

A paper featured at the  
2011 Topical Symposium:

***Forging an American Grand Strategy:  
Securing a Path Through a Complex Future***

Hosted by:  
The Institute for National Strategic Studies  
of  
The National Defense University

8-9 November 2011

**By**

**ROBERT POLK**



Papers presented at NDU Symposia reflect original research by members of NDU as well as other scholars and specialists in national security affairs from this country and abroad. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.

# **Designing the U.S. President's Ability to Make Strategy**

## **A Presentation By**

**Bob Polk**

Hello. My name is Bob Polk and I want to start my presentation with a story. The year is 2018, and the National Well-Being Act passed by Congress six years earlier had already established the new and unprecedented National Planning & Execution Management System. On this day, U.S. President Jennifer Landon is preparing for counsel on a brewing international situation centered on the country of Pacifica. In my book, *The Thinking and Doing of National Security – A Proposal for the President*, I depict several characters in this day-in-the-life scenario but here I will offer only the perspectives from the President. (Polk, 2010, pp. 96–98)

From President Landon: I entered the Think Room of the National Assessment, Visioning, and Integration Center (NAVIC) with my accompanying National Security Staff (NSS) staff and Cabinet members for the deliberation ‘experience’ orchestrated by the White House Chief of Staff (CofS). The NAVIC had its work cut out for it. By the end of the 90-minute session, the NSS staff and key Cabinet members, with assisting NAVIC professionals, presented me with all the essential fused aspects of the environment affecting Pacifica and its potential for success or failure. The presentation went according to the usual script using the now venerated ends, ways and means thinking and doing [slide 2] framework enshrined in National Planning & Execution Pub or NPE-1, version 2.0. The situation in Pacifica was only one of eighty-five high priority issue areas being managed by the NAVIC across the five geographical knowledge bins.

To be exact, upon taking office, I had approved planning and monitoring of thirteen issues for Space; twenty-two issues affecting the entire Globe; seven Regional issues affecting a total of thirty-one countries and seventy-two percent of the Earth's population; seventeen Country-specific issues; and twenty-six issues of national security affecting the Internal U.S. mainland. I was intimately familiar with this framework model, as the reports I received daily from the White House CofS and my Cabinet were always broken down into these same categories, and as I sat in my "captain's chair", I was able to ask very penetrating questions about Pacifica after the briefing had ended.

Furthermore, because my staff and the NAVIC were already fully integrated with the resource management arm of my executive branch, and also because my team had fully integrated the Congressional oversight and watchdog councils high and early, I could, at that very moment, turn to my team in the Think Room to get a strong sense of whether the Pacifica situation was spinning out of control and, if so, what I had at my disposal to do about it.

The NAVIC's risk assessment modeling plus its red teaming of the NSS's preliminary recommendations on Pacifica gave me a good feel for the complexities and the potential tradeoffs. All of this was displayed visually in front of me, and this conversation was beaming real-time to all the participating actors' mini NAVICs around the country and globe with two-way, full-sized 3-D, Blu-ray surround sound quality.

I saw the impact of doing nothing clearly from the presentation 'experience' that the Visioning Team had brought forth. After my staff and I took our multisensory headsets off, we clearly understood in the most visceral, four-dimensional way that the United States' presence on the ground in Pacifica would change lives. This multisensory briefing

technique had prepared me exceptionally well, combined with the series of ten eight-minute visual presentations in addition to my twenty-minute pre-presentation discussion I'd had over coffee with my inner team of advisors in an adjacent room just minutes before joining the full staff in the Think Room.

I thanked the White House CofS for orchestrating this fine staff work and mentioned that I was particularly happy with the work that the NAVIC had done in pulling together the experience. I left the room to join my advisors back in the adjacent President's Room to discuss the options in more detail. [slide 1] I understood the integration factors for my national ways and means to support my ends, and I understood how this particular matter of Pacifica fit inside the context of my administration's broader Grand Strategy priorities based on my National Security Review and the status of the government and commercial systems at play from our ongoing (living) National Operational Analyses. My national assessment teams had helped me link my original priorities to the evolving environmental factors of red (key adversaries), blue (key U.S. missions and program outcomes) and green (key partner intents, missions, programs and capabilities affecting this issue area) across all the various spectrums, and I knew how they all were leading me toward change in both the near, mid and long term.

I was confident that no matter the direction, my executive branch was more ready than ever, after a five-year reform effort had finally produced a more modular executive branch with core and surge templates for easy reconfiguration to respond to any national or international need. [slide 5] I had already experienced success with my first Presidential Issue Team a year earlier, with its whole-of-government execution of a mission in the homeland during an earthquake in central Missouri. I also knew from that experience that

the 'living' quality of my planning and execution management system and products were the key to a flexible response, especially when some of the preconceived plans had been off the mark.

Finally, it had been a stretch in the beginning to eliminate the use of the words policy, plans, and strategies and replace these three with the one word; "approaches" but the change proved a valuable reinvention of the 18<sup>th</sup> century constructs. [slide 7] I knew that all the parts of the system upon which I would soon rely for action in Pacifica were now empowered to think and act in a truly decentralized manner and this change reflected that reality. All levels were free to consider the inter-connectedness of the various ends, ways, and means at all levels to the fullest extent because we had learned that strategic aims and effects could and often did occur at every level. Policy now simply referred to as ends was no longer relegated only to the highest realms; we now acknowledged a 21<sup>st</sup> century paradigm with fewer artificially imposed cognitive boundaries. My White House ends, ways, means Approach would support an integrated Cabinet ends, ways, means Approach and so forth. All approaches vertically and horizontally would nest. It worked well during the Missouri earthquake response and I was eager to embrace this innovation with Pacifica.

I felt gratitude to those who had the foresight in previous decades to see these visions for a more effective 21st century national planning and execution management system and, in this particular instance, I could feel the way ahead. But now I just needed a bit of time to soak it all in. A decision would be forthcoming in the morning...

This story represents a slice of what a future national system of thinking and doing might look and feel like at a point in time to a single actor – in this case the President. As

you may surmise, my premise today has less to do with actual grand strategy per se and more to do with how we make grand strategy and follow through with its implementation. So I am here to talk about the HOW of Grand Strategy making--not the WHAT.

Let me note that the following remarks do not reflect the views of my parent research institute. I also acknowledge that my thoughts are not presented as a final evidenced-based proposal but as food for thought. I am simply offering a vision of what could be while other solutions are certainly possible if not likely. I only want to help shape the contour of the debate from a slightly different series of perspectives.

My choice to focus on the mechanisms of strategy making rather than on any particular strategy is especially prudent if you believe Professor Russell L. Meade's assertion that we already have a U.S. grand strategy; and it works. He offers a single voice that I find interesting and useful as a contrast to some of what you may have heard already. It also serves my purpose of stirring the debate.

Meade proposes several components of what he calls America's existing, historical, 'strategy to dominate the world'. First, the U.S. established and maintained an open society at home where everyone was welcome, especially with his or her ideas. Secondly, the U.S. took, 'the show on the road' and aggressively engaged with the rest of the world. Thirdly, with its new friends, the U.S. bought, traded, and grew rich. Fourth, the U.S. developed and maintained a geo-political strategy and vision to match this open and engaging economic vision. (Russell L. Meade, 2009)

According to Meade, this global geo-political strategy ushered in our now default balance of power paradigm. This contributed to a self-beneficial world order where all societies were open to engagement and trade with the U.S. Such a world order was one in

which all global participants could get rich and happy as long as everyone played by the same rules as we. The hope was and remains that intertwined interests reduce the will for conflict.

So there it is. The U.S. fundamentally rejected the “Lighthouse State” where Bismarck standing in his fortress tower elevated above the rest of society sees, thinks great thoughts and then plays a complicated game of chess with other leaders in other towers across the different nations. From the state comes a beam of light that illuminates the course to follow. Instead we evolved into a Mirror State where the political process reflects the various different voices and coalitions fighting over the wheel. All interests on board combine to vector the ship of state. There is no intellectual construct of divine thinkers sitting in tall towers. Rather the state and its people look at history and the patterns of its actions to put pressure on the system.

Meade at least correctly points out that we simply don’t keep the ship of state in tact long enough to make really grand strategy of generational significance. Instead we are all on board a ship that lurches from side to side never quite going where we want it to for very long (Meade, 2009) and...it hasn’t run aground, yet. I think our future President Jennifer Landon would likely still agree with this overall characterization in 2018.

Rebecca Costa in her 2010 book, *The Watchman’s Rattle*, adds color to this conversation. She suggests that our greatest problems are no longer political anymore; they are biological. Specifically, she reports that science and anthropology have converged to prove that the human brain hasn’t evolved to keep up with human progress. Complexity has outpaced the brain’s ability to process it causing it to hit what she terms a cognitive threshold or the difference between the slow speed at which the human brain can evolve

and the rapid rate at which complexity grows. (Costa, 2010, p. 188). She argues that all fallen human civilizations suffered in part from this very phenomenon.

Costa answers the so-what of her research by contending that when societies reach a collective cognitive threshold, it begins to replace facts with simple beliefs – beliefs that increasingly have no substantiation. This can lead to the creation of false memes (beliefs passed unchallenged to the next generation) sold by false prophets. Some memes grow into super memes and affect the very fabric of societies.

Costa goes on to report that the U.S. is entering such a societal cognitive threshold. Who can argue that the U.S. Congress is not overwhelmed with complexity? The U.S. President is certainly no better off. Who among us understands the global economy? Does anyone have a handle on the intersection of religion and politics anymore? Who has the time or the ability to really make sense of this world that is paradoxically getting smaller every day? These are just a few opportunities where unsubstantiated beliefs can easily creep into the conversation and become the non-evidenced base norm for us as individuals. The more extreme beliefs can infect mainstream societies.

Costa argues that the following super memes are at work today here in America and in many global societies preventing growth and stagnating progress: 1) Irrational opposition to each other and to evidence-based argument; 2) The personalization of blame as the scapegoat for compromise; 3) Counterfeit correlations where causation is no longer the standard and simple correlation however falsely conceived will do; 4) Silo thinking where we find it too difficult to see the world as complex and intertwined leading to solutions that often fall far short of being holistic, and finally; 5) Extreme economics where short term profit is the moral equivalent of the harder right even if the long term negative

consequences may be obvious. (Costa, 2010, p. 175) These super memes, if they do exist, can cloud or even block any strategic approaches to thinking and doing.

Alas, Costa gives hope when she reports how there may be some human approaches to complement our social and political approaches that can help us break away and move beyond this cognitive threshold. Most importantly she suggests the increased and deliberate use of insight as a tool of left & right brain synthesis. She offers evidence of now provable scientific phenomenon that supports the ability to nearly call up insight on demand. Here, Costa champions Dr. Michael Merzenich's research on brain fitness where certain warm up exercises in the brain can measurably lead to such insight creation.(Merzenich, n.d.)

As a short aside for those of us who call ourselves visioning, foresight, strategy-making or planning experts, Costa reports that when viewing brain activity on a computer screen, short-term thinking in humans stimulates a great deal of colored, lighted activity on display. However, when humans think about long-term tasks, the human brain barely displays a glimmer! Controlled for other variables, the implication is that we seem to be biologically hard wired to support actions of immediate import while evolutionarily eschewing long-term consequences. This is the brain we have today. Is it any wonder then that strategy making is hard for us? Costa asserts that some evidence suggests that our brain actually tries to reduce, in evolutionary terms, long-term thinking abilities as superfluous and even harmful to our basic survival needs.

As if the challenge to long-term thinking couldn't get worse, Costa also notes most of us already know that, "When business principles prevail, there is enormous pressure for individuals to respond to complex problems with great speed and efficiency. Quick,

decisive action is prized over slower, thoughtful methodical examination...” but then she adds, “Never mind that [our] leaders possess the same biological apparatus we do and, therefore, are overwhelmed by complexity in the same way we are in our daily lives.”(Costa, 2010, p. 172). Isn’t it time we take a closer look at the biological aspects of our human capacity in strategy making?

In the storyline I offered earlier, President Landon understands these limitations all too well and in recognition of this, she immersed herself in the ‘deliberation experience’ to gain advantages in decision-making that were not available to past leaders. She praised and embraced the new tools to enhance her understanding and improve her participation in strategy making. Finally, she inspired others to do the same.

Costa concludes with a final note on how to mitigate against these biological limitations and long held super memes. Reminding us that complexity theory states that there are more wrong solutions than right ones, she suggests that the only way to get at these fewer right solutions is by doing something; or as some might say in more technical terms, prototyping using ‘high failure rate modeling’. This is very similar to what the design thinking community espouses.

According to one of the most famous offspring of the design community, the company IDEO and its current President, design thinking is defined as a, “human-centered, creative, iterative, and practical approach to finding the best ideas and ultimate solutions.” The U.S. military’s leading authority on design thinking, the School of Advance Military Studies (SAMS) adds that design thinkers are unique in their ability to produce novel and unexpected solutions, tolerate uncertainty, work with incomplete information, apply

imagination and constructive forethought to practical problems using drawings and other modeling media as means to problem solving. (“Art of Design\_v2.pdf,” n.d.)

In their book, *Designing for Growth*, Liedtka and Ogilvie (L&O) support this discussion by offering a testimony from a design-thinking veteran that there are two types of problems – mysteries and puzzles. Puzzles are problems with an answer. Mysteries are situations where there may not even exist a discernable problem let alone a solution (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 13). The latter situation is where design thinking distinguishes itself from analysis with its heavy use of visualization, pursuit of novelty, emotional context, iterative movement between abstract and practical, co-creation with users, and prototyping where the object is to learn not launch (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 12).

So why isn’t design thinking a more popularly employed technique in the USG today? Well, as my colleague TX Hammes from the National Defense University reminded me recently, the challenge of design thinking is in how to translate the iterative process of design into the linear processes of bureaucracy. If anyone could answer this question, it would be the team of L&O.

L&O’s thoughts apply equally to the public and private sectors and so I want to introduce their thoughts as relevant to the U.S. national mechanisms for making grand strategy. According to L&O, design thinking can be made practical by applying the following approaches: 1) Exploring current reality and framing a challenge (or determining *What is*); 2) Generating new possibilities for growth (of determining *What if*); 3) Testing assumptions and refining and prototyping the concept (or determining *What wows*); and 4) Enrolling customers to shape it into something we can execute (or

determining *What works*). There are a number of sub-steps and techniques embedded in each of these.(Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 21)

None of this is full proof of course, and L&O point out that failure to achieve results from design thinking usually revolves around an inability to connect the concept to an unmet need; failure to get the results prioritized amid the sea of ideas and priorities; failure to prototype or visualize the results so others understand it; and failure to get live customers involved in shaping the results from the beginning (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 178).

One of the most profound aspects of design thinking is its ability, “to bypass the culture of debate and help managers learn through action in the marketplace” (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 167). Most of us would intuitively agree with the statement that, “...the greatest barriers to growth and innovation in most organizations are not about competitors and customers and market conditions, they are about the organization’s internal army of designated doubters exercising their veto power before you even have the chance to try.”(Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 184) So one way to help ease design thinking into an organization is first never to call it design thinking. Just do the techniques and call it whatever you like and, think small...at first. Don’t push all the ideas at once.

Finally, L&O provide a great list of attributes of a successful design team. My sense is that this list would be great targets to shoot for in the national professional education system for America’s civil servants. Ask yourself if these attributes would be found in most of today’s government staffs and leaders? Design teams should have a diversity of skills including: 1) Observation and listening; 2) Framing and strategy; 3) Analysis; 4) Visualization and storytelling; 5) Organization and management; 6) Low ego needs –

collective wisdom will lie dormant if a dominant personality squelches debate; 7) Co-location and a flexible, collaborative physical space; 8) A shared purpose; and 9) A formal extended team (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 187). I don't know about you, but I'd like to be a part of such a team and these are the attributes I would want in a national strategy making organization.

Now I want to give you my suggestions for combining a proper strategic context with our better understanding of the biological limitations of humans along with techniques in design thinking rolled into the proper functions and forms of a successful system for the thinking and doing in the USG. What I will describe briefly is the detailed system I created as the backdrop to the day-in-the-life story of President Jennifer Landon in the year 2018. Here we are going back to the future. I call my approach the National Planning and Execution Management System. [slide 1] Its components consist of the interaction amongst the President, his/her National Security Staff, the 50 governors and the U.S. departments as well as the public at large and the Congress in new and creative ways.

My proposed system begins with a proposed common way of framing any conversation on strategy making into five concentric bins of knowledge. [slide 2] Any issue that could affect the viability and vitality of the nation will find a home in one of these bins. These bins are: space, the globe, regions, countries, and internal U.S. matters. I realize that at first glance such a framework seems to defy modern reality that most of our problems today abide by no boundaries from global warming to health concerns and the economy. Yet, every such trans-boundary issue imaginable can be categorized in one of these categories. Each of these broad categories is sub-organized into the timeframes of near,

mid, and long-term. The intersections of these timeframes and geographical knowledge bins contain the various national strategies for linking the ways and means to all stated ends for every issue area of concern. This thinking and doing framework would serve as a template across all the participants in the National Planning and Execution Management System.

The linchpin of this system would be a newly established capability called the National Assessment, Visioning, and Integration Center (NAVIC) [slide 3 then 4] housed within the EOP. It's functions would include in broad terms: 1) Providing visioning, assessing, strategy-making services up to the National Security Staff (NSS) and Congress while never making policy itself; 2) Providing the same services out to the Governors and the U.S. Cabinet; and finally, 3) Integrating all national assessments and assisting the Governors and U.S. Cabinet in synthesizing feedback and lessons learned into new approaches for the President and the administration to consider. Selected congressional entities would have an unprecedented access high and early in the executive processes within the NAVIC.

The NAVIC's would serve the NSS as its primary client and it is from the NSS that the NAVIC would get its priorities. These services would free the already beleaguered NSS to stay focused on its primary duties of advising the President on the national ends while leaving the NAVIC and the Cabinet to devise and integrate the ways and means.

The NAVIC would enjoy state-of-the-art facilities, design thinking, and other visual decision support aids. It would provide continuity on matters across the spectrum of national priorities, staffs, and organizations. It would provide a common informational connectivity across the breadth of actors. It would provide the President multiple

redundant command center capabilities throughout the 50 states, the Cabinet, and the Congress. Each of these sub systems would include small versions of the NAVIC to create a bottom up, empowered system of systems. [slide 6] It would emphasize the integration of both thinking and doing under one roof. Each of the geographical knowledge bins would have their corresponding functional areas managed by Senate confirmed Assistant Directors serving for 15-year tours reporting to one Presidentially appointed Executive Director. The Executive Director would also serve as the deputy to the President's Chief of Staff in order to ensure the overall system serves as the pleasure of the President.

So this is the system that President Landon inherited to cohere the full breadth and depth of the U.S. government more effectively in making strategy. She used this system as a way to mitigate against threats and to take advantage of opportunities that affected the viability and vitality of the nation in the near, mid, and long term. Her system included the human and organizational dimensions of thinking and doing as equal sides of the same coin. It also included developing the visions through foresight leading to making strategy that matches the ways and means to our designated ends through a human-centered process of design.

All these ideas are more fully expressed in my book. The only adjustment I've made in this talk from what is written in my book is to downplay the use of the term 'security' when security has become a red herring for narrow constructs. In my book I broaden the meaning of this term widely to include anything that affects the viability and vitality of the nation. Some suggested that I eliminate the word security from my title and while I agree with the sentiment, it is a little too late for that. Regardless, I encourage all of you to read

and if possible initiate a dialogue with others and me on my ideas as we work together to create better strategy-making capabilities for the USG.

## References:

- ArtofDesign\_v2.pdf. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CGSC/events/sams/ArtofDesign\\_v2.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CGSC/events/sams/ArtofDesign_v2.pdf)
- Costa, R. (2010). *The Watchman's Rattle: Thinking Our Way Out of Extinction* (First Edition, First Printing). Vanguard Press.
- Liedtka, J., & Ogilvie, T. (2011). *Designing for Growth: A Design Thinking Toolkit for Managers*. Columbia University Press.
- Merzenich, M. (n.d.). Dr. Michael Merzenich's Brain Fitness Program: "You Can Rejuvenate Your Memory And Your Abilities To Learn" «□DeansGuide. Retrieved October 27, 2011, from <http://deansguide.wordpress.com/2007/12/15/dr-michael-merzenichs-brain-fitness-program-you-can-rejuvenate-your-memory-and-your-abilities-to-learn/>
- Polk, R. B. (2010). *The "Thinking and Doing" of National Security: A Proposal for the President*. Trafford Publishing.
- Russell L. Meade. (2009, December 10). U.S. Grand Strategy - from Theory to Practice. *Rethinking Seminar Series*. Retrieved October 27, 2011, from <http://outerdnn.outer.jhuapl.edu/rethinking/VideoArchives/MeadVideo.aspx>