

Does America Have a Strategic Culture?

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[See table of contents](#)

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Botti, Timothy J. *Ace in the Hole: Why the United States Did Not Use Nuclear Weapons in the Cold War, 1945 to 1965*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996.

Hoffman, F.G. *Decisive Force: The New American Way of War*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996.

Ever since Russell Weigley wrote of "the American way of warfare," strategic analysts in the United States have been attracted to the idea that states have strategic dispositions generated by their national and military cultures. So certain are some of these analysts that "strategic culture" exists, they used the idea to explain the failure of the West to meet the Soviet threat in the 1970s and 1980s. Colin Gray and Richard Pipes, among others, insisted that since the Soviet Union had an understanding of strategy rooted in Russian historical experience, Americans should abandon their own culturally conditioned faith in deterrence a faith that had left the West ill-prepared to meet the more Clausewitzian Russian enemy and prepare to fight and win a nuclear war. Strategic culture is not, then, an academic side-show.

These two studies of American military doctrine since 1945 are both grounded in the idea of strategic culture and the problems it creates for contemporary civil-military relations in the United States. In a detailed and well-researched study, Timothy Botti asks why the United States failed to use nuclear weapons during the Cold War when to have done so would have better preserved American interests. Instead, since the United States acted on the sense of omnipotence provided by nuclear supremacy, only to be then constrained by nuclear inhibitions, it tended to overreach its power. This led it repeatedly into far-flung crises that could only be resolved through political-economic hegemony and conventional intervention. The failure to distinguish between vital and peripheral interests, combined with nuclear cold feet, cost American lives, weakened the economy, and in the 1960s at least nearly destroyed America's social fabric.

It is an interesting counterfactual excursion by which Botti's alternative nuclear use forces him to address the possibility of mutual escalation and conclude, as a number of American military minds did in the 1950s, that the only safe and responsible course would have been preventive war. (p. 249) Indeed, at times his analysis is so resonant with the spirit of Curtis LeMay, that he appears to be engaging in a polemical assault on the limited war theorists of the 1950s rather than offering an historically-grounded explanation for American nuclear reticence. His opening dedication to American combatants whose "lives are more important than the prestige of bureaucrats, politicians, and diplomats" betrays his commitments. In case the reader missed it, the villains in this story and for some reason there must be villains are the very civilians whose job it was to articulate and define the national interest, not to mention control the power of the military. There is a certain naiveté to all this, if Botti does not understand that the "prestige" he speaks of is a vital structure in international relations, something as essential and real to effective statecraft as material power. Johnson, Bundy and McNamara may have been wrong in believing that America's global credibility rested on

building a viable South Vietnamese state, but they were surely not wrong to believe that credibility is sometimes the essence of power. If Botti grasped this, he would appreciate why American civilians worried so much about alienating US allies. The real prize of the Cold War was Europe (and the oil that fed it from the Middle East), and secondarily Japan. Everything else was symbolic, tied into the Munich discourse of the Cold War in which prestige and commitment held the key to maintaining international order. To risk losing allies in order to save US soldiers in Korea was to wildly misunderstand American interests. But then Botti also believes that those very same allies were, in the end, appeasers for failing to back the United States in Indochina and Formosa. (p. 45) Such an interpretation fits closely with the views of American unilateralists and neo-isolationists of the 1950s, but it offers little to our understanding of why the United States behaved the way it did.

Botti echoes the world-view of the conservative nationalists of the 1950s in other ways. His belief that American politicians and bureaucrats were moral cowards who thwarted what would have been in America's natural interests rings with the conspiratorial tone of the era. Nathan Twining's attack on limited war theorists in 1966 said virtually the same thing. A willingness to use nuclear weapons, he argued, was "typically American," and would have been America's strategic choice were the public's voice not muffled by liberal bureaucrats. The corrupt elites of Washington, in other words, put political expediency ahead of strategic culture, although how politically expedient it was to resist a nation's "natural" urges is not clear. One wonders whether the conspiracy theory or the thinly veiled contempt for democracy is more troubling, but in the end it hardly matters. Botti's work is strikingly partisan, assumes that America's interests were synonymous with the interests of "civilization," is oblivious to the way American behavior threatened the Soviet Union (his own argument seems proof that Moscow had much to fear), unwilling to read counter-arguments seriously, and prone to using value-laden Cold War language (especially irritating is his use of the word "Chicom" to refer to the PRC).

Of much more interest is F.G. Hoffman's examination of the emergence of a post-Gulf War doctrine of "Decisive Force," the evolutionary product of recent efforts by the military to shake off the Vietnam syndrome. The doctrine, which grew from the successful military incursions into Panama and the Gulf War, argues that "once a decision for military action has been made, half-measures and confused objectives exact a severe price in the form of a protracted conflict which can cause needless waste of human lives and material resources, a divided nation at home, and defeat." (pp. 100-01) The emphasis on winning decisively as the sole objective of employing military force fits, as Hoffman notes, with the "absolutist" school of American civil-military relations and, he believes, with American "strategic culture" generally. It also accords, interestingly, with Botti's normative purposes. But Hoffman is more critical of Decisive Force than one imagines Botti would be, because he understands that "military victory for the sake of military victory is not consistent with Clausewitz or sound policy." Although he is a Marine Corps historian, Hoffman offers a balanced and sympathetic history that understands why Decisive Force emerged from the aftermath of Vietnam and the disaster in Lebanon, but at the same time recognizes that the absolutist faith sometimes threatens civil-military balance and, moreover, may not provide the flexibility needed to deal with

complex post-Cold War disorders. Hoffman has criticisms of civilian leadership, but he is neither contemptuous nor conspiratorial. He offers, instead, a gentle plea for better civil-military dialogue.

If Hoffman's work has a weakness, however, it lies in the looseness of his concept of strategic culture from which he insists Decisive Force emerged. The problems here are the same that afflict the work of Gray, Pipes and Carnes Lord, namely, a crippling imprecision in the use of the word "culture." All of them seem to equate certain acts with culture, assuming that these patterns of behavior are culturally derived without testing whether such behavior could stem from factors that are non-cultural. Without a clear definition of culture, of course, there don't appear to be any factors that are non-cultural except those that do not fit the argument. So in the end, to assert that the United States is culturally disposed toward the absolute use of force, toward total war in other words, simply does not stand scrutiny. Other societies have experienced total war more intimately than the United States, and yet they are not thought to be culturally disposed toward absolutism. If they are, then the disposition is hardly culturally unique. Moreover, to focus on the American experience of total war as culturally formative does not suggest why that experience was determining, while the equally long American tradition of limited interventions was not. Why does the American military learn certain lessons from history but not others? More disturbing, how does the relentless retelling of this cultural narrative about American use of force construct our identity and limit our options? These are not questions Hoffman sees, but by the end of his book, he loses sight of his opening cultural argument anyway and never really returns to it. He suggests that historical lessons are "influenced, for better or worse, by organizational interests and perceptions." (p. 99)

This, of course, is a very different argument. Hoffman ultimately offers a picture of a military culture that supports bigness not for any uniquely American reasons, but because it justifies a claim for autonomy from civilian control. The main difference between Lebanon and Panama was not the clarity of the political objectives, but the size and freedom of the force. As Hoffman suggests, this means that sound strategy is now simply defined by military victory, not by any correspondence with long-term objectives. The Gulf War seems to have perpetuated this myopia, since the decisive military victory has not translated into anything approximating regional stability. It is doubtful, indeed, that even the destruction of Hussein himself would bring that about. Hoffman is right, then, to look skeptically at Decisive Force as a viable integration of civil-military interests, even if his argument builds on the slippery terrain of American strategic culture.

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