country's strategic culture, only to learn that that culture is willing and able to borrow what its bearers recognize to be contemporary best practice from abroad. In short, strategic and military cultures may be quite adaptable. They will not be infinitely so. As we suggested earlier, truly radical change in culture occurs only as a result of seismic political, social, or military shock. But, it can and does occur. However, recent historical scholarship shows that when security communities benefit from the diffusion of useful strategic ideas and technologies, they are likely to choose to benefit in ways distinctive to themselves.⁴⁸ Historical examples abound, but the cases of national diversity in armored and air forces in World War II provide near perfect illustration of the triumph of culture.

9. Cultural empathy does not ensure victory: It is always a good idea to understand both the enemy and one's friends. But, understanding alone, no matter how accurate, has only limited value. Someone, or something, at the military end of the strategy bridge actually has to do strategy, operationally and tactically. The most characteristic feature of warfare is violence. War entails the threat to use force, and the actual breaking of things and killing of people. As our studies of strategic and military culture advance, we must never forget, to repeat, that strategy is a pragmatic enterprise. It is not hard to identify

⁴⁶ See Eliot A. Cohen, "The Mystique of U.S. Air Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (January/February 1994), pp. 109-24. In his *Storm over Iraq: Air Power and the Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), Richard P. Hallion, the USAF's Official Historian, claims that "[a] dominant land power characterized a *Pax Romana*, and dominant sea power a *Pax Britannica*, dominant air power is the characteristic of modern America," p. 267.

⁴⁷ This danger was flagged many years ago in Gerald Segal, "Strategy and 'ethnic chic,'" *International Affairs*, Vol. 60, No.1 (Winter 1983/84), pp. 15-30.

⁴⁸ The case studies are excellent in Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, eds., *The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

weaknesses, in principle, in an adversary's strategic culture. But, can we exploit them? Understanding and consequential effective behavior may be two very different things. As often as not, one suspects, the achievement of a much deeper cultural comprehension will simply reinforce the conviction that the enemy inhabits another intellectual and emotional planet.

10. Policy and strategy are negotiated outcomes: Scholars may succeed in teasing out what they believe to be the core elements of a country's strategic culture, only to forget that their subject is, dare we repeat, a practical one. Academics do not inhabit a world of intellectual compromise and expedient decisions. Instead, they are, or should be, committed to the search for truth. Had such scholars functioned in government they would know that the pure flame of strategic culture is certain to be dimmed by the constraints imposed by scarce resources and competing agencies. In short, policy and strategy are always negotiated outcomes. The negotiation is unlikely to negate the influence of a general strategic culture entirely, but it is certain to ensure that that culture will be mediated by financial constraints and by competing organizational interests and cultures.

11. Beware of the methodological bog: This final peril and potent source of pitfalls was mentioned early on in this paper. Some social scientists, theorists of International Relations to be precise (names withheld to protect the guilty), are wont to commit the same fundamental mistake that mars a great deal of official American defense analysis. In the apposite words of John J. Weltman, and I admit to quoting him out of context, the development of nuclear strategy "represent[ed] an attempt at a Jominian solution to a problem that was essentially Clausewitzian."⁴⁹ The theorists in question seek a certainty of understanding that is not attainable. For a contemporary illustration of this phenomenon, official military enthusiasm for EBO (Effects Based Operations) is the latest example of an attempt to turn the art of war into the science of war.⁵⁰ Of course, it is folly. But, the quest for calculable certainty is never ending.⁵¹ Given the hazards of warfare, such a search is easily understandable. Alas, warfare cannot be reduced to a quantifiable problem. Similarly, many of the worthy efforts by scholars to uncover the secrets of a country's strategic culture, and especially the influence of that culture on behavior, are triumphs of misplaced methodological ingenuity. Methodologically elaborate and rigorous historical case studies of strategic culture, not that there have been many, have a way of being obliged to do great violence to the nuances and complexity of their subject. I doubt if I am the only person to notice that sophistication, at least ambition, in methodology, is rarely rewarded with plausible sophistication in knowledge gained. I suggest, as I have before, that in common with the causes of war, the scholarly challenge presented by strategic

⁴⁹ John J. Weltman, *World Politics and the Evolution of War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 152.

⁵⁰ Milan N. Vego, "Effects-Based Operations: A Critique", *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 41 (2nd qtr., 2006), pp. 51-7, is a blistering condemnation that takes no prisoners.

⁵¹ The finest work of strategic theory since Clausewitz's *On War*, warns that "planning for certitude is the greatest of all military mistakes, as military history demonstrates all too vividly." J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (1967; Anapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p. 72.

culture resides primarily in the highly resistant nature of the subject, rather than with deficiencies in our research.

Conclusions

Five claims serve to conclude this paper.

First, our analysis supports and affirms the view that culture in its several guises—public, strategic, and military-organizational—is vitally important. The “cultural thoughtways” of friends, foes, and, of course, ourselves, can have a directive or a shaping effect upon decisions and behavior.⁵² In 1979, Ken Booth argued that “[s]trategic studies divorced from area studies is largely thinking in a void. The general neglect of area studies is one of the biggest criticisms which can be levelled against strategists.”⁵³ Booth was correct then, while just about everybody interested in security policies and strategy has come, very belatedly, to realize that he is correct for today and tomorrow.

Second, hard experience should tell us that a little theory for the probing of strategic culture goes a long way, usually too far. The needs of theory building and the reality of culture’s ubiquitous contextuality, are, alas, severely at odds. This does not matter for our understanding of strategic culture, but it can be deadly for the practicality, let alone the utility, of theory. I suggest that since we are all necessarily encultured, everything that we think strategically, and that subsequently we seek to do for strategic reasons, may be influenced by the cultural dimension.

Third, cultural awareness and understanding can only be helpful, but they are not a panacea for strategic dilemmas. Even a genuine cultural expertise is not the answer, the magic key to strategic success. There are many reasons why policy and strategy can succeed or fail, and cultural empathy or blindness is only one of them. Those among us who are recent converts to culturalism, or even just to a new respect for the cultural anthropology of conflict, should hasten to reread their Clausewitz. Such factors as chance, friction, fear, the fog of war, and sheer incompetence, may well be more important in the shaping of events than is strategic and military culture.

Fourth, cultural change, even cultural transformation, can and does happen, but do not hold your breath waiting for it. There are serious reasons, rooted in local perceptions of historical experience and in a community’s geopolitical context, why a country’s strategic culture is what it is. To recognize the need for change, as in the United States today with reference to the challenge posed by irregular enemies, is not necessarily to ensure that the needed change will occur. Such change may meet with too much resistance.

Fifth and finally, the new culturalism is in danger of becoming fashionable; indeed, it may be fashionable already. For those of us who have long touted the virtues of cultural study for strategists, it is most satisfying to note that the subject of our belief is now a

⁵² “Cultural thoughtways” is an inspired concept borrowed gratefully from Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

prime-time issue-area. But, the trouble with fashion is that it has to change. We should worry lest the current enthusiasm for cultural study and culturally informed strategic behavior should fade into history. They may join the other inherently brief fashions that have marked the passage of recent American strategic history. New, or more often, rediscovered, concepts can be discarded because they are soon intellectually exhausted, at least at a fairly elementary level. Strategic culture may well cease to find widespread favor once officials, soldiers, and sensible scholars, come to appreciate just how difficult a subject it is. More to the point, perhaps, political and military executives will be discouraged by mature recognition of the difficulties that must hinder prudent efforts to operationalize cultural knowledge and understanding. Practical people, a category that should include strategists, will ask that most brutally direct of questions, 'so what?' So what do we do with greater self-, and other-, cultural understanding? Culture matters greatly, but so do the other dimensions of war, peace, and strategy.
