

Preface and Acknowledgments

In the opening months of 2017, America is in the process of a dramatic presidential transition. Many commentators are already anticipating drastic foreign policy changes as well as a general sense of administrative incoherence. As evidence, they point to the wide differences between the pronouncements of President Trump and the comments made in their confirmation hearings by many of those he nominated for senior foreign policy positions. Indeed, in *Foreign Policy* in January 2017, Micah Zenko and Rebecca Friedman Lissner pronounced that Trump had no grand strategy, before he was even sworn in as president.

Clearly, the appointment of military officials to senior policymaking positions suggests a tone and approach different from the Obama administration's. As we argue in this book, military personnel generally lack faith in the virtues of any grand strategy. They are pragmatic problem solvers, more comfortable with a response to specific problems than a recourse to abstract principles. That point was tellingly illustrated in James Mattis's congressional confirmation hearing for the post of Defense Secretary. When Mattis was asked about Russia he responded, "I'm all for engagement, but we also have to recognize reality and what Russia is up to. . . . There's a decreasing number of areas where we can engage cooperatively and an increasing number of areas where we're going to have to confront Russia." Circumstances outweighed principle in language, policy, and practice.

In this book, we argue that Zenko and Lissner's comments about the Trump presidency are unwittingly symptomatic of a larger trend: that the link between values and "ways, means and ends" defies the deductive formulations about grand strategies debated by academics and formulated by policymakers. We can look back nostalgically at American grand strategy

during the Cold War, but its reputed coherence has been replaced by a new series of challenges in the twenty-first century. Those new challenges are not susceptible to treatment with a one-size-fits-all grand strategy.

Now, we suggest, the stresses and strains of American domestic politics and the exigencies of military operations together conspire to sabotage even the most elegantly articulated and carefully constructed general formulations. Faced with a growing array of hostile actors, a plethora of new threats, and novel forms of conflict, American military officials depend far more on context than on central principles as they decide how to act. Grand strategy may retain a role in defining our central values, but those values are a poor guide to policy in the twenty-first century. President Trump will not be alone in finding that grand strategy has little utility. His immediate predecessors discovered the same—neither President Bush’s efforts at nation building nor President Obama’s pursuit of what we label in this book as Sponsorship were crowned with success.

Strategies, we argue, have to be calibrated according to operational circumstances. They exist in the plural, not in a singular grand strategy. As a result, we show, America employs varying and familiar strategic approaches every day.

Books often have a long pedigree. This one began more than two decades ago. At that time, the authors discussed the possibility of working together as administrators. That particular plot was aborted. But it stimulated a longstanding discussion about administrative failings, principally the gap between strategy, policy, and implementation. Since then, Simon Reich has worked intermittently in both the think tank and academic world. Peter Dombrowski’s contribution to public service has been continuous and more substantial, as a regular participant in strategic planning within America’s security community. The consequence of that dialogue is this book, one that focuses on strategy limitations from the ground up and defies the vicissitudes of abstract plans.

Swimming against the tide of conventional knowledge inevitably tests the forbearance of those generous enough to patiently and positively respond to our argument. That list includes Robert Art, Hal Brands, Colin Dueck, Christine Fair, and Andrew Ross who all participated with us on a panel at the International Studies Association. Our gratitude also extends to two anonymous reviewers who provided us with a plentiful number of helpful comments. And specifically, we thank Ryan French who provided us with invaluable research and editing support while serving as a research fellow at the Naval War College. Dean Tom Culora and Andrew Winner of the Naval War College also added substantially to the writing of this book. Thierry Balzacq joined the two of us in our continuing debate two years ago. We appreciate our discussions as we continue to learn from his comparative perspective on the concept of grand strategy.

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The End of Grand Strategy

