

STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES FOR U.S. POLICY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

By Harry G. Summers, Jr.

Editor's Preview: What are the objectives of United States policy in trouble spots like El Salvador, Nicaragua, Grenada, Lebanon? In which of these crisis points should we take the offensive, which the defensive?

With only limited military power to deploy against worldwide Soviet expansionism, where is it most important for the U.S. to mass its forces—and where can we economize force in order to do so? How can we balance the need for military security and surprise with the democratic requirements of an open society?

And the question most pressing in many Americans' minds, has this country learned the right lessons from its bitter experience in Vietnam (as well as from the West's unpreparedness in the 1930s) to be able to defend its interests and values short of war in the 1980s?

Colonel Harry G. Summers of the U.S. Army War College is an exceptionally thoughtful student of those lessons and of the enduring strategic principles they illustrate. Here, in one of the most timely and applicable articles *Imprimis* has ever published, Col. Summers outlines the nine classic Principles of War, proposes a tenth, and suggests how they might guide our thinking about meeting the Soviet-Cuban thrust into the United States' strategic backyard.

U.S. policy in Central America appears generally sound according to these principles, the author says, but dangers remain. Although he does not expand his analysis to take in Lebanon, readers will certainly be tempted to do so for themselves. More than just informative reading, this month's issue is a formidable tool for intelligent citizen action. Clausewitz never seemed more contemporary.

As one looks at the strategic issues facing the United States, whether they be in Central America or elsewhere in the world, the framework provided by the Principles



of War provides a constructive and useful set of questions with which to formulate a response. These principles break down into three primary questions:

- What are we trying to do?
- How are we going to do it?
- Who is going to command and control it?

If these questions are correctly answered, then military power—in conjunction with diplomatic, economic and psychological power—can be a useful instrument by which to attain, or assist in attaining the national political objectives of the United States.

Since I am not a Central American specialist, this attempt to lay out a framework for analyzing American concerns in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and nearby countries may seem somewhat presumptuous. But strategic principles, if they are indeed *principles*, should have universal application, and should thus provide a framework for

analyzing and understanding problem issues in any region of the world, including Central America.

To help us build such a framework, the Department of Defense definition of national strategy provides a useful point of departure. "National strategy," the official dictionary states, is "the art and science of developing and using the political, economic, and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war to secure national objectives."

To be more precise, this definition is better understood as "the art and science of developing and using the *diplomatic*, economic, and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war to secure national *political* objectives."

This latter definition clarifies the ambiguous word *political* which can be understood in many different contexts. For our purposes, "political objectives" are the goals to be obtained, which have been determined by our elected representatives in the Executive Branch and which

Colonel Harry Summers Addresses the Center for Constructive Alternatives

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Harry Summers is the author of numerous articles on military strategy in professional journals as well as national newspapers and magazines. His book, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Presidio Press, 1982), won the Furniss Award as the best new book on national security affairs and is now being used by the Army, Naval, and Air War Colleges as a student text.

This presentation was given as the keynote address in the seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives entitled "Foreign Policy and the Citizen: Central America as a Case Study," held November 6-10, 1983, at Hillsdale College. Other major speakers at the seminar included Michael Skol of the U.S. Department of State; Richard Pipes of Harvard; Mexican economist Agustin Navarro; Enrique Baloyra of the University of North Carolina; ex-Sandinista Humberto Belli; Manuel Ayau, president of Guatemala's Universidad Francisco Marroquin; Kendall Brown, Latin American specialist at Hillsdale College; and Christopher Manion, staff director of the Senate Committee on Western Hemisphere Affairs.

have the ultimate approval or acquiescence of the Congress. From a military point of view, it is essential that we clearly understand that the goal—the end result we are trying to obtain by the use of military strategy—is a *political* objective. It is also essential to understand that there are means other than military that the national leadership can (and in the majority of cases, does) use in order to obtain that objective, including diplomatic, economic, and psychological means.

Ends and Means

Such an understanding is obviously lacking in those who argue that the United States is trying to reach a military rather than a political solution in Latin America. For a military strategist, that argument makes no sense, because there is no such thing as a military solution. There is only a political solution. This relationship between ends and means is crucial to an understanding of strategy. Military actions, economic actions, or diplomatic actions are all *means* to be used, (either by themselves or, more likely, in conjunction with one another) in order to obtain an *end*, the political outcome one wishes to obtain.

This point is easier to understand if one looks at our adversaries. It is obvious that in El Salvador the guerrilla movement is trying to use military or para-military means in order to obtain a political solution; that is, to obtain political control of the government in Salvador.

With an understanding that military means are only one of the various means available to the national government, military strategy can then be placed in its proper context. The Joint Chiefs of Staff definition of military strategy is "the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force or the threat of force." In other words, there are two dimensions to military strategy. One has to do with means—the ships, planes, tanks and soldiers available. The other has to do with ends—the political goal as established by the national leadership. Military strategy thus has to do with *how* this is to be done; with precisely how military means can be used to accomplish political ends.

Among the tools available within the military to determine how this may be done are the Principles of War. Growing out of our experience in World War I, they were used extensively in World War II and Korea but, as I and others have documented elsewhere, unfortunately not in Vietnam. These nine principles are laid out in Army doctrine as guidelines for the execution of military strategy. They give us a valid and useful framework for analyzing strategic issues, not by providing answers to our problems, but instead, by doing a much more vital service—by providing questions on what we are trying to do and how we are going to do it.

The first question is posed by the first Principle of War, the principle of *The Objective*. For a military strategist attempting to analyze a problem, the first set of questions must be, "What are we trying to do?"

“What are we attempting to accomplish?” “What political end are we attempting to reach by the application of military force or the threat of application of military force?” That sounds so fundamental that one might think it is hardly worth asking. Unfortunately, it is so basic that it is often overlooked.

In the Vietnam War, for example, the North Vietnamese essentially had one objective, the unification of Vietnam under their control. As you look at the United States’ objectives, we had some twenty-one various political objectives, some of which directly contradicted one another. They were so unclear that ten years after the war is over, we are still arguing among ourselves as to their exact nature. Analyzed in view of this first principle of war alone, it is no wonder that Vietnam policies came to grief, for if we had no clear picture of precisely where we were going, common sense would tell us that it would (and did) ultimately prove impossible to determine how to get there.

One of our problems is that too often the objective of American policy is stated in terms of platitudes: “We have got to keep the world safe for democracy,” or “We’ve got to protect access to raw materials,” or “We’ve got to keep sea-lanes open.” Among their other faults, such platitudes do not provide specific focus on precisely what we are attempting to do, a precision that is an absolute requirement if political goals are to be translated into attainable military objectives.

Offense or Defense?

The question “What are we trying to do?” *must* be answered before we can address the second question, “How are we going to do it?”, a question initially posed by our next Principle of War, the principle of *The Offensive*. This principle, the second Principle of War, has to do with maintaining initiative and freedom of action on the battlefield. The traditional way of doing this is through offensive action, that is, by taking the war to the enemy as we did in World War II. In that war we destroyed the enemy’s will to resist (the ultimate goal in warfare) by destroying his armies and seizing and occupying his territory.

The problem today is that we do not have that option. From a strategic point of view, the United States has deliberately ruled out the strategic offensive against our major adversaries. Starting in the Korean War in November 1950 when the Chinese intervened in that war, the political decision was made not to strike the Chinese mainland and not to invade China. This decision was reinforced by President Eisenhower when he brought the Korean War to an end on the basis of the restoration of the *status quo ante*.

It was again reinforced when President Eisenhower decided not to pursue rollback or liberation in the Hungarian uprising and instead opted for containment. Yet again it was reinforced by President Kennedy in 1962 when the decision was made not to attack Cuba in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis and, the Monroe

Doctrine notwithstanding, to acquiesce in the continued penetration of Soviet political power into the Western Hemisphere.

Since 1950, the United States has thus deliberately pursued a national policy of containment rather than liberation or rollback. In military strategic terms, this translates into the strategic defensive.

What does that mean for us? What kind of questions does that raise? To find the answer, one must turn back to the classic work on the conduct of military operations, Karl von Clausewitz’s *On War*, written in the early nineteenth century by a Prussian staff officer based on his experiences in the Napoleonic wars. Curiously enough, this century-and-a-half old work is still the basic text on military fundamentals and military theory. While difficult to read, his work is descriptive rather than prescriptive, and most of what it has to say is plain common sense. As Clausewitz himself remarked, everything about the military is very simple, even the most rudimentary mathematical formula is much more complicated than military theory. It is the execution of this theory that is exceedingly complex.

Whose Side Is Time On?

This observation is borne out by his discussion of the defense. The fundamental nature of the defense, he reminds us, is “waiting.” Therefore, the first requirement for defensive operations is that time must be on your side. If the longer you wait the worse things get, then waiting does not make much sense. So his prescription was that if time is not on your side, then you either ought to give up the political goal you are trying to achieve or you ought to attack now because if you wait, conditions will only get worse. It has been argued that it was just this kind of thinking that led Germany to war in 1914, for by their calculations, the longer they waited the more powerful their enemies would become.

This same argument was heard thirty years ago when some argued that time was not on our side—that the greatest threat to world peace was that capitalism (that is, the Western democracies) in its “death throes” would lash out and destroy the world. But contrary to such gloomy forecasts, time has been on our side to a remarkable degree. Thirty years ago it appeared that we were confronted by a monolithic world Communist movement, centrally directed by Moscow, whose ideology was so strong that it overrode traditional nationalistic antagonisms. Their model for economic development was so dynamic and so successful that it was going to be used by the entire world. Their ideology was so pervasive that it would undermine and destroy democratic institutions. It was just a matter of time, therefore (so it was said), until capitalism—the Western democracies and especially the United States—collapsed of their own weight.

Come ahead thirty years. In the political dimension, one sees not monolithic world Communism, but polycentric power centers where Communism has split into various factions. Nationalism has proved so strong that com-

Communist nations, against every tenet of Communist philosophy, have gone to war with each other—with border clashes between the Soviet Union and China; with Communist Vietnam attacking Communist Cambodia; with another Communist nation, China, attacking their “socialist brothers” in Vietnam. Instead of Communism transcending nationalism, the reverse has proved true.

In the economic dimension their model has been so discredited by its own abysmal performances that no one would seriously consider using the Communist economic model as the model for development, for one of the striking features about Communism today is that as an economic system, it just doesn’t work very well. It has not worked well in any country in which it has been tried.

Marxist-Leninist ideology has waned as a source of inspiration and power even among Communist nations themselves. Now there are those who say that the major threat to world peace is that Communism, on the ash-heap of history, is about to lash out at the world. There has been almost a total reversal of the world view that was held thirty years ago. In almost all respects, the strategic defensive (that is, U.S. containment policy) has been a wise strategy, for over the long run, time has been on our side.

Echoes of 1939

But, having said that, we cannot relax our vigilance. One of the anomalies of national power is that the separate elements are not equal, for military power can cancel out political, diplomatic, economic, and psychological power. A nation can be politically developed, economically stable, and ideologically sound and can still be destroyed by military power. Even though politically, economically, and ideologically, time has been on our side, the United States must still be concerned with the fact that the military strength of our adversaries has increased to an almost infinite degree over the last thirty years.

Thirty years ago, the United States had almost a monopoly on nuclear weapons. We were able to use these weapons as a substitute for conventional forces in order to defend our interests in the world and deter our major adversaries. Many have not yet come to grips with the degree to which this has changed. The Soviet Union now has nuclear parity at the strategic level, nuclear parity at the theater level, and nuclear parity at the tactical level.

General Edward C. Meyer, just before his recent retirement as Army Chief of Staff, pointed out that American development of nuclear weapons was as a substitute for conventional forces. Conversely, he argued, the Soviet Union saw their development of nuclear weapons to the point of nuclear parity with the United States as a way to validate their already large advantage in conventional forces. We now find ourselves in a kind of “Mexican stand-off” with nuclear weapons, which means that conventional forces take on a new (more correctly a renewed) significance.

In many (but not all) respects, we are back to 1939 again. Unlike thirty years ago, when we talk about the principle of *The Offensive* today, we are talking about how to use conventional (that is, non-nuclear) military forces in the pursuit of U.S. political objectives.

Six More Principles

This question of “how” is amplified by the next three Principles of War: *Mass*, *Economy of Force*, and *Maneuver*. These three Principles of War have a relational aspect, one to the other. Essentially, they recognize the reality that we are not strong enough, nor will we ever be strong enough, to be able to simultaneously apply maximum power everywhere in the world. Therefore, we must *mass* our forces (concentrate our forces, if you will) at the point where they are most needed against the most likely threat, and must use an *economy-of-force* (i.e., lesser forces) to contain other threats to our security. These forces must then be *maneuvered*, shifted back and forth, to meet the changing dimensions of the threat, and the changing demands and challenges to our national security.

These dynamic principles are at the heart of some of today’s strategic arguments. For example, critics such as Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia have recently questioned whether or not American forces are spread too thin with their simultaneous commitments to uphold U.S. interests in Western Europe, Northeast Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East. A continuing dilemma for American strategists has been whether to continue to concentrate our forces in Western Europe where the Soviet threat has been the greatest and where U.S. interests have traditionally been the strongest, or use an economy-of-force there and mass our forces to meet threats elsewhere in the world. As a matter of fact, although it was never made obvious, we pursued this latter course during the Vietnam war, when we drew down our forces in Europe to a very dangerous level to reinforce in Vietnam.

Thus the principles of *Mass*, *Economy-of-Force* and *Maneuver* impose real constraints on the application of American power. They require hard choices from our national leadership on precisely where to weight our efforts.

The next two Principles of War, *Security* and *Surprise*, also require hard choices. These principles have been much in the news recently, because they entail a fundamental conflict with the values of our own society. If we have absolute security, then the linkage with the American people, who quite rightly demand to know what their military forces are up to, is severely weakened—and continued public support for military operations is jeopardized. The question is “How do you balance the requirement for *Security*, a requirement essential to the principle of *Surprise*, with the legitimate need-to-know of the American people?” As recent events in Grenada have illustrated, there is no simple answer to this dilemma. If there is an answer, it appears to lie in finding the proper balance between these competing re-

quirements, both of which are essential to our national security.

The next Principle of War is *Unity of Command*. At one time this principle concerned itself with command arrangements among the Army, Navy, and Air Force, but these problems have largely been resolved with the organization of our Joint Chiefs of Staff and their worldwide unified command arrangements. Now, at the strategic level, *Unity of Command* is particularly concerned with command arrangements with our allies. Given the fact that our national security rests on coalitions with allies around the world, the question to be addressed is "How do you provide for the protection and enhancement of American interests while at the same time taking into account the interests of our allies?"

Uneasy Alliances

The root of the problem is that the United States is a global power with global interests. Our allies, on the other hand, are regional powers with regional interests. This problem first surfaced during the Vietnam War where the United States, as a Pacific as well as an Atlantic power, felt that Communist China and what was perceived to be its North Vietnamese surrogate threatened American vital interests. While we received support from our Asian allies such as Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia, our European allies were not that supportive. They were not supportive because they saw American involvement in Southeast Asia as taking attention away from European security concerns. Further, many saw China, not as an enemy, but as a useful counterweight to the Soviet Union.

This divergence of interests has recently resurfaced again in the reaction of our NATO allies to events in Central America. While the Caribbean is of great strategic interest to the United States, it is of little interest to most of our allies elsewhere in the world. There is no solution to this problem, for it is inherent in alliance relationships. It is a problem we simply have to learn to live with.

More pressing is the problem of unbalanced coalitions where the more powerful partner tends to totally dominate the alliance to the point where the independence, self-respect and self-reliance of the junior partner is undermined and in some cases destroyed. We saw this happen in Vietnam, and it is something we are seeking to avoid (so far, successfully) in current operations in Central America. If our effort there is to continue to succeed, we must temper our arrogance and our conviction that we have all the answers, and we must increase our patience so that our allies can, with our help, work out their own solutions.

As currently written, the final Principle of War is *Simplicity*. Simplicity is a kind of litmus test for the other principles. Among the questions it poses are "Is our objective clear and understandable to both the military and the American people?" "Are we clear in the distinction between offensive and defensive operations?" "Have we

correctly indentified both our objectives and the threat to these objectives so that we can mass our forces against the major threat and use an economy-of-force elsewhere in the world?" And finally, "Have we maximized our security requirements so as to achieve surprise without, in so doing, jeopardizing our links with the American people?"

No Repeat of Vietnam Morale Crisis

This final point is inherent in what has been proposed as a tenth Principle of War. Entitled *Morale*, at the tactical level it would have to do with building and maintaining the fighting spirit of our soldiers. At the strategic level, it would have to do with the need to build and maintain public support for the conduct of military operations. The rationale for this principle is contained in our very Constitution, which specifically rooted the military in the American people. While the President was appointed Commander-in-Chief, the power to raise and support armies and to declare war was deliberately given, as Alexander Hamilton put it in *The Federalist*, to the Legislature, "the representatives of the people periodically elected."

As with the other principles, this principle is rooted in common sense. If the American people are to be asked to support military operations with their tax dollars, and, more importantly, with the lives of their sons and daughters, they must also have a say in what is going on. In the 1950s, academic limited war theorists advanced the idea that the public really had no part to play in the strategic equation. Their theories were tested in the Vietnam War, and it was soon discovered that the American people had something to say about such notions. One of the major lessons to come out of Vietnam was that the American Army is an arm of the American people, who take a jealous and proprietary interest in its commitment. It is a lesson that appears to have been well learned, for one of the encouraging aspects of recent developments is the degree to which the Administration—and in particular the Defense Department—is aware of the *Morale* principle and is working to build public support for American foreign policy and the military forces which undergird and sustain it.

As one looks at the strategic issues facing the United States, whether they be in Central America or elsewhere in the world, the framework provided by the Principles of War provides a constructive and useful set of questions with which to formulate a response. These principles break down into three primary questions:

What are we trying to do?

How are we going to do it?

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If these questions are correctly answered, then military power—in conjunction with diplomatic, economic and psychological power—can be a useful instrument by which to attain, or assist in attaining, the national political objectives of the United States.

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