

Strategic Vision Can Be Powerful

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By Don DeYoung

Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. Hab. 2:2

Why can the subject of strategic vision make even the ancients want to flee?¹ For one thing, "strategic vision" can be just insipid business jargon that lures the executive staff into spending time, money, and goodwill to create ponderous documents that have little or no effect on future action. One military department, for example, produced more than 3,300 pages of text to help develop a vision for the post-Cold War world.² On the other hand, a powerful strategic vision can infuse action with meaning and direction, sufficient to guide a nation, organization, or individual through the most turbulent of times. The ancients also said, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18). But what makes the difference; what makes a vision powerful?

A powerful strategic vision expresses core values that inform action, and it nurtures the capabilities needed to prosecute that action. It is much more than speculating about world trends or forecasting the impact of future technologies. Strategic vision is grounded in the past, but it looks to the future. And because such a vision is durable, it should not require revision every few years. Two examples show that while the concept may be hard to explain, you know it when you see it.

➤ ***America's Founding.*** The strategic vision that created the United States is embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. With these two documents, the nation's founders drew on an Old World heritage tempered by New World experiences. Specifically, the Declaration's concepts of natural rights were rooted in the Enlightenment, and its revolutionary political ideals were forged by life in colonial America. This one-page document, still relevant today, expresses values that placed man in a revolutionary position with respect to his government.

The Constitution translated the Declaration's ideals into a practicable reality by developing political instruments that were appropriate and effective for a democratic republic. That it has had only 27 amendments attests to its remarkable workability. Together, the Declaration's expression of core values and the Constitution's pragmatic translation of those values into capabilities set a young nation on a radical new course with a powerful strategic vision to guide it.

➤ ***National Strategy during the Cold War.*** For nearly 40 years the U.S. conflict with the Soviet Union was guided by a strategic vision embodied in the containment strategy. Articulated by George Kennan's "X" article (1947) and Paul Nitze's *NSC-68* (1950), the strategy focused all three components of national power—political, economic, and military—toward the defeat of Soviet communism. The United States used its political power to lead the NATO alliance, its economic power to fund the Marshall Plan, and its military power to extend deterrence to Europe. And, when necessary, this strategy contained the Soviet Union within its sphere of influence through the application of military force.

Neither the "X" article nor *NSC-68* predicted future technologies or planned force structures. Instead, they articulated a vision that was durable enough to guide the administrations of nine U.S. presidents through a long struggle with a hostile and expansionist ideology. In the end, the strategy's success lay in the fact that it was compatible with the nation's values and capabilities.

Visions of a Post-Cold War World

In the years after the Cold War, the U.S. military has had many visions. DoD issued "Joint Vision 2010" (1995) and "Joint Vision 2020" (2000). The Army had "Force XXI" (1994), "Army Vision 2010" (1996), and "The Army Vision" (2000). The Air Force put out "The Air Force and U.S. National Security" (1990), "Global Reach-Global Power" (1992), "Global Presence" (1995), "Global Engagement" (1996), and "Air Force Vision 2020" (2000). The Navy had ". . . From the Sea" (1992) and "Forward . . . from the Sea" (1994), and the Marine Corps followed with "Operational Maneuver . . . from the Sea" (1996).

Why so many visions? Perhaps winning the Cold War has caused prolonged strategic instability. Victory shattered worldviews that had been status quo for nearly 50 years, and with that military roles and missions shook. If ongoing re-visions are indicators of strategic instability or drift, then perhaps it can be argued that the Marine Corps is the most strategically stable service and the Air Force the least.

Or perhaps the impetus behind the recent rash of re-visions has to do with the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review. One might question whether the re-visions actually are public relations tools used to jockey for roles, missions, and increased budgets. Reviewing each service vision to answer that question would require too much time, but there are four prerequisites to creating a vision that expresses core values that inform action and nurtures the capabilities needed to prosecute that action—know the enemy, know yourself, support national values, and recognize that technology is not a value. (These mirror the elements that form personal visions—comprehend the world, understand who you are, believe in something larger than yourself, and know that what you possess does not define who you are—which might be expected, given that organizational visions are built on the visions of individuals.) If one or more are missing, the service has either failed to create an effective vision or is merely posturing for maximum effect in the budget wars.

- ***Know the enemy.*** The armed forces must have an accurate view of the world and a realistic sense of how threats might emerge so that effective capabilities (i.e., doctrine, tactics, and technology) are developed in time to meet those threats. This is doubly necessary because traditional balance-of-power conflicts have been released from the moderating influences of the Cold War, with a new and disturbing complication—transnational ethnic and religious groups with the desire, and someday the means, to threaten the viability of nation-states. But despite the advice of reviews such as the 1997 National Defense Panel, which emphasized uncertainty and the dangers of overcommitment to particular weapon systems, defense-budget proposals still favor spending increases for updating existing platforms and weapons.³ This is a worrisome trend.

In the past, the United States has relied heavily on sea power for dealing with balance-of-power conflicts. But before our historical reliance on warships can be projected into the future, naval forces must answer how the fleet will respond to asymmetrical threats and use force to attain meaningful political ends under these circumstances. The other services must do the same.

- ***Know yourself.*** Self-knowledge provides a clear sense of purpose and makes uncertainty less daunting. In his book *The Masks of War*, Carl Builder examines how the military departments see themselves and how values shape their identities and influence their behavior. He makes a convincing case that the Navy "worships" tradition, particularly its tradition of autonomy; the Army worships service to country; and the Air Force worships technology.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of service identity, and equally hard to put it into words. Fortunately, service mottoes and emblems often can convey what is deeply understood but rarely articulated. Perhaps the most powerful example is the Marine Corps motto, *Semper Fidelis*, and its emblem, the eagle, globe and anchor—a shared sense of identity subtly expressed and collectively honored. It is unlikely that Marines waste much time agonizing about their identity or looking externally for advice on how to present their service's image to others. In contrast is the Air Force's decision to create a new slogan and emblem for the 21st century. Instead of drawing from within its ranks, the service conducted focus groups and hired a New York public-relations firm whose clients include American Express and Coca-Cola.⁴ Not surprisingly, this has caused much dissension within the service.

- ***Support national values.*** The sole purpose of the U.S. military is to defend national interests, which are driven by security requirements and national values. Security requirements, such as political independence and territorial integrity, are concrete necessities and require no discussion. Not so concrete are national values.

Some national values change over time, such as the historical distrust of a large standing army. In colonial America, the people feared such an army might become a tool of dictatorship, but by 1972, the distrust had diminished enough to support an all-volunteer professional force. Another example is the military's shift in focus over the past ten years, becoming less an instrument of warfare and more a humanitarian and peacekeeping force. When the military does go to war, there is now almost a precondition that there be few or no casualties. Other changes in national values are resulting in wider acceptance of women in combat roles and tolerance for homosexuals in the ranks.

But some national values are enduring, such as freedom of trade, freedom of the seas, and autonomy of action—values particularly supported by naval forces. From 1801, when they deployed to the Mediterranean to protect U.S. shipping off Tripoli, to 1990, when they arrived in the Gulf for Desert Shield, naval forces have defended freedom of the seas and freedom of trade—and have done so as sovereign warships, capable of self-sustained, independent action. No other service is capable of such powerful forward presence. The Air Force's long-range heavy bombing is a critical and unique mission, but it is not the same as a

sustained and visible forward presence offering prompt, effective, and repetitive strikes. It bears noting that 1998's military strikes against terrorist sites in Sudan, which is nearly land-locked, and Afghanistan, which is land-locked, were accomplished solely by U.S. warships. The nation requires forward-deployed military power.

- ***Recognize that technology is not a value.*** The international balance of power is sensitive to emerging technologies, so perhaps it is understandable that the military, and in particular the Air Force, has a tendency to worship at technology's altar. But technology is not a value; it is just a tool for enhancing the capabilities of land power and sea power.

The Navy, in fact, has preserved its capabilities of power projection, sea control, strategic deterrence, and sustained forward presence through constant technological innovation. The Naval Research Laboratory invented the first U.S. radar, the first intelligence satellite, and the first global positioning system satellite prototypes—each of which literally tipped the balance of power. But in each case, technology was a tool. When it becomes a value, invention becomes the mother of necessity, and new weapon systems must look for missions.

Air Force, Yes; Air Power, No

Perhaps the Air Force identifies with and depends on technology, to the point of being defined by it, because the service actually is no more than a military capability. With all due respect to the theories of Giulio Douhet and Billy Mitchell, perhaps there is no such thing as air power, only air force projected by land or sea power. Dominating the skies through air force is critical in warfare, but seizing and holding ground and sea is essential to achieving political goals. Air force is used by land power and sea power to pursue those goals. In other words, military power has only two components: land and sea.

Some may dismiss this argument as creative semantics. But recall Winston Churchill's comment that "airpower is the most difficult of all forms of military force to measure, or even to express in precise terms."⁵ Churchill was on to something. The difficulty lies in trying to measure a force that in isolation achieves no measurable outcome other than the destruction of targets. Unlike air force, land power and sea power seize and hold ground or sea that achieves political objectives—the beaches of Normandy and the woods of the Ardennes, the Pusan perimeter and the Inchon harbor, the seas surrounding 1962 Cuba, the streets of Hue and the firebase at Khe Sanh, the desert plains of Iraq. In contrast, since the end of the Gulf War the United States has dominated the skies of Iraq, but with little effect on political objectives, such as ensuring that Iraq is not producing weapons of mass destruction.

This could be why air force enthusiasts refer to space as the "high ground" and why the service refers to itself as the "Aerospace Force." In this way aerospace power can take its place alongside land and sea power, thus ensuring long-term relevance for the Air Force. But until that occurs, it would seem that a structural flaw was created in 1947 when the rib of fixed-wing air force was taken from the body of U.S. land power.

Back to the National Vision

Service visions often are summed up in "vision statements" that fall somewhere in length between a motto and a mission statement, but without the power of the former or the information of the latter. They ring hollow, are of little use, and advertise the U.S. armed services like one might an overnight package delivery company. This point becomes more apparent if we try to distill a vision statement from the larger national vision articulated in the Declaration of Independence:

One People, Endowed with Unalienable Rights, Dissolving Political Bands to Institute a New Government that Derives Its Just Powers from the Consent of the Governed.

It lacks power, passion, and purpose.

Service visions not anchored to the national vision risk becoming self-contained, which can disconnect them from the larger vision, or self-serving, which risks subordinating the national interest to the service vision. It also is critical that national values be identified, understood, and supported by the services. When service visions cite values, they often are personal and institutional, such as integrity, service, and excellence—all desirable qualities for employees and organizations. But they fail to instill greater and more fitting meaning to the ultimate purpose of American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, which is to fight, and if need be die, for our country.

On 22 September 1999, Senator Charles S. Robb (D-VA) received the Marine Corps League "Iron Mike Award." His remarks on his military service describe with powerful clarity what happens when personal vision, service vision, and national vision converge.

It helped shape my core values and guiding principles. It helped me understand who I was and what I wanted to do. And it helped reinforce my belief that we get more out of what we live for once we accept what we're willing to die for.

1 Not being a biblical scholar, I likely missed the accurate—but less humorous—meaning of this verse.

2 The Air University, "Air Force 2025," June 1996.

3 Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Allen K. Kaufman, "Security Lessons from the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 1999), p. 89.

4 Elaine M. Grossman, "Air Force Leaders at Odds Over Unveiling New 'World Ready' Identity," *Inside the Pentagon*, 16 December 1999.

5 Cited by Gen. R. Fogelman, former Air Force Chief of Staff, in a speech presented at the Air Force Association National Symposium, Los Angeles, 18 October 1996.

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