IS STRATEGY AN ILLUSION?

Karl Walling

Betts, Richard K. *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas of National Security.* New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2012. 367pp. $20

Richard Betts is one of the most distinguished strategists in the United States today. He is the Salzman Professor of War and Peace Studies and the director of the International Security Policy Program at Columbia University. Not only has he written five prizewinning scholarly books, but he has a wealth of practical experience in formulating and implementing U.S. national security policy and strategy. He has served on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (the Church Committee), the National Security Council during the Carter administration in the 1970s, and on the National Commission on Terrorism (the Bremer Commission) in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

In *American Force* Betts synthesizes his scholarship and practical experience in a book that is in part a collection of articles he has written since the end of the Cold War and in part a kind of intellectual autobiography—a quasi memoir. He tells the story of his transformation from being a Cold War hawk along the lines of Senator "Scoop" Jackson into a post–Cold War dove, somewhere between now–Secretary of State John Kerry and Congressman Dennis Kucinich. Some might find this transformation inconsistent, but Betts is a political realist. The nature of the threat during the Cold War required national self-assertion. The end of the Cold War made such assertion less necessary, but, Betts laments, American political leaders rushed too hastily to fill a power vacuum, and this effort to globalize the American system was bound to produce a backlash.

For Betts, U.S. political leaders made two different kinds of strategic mistakes in the aftermath of the Cold War, one resulting from fecklessness, the other from recklessness. The Clintonites were feckless. As crises developed around the world and public pressure mounted to "do something," they became willing to intervene in Somalia and the Balkans and elsewhere but not to do anything that might prove politically unpopular, that might cost or risk much in public opinion polls. The result was halfhearted compromises—enough presence to put Americans in uniform in

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harm's way but not enough force for them to achieve anything decisive. Quoting Clausewitz, Betts observes that "a short jump is certainly easier than a long one, but no one wanting to get across a wide ditch would begin by jumping half-way." Self-defeating as such faintheartedness might be, Betts is much more incensed by the recklessness he associates with the second Bush administration. Following Samuel Huntington and Walter Russell Mead, he worries about self-inflicted clashes of civilizations arising from ambitions to remake the world order in the American image. This cure may often be worse than the disease, as it spreads disorder, chaos, terror, murder, and even genocide throughout regions, the Middle East especially. Hence, one of Betts's best chapters consists of advice against preventive wars, which rarely turn out well and usually compromise the legitimacy of the instigator of the war. For Betts, preventive wars are almost always opportunities well lost.

The reason lies in the most provocative and deeply theoretical chapter in the book, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" If it is, many who teach at war colleges may need to find a new line of work, so the question deserves careful attention. The chapter was first published as an article in *International Security* in 2000; Betts has updated it to apply to the present. For Betts, strategy is meant to be the bridge between policy and operations. In principle, national interest, grand strategy, policy, strategy, operations, and even tactics are linked in a rational way, with lower means serving ever higher ends. But is such a chain of cause and effect really possible when political leaders choose to use force as an instrument of policy?

Betts produces ten critiques of the very possibility of this sort of instrumental rationality. These range from the difficulty in all wars of predicting what the political result of using force might be to the possibility that nonrational psychological and cultural mind-sets may blind leaders to what actually motivates them. These include cognitive constraints on the ability of anyone in war to comprehend all its variables, especially when "nonlinear" dimensions need to be factored into the strategic calculus; "goal displacement," in which standard operating procedures of complex organizations become ends in themselves rather than entirely changeable means of achieving strategic objectives; interaction with the enemy; and "friction." In the United States especially, they include democratic pluralism, which makes it difficult to set a coherent policy or to tailor strategy to it, and the need for compromise, which makes it highly likely that more than a few political leaders will jump only halfway across Clausewitz's ditch, thus failing to achieve their objectives.

Betts attempts to "salvage strategy" by refuting each of these critiques, showing they are at best partial and do not prove that strategy is impossible, but their cumulative weight makes him well aware that if anything can go wrong in strategy, it often will, which makes him skeptical of those whose fecklessness or recklessness

leads them too eagerly to follow Shakespeare's Mark Antony in "cry[ing] 'Havoc!,' and let[ting] slip the dogs of war." As much as anything, this explains why Betts became a post–Cold War dove. You never know for sure where the dogs of war will go. Hence, it would be folly to fight preventive wars. Betts is not a pacifist, but he insists on restraint, which is not the same as isolation. There is so much uncertainty that wars need to be avoided unless the stakes are extraordinarily high and there is good evidence that a reasonable chance exists of return on the investment of lives, treasure, prestige, and legitimacy. Strategy is not an illusion, but we should avoid the delusion that it can ever be easy. When force is to be used, however, Betts is a hawk. Concentrate force for decisive victory, preferably a quick one, which is often the most humanitarian way to fight as well. Also, because of the cumulative weight of the critiques of the very possibility of strategy, Betts insists on simplicity in planning. The fewer the parts in any plan, the less chance there will be for friction among them. Above all, Betts wants his readers to be mindful of stakes. Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations are threats, but not of the same kind as the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. The greatest threat in the twenty-first century is likely to be of the same kind as in the twentieth century—namely, great-power war—so prioritizing against potential peer competitors is the essence of strategic prudence today.

In strategy, it seems, everything old is new again. Perhaps unintentionally, Betts winds up sounding a great deal like Colin Powell. He has almost reinvented the Powell Doctrine, blending caution against resorting to war with overwhelming force when war is chosen as an instrument of policy. At times he sounds like a cheerleader for the Obama administration: "Don't do stupid stuff." But even that administration has found it difficult to follow the all-or-nothing approach of the Betts (aka Powell) Doctrine. Middle-range threats may require something between all and nothing, like drone strikes and special operations, for example. Middle-range threats—dare one say it?—may require more "flexible responses" than Betts seems willing to endorse, though always with some risk that they will be mere half-measures. That said, this book is a marvelous blend of theory, historical cases, and social-science insight, the sort most war college professors could only dream of writing. It merits careful study by all who labor to ensure that strategy is not an illusion.