



# The Multiple Faces of Effective Grand Strategy

Bryan N. Groves

*United States Military Academy*, [bryan.groves@usma.edu](mailto:bryan.groves@usma.edu)

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## Author Biography

**Bryan Groves** is currently the Deputy Director of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. A 2008 graduate from Yale University's Masters of Arts in International Relations program and a 1998 West Point alum, he is a Special Forces Officer and has served in Iraq and Bosnia. Most recently he served as part of a four-man team from the CTC advising General McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry on external factors influencing the militant landscape in Afghanistan. At West Point, he has taught courses on terrorism and counterterrorism as well as on international relations. His research interests lie in the Security Studies, Grand Strategy, and European Studies genres. He can be reached for comment at: [bryan.groves@usma.edu](mailto:bryan.groves@usma.edu).

## Abstract

Effective national leaders throughout history have deliberately developed grand strategies and successfully implemented them to attain their political goals, while also integrating and accomplishing economic, social, defense, and sometimes religious objectives. Not all leaders have been successful, however, as this process is immensely complex and can be adversely affected by the actions of other leaders around their region and the world. It bears examination, then, to determine what factors contribute to successful grand strategies and why many leaders fail to reach their stated ends. This article utilizes a historic case study approach and explores three key areas of grand strategy: universal principles, Clausewitzian approaches, and indirect approaches. I handle each separately and in distinct fashion, though some connective tissue does interlace across sections. Additionally, the unifying argument is that thoughtful, rational leaders, who weigh the costs and benefits associated with each course of action available to them, still must heed the truths embedded in these three sections to attain their objectives. Not doing so often leads to failure, unrealized goals, and a nation gone awry.

# The Multiple Faces of Effective Grand Strategy

By Bryan N. Groves<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Effective national leaders throughout history have deliberately developed grand strategies and successfully implemented them to attain their political goals, while also integrating and accomplishing economic, social, defense, and sometimes religious objectives. Not all leaders have been successful, however, as this process is immensely complex and can be adversely affected by the actions of other leaders around their region and the world. It bears examination, then, to determine what factors contribute to successful grand strategies and why many leaders fail to reach their stated ends. This article utilizes a historic case study approach and explores three key areas of grand strategy: universal principles, Clausewitzian approaches, and indirect approaches. I handle each separately and in distinct fashion, though some connective tissue does interlace across sections. Additionally, the unifying argument is that thoughtful, rational leaders, who weigh the costs and benefits associated with each course of action available to them, still must heed the truths embedded in these three sections to attain their objectives. Not doing so often leads to failure, unrealized goals, and a nation gone awry.

## Universal Principles of Flexible Grand Strategy

Grand strategy is the matching of large ends with means.<sup>2</sup> Visionary leadership and relevant communication are two universally applicable principles of grand strategy. Leaders who employ them effectively increase their country's likelihood of success. Polybius and Thucydides are key historical figures who provide insight into these principles. The terminology each used varies, but the concepts and their significance to the development and execution of successful grand strategy does not.

Visionary leadership is the fundamental principle necessary for the implementation of an effective grand strategy. Thucydides and Polybius use historical approaches to explain the significance of leadership to grand strategy. In his account of Hannibal's campaign across the Alps and the ensuing battles between his Carthaginian army and the Roman armies, Polybius repeatedly indicates how Hannibal proactively chose the terrain

on which he would have an advantage.<sup>3</sup> Hannibal also exercised effective leadership by balancing mission accomplishment and care for his troops. He provided his troops with periodic respites to regain physical and emotional strength, and to scavenge for food.<sup>4</sup> This served both to encourage his troops and to facilitate the mission of conquering the Roman army and acquiring more Roman territory.

In contrast, Alcibiades' influence over the Athenians led them to embark on the ill-fated Sicilian Expedition. Alcibiades saw the conquest of Sicily as the best means to accomplish Athenian grand strategy and extend their influence because it used their strength—sea power.<sup>5</sup> The endeavor failed, however, because it lacked unity of command.<sup>6</sup> The decision led Athens to deviate from their grand strategy which had been to focus on Sparta, who posed the greatest threat in terms of power and proximity, before extending their influence further. The deviation proved disastrous for the Athenians and weakened their capability to fight the Spartans. Hannibal's actions, when compared with those of Alcibiades, demonstrate the difference that leadership makes in grand strategic outcomes.

Articulate communication that resonates with and inspires subordinates and supporters alike is a second grand strategic principle that transcends time and place. People weary from strenuous effort, fearful of daunting challenges or threats that lie ahead, or unclear of the difference they can make need motivation to complete their tasks. Soldiers are often in these circumstances. Athenian, Spartan, Roman, Carthaginian, and contemporary commanders have all recognized this and inspired their troops with motivational speeches prior to battle.

Wise leaders wanting to implement a successful grand strategy use communication to inspire, but also to direct. People cannot execute the leader's plan nor take ownership of it if they do not understand the ends or the general means by which the leader intends to reach the objectives. They will not participate wholeheartedly unless it is clear how it is in their self interest to do so and to help the team achieve the expressed goals. With widespread public support for their grand strategy, leaders can mobilize and direct the resources necessary to realize success; without it, they will likely fail, even if they have made the proper estimate of the enemy's situation and their own.<sup>7</sup>

The previous discussion indicates the power of domestic communication between a leader and his people. Effective intergovernmental communication is another facet of successful grand strategy. The Debate at Sparta and the Melian Dialogue are particularly instructive regarding diplomatic communication. In the Debate at Sparta, the Corinthians demanded Spar-

tan engagement against Athens, arguing that the Spartans had not lived up to their commitments to the Allies. The Corinthian argument eventually convinced Sparta and they became involved in the war.<sup>8</sup> During the Melian Dialogue the Melians unsuccessfully attempted to sway Athens to allow them to remain neutral. The Melians' failed efforts at moral persuasion and their refusal to side with Athens resulted in their ruin.<sup>9</sup>

Competent leadership and clear, persuasive communication are universally necessary principles of grand strategy. Although the implementation of these principles will vary due to different times, regions, organization types, or the technology available, abiding by these principles is important. Leaders who fail to successfully exercise these principles will not achieve their goals. The same can be said of leveraging appropriate means to accomplish desired ends. This maxim is at the core of the Clausewitzian grand strategic approach.

## Grand Strategy—Applying Clausewitz throughout History

The Prussian general and strategist Carl von Clausewitz argued that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means."<sup>10</sup> By this he meant that war is one "instrument"<sup>11</sup> available to leaders for accomplishing their grand strategic ends, and that political objectives should precede military ones.<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz also argued that means must match their ends, and a leader must not choose ends for which he does not have the means.<sup>13</sup> Phillip II of Spain, Elizabeth I of England, and the Founding Fathers of America understood this Clausewitzian "principle"<sup>14</sup> to different degrees and exercised it to varying levels of success.

### *Phillip II*

Phillip II did not well apply the Clausewitzian concept of matching appropriate means to accomplish political ends. Phillip's grand strategy was to restore Catholicism to England under his rule and increase the religion's influence across Western Europe. Phillip believed God wanted to use him to accomplish these goals. He saw himself as having special access to God which enabled him to understand God's will better than others. Phillip believed his divine connection guaranteed his success and so did not make the necessary calculations and preparations to ensure success. He did not ensure that his navy had the proper ammunition aboard each vessel to fit their cannons, nor enough of it to successfully defeat the British Navy and conquer England. Phillip did not take seriously the logistical requirements of food preparation for the journey and did not ensure that

commanders' enforced the necessary discipline of eating the oldest food first. Instead he impatiently sent his Navy off to war, "in the hope of a miracle,"<sup>15</sup> before they had stockpiled enough food.

Phillip's inability to establish an efficient bureaucracy to process the voluminous paperwork from his field commanders was another failure that prevented the realization of his grand strategy. His micromanagement meant that his commanders did not have decentralized control to make operational decisions necessary to ensure success. Instead they sought guidance from Phillip, but often did not obtain a timely answer due to the time lag associated with couriers and from Phillip's inefficient information processing. Despite having a more secure financial situation and a stronger military than England, these failures and the friction<sup>16</sup> caused by bad weather and British actions contributed significantly to the rout of his Armada by Elizabeth I and her Royal Navy. They also demonstrated that while Phillip did subordinate military means to reach his political objective, he did not use the means necessary to successfully accomplish it.

### *Elizabeth I*

Elizabeth I experienced greater success in her grand strategy than did Phillip II because she applied the concepts that Clausewitz wrote about years later. Her grand strategy was to strengthen England's position in relation to Continental Europe, and to further Protestantism. One way she did this was by remaining unmarried and by abstaining from wars that did not suit England. By remaining unmarried and childless she was able to exercise balance of power diplomacy<sup>17</sup> without being drawn into wars simply for dynastic reasons. As the leader of a relatively weak power, Elizabeth's decision to avoid overstretching her nation was a wise approach toward reaching her grand strategic ends.

A second way by which Elizabeth sought to accomplish her grand strategy was through decentralized execution, but within guidelines that she set. She directed Lord Howard, Sir Drake, and her other commanders to "harass"<sup>18</sup> the Spanish Armada, waiting for the time when the enemy was vulnerable to decisively engage, the point Clausewitz referred to as the "culminating point."<sup>19</sup> This measure of freedom permitted her commanders to develop tactical and operational means to suit her strategic guidance. Operating under this freedom, Drake launched a preemptive raid in 1587 on the port at Cadiz, destroying enough ships to postpone the Spanish invasion by a year.<sup>20</sup> The next year Drake and his superior, Lord Howard, used fire-ships to terrorize the Spanish fleet and force them out of Calais. This served as a turning point that, along with Spanish errors and poor weather, led to English victory. Elizabeth's calculated and ratio-

nal approach toward her grand strategy proved more successful than Philip's and confirmed that she understood Clausewitz's principle of determining her political aim and then matching means to accomplish it.

### *America's Founding Fathers*

America's Founding Fathers understood and applied Clausewitz to their grand strategy. Their broad purpose was to see if a government could last without the force that a monarch imposes.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, they believed the best means of doing so was to turn the newly-independent American states from a Confederation into a Union and a great power.<sup>22</sup> Toward these ends they sought economic growth and security, both internal and external. A Union with a strong federal government offered the best opportunity for success because it provided the greatest protection from internal factions<sup>23</sup> and from external threats.<sup>24</sup> A Union also offered the greatest hope for moving America from being a peripheral entity to a central power because it would enable Americans to pool the vast resources available on the continent. They devised a constitution that addressed the weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation and established a framework for a stronger central government, capable of protecting all Americans and establishing America as a formidable world power. Realizing that they could not have the Union and abolish slavery, they made provisions for slavery to remain legal for the time being, believing that the most important thing was to form the Union; slavery could be addressed later. To ensure ratification, Hamilton, Jay, and Madison laid out the reasoning for the constitution and the formation of such a Union in the Federalist Papers. Later, the Founding Fathers adopted a policy of avoiding entangling alliances<sup>25</sup> to avoid engagement in unnecessary wars during America's formative years. These means helped preserve a strong Union and contributed to America's rise as a global power. They also demonstrate that the Founding Fathers adopted means consistent with their ends and subordinated military pursuits to political interests.

Clausewitz remains relevant for statesmen today. Contemporary leaders are wise to subordinate military considerations to the political objective and to match ends with appropriate means when formulating and executing their grand strategy. President George H. W. Bush did this during the first Gulf War in the early 1990s when he rallied the international community, formed a coalition, and drove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait—his stated political objective—using the requisite military force, but not more than was necessary. His son, President George W. Bush, experienced less success waging the current Iraq War because he violated Clausewitzian concepts. While he generally kept military considerations subject to the political aim, he did not always apply appropriate means to reach his

political goal. The failure to properly plan for the post-invasion tasks of reconstruction and nation building was a classical example of taking "the first step without considering the last"<sup>26</sup> and led to errors in execution and increased instability. As a result, Iraq has proven a painful reminder that Clausewitz was right when he harped on the critical importance of matching means to ends.

## Grand Strategy and the Indirect Approach

As with policies based on Clausewitz, successful national leaders have also utilized an indirect approach to accomplish their political objectives.<sup>27</sup> Some practitioners of grand strategy have successfully employed it to achieve their aims with lower financial and human costs than via a direct approach. The indirect way contributed to a successful grand strategy when its practitioners accurately accounted for their domestic situation, their relative position in the international arena, and recent technological developments.

Both Sun Tzu and B. H. Liddell Hart were theoretical proponents of applying indirect approaches to the practice of grand strategy.<sup>28</sup> Sun Tzu wrote that the best war is the one you do not fight because you win through diplomatic means, intelligence operations, or other indirect methods.<sup>29</sup> Hart, the great British strategist, defined the indirect way as an "approach to the main enemy (that) was essentially ... through (their) weakness to strength."<sup>30</sup> The goal was to pit one's strengths, including a variety of resources—even unconventional methods—against an enemy's weaknesses, rather than meeting his strengths head on.

Hart thought the primary benefit of utilizing the indirect way was that it left a nation better off after a war than before.<sup>31</sup> British grand strategy during World War I frustrated Hart because it deviated from what he understood to be the country's traditional use of the indirect way to win wars through mastery of the seas, a colonial empire rich in resources, and financial support for continental allies who served as British proxies, fighting decisive land battles. When Britain used the indirect way during a war, it emerged relatively stronger because it stayed out of the fray and allowed others to handle direct engagements and therefore suffer the majority of the casualties. Britain did not use the indirect way in WWI and was not better off after the war than before.

Successful use of the indirect approach involves more than simply asymmetrically leveraging assets against a foe. A leader must also have an accurate understanding of the domestic and international situations in



which he is operating. An improper evaluation of either can lead to failure. The Athenian leader, Pericles, is one example. Pericles failed to understand the adverse impact his grand strategy would have on the domestic morale of the Athenian people. Pericles adopted a defensive posture in an attempt to demonstrate to the Spartans that Athens was invincible and that frequent invasions were futile. Although his grand strategy had operational merit, Pericles forgot to account for the emotional reaction of his people upon seeing the Spartans ravage their homeland. This miscalculation led to the ultimate failure of Pericles' grand strategy.

As with Pericles, using an indirect approach does not inevitably lead to success, nor does using a direct approach inevitably lead to failure. Hannibal experienced tremendous operational success despite using a direct approach, capitalizing on superior tactics and intelligence to win decisive battles at the time and place of his choosing. In the end, though, he was unable to force the Romans to accept his terms of peace. Although it is impossible to know for sure whether indirect methods would have been more successful, the result of Hannibal's grand strategy illustrate the difficulty of gaining victory by directly attacking a formidable foe and extending one's logistical support over many miles and difficult terrain. Napoleon's foray into Russia likewise demonstrated the near impossibility of such an international undertaking, made even more difficult by an enemy utilizing indirect means to further his forces' attrition.

Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt demonstrated a keen understanding of the indirect approach as grand strategic practitioners and partners during WWII. Churchill accurately recognized that his position vis-à-vis the Germans was weak. Because he knew that Britain could not win the war on its own, he actively courted the American President to join the war effort. The British Prime Minister simultaneously mobilized his own limited resources to maintain the fight against Nazi Germany until he could win the full support of allies, especially the Americans, and by so doing tip the balance in his favor. Meanwhile, Roosevelt utilized the indirect way to move the U.S. toward actual entrance into the war. He incrementally moved America toward war by gradually increasing its material support for the Allied cause. From moral support in the Atlantic Charter to Lend Lease, Roosevelt supported Churchill but without getting too far ahead of his domestic support base. After Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt could enter the war with the support of the American people, but he still exercised leadership as a grand strategist, adopting a 'Europe first' approach when the country was fixated on Japan.

In the end, American support enabled Churchill to bridge the time gap until America actually entered the war. In the meantime, Churchill's emphasis on gaining air superiority enabled Britain to distance itself from Germany and survive until American (and Soviet) troops joined the war effort. Churchill's ability to envision and shape the big picture by utilizing means commensurate with his ends,<sup>32</sup> including an indirect approach, contributed to his success in navigating English grand strategy.

The post-WWII world also contains several examples of grand strategists successfully employing the indirect approach. George Kennan's strategy of containment proved to be complementary to the Marshall Plan and a successful indirect approach to limiting Soviet influence in Europe during the Cold War. President Reagan used increased defense spending, rhetoric, and diplomacy as indirect means to cause the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the American military was directly engaged in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Bush Senior successfully employed indirect methods by using the UN to build a unified coalition to share the financial costs and military involvement in the Persian Gulf War and to increase its legitimacy.

In each case these post-WWII grand strategists bridged the gap between setting and realizing their political objectives by using indirect methods as part of their means. Doing so enabled them to accomplish their goals with less loss of life and potentially less financial strain. They were successful not just because they used the indirect way, but because they could count on the support of their country as they implemented their grand strategy. They were also successful because they adapted their grand strategy to the technological developments of the nuclear age and, in accordance with Clausewitz, used means commensurate with their ends.

## Conclusion

President Obama appears to understand that effective grand strategy involves weighing priorities. His speech on Afghanistan at West Point last December demonstrated a commitment to disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al-Qaida in South Asia, yet recognized that U.S. efforts there were limited in scope, timeframe, and resources. America (at least under his administration), would not subordinate its domestic, diplomatic, and economic goals to the unlimited and unending pursuit of al-Qaida. This admission is an initial indication that Obama understands the need to subordinate military endeavors to his political objectives. It also shows his grasp of the context in which he is operating, with respect to both his domestic audience and the strategic geopolitical context in which he leads

and operates. Time will tell whether he is able to bring his grand strategic plans to fruition as it relates to economic recovery, an overhauled health care plan, climate change, gaining international momentum toward nuclear zero, bringing American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan to a successful, timely, and stable close, and protecting the homeland from further terrorist attacks. As he attempts to do so, he will undoubtedly face many more challenges. And, as he navigates these, Obama will do well to apply the universal principles of grand strategy and Clausewitzian and indirect approaches wherever possible.

## About the Author

Bryan Groves is currently the Deputy Director of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. A 2008 graduate from Yale University's Masters of Arts in International Relations program and a 1998 West Point alum, he is a Special Forces Officer and has served in Iraq and Bosnia. Most recently he served as part of a four-man team from the CTC advising General McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry on external factors influencing the militant landscape in Afghanistan. At West Point, he has taught courses on terrorism and counterterrorism as well as on international relations. His research interests lie in the Security Studies, Grand Strategy, and European Studies genres. He can be reached for comment at: [bryan.groves@usma.edu](mailto:bryan.groves@usma.edu).

## References

- 1 The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.
- 2 Professors John Gaddis, Charlie Hill, and Paul Kennedy used this definition during the *Studies in Grand Strategy Seminar*, Yale University, Spring 2008.
- 3 Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert, (London, Penguin Books, 1980), 197–276.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 361–371.
- 6 Ibid, 128.
- 7 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. Translated by Samuel B. Griffith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 63–71.
- 8 Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 49.

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- 9 Ibid, 356–357.
- 10 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), 87.
- 11 Ibid, 610.
- 12 Ibid, 88–89.
- 13 Ibid, 87.
- 14 See, for example, the works of Howard and Paret, *On War*. Clausewitz strongly argued against the reduction of war to a set of principles such as other philosophers of war had done, like the Swiss theorist Jomini. He believed this was too simplistic and inaccurate. I use the word here and in other places more in the sense of an important concept than a hard and fast "rule" of war or grand strategy.
- 15 Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 217. This phrase was used by one of Phillip II's commanders, thought to be Juan Martinez de Recalde, to describe the ambitious undertaking.
- 16 Howard and Paret, *On War*, 119–121. Clausewitz uses the term to describe the concept that in war plans do not go according to plan. The enemy, weather, communication problems, incomplete information, mistakes, human limitations, and other factors influence the outcome and are largely beyond the leader's control.
- 17 An idea discussed during Yale University's *Studies in Grand Strategy Seminar* on February 11, 2008.
- 18 Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 200–232.
- 19 Howard and Paret, *On War*, 582.
- 20 Mattingly, *The Armada*, 93–109.
- 21 Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 1, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, (New York: Signet, 2003).
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 John Jay, Federalist No. 3, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, (New York: Signet, 2003).
- 24 Rossiter, Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 1.
- 25 George Washington developed this policy which later was replaced with the Monroe Doctrine. In both cases, the Founding Fathers' desire was to remain out of unnecessary wars, yet defend themselves from European powers still intent on colonizing portions of America. In the end, they wanted America to become the balancer, not the balanced. An idea discussed during Yale University's *Studies in Grand Strategy Seminar* on February 18, 2008.
- 26 Howard and Paret, *On War*, 584.
- 27 Ibid, 88–89.
- 28 See examples in: Griffith, *The Art of War*, and B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian, 1991).

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- 29 Griffith, *The Art of War*. 66, 77, 106, 144–149.
- 30 B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Historic Strategy of Britain*, 24.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Howard and Paret, *On War*, 88–89, 579, 610.

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