

Presidents Make the Policies, Generals Set Up the Plans

“If, as Clausewitz so justly said, war is a continuation of national policy, so are war plans.”

—Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 1962

Over the next two presidential debates, we can expect questions for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump about their respective plans for dealing with ISIS. But should Clinton or Trump even have a plan? Presidents don't make military plans, generals and admirals do—or, their deputies for operations do. Presidents are responsible for establishing national security policy.

In 1941, before the United States became directly involved in what still were localized wars in Asia and in Europe, President Franklin Roosevelt and Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill agreed on a strategic policy after the United States entered the conflict. In broad terms, that policy involved destroying Nazi Germany and then crushing Imperial Japan. The United States and the British Empire committed to unconditional surrender as the only acceptable outcome.

Although Roosevelt made minor interventions like insisting on a quick retaliatory strike against Japan to bolster American morale until the United States could bring its industrial resources to bear on manifesting the arsenal of democracy, he wisely left specifics of war plans to military planning staffs. Nevertheless, he told Gen. George C. Marshall, “Planners are always conservative and see all the difficulties, and more can usually be done than they are willing to admit.”

Then came the atomic bomb and it changed everything. National

security thinkers—from Ivy League professors to think-tank intellectuals—reasserted Georges Clemenceau's assertion that wars cannot be trusted to generals. This rendered three decades of American flag officers focused on devising force structures and fighting budget battles.

Meanwhile, the national security strategy of the United States was to contain communist expansion. Focused as they were on weapons acquisitions and force structures, generals and admirals became executives resembling their counterparts at General Motors and American Telephone and Telegraph. Stalemate in Korea was followed by strategic paralysis in Vietnam mainly due to President Lyndon Johnson's negative objectives of not provoking a wider war while also not losing the war in South Vietnam. Not losing proved costly and ultimately failed because nothing succeeds like winning. For Johnson, strategy devolved into target selection, and his military leaders accommodated him.

The president is required by law to submit an annual "National Security Policy of the United States." The Joint Chiefs of Staff must then respond with a corresponding national military strategy based on the president's broad policy goals. To compete globally an effective president must understand strategic threats, available American resources and correctly assess national will.

Statements like "I will not put American boots on the ground" or "after I'm elected I'm going to bomb..." are inane in the first instance and silly in the second. Any declaration against specific threats, whether it's a nut-job dictator in North Korea threatening nuclear war with the United States, China pumping up island military bases in the South China Sea, Russian forces war-gaming against Ukraine, or ISIS spreading terror globally, must be weighed against resources and capabilities.

The absolute first requirement for an effective president is

to understand clearly the strategic threats and not confuse them with domestic political or ideological agendas. Second, it's the president's responsibility to assure that whatever the national security policy, the military has resources needed to fulfill it. Currently, this means improving operational readiness and reinstituting effective training. Additionally, the Reagan-era force must be modernized to include new warplanes, warships, armored vehicles, helicopters, and artillery. Third, victory demands the national will to win. Because war is an act of violence pushed to the ultimate, there will always be a butcher's bill and the American people must be willing to pay it. That is why the next president must be a leader who clearly understands global strategic threats and effectively communicates that understanding to we the people.

Ultimately, the best strategy is to be strong enough to enter any confrontation with the advantages attendant to unmatched military power. Furthermore, the next president must understand that military orders of battle—quantity of weapons in the inventory—can lead to a cult of numbers that is the fallacy of modern warfare.

Despite overwhelming military power, and far more combat victories than defeats, the United States has not won a war decisively since 1945. Military power alone is not enough. Potential adversaries like China seeking regional military hegemony, Russia intent on restoring its East European strategic swagger, and a hopefully soon-to-be devastated ISIS, must understand that in addition to possessing overwhelming military power, the United States will use it and do so effectively.

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