UNITED STATES STRATEGIC CULTURE

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Prepared for:

Defense Threat Reduction Agency
Advanced Systems and Concepts Office

Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum
Contract No: DTRA01-03-D-0017, Technical Instruction 18-06-02

rev. 13 November 2006

Report Documentation Page		*Form Approved* *OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE **13 NOV 2006**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **United States Strategic Culture**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **SAIC From Science to Solutions,Washington,DC**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**25**	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

United States Strategic Culture

Thomas G. Mahnken

The notion that there is a connection between a society and its strategic culture has a long and distinguished pedigree. In his history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides records that the Spartan king Archidamus and the Athenian *strategos* Pericles each linked the capabilities of their military to the constitution of their state.[1] Writing more than 2,400 years later, Julian Corbett drew a distinction between the German or "continental" and British or "maritime" schools of strategic thought, with the former focusing on war between land powers and the latter on a conflict between a sea power and a land power.[2] Basil H. Liddell-Hart refined Corbett's argument, noting that Britain had historically followed a distinctive approach to war by avoiding large commitments on land and using sea power to bring economic pressure to bear against its adversaries.[3]

A nation's strategic culture flows from its geography and resources, history and experience, and society and political structure.[4] It represents an approach that a given state has found successful in the past. Although not immutable, it tends to evolve slowly. It is no coincidence, for example, that Britain has historically favored sea power and indirect strategies, or that it has traditionally eschewed the maintenance of a large army. Israel's lack of geographic depth, its small but educated population, and technological skill have produced a strategic culture that emphasizes strategic preemption, offensive operations, initiative, and – increasingly – advanced technology.[5] Australia's minimal geopolitical status, its continental rather than maritime identity, and its formative military experiences have shaped its way of war.[6]

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[1] Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 45-46, 81-82.

[2] Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1911), 38.

[3] Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare* (New York: MacMillan, 1933).

[4] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Ch. 5.

[5] Michael I. Handel, "The Evolution of Israeli Strategy: The Psychology of Insecurity and the Quest for Absolute Security" in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[6] Michael Evans, *The Tyranny of Dissonance: Australia's Strategic Culture and Way of War, 1901-2005* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Center, 2005).

This case study examines the strategic culture of the United States. For obvious reasons, the strategic culture of the United States has received considerable attention. The United States is the world's most powerful nation, and will be for the foreseeable future. How the United States behaves affects not only its citizens, but also those across the globe. Understanding the strategic culture of the United States is important for friends, enemies, and neutrals.

What follows is an examination of American strategic culture on the level of the nation, the military, and the armed services. As a nation, American strategic culture was shaped by free security and imbued with exceptionalism. American strategic culture emphasizes liberal idealism and views war as a discontinuation of policy. American military culture, the so-called "American way of war", emphasizes direct strategies, an industrial approach to war, and firepower- and technology intensive approaches to combat. The U.S. armed services, in turn, vary in their structure, dominant groups, and attitudes toward technology.

STRATEGIC CULTURE DEFINED

This case study adopts the definition of strategic culture that was adopted for the project as a whole. Specifically, throughout this chapter, "Strategic culture is that set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives."

More specifically, this is a chapter about American strategic culture. It is, in the words of Colin S. Gray, "That culture referring to modes of thought and action with respect to force, derived from perception of the national historical experience, aspiration for self-characterization…and from all of the many distinctively American experiences (of geography, political philosophy, of civic culture, and "way of life") that characterize an American citizen."[7]

One of the central challenges facing the scholar of any state's strategic culture lies in determining which institutions serve as the keeper and transmitter of strategic culture. Is it the state? The military as a whole? Or some subset of the military? Another lies in identifying the content of strategic culture: the most salient beliefs and attitudes that comprise culture. Last

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[7] Colin S. Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example," *International Security* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1981), 22.

but not least is the problem of determining the extent to which strategic culture, rather than power considerations, actually determines attitudes and behavior.[8]

This case study considers strategic culture on three levels: those of the nation, the military, and the military service. At the national level, strategic culture reflects a society's values regarding the use of force. At the military level, strategic culture (or a nation's "way of war") is an expression of how the nation's military *wants* to fight wars. Although practice does not have to conform to this desire, success in waging wars that run counter to national ways of war may come only after a period of painful adaptation. Finally, strategic culture at the service level represents the organizational culture of the particular service – those values, missions, and technologies that the institution holds dear.[9]

There are two reasons why it is worthwhile to examine culture on different levels explicitly. First, although military institutions generally reflect the societies that they defend, it cannot be assumed that they will mirror one another at all times. During the 1990s, for example, a number of scholars argued that the U.S. military was becoming less representative of American society in terms of its attitudes.[10] Second, as Clausewitz noted, there is often a tension (and generally a healthy one) between the military, the government, and the society as a whole. As he noted, the military generally operates in the realm of probability and chance, whereas rationality and the people generally characterize the political leadership by passion.[11]

STRATEGIC CULTURE PROFILE

National Strategic Culture

Both geography and history have shaped American national strategic culture. Throughout most of America's history, North America's insular position and weak neighbors

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[8] Alan Macmillan, Ken Booth, and Russell Trood, "Strategic Culture" in Ken Booth and Russell Trood, eds., *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 8-12.

[9] As Edgar Schein puts it, organizational culture is "The pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problemsEdgar H. Schein, "Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture," *Sloan Management Review* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1984), 3.

[10] See, for example, Ole Holsti, "A Widening Gap Between the Military and Society? Some Evidence, 1976-1996," *International Security* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1998-99): 5-42; and Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

[11] Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

to the north and south combined to provide the United States free security. Shielded by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and the Royal Navy, the United States grew to maturity in a benign environment. The fact that the United States did not have to exhaust itself by preparing for and waging wars against its neighbors separated it from other countries, particularly the European great powers. American insularity and the existence of free security bred the view that war is a deviation from the norm of peace. American strategic culture was shaped by long periods of peace punctuated by generational conflicts – the War of 1812, the Civil War, World War I, and World War II – defined as a crusade of good versus evil.

Free security, in turn, affected the American outlook on the world. As C. Vann Woodward wrote more than four decades ago, "Anxieties about security have kept the growth of optimism within bounds among other peoples…the relative absence of such anxieties in the past has helped, along with other factors, to make optimism a national philosophy in America."[12]

American strategic culture explicitly rejects the European tradition of power politics. Rather, from the founding Americans have seen themselves as exceptional. This exceptionalism has influenced the way the United States deals with others. As Walter Lippmann observed, American strategic culture "does not recognize that America is one nation among many other nations with whom it must deal as rivals, as allies, as partners." Rather, "an aggression is an armed rebellion against the universal and eternal principles of the world society. No war can end rightly, therefore, except by the unconditional surrender of the aggressor nation and by the overthrow and transformation of its political regime."[13]

The impulse to transform the international system in the service of liberal democratic ideals forms a strand that runs throughout American history. The Clinton administration's national security strategy of engagement and enlargement and the George W. Bush administration's commitment to spreading democracy, expressed most eloquently in his second

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[12] C. Vann Woodward, "The Age of Reinterpretation," *American Historical Review* 66 (October 1960), 6.

[13] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the United States* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), 25-26.

inaugural address, have more in common with one another than either administration's supporters would care to admit.[14]

Much of America's Cold War foreign policy elite, steeped in the history of European power politics and schooled in the realist tradition, saw America's traditional exceptionalism and idealism as dangerous. George Kennan, in his lectures on American diplomacy delivered in 1950, argued that the American approach to international relations was characterized by excessive "moralism and legalism" that led to the tendency to launch crusades against evil. As Kennan put it, "A war fought in the name of high moral principle finds no early end short of some form of total domination."[15]

Americans have often conceived of interstate war not as a continuation of policy, in Clausewitz's famous formulation, but as a symptom of its breakdown. J.C. Wylie was reflecting a widely held American view when he wrote:

> Is war in fact a continuation of policy? For us, I think not. War for a nonaggressor nation is actually a nearly complete collapse of policy. Once war comes, then nearly all prewar policy is utterly invalid because the setting in which it was designed to function no longer corresponds with the facts of reality. When war comes, we at once move into a radically different world.[16]

Similarly, the U.S. Army's 1936 textbook on strategy held that "Politics and strategy are radically and fundamentally things apart. Strategy begins where politics end. All that soldiers ask is that once the policy is settled, strategy and command shall be regarded as being in a sphere apart from politics."[17] Americans have, in other words, tended to think astrategically.[18]

The combination of the rejection of power politics and discontinuity between policy and strategy has yielded a dichotomy in American strategic culture: although Americans are basically peace loving, when aroused they mobilize the nation's human and material resources

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[14] William J. Cinton, National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (Washington, D.C.: White House, 1995) at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/research_pubs/nss.pdf. "President Bush Sworn-In to Second Term" at http://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural/ (accessed July 16, 2006).

[15] George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 100.

[16] J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967), 80.

[17] *The Principles of Strategy for An Independent Corps or Army in a Theater of Operations* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff School Press, 1936).

[18] Colin S. Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example," *International Security* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1981), 33.

behind in the service of high-intensity operations. Samuel Huntington saw America's ferocity in war as the flip side of liberal pacifism outside of war. As he put it:

> The American tends to be an extremist on the subject of war: he either embraces war wholeheartedly or rejects it completely. This extremism is required by the nature of the liberal ideology. Since liberalism deprecates the moral validity of the interests of the state in security, war must be either condemned as incompatible with liberal goals or justified as an ideological movement in support of those goals. American thought has not viewed war in the conservative-military sense as an instrument of national policy.[19]

The United States has thus displayed a strong and long-standing predilection for waging war for unlimited political aims.[20] During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant fought to defeat utterly the Confederacy. During World War I, General John J. Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Force, favored a policy of unconditional surrender toward Imperial Germany even as President Woodrow Wilson sought a negotiated end to the conflict.[21] In World War II Franklin D. Roosevelt and his commanders were of one mind that the war must lead to the overthrow of the German, Japanese, and Italian governments that had started the war. In the current war against jihadist extremists there is no sentiment for anything approaching a negotiated settlement.

Just as Americans have preferred a fight to the finish, so too have they been uncomfortable with wars for limited political aims. In both the Korean and Vietnam wars, American military leaders were cool to the idea of fighting merely to restore or maintain the *status quo*. Indeed, Douglas MacArthur likened anything short of total victory over communist forces on the Korean peninsula to "appeasement."[22] Similarly, the standard explanation of

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[19] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Practice of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 151

[20] As Clausewitz wrote, "War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy* – to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations. Transitions from one type to the other will of course recur in my treatment; but the fact that the aims of the two types are quite different must be clear at all times, and their points of irreconcilability brought out [emphasis in original]." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 69

[21] David R. Woodward, *Trial by Friendship: Anglo-American Relations, 1917-1918* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 213-214.

[22] See the testimony of General Douglas MacArthur in Allen Guttmann, ed., *Korea: Cold War and Limited War*, 2nd ed. (New York: D.C. Heath, 1972).

American failure in Vietnam—and the one most popular among U.S. military officers—is that the U.S. military would have won the war were it not for civilian interference.[23]

Americans have tended to cast their wars as crusades against evil. As Samuel Huntington put it, "For the American a war is not a war unless it is a crusade."[24] Of course, such an attitude has strong historical roots: during the twentieth century the United States fought a series of despotic regimes, from Hitler's Germany and Kim Il-Sung's North Korea to Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia. However, there has always been a clear tension between the need to rally the public in support of the use of force and the need to pursue limited aims. Political leaders who demonized America's adversaries often faced a backlash when the United States did not continue the war to the finish. Advisors to President George H.W. Bush, for example, bristled at his comparisons of Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler, fearing that it would complicate the conduct of the 1991 Gulf War.[25]

The United States has similarly encountered difficulty when it has fought adversaries who at least appear less than demonic. Although Ho Chi Minh presided over a brutal communist government, North Vietnamese propaganda and American opponents of the war in Vietnam were able to portray him as a kindly "Uncle Ho", or even a latter-day George Washington. The United States is thus fortunate to have in its war on terror an adversary such as Osama bin Laden, an individual who viscerally hates the United States and all it stands for.

Military Strategic Culture

Just as Americans as a whole exhibit certain preferences when the United States goes to war, so too does the U.S. military. And like the features of American strategic culture, those of American military culture have been marked more by continuity than change.

The notion of a distinct American military culture, a definitive "American way of war," is inextricably linked to Russell Weigley's book of the same name.[26] In it, Weigley argued that

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[23] For alternative views, see Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 175-184; Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

[24] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Practice of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 152.

[25] George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 389.

[26] Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973). For a more critical appraisal of the "American way of war", see

since the American Civil War the U.S. armed forces have pursued a unique approach to combat, one favoring wars of annihilation through the lavish use of firepower. In his formulation, the main characteristics of the "American way of war" include aggressiveness at all levels of warfare, a quest for decisive battles, and a desire to employ maximum effort. The U.S. military has viewed "the complete overthrow of the enemy, the destruction of his military power, [as] the object of war."[27] By contrast, the American military has been uncomfortable waging war with constrained means for limited or ambiguous objectives. Weigley argued that "Americans, especially American soldiers" held a narrow definition of strategy that tended to "give little regard to the non-military consequences of what they were doing."[28]

Weigley's formulation, though influential, represents a narrow interpretation of American military history. As Brian M. Linn has noted, the U.S. armed forces have in fact favored strategies of attrition over annihilation. In addition, the United States has throughout its history pursued a much wider range of strategies than Weigley's formulation indicates, including deterrence and wars for limited aims. [29] Linn and others have noted that the U.S. military has a rich tradition of fighting small wars and insurgencies. Indeed, Max Boot went so far as to propose this tradition as an alternative American way of war.[30]

Linn and Boot both offer valid critiques of Weigley's interpretation of American military history. Weigley's formulation nonetheless stands up remarkably well as a portrayal of American military strategic culture and thus the *aspirations* of the U.S. military.

Another historical tendency has been a preference for the direct approach to strategy over the indirect. The U.S. military has throughout its history sought to close with and destroy the enemy at the earliest opportunity. As Colin S. Gray has put it, "Americans have favored the quest for swift victory through the hazards of decisive battle rather than the slower approach of maritime encirclement."[31] There is perhaps no better illustration of this tendency than the debate over strategy between the American and British governments during World War II. The

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Colin S. Gray, "Strategy in the Nuclear Age: The United States, 1945-1991" in Murray, Knox, and Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy*, 579-613.

[27] Weigley, *American Way of War*, xxi

[28] Weigley, *American Way of War*, xviii-xix

[29] Brian M. Linn, "*The American Way of War* Revisited," *Journal of Military History* 66 no. 2 (April 2002), 501-533.

[30] Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[31] Gray, "Strategy in the Nuclear Age," pp.594-595.

U.S. military, led by Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, sought to concentrate forces for a cross-channel invasion at the earliest possible time. The British, by contrast, sought to encircle Axis-controlled Europe, allowing the Soviets to attrit German forces while the allies carried out a strategic bombing campaign and unconventional warfare in occupied Europe, postponing the invasion until it would be little more than a *coup de grace*.[32]

Coupled with a preference for direct strategies has been an industrial approach to war. During World War II, for example, the United States provided almost two-thirds of all Allied military equipment, building some 297,000 aircraft, 193,000 artillery pieces, 86,000 tanks, 2 million trucks, 8,800 naval vessels, and 87,000 landing craft. In its first year in the war, the United States out-produced the entire Axis in aircraft, tanks, and heavy guns.[33] During the Gulf War, U.S. strategic airlift assets alone moved 500,000 people and 540,000 tons of cargo – and only 5 percent of the materiel the United States employed in the war moved by air.[34] Over the past decade and a half, the United States has demonstrated the ability to organize and deploy large forces worldwide on short notice. Even peacekeeping operations such as Bosnia and Kosovo have involved considerable logistical support.

One characteristic that flows from the industrial approach is the lavish use of firepower. Contemporary accounts of the Battle of Mogadishu focused upon the fact that eighteen American servicemen lost their lives and 83 were wounded. Less remarked upon was the fact that at least 500 Somalis were killed and a thousand wounded in the same engagement.[35] During the major combat phase of the campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan U.S. air forces delivered some 22,000 bombs—including some 12,500 precision-guided munitions (PGMs)—in support of U.S. Special Forces and the Northern Alliance.[36]

A firepower-intensive approach to war makes sense, at least from a certain point of view. The United States can certainly afford the expenditure of resources to conduct such an approach. Moreover, firepower often saves American lives. However, the Vietnam War showed how a reliance on firepower could prove dysfunctional in a counterinsurgency

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[32] Kent Roberts Greenfield, *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1982), Ch. 2.

[33] Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), p.192.

[34] *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, volume III, *Logistics and Support* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 9.

[35] Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), p. 333.

[36] O'Hanlon, "A Flawed Masterpiece," *Foreign Affairs,* May/June 2002, p.52.

campaign. The lavish use of artillery and air power was irrelevant to the main problem of the war: how to cut the communist insurgency off from its base of popular support. If anything, the destruction caused by the strategy increased support for the communists.[37] Similarly, the profligate use of American firepower in Afghanistan threatens to weaken support for the United States—support that is vital to ensure the viability of the government of Afghanistan and reduce support for the Taliban.

Another characteristic of the American way of war is its emphasis on technology. No nation in recent history has placed greater emphasis upon the role of technology in planning and waging war than the United States. World War II witnessed the wholesale mobilization of American science and technology, culminating in the detonation of the atomic bomb. Technology played an important role in America's conduct of the Cold War as well, as the United States sought to use its qualitative advantage to counterbalance the numerical superiority of the Soviet Union and its allies. America's post-Cold War conflicts in Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan highlighted its technological edge over friend and foe alike.

Empirical research into the attitudes of U.S. officers shows them by and large to be technological optimists. A survey of some 1,900 officers attending U.S. professional military education institutions conducted in 2000 by this author and James R. FitzSimonds found that most officers believed new technology, doctrine, and organizations would make it easier for the United States to use force and achieve decisive battlefield victories. They also felt that advanced technology would allow the United States to engage in high-intensity operations with substantially reduced risk of casualties and that it would substantially reduce the duration of future conflicts.[38]

As Colin Gray has observed, strategic culture is neither good nor bad. Rather, it represents the context for strategic action. As he has written:

> The machine-mindedness that is so prominent in the dominant American "way of war" is inherently neither functional nor dysfunctional. When it inclines Americans to seek what amounts to a technological, rather than a political, peace, and when it is permitted to dictate tactics regardless of the political context, then on balance it is dysfunctional. Having said that, however, prudent and innovative

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[37] Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp.196-205.

[38] Thomas G. Mahnken and James R. FitzSimonds, *The Limits of Transformation: Officer Attitudes toward the Revolution in Military Affairs*, Newport Paper 17 (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2003), ch. 6.

exploitation of the technological dimension to strategy and war can be a vital asset.[39]

America's traditional reliance upon technology in war is certainly no recipe for success. Technology is a poor substitute for strategic thinking. The United States lost in Vietnam despite enjoying a considerable technological edge—at least in most areas—over its adversaries because it failed to develop an adequate strategy to achieve its political objectives. During the 1990s, the U.S. government increasingly looked to technology, in the form of standoff air- and sea-launched precision-guided munitions, to solve problems—such as terrorism and ethnic violence—that were at their root political. Washington's penchant for advanced technology also fostered the illusion among some that the United States could use force without killing American soldiers and innocent civilians, and among America's enemies the impression that the United States was averse to sustaining casualties. Saddam Hussein, for one, saw high-technology warfare as a sign of American weakness rather than strength.[40]

A more recent, and more ambiguous, tendency has been a seeming American reluctance to incur casualties. The conventional wisdom is that the American public is very sensitive to losses. Many further argue that the willingness of the American public to sustain casualties has declined significantly since the end of the Cold War.[41]

In fact, the phenomenon of casualty aversion defies such a neat formulation. In many ways, a reluctance to put American troops in harm's way was a logical response to the circumstances of the 1990s. Throughout that decade the United States fought wars for interests that were secondary, even tertiary. The low stakes involved in Somalia made it perfectly rational to withdraw after the death of eighteen American servicemen during the Battle of Mogadishu. Moreover, the U.S. advantage in air power has allowed it to use force effectively without putting a large number of American lives at risk. NATO's air campaign over Kosovo was, after all, able to achieve the alliance's political objectives short of the introduction of

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[39] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 147.

[40] Kevin M. Woods, Michael R. Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership* (Norfok, VA: U.S. Joint Forces Command, 2006), 15.

[41] See, for example, Edward N. Luttwak, "Where are the Great Powers?" *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 73, No. 4 (July/August 1994); Edward N. Luttwak, "From Vietnam to Desert Fox: Civil-Military Relations in Modern Democracies," *Survival* Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 1999); Charles Moskos, "Grave Decision: When Americans Accept Casualties," *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1998, p. 25; and Harvey M. Sapolsky and Jeremy Shapiro, "Casualties, Technology, and America's Future Wars," *Parameters* (September 1996), pp. 119-127.

ground forces. In such circumstances it made little sense to put American lives at risk unnecessarily.

But there is clearly more to it than that. Recent research appears to show that the military leadership and civilian decision makers are more casualty averse than the American public.[42] Indeed, the U.S. military has consistently sought to reduce casualties. The so-called Powell Doctrine emphasizes the use of overwhelming force against U.S. adversaries not due to political or strategic imperatives, but because of the belief that it will bring victory sooner while producing fewer U.S. casualties. Similarly, the military leadership has been one of the primary advocates of "force protection" measures to reduce the risk to U.S. forces. It is notable, for example, that two of the three metrics General Wesley Clark established to measure the effectiveness of Operation *Allied Force*, NATO's air war over Serbia, involved protecting allied forces rather than compelling Milosevic to quit Kosovo.[43]

Ironically, the military's concern over casualties appears to be stronger and more persistent than that of its civilian masters. For example, there is no evidence that the U.S. political leadership established the level of U.S. casualties as a criterion for the success of the campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, it appears that the military's concern over casualties played a major role in shaping the campaign's conduct. Indeed, at least one observer has attributed the seeming unwillingness of U.S. Central Command to commit large numbers of U.S. ground forces to the Battle of Tora Bora to the military leadership's concern over casualties.[44]

Real or not, the notion that the United States is casualty averse has become fixed in the mind of both allies and adversaries. U.S. allies have expressed concern that U.S. sensitivity to fatalities will constrain future military operations. As a senior British officer wrote, "in future conflicts, the United Kingdom will have to work within, or possibly around, the constraints

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[42] Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "How Many Deaths are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *The Washington Post*, November 7, 1999, p.B3.

[43] The three "measures of merit" were (1) not to lose allied aircraft, (2) to affect Yugoslav military and police activities on the ground in Kosovo as quickly and effectively as possible, and (2) to protect allied ground forces from retaliation. See General Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), pp. 183-184.

[44] See, for example, Michael E. O'Hanlon, "A Flawed Masterpiece," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 81, No. 3 (May/June 2002), p. 57.

imposed by this American aversion to casualties."[45] Chinese defense analysts see American

casualty sensitivity as a weakness that can be exploited.[46] However, this may prove to be a

dangerous misperception. Indeed, the idea that the United States has a glass jaw is hardly new.

Allies and adversaries should remind themselves of the United States' demonstrated ability to

endure hardship and suffer punishment. They should recall not only the U.S. government's

response to the Beirut barracks bombing and the Battle of Mogadishu, but also its reaction to

the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001.

Service Strategic Culture

Although American military strategic culture has well defined features, each service

also has its own unique culture, one shaped by its past and which, in turn, shapes its current and

future behavior.[47] Service cultures are hard to change because they are the product of the

acculturation of millions of service members over decades and are supported by a network of

social and professional incentives. People join the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps,

not "the military" in the abstract. Service training and education strengthen that identity. They

join because they identify—or want to identify—with a service's values and its culture. It is

therefore not surprising that two decades after the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, which

sought to promote jointness, an officer's service affiliation remains the most important

determinant of his views, more than rank, age, or combat experience.[48]

In many cases, service identity is more important to officers than an officer's branch

identity. All aviators, for example, are not alike: Air Force pilots have cultural attitudes that

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[45] Wing Commander K.S. Balshaw, RAF, "Spending Treasure Today but Spilling Blood Tomorrow: What are the Implications for Britain of America's Apparent Aversion to Casualties?" *Defence Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2001), p. 101.

[46] See, for example, the essays in Michael Pillsbury (ed.) *Chinese Views of Future Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1997).

[47] Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 7.

[48] Thomas G. Mahnken and James R. FitzSimonds, *The Limits of Transformation: Officer Attitudes toward the Revolution in Military Affairs*, Newport Paper 17 (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2003), 108.

differ significantly from those of their Navy counterparts.[49] Army infantrymen similarly have views that differ significantly from their Marine Corps counterparts.[50]

One example of the way in which service culture manifests itself is in attitudes toward technology. Not all elements of the U.S. military are equally reliant on technology. Because war at sea and in the air is by definition technologically intensive, the Navy and Air Force have tended to emphasize the role of technology in war. The Army and Marine Corps, by contrast, have tended to emphasize the human element. As the old saw goes, the Air Force and Navy talk about manning equipment, whereas the Army and Marine Corps talk about equipping the man. Not surprisingly, therefore, Army and Marine Corps officers tend to be somewhat more skeptical than their Air Force and Navy counterparts regarding the impact of technology on the character and conduct of war.[51]

The services also vary in terms of their structure and dominant groups. The Marine Corps and Air Force are "monarchical," with powerful service chiefs drawn from a single dominant subgroup, whereas the Army and Navy are "feudal," with less powerful chiefs drawn from a variety of subgroups.[52] Each also has its own "altars of worship"—those things that the institution values.[53] These characteristics, in turn, affect how the services approach technology and how technology affects the service.

The U.S. Marine Corps is a unitary, monarchical organization. The smallest of the services, it is also the most cohesive.[54] Its ethos is based on the notion that all Marines are the same and that every Marine is a rifleman. Despite the fact that the Marine Corps contains all

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[49] For example, when surveyed in 2002, 41% of Air Force pilots but only 21% of Navy aviators agreed with the statement "The ability to strike an adversary with precision weapons from a distance will diminish the need for the U.S. to field ground forces."

[50] For example, when surveyed in 2002, 57% of Army infantry officers but only 30% of Marine infantry officers agreed with the statement "The U.S. armed forces must radically change their approach to warfare to compete effectively with future adversaries." Sixty-five percent of Army infantry officers but only 14% of Marine infantry officers agreed with the statement "Modern conditions require significant changes to traditional Service roles and missions."

[51] Thomas G. Mahnken and James R. FitzSimonds, *The Limits of Transformation: Officer Attitudes toward the Revolution in Military Affairs*, Newport Paper 17 (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2003), 60.

[52] Thomas P. Ehrhard, "Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in the United States Armed Services: A Comparative Study of Weapon System Innovation," (Ph.D. dissertation: Johns Hopkins University, 2000), 75.

[53] Builder, Masks of War, 18.

[54] See, for example, Terry Terriff, "'Innovate or Die'?: Organizational Culture and the Origins of Maneuver Warfare in the United States Marine Corps," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 3 (June 2006): 475-503.

combat arms – infantry, artillery, and armor – as well as an aviation component, only one of the last ten Commandants of the Marine Corps has been a non-infantryman.[55]

Of the U.S. armed forces, the Marine Corps has the strongest commitment to tradition and the *status quo*, one reinforced by the deliberate, self-conscious study of history. It is, for example, the only service that teaches officers history as part of Officer Candidate School.

The Marine Corps' emphasis on tradition and conformity is manifest in the Marine uniform. Not surprisingly, it has changed the least since World War II of any service's uniform. It also reflects the service's ethic of conformity; with the exception of aviators, who wear gold flight wings on their chest, it is impossible to determine a Marine's specialty from his uniform.

Marines value technology the least of any service. In part, this is the result of a culture that puts the individual warrior at the center of warfare. It is also the result of the fact that as the smallest service, the Marine Corps has had the least money to devote to technology. Until very recently, the Marines let the Army and Navy develop the majority of their equipment, adopting and adapting it as necessary.

In contrast to the Marine Corps' monarchical structure, power in the Army is shared among the traditional combat arms: infantry, cavalry/armor, and artillery. Not surprisingly, the position of Army Chief of Staff tends to rotate among these combat arms. The current Army Chief of Staff, General Peter Schoomaker, is the first Special Forces branch officer to head the Army, his most recent ten predecessors included four from the infantry, three from armor, and three from the artillery.[56]

Whereas service identity is paramount to the Marine, his Army counterpart attaches great importance to branch identity. The Army is, in Carl Builder's words:

> A mutually supportive brotherhood of guilds. Both words, *brotherhood* and *guilds*, are significant here. The combat arms or branches of the Army are guilds – associations of craftsmen who take the greatest pride in their skills, as opposed to their possessions or positions. The guilds are joined in a brotherhood because, like brothers, they have a common family bond (the Army) and a recognition of their dependency upon each other in combat.[57]

Unlike the Marine uniform, an officer's branch identity is visible on the Army uniform.

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[55] General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr, who served as Commandant between 1968 and 1971, was an artilleryman.

[56] Generals Fred C. Weyand, Bernard W. Rogers, Edward C. Meyer, and John A. Wickham, Jr were infantrymen; Creighton W. Abrams, Gordon R. Sullivan, and Eric K. Shinseki were tankers; and William C. Westmoreland, Carl E. Vuono, and Dennis J. Reimer were artillerymen.

[57] Builder, *Masks of War*, 33.

The Army has tended to assimilate technology into its existing branch structure. The widespread adoption of the helicopter, for example, did not spawn a new branch, but rather led to a redefinition of cavalry to include rotary-wing aircraft.

Army officers, like their Marine counterparts, frequently profess that technology plays a subordinate role in warfare. In fact, however, the U.S. Army has traditionally valued advanced technology. Indeed, Army leaders have consistently seen advanced technology as a comparative advantage over potential foes. Whereas the Marine Corps sought to adapt itself to the advent of nuclear weapons, for example, the Army wholeheartedly embraced the weapons.

Technology is inherently more important to naval forces than to ground forces. Navies operate in an environment that is intrinsically hostile, and sailors from time immemorial have depended on naval technology to protect them from the elements. This has produced an attitude that recognizes the importance of technology but also prizes the tried-and-true over the novel.

The 20th century witnessed the Navy's evolution from a monarchical to a feudal organization. At the dawn of the 20th century, navies were synonymous with surface fleets. During the 20th century, however, the development of naval aviation and submarine forces changed the structure of the Navy fundamentally. Whereas the Army has tended to assimilate new ways of war into existing branches, the Navy responded to the advent of aircraft and submarines by adding new branches and career paths. As a result, the dominant communities in the Navy are surface, submarine, and aviation. These three branches collectively control the Navy: Of the last ten Chiefs of Naval Operations, four have been aviators, three surface warfare officers, and three submariners.[58]

The Air Force had its origins in, and continues to be defined by, the technology of manned flight. The Air Force is divided into pilots and non-pilots and between different communities of pilots. Even though combat pilots make up less than one-fifth of the Air Force, they are the ones who have dominated the service since its inception.[59] From 1947 to 1982, the Air Force Chief of Staff was always a bomber pilot; since 1982, the Air Force Chief of Staff has always been a fighter pilot.

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[58] Admirals Thomas H. Moorer, James L. Holloway III, Thomas B. Hayward, and Jay L. Johnson were aviators, Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., Jeremy R. Boorda, and Vern Clark were surface warriors, and James D. Watkins, Carlisle A. H. Trost, and Frank B. Kelso II were submariners.

[59] Ehrhard, 89.

STRATEGIC CULTURE IN ACTION

National, military, and service strategic culture has affected the way the United States has approached nuclear weapons.

National Strategic Culture

Nuclear weapons have reinforced the long-standing view in the United States that there is a sharp dichotomy between peace and war. Since early in the Cold War, the dominant view expressed by both civilian strategists and military officers has been that nuclear weapons are first and foremost weapons of deterrence. As George Kennan put it in 1961:

> The atom has simply served to make unavoidably clear what has been true all along since the day of the introduction of the machine gun and the internal combustion engine into the techniques of warfare…that modern warfare in the grand manner, pursued by all available means and aimed at the total destruction of the enemy's capability to resist, is… of such general destructiveness that it ceases to be useful as an instrument for the achievement of any coherent political purpose.[60]

In other words, the use of nuclear weapons cannot serve as a continuation of policy.

Beyond the basic view of nuclear weapons as deterrents has been the development and growth of a strong American taboo against their use. As Nina Tannenwald has observed, "Nuclear weapons have come to be defined as abhorrent and unacceptable weapons of mass destruction, with a taboo on their use."[61]

Thomas Schelling attributes the nuclear taboo to "a belief, or a feeling—a feeling somewhat beyond reach by analysis—that nuclear weapons were simply different." Reinforcing this was the belief that "nuclear weapons, once introduced into combat, could not, or probably would not, be contained, confined, or limited."[62] In his view, the nuclear taboo has affected not only nuclear weapons, but also other "peaceful nuclear explosives" and nuclear power.

American leaders regarded nuclear weapons as different militarily, politically, and psychologically from other weapons almost from the beginning. Even before the Soviets

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[60] Quoted in Chris Hables Gray, *Postmodern War: The New Politics of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1997), 138.

[61] Nina Tannenwald, "Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005), 5.

[62] Thomas C. Schelling, "An Astonishing 60 Years: The Legacy of Hiroshima," *Perspectives of the National Academy of Science*, 103, no. 16 (April 18, 2006), 6090.

acquired nuclear weapons, let alone achieved parity, American leaders believed that U.S. use of nuclear weapons would have severe long-term political consequences for the United States.[63]

The nuclear taboo was first identified during the early Eisenhower administration. At the time, it was seen as something that the U.S. government needed to counter.[64] Over time, however, the plausible range of uses for nuclear weapons has narrowed considerably. The actual practice of nonuse of nuclear weapons in crisis and war throughout the Cold War both reflected and bolstered the taboo,[65] as did nuclear nonuse during the Vietnam War.[66] As a result, uses of nuclear weapons that were once plausible, such as the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield or direct threats to employ nuclear weapons in order to deter conventional conflict, no longer appear legitimate.

During the 1990s, opposition to nuclear weapons grew into a movement to abolish them altogether. At the forefront of the movement were senior American officers and civil servants. For example, in a speech to the National Press Club in December 1996 General Lee Butler, the former Commander in Chief of U.S. Strategic Command, argued that

> nuclear weapons are inherently dangerous, hugely expensive, and militarily inefficient; that implacable hostility and alienation will almost certainly over time lead to a nuclear crisis; that the failure of nuclear deterrence would imperil not just the survival of the antagonists, but of every society; and that nuclear war is a raging, insatiable beast whose instincts and appetite we pretend to understand but cannot possibly control.[67]

For him, nuclear deterrence represented not a force for stability, but rather a catalyst for conflict. In his view, deterrence was "a formula for unmitigated catastrophe...premised on a litany of unwarranted assumptions, unprovable assertions and logical contradictions." In his eyes, "the threat to use nuclear weapons is indefensible."[68] He was dubious of the ability of

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[63] Timothy J. Botti, *Ace in the Hole: Why the United States Did Not Use Nuclear Weapons in the Cold War, 1945 to 1965* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), Ch. 22.

[64] McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), 241, 249.

[65] Nina Tannenwald, "Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005), 33.

[66] Nina Tannenwald, "Nuclear Weapons and the Vietnam War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 4 (August 2006).

[67] General Lee Butler, Abolition of Nuclear Weapons Speech, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., December 4, 1996, at http://www.wagingpeace.org/butlerspeech.html.

[68] General Lee Butler, "The Risks of Nuclear Deterrence: From Superpowers to Rogue Leaders," National Press Club, February 2, 1998.

nuclear weapons to deter the use of chemical or biological weapons by rogue states. He claimed, in short, that a world free from the threat of nuclear war had to be devoid of nuclear weapons.[69]

Although the 1990s witnessed repeated elite calls for nuclear abolition, public surveys show a more complex picture. The results of several surveys of the American public show considerable skepticism regarding the feasibility of completely eliminating nuclear weapons. Rather, they show that the public sees continuing value in a smaller nuclear arsenal, little optimism about the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in a more proliferated world, and a willingness to see nuclear weapons used to deter not only nuclear, but also chemical and biological, use.[70]

American attitudes toward nuclear weapons also bear the mark of the U.S. tradition of liberal idealism. As announced by President Ronald Reagan on 23 March 1983, the Strategic Defense Initiative marked a fundamental shift in thinking from deterrence to defense:

> Let me share with you a vision of the future which offers hope. It is that we embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive. Let us turn to the very strengths in technology that spawned our great industrial base and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today.
> What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?
> I call upon the scientific community in our country, those who gave us nuclear weapons, to turn their great talents now to the cause of mankind and world peace, to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete.[71]

For Reagan, at least, strategic defense offered the prospect of absolute security in the liberal idealist tradition.

Military Strategic Culture

The way the U.S. military has dealt with nuclear weapons reflects its strategic culture as well. For example, nuclear weapons comport with the emphasis the American military has

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[69] Butler, Abolition of Nuclear Weapons Speech.

[70] Dennis M. Gormley and Thomas G. Mahnken, "Facing Nuclear and Conventional Reality," *Orbis* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2000).

[71] Ronald Reagan, "Announcement of Strategic Defense Initiative," March 23, 1983, at http://www.missilethreat.com/resources/speeches/reagansdi.html (accessed August 16, 2005).

traditionally placed on advanced technology. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. military viewed its technological edge, including its lead in nuclear technology, as a competitive advantage over the Soviet Union. Nuclear weapons were seen as a counterweight to Soviet quantitative conventional superiority. During the Carter and Reagan administrations, technology came to be seen as a key arena of superpower rivalry. The Strategic Defense Initiative, for example, represented an effort to use advanced U.S. technology to render obsolete the Soviet heavy missile force.

American planning for nuclear war also reflected the tendency of the U.S. military to think in terms of war for unlimited aims with total means. As both James Schlesinger and Albert Wohlstetter argued at different times, U.S. military planning was biased toward the massive use of nuclear weapons, rather than exploring the possibility of the discriminate use of such weapons.[72]

Service Strategic Culture

Although U.S. defense policy emphasized nuclear weapons throughout the Cold War, the attitudes of individual armed services toward the weapons was mixed. The Army, Navy, and Air Force all embraced nuclear weapons during the early Cold War, but their interest in them waned thereafter.

During the early Cold War, the U.S. Army in particular embraced nuclear weapons. Indeed, in many ways the Army was predisposed to them. There was a good fit between nuclear weapons and the Army's tradition of substituting technology for manpower and its reliance on firepower. It fielded a family of nuclear weapons that ranged from the *Davy Crockett* nuclear bazooka to the massive 280mm nuclear cannon and the *Redstone* and *Jupiter* intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The Army viewed tactical nuclear weapons not so much as small strategic bombs, but as very powerful artillery.[73]

The Navy not only adopted nuclear weapons—first bombs for carrier-based aircraft, then cruise and ballistic missiles—but also adopted nuclear propulsion for both submarines and

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[72] Desmond Ball, "The Development of the SIOP, 1960-1983" in Desmond Ball and Jeffrey Richelson, eds., *Strategic Nuclear Targeting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 63; "Policy for Planning the Employment of Nuclear Weapons," National Security Council, NSDM-242, January 17, 1974, Washington, D.C.; and Fred Ikle and Albert Wohlstetter, *Discriminate Deterrence: Report of The Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, January 1988), 8.

[73] Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era,* 65.

surface ships. The Navy readily accepted nuclear propulsion for submarines because it fit comfortably within the identity of the submarine community. Indeed, Owen Coté has termed the nuclear submarine a "true submarine," "one that needed no umbilical cord to the surface and could remain completely submerged."[74]

Not surprisingly, the Air Force whole-heartedly embraced strategic nuclear bombing as its core mission. Bomber pilots dominated the Air Force as they had the Army Air Corps, and Strategic Air Command became the most powerful organization in the service. To many air power advocates, the advent of nuclear weapons seemed to validate the concept of strategic bombing that had animated aviators since the 1920s. The Air Force's embrace of strategic nuclear bombing yielded substantial dividends. During the 1950s, the U.S. Air Force garnered the lion's share of the defense budget. Nuclear-armed bombers, then nuclear-tipped missiles, became the coin of the realm.

During the late Cold War, however, the enthusiasm of each of the services for nuclear weapons diminshed. The shift was most dramatic in the case of the Army. The service that had reorganized in the mid-1950s around the possibility of nuclear warfare had by the early 1960s gone back to an organizational structure that bore more than a passing resemblance to its World War II structure.[75] Although a portion of the Army's artillery branch drew its identity from nuclear weapons, atomic arms were peripheral to the identity of the other combat arms – armor and infantry. Moreover, nuclear weapons played no role in Vietnam War and became a less prominent feature of the Army's major planning contingency, a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict in Central Europe.

Although nuclear weapons (and nuclear power) remained central to the identity of the Navy's submarine service, both became increasingly marginal to the identity of the surface navy and naval aviation. The last nuclear missile system to be deployed on surface ships, the BGM-109A *Tomahawk* Land Attack Missile-Nuclear (TLAM-N), was a program developed and advocated by Pentagon civilians. The missile the Navy really wanted was the BGM-109B

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[74] *Ibid.,* 21.

[75] Major Robert A. Doughty, *The Evolution of U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, ~1981), 23.

Tomahawk Anti-Ship Missile (TASM).[76] Even the Air Force's interest in nuclear weapons began to wane as fighter pilots displaced bomber pilots at the head of the service's hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

The enduring features of American strategic culture, military culture, and the organizational culture of the U.S. armed services has thus influenced how the United States has approached nuclear weapons. As a result, American strategic culture has been dominated by continuity rather than change. Six decades after the advent of the nuclear age, what is notable is the limited enduring impact of nuclear weapons on the way the U.S. military conceives of war.

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[76] Robert J. Art and Stephen E. Ockenden, "The Domestic Politics of Cruise Missile Development, 1970-1980" in Richard K. Betts, ed., *Cruise Missiles: Technology, Strategy, Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1981).

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