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RESEARCH & DEBATE

STILL WORTH DYING FOR NATIONAL INTERESTS AND THE NATURE OF STRATEGY

P. H. Liotta

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to James Miskel's well written if logically flawed essay mistitled "National Interests: Grand Purposes or Catchphrases?" (in the Autumn 2002 issue of this journal). The substance of his essay, after all, is not just about the evident "value" of national interests; Miskel, rather, questions why presidential administrations publish and revise national security strategies, per congressional mandate, over the course of their terms. In present-

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ing his case, he conflates the distinction between interests and objectives; consistently misses several truths that the Bush administration's *National Security Strategy* of 17 September 2002 recognizes as enduring; misstates the analytical perspectives of liberalism and realism; and offers an interpretation of national interests and the nature of strategy that is both narrow and deterministic.¹

Yet, before proceeding farther, I should admit an obvious bias in my response. Jim Miskel is a close personal friend and a colleague for whom I hold great respect. While we have certainly disagreed on fundamental strategic issues before, my concern for bias here is not that I will be harsh in my comments but that I will not be harsh enough.

My greatest contention with Miskel's argument lies in the beginning and the conclusion of his essay, where he opines, "The congressional requirement for unclassified national security reports has clearly

proven to have little value in terms of furthering the debate. Congress would do well to consider whether the public interest would be better served if national security reports were required only once in a presidential term—on the assumption that interests and strategies do not, or at least should not, change annually. . . . Implicit in [this debate] . . . are two assumptions. One is that national interests can be defined precisely. . . . The second assumption is that statesmen actually attempt to define national interests with precision.”²

WHAT’S GOING ON? MISSING THE GRAND PURPOSE BY FOCUSING ON THE CATCHPHRASE

While there are some basic truths in Miskel’s skillfully worded sentences—namely, that national security strategies are marketing strategies of administration achievements as much as clear statements of strategic vision—the flaws in Miskel’s argument seem apparent as well.

First, Miskel fails to recognize that U.S. national interests, far from what he terms “vague platitudes,” are in fact long-term, enduring, abstract principles that are embedded in the U.S. Constitution.³ Secondly, Miskel’s suggestion that national security strategies are simply expressions of national interests is just plain wrong. National security strategies are presidential declarations of strategic interests and policy objectives, as well as explanations of the means offered to achieve these ends. Objectives, therefore—which Miskel *never* recognizes in his essay as distinct from interests—are the goals of policy, meant to secure long-term, abstract strategic interests.

Miskel’s failure to distinguish, or recognize a difference, between abstract interests and short-term objectives seriously weakens his argument. At the most fundamental level, basic national interests are enduring and unlikely to change over time: to guarantee the security and prosperity of the nation-state. It ought to be obvious to even the most casual observer of international affairs that the involvement of the United States in the global landscape is also a critical aspect of its national interests; rightly or wrongly, we cannot secure our interests without our involvement in the international arena. Thus, the fundamental “model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise,” which forms the initial template for the Bush *National Security Strategy* (or NSS), differs little from the previous administration’s emphasis on “engagement” in the globally interdependent environment and “enlargement” of democratic communities throughout the world.⁴ The three “strategic postures” of the previous NSS only emphasize this essential interest orientation: “Enhancing Security at Home and Abroad,” “Promoting Prosperity,” and “Promoting Democracy.” (Despite Miskel’s rejection of these postures as a “laundry list of bromides and unfulfilled

wishes,” the previous administration deserves credit for its emphasis on homeland security—which has become the central focus of the latest national security, and which was largely ignored or given far less significant priority in previous national strategies.)

How one achieves that security and prosperity is not always obvious; one must rely on specific policy objectives meant to secure these interests. Therefore, while the *interests* of the Clinton administration and of the current administration, for example, are decidedly similar in their purposes, their *objectives* are decidedly at odds. Consider these key areas of policy objective differences—despite similar declarations of national interests—between the 1999 Clinton strategy and the 2002 Bush strategy, as given in figure 1.

FIGURE 1

	Preemptive Action	International Treaties	U.S. Military	Global Economic Growth
Clinton Strategy	No use of the word “preemption.” U.S. prepared to “act alone”; notes that many security objectives can be achieved only by leveraging influence and capabilities through international organizations, alliances, and as leader of ad hoc coalitions.	Arms control and nonproliferation essential. The ABM Treaty remained cornerstone of strategic stability. U.S. committed to Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In principle, supported Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change.	Fighting and winning major theater wars “ultimate test” for U.S. Armed Forces. In concert with allies, U.S. must have capability to deter and defeat large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theaters in overlapping time frames.	Focus on debt relief, building macroeconomic “stable, resilient global financial system” with more openness for International Monetary Fund, focus on social and human labor, and environmental concerns.
Bush Strategy	While U.S. will enlist international community, will not hesitate to act alone to exercise right of self-defense by acting preemptively. Will deny terrorists sanctuary or support by “convincing or compelling states” to accept sovereign responsibilities.	Claims that nonproliferation efforts have failed, and that—despite agreements—Iran, Iraq, and North Korea (not mentioning India or Pakistan) have obtained weapons of mass destruction. Relies instead on “counter-proliferation,” claiming right to deter and defend against threat before it is “unleashed.”	The U.S. must maintain capability to defeat any enemy—whether state or nonstate actor—with forces strong enough to dissuade adversaries “from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”	Calls for “pro-growth” regulatory policies that improve incentives for work, investment, and free trade. Includes the New Millennium Account—to reward states that show acceptable reform. Urges IMF and World Bank to achieve sound policy, not reform.

Source: Partially adapted from early Clinton national security strategies, the 17 September 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States*, and a comparative analysis made for a front-page story for the *New York Times*, “Changes in Strategy for National Security,” 20 September 2002.

Thirdly, Miskel actually seems serious in suggesting that such speeches as the 30 January 2002 address, to which he refers as the “axis of evil” speech, are more “useful” and “clarifying” than the publication of national security strategies he broadly dismisses as “collective arm [twisting]” and that are published “without enthusiasm.” He further claims that the “axis of evil” speech—which he never

once refers to as the president's first State of the Union address, much else of which no one seems to remember, let alone quote—is “a positive step in terms of debating and defining more rigorously than usual [our] national interests.”⁵

To be sure, the State of the Union address did indeed provoke a vigorous debate about terrorists, weapons, and tyrants. But Miskel performs some entertaining leaps of faith in suggesting that the “‘axis of evil’ epithet”—which is nothing more than a *specific* platitude—is “preferable to platitudes about the survival and vitality of the United States.” Significantly, the Bush administration distanced itself in its 17 September national strategy from the claims made in the previous State of the Union address. Iran, for example—part of President Bush's “axis of evil”—is not even mentioned as a rogue state in the NSS. Iraq and North Korea, further, have historically shown that they understand deterrence; in October 2002, North Korea admitted to nuclear-weapons status and professed to seek a “diplomatic solution.” President Bush has also publicly stated that neither North Korea nor Iran were candidate targets for U.S.-initiated use of force. So much for the value of speeches instead of strategies . . .

Miskel's argument again suffers when he fails to acknowledge that the Clinton and Bush administrations each published its various strategy revisions when it felt both compelled and ready to publish them, not on an annual basis. (The first Clinton national security strategy, for example, went through twenty-one drafts prior to its 1994 publication.)⁶ Further, Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, has repeatedly emphasized the critical importance of the *National Security Strategy* and was quite emphatic in her enthusiasm for its publication.⁷ Further, Rice has publicly stated that—aside from the “axis of evil” designation of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea—there are certainly more than three “rogue states” in the world, though “it's probably best not to name them. . . . Countries can change their behavior, I suppose.”⁸

Finally, the heated debate on the preeminence of U.S. armed forces, by which adversaries will be dissuaded from pursuing “military buildup[s] in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States,” has put into print a conviction that has been present since early drafts of the 1992 *Defense Planning Guidance* (under the direction of then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney). Stating such a position in a national strategy, which is a claim to primacy, makes clear an administration's position and relative emphasis on aspects of national interests in a way no other official document, or speech, could.

As further proof of why national strategies should be open to debate (and inevitably will undergo subsequent revisions), much attention has focused on the Bush strategy's emphasis on preemption. While the Bush *National Security Strategy* does not suggest preempting China, Russia, India, or other major powers, it argues for preemption against terrorists, in terms not radically different

from the strategies employed by previous administrations. But the Bush strategy becomes more debatable regarding “rogue states,” where it rests, according to a recent Brookings Institution policy brief, on a disputed conjecture that “deterrence based upon the threat of retaliation is less likely to work against the leaders of rogue states willing to take risks.”⁹ Equally, the Bush national strategy provides no guidance on *when* to preempt, fails to acknowledge that a preemptive attack could *cause* the very attacks it seeks to prevent (in the Middle East or on the Korean Peninsula, for example), and may allow “partners” against terrorism merely to settle private national security differences—as Russia has already hinted it is ready to do in Georgia. Even Henry Kissinger argues that “it cannot be either the American national interest or the world’s interest to develop principles that grant every nation an unfettered right of preemption against its own definition of threats to its security.”¹⁰

Surely, then, there is a necessity, in declaring the significance of national interests to strategy, to pronounce why. Such declarations of interests are hardly bromides, wish lists, or platitudes. Such interests stem from the analytical perspective of the decision maker, yet Miskel may have simplified too cleanly in distinguishing these perspectives—as the next section briefly suggests.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS?

CONFUSING PERSPECTIVES, CONFOUNDING ANALYSIS

Before presenting an argument on the necessity of national interests, I would like to question Miskel’s broad description of “the two basic schools of thought about how national interests should be defined,” which he offers as realism (whose “avatars” are von Bismarck and Nixon, and who would favor military force as the most tangible form of power for the state) and Kantian idealists or liberals (though he never actually gives a name to the latter but credits both Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin as being members of that “school”). Miskel’s analysis is clear and readable, but it is also wrong. Numerous advocates of realism, particularly those of the strategic-primacy bent (such as Robert Kagan), would strongly support U.S. and NATO intervention in the Balkans, despite Miskel’s argument to the contrary. Indeed, such realists would argue that U.S. intervention came too late, rather than that it should not have occurred at all.

Thus, to claim that only the Wilson “idealists” favored intervention in Rwanda or the Balkans is simply not correct. On the one hand, the Clinton administration, which Miskel implies was more infected by the idealist school than by realism, had clear intelligence and probable foreknowledge of genocide but chose not to act for any number of reasons—to include an assessment of Rwanda as not in the realm of defined, stated, vital, or important national security interests.¹¹ In the same vein, it is a clear truth that—unlike Somalia or

Rwanda—vital national interests were at stake in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Kosovo: the U.S. commitment to NATO (a permanent alliance) and the prevention of spillover of conflict into neighboring states, including NATO members Greece and Turkey. Humanitarianism, therefore, was not the only reason we intervened in the Balkans. Moreover, Miskel's analysis that U.S. interests were "uncertain" during the "air war on Serbia in 2000"—which was actually not a war, took place in 1999 against Yugoslavia (not just Serbia), and was set to become a ground intervention as well if airpower did not succeed—is flatly misdirected. Milošević knew exactly what would happen to him; he simply had no other choice left and had to hope for the best.

I acknowledge the merit in much of Miskel's subsequent focus in his essay, which centers on the Arab-Israeli conflict and draws upon the dynamics of the domestic political process and the "marketing of the American public and Congress." But his focus, like his analysis of the dynamics of the realist and liberal schools, is far too narrow.

By my last count, there are at least seventeen "schools" of analytical perspectives. All of them—and I can hear many of our colleagues, most not well grounded in international relations theory, already screaming their denials—have some form of influence on national security decision making. After all, the most "Wilsonian" of presidents in the last half of the twentieth century, as scholars such as G. John Ikenberry have repeatedly argued, was Ronald Reagan.¹² Further, and to be blunt, the "realism" of Richard Nixon has almost no place in the administration of George Walker Bush. To the contrary, the current administration and the political debate that centers around its national strategy is primarily divided between three "schools": the realists, the liberals, and the moralists (or, more correctly, the idealists). The moralists are firm in their belief that spreading American "values" and American democracy will best achieve the ends of our national security, and thus far, both in the declaration of national interests and in the execution of national strategy to remake the world and to win the war on terror, they appear to be carrying the day.¹³

TO DIE FOR: NATIONAL INTERESTS AND THE NATURE OF STRATEGY

The national interest, admittedly, is a pretty slippery concept. Yet how one views, focuses on, and consistently acts upon such interest will prove the true test of larger "grand" strategic perspectives. The bottom line, after all, remains unchanged: what a nation wants and its citizens are willing to go to war over—and to die for—remains unchanged as a fundamental interest.

Miskel is not the first scholar to argue forcefully that there can be no agreement among Americans themselves about what constitutes the national interest.

Peter Trubowitz, in a study meant to define the meaning of American national interests, came to the conclusion that those “who assume that America has a discernible national interest whose defense should determine its relations with other nations are unable to explain the persistent failure to achieve domestic consensus on international objectives.”¹⁴ Others, such as historian Martin van Creveld, have become more cynical about the utility of interest:

To say that peoples go to war for their “interests,” and that “interest” comprises whatever any society considers good and useful for itself, is as self-evident as it is trite. Saying so means that we regard our particular modern combination of might and right as eternally valid instead of taking it for what it really is, a historical phenomenon with a clear beginning and presumably an end. Even if we do assume that men are always motivated by their interests, there are no good grounds for assuming that the things that are bundled together under this rubric will necessarily be the same in the future as they are today. . . . The logic of strategy itself requires that the opponent’s motives be understood, since on this rests any prospect of success in war. If, in the process, the notion of interest has to be thrown overboard, then so be it.¹⁵

Yet surely the purpose of any administration is to set the tone for leadership by declaring specific interests in writing, and by showing demonstrated commitment to those writings. The best possible way to do this is through the publication and revision of a national strategy. This is not to say that employment of the traditional military, economic, and political instruments of power ought to continue in the ad hoc manner in which they were applied during the 1990s. Regarding the military instrument in particular, Kissinger noted in late 1999, with particular reference to the Kosovo engagement, “I am uneasy with the readiness with which the military instrument is being used as the key solution for humanitarian crises.”¹⁶ Yet this potential weakness also emphasizes the extraordinary magnitude of American strength at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

There are few countries or crises that can threaten American vital interests. Yet our “sole superpower” status means the U.S. will continue to use its influence, and perhaps its military forces, to save lives, right wrongs, and keep the peace. . . . We are in an era in which U.S. interventions may be seen as important but not vital. In such instances, U.S. leaders, supported by public opinion, may be willing to use military force for humanitarian reasons.¹⁷

Setting Power and Priorities: The Hierarchy of Interests

Interests are a starting point, not an end state. At its simplest understanding, the national interest demands that a state be willing to uphold its moral and national values with its treasure, blood, time, and energy, to achieve sometimes specific and sometimes unspecific ends. National interests reflect the identity of a people—geography, culture, political sympathies, and social consensus, as well

as economic prosperity and demographic makeup. Thus, national interests constitute little more than a broad set of often abstract guidelines that allow a nation to function the way it believes it should function. National interests also answer the fundamental but essential question, “What are we willing to *die* for?”

Hans J. Morgenthau, the classic realist thinker, saw two levels of national interest, the vital and the secondary.¹⁸ Vital interests assure a state of its security, the defense of its freedom and independence, protection of its institutions, and enshrinement of its values. Vital interests also negate compromise; they represent issues over which the state is willing to wage war. Secondary interests are more difficult to define, except that they involve compromise and negotiation.

How a nation identifies such vital and secondary interests has to do with the kind of national identity—or *polity*, as Aristotle termed it—its people want to assume for themselves. This identity can change over time. America, for example, has not been since the 1940s the isolationist nation it once prided itself on being. In 1941, Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt jointly proclaimed, in the Atlantic Charter, the liberal principles that would guide the post-World War II world. In 1944, representatives at the Bretton Woods conference established the core principles of economic order that are embodied today in the World Trade Organization; that same year, political leaders at Dumbarton Oaks presented aspects of a vision of future order in their proposals for a United Nations.

What America became committed to in the postwar order was a broader internationalist conception of vital interests that was in many ways antithetical to the isolationist leanings of the founders of the American republic. George Washington’s farewell address revealed a preference for American national interests that seems oddly out of place in today’s environment: “Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns.”¹⁹ If anything, Europe’s interests—as a result of both common histories and struggles—are now at the core of American interests.

It seems significant, therefore, that the Bush NSS does not precisely define national interests in its introductory session, “Overview of America’s National Strategy,” and instead refers to “American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests”—“political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states” and “the non-negotiable demands of human dignity.” (By contrast, the previous Clinton strategies prioritized interests in categories termed “vital,” “important,” and “humanitarian.”) Indeed, not until much later in the Bush document is a distinction even made between values and interests:

In Africa, promise and opportunity sit side by side with disease, war, and desperate poverty. This threatens both a core value of the United States—preserving human dignity—and our strategic priority—combating global terror. American interests and American principles, therefore, lead in the same direction: we will work with others for an African continent that lives in liberty, peace, and growing prosperity. Together with our European allies, we must help strengthen Africa’s fragile states, help build indigenous capability to secure porous borders, and help build up the law enforcement and intelligence infrastructure to deny havens for terrorists.²⁰

Core Strategic Interests and Interests of Significant Value

At their most basic and abstract level, U.S. national interests in the contemporary world are simple to describe: to ensure the security and prosperity of the American people in the global environment. But distinguishing core strategic interests from significant interests that *might* require the United States to commit its treasure, blood, time, and energy is almost never easy. Indeed, the misrepresentation of what constitutes a national interest may well embody the central strategic dilemma the United States faces in this next century. It was no accident that political scientist Arnold Wolfers, five decades ago, referred to the concepts of “national security” and “national interest” as “ambiguous symbols.”²¹

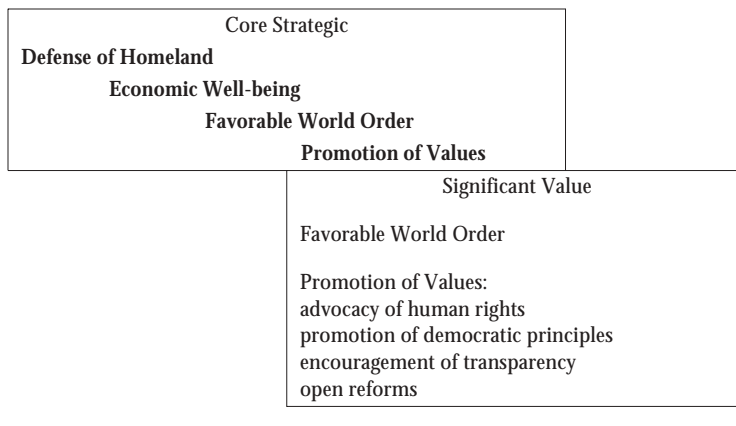
More frequently than often admitted, policy makers cannot know exactly how a potential crisis may impact the real national interest. Even seemingly objective and clear “threats” are difficult to sort through. The connection between Iraq’s 1991 invasion of Kuwait and Serbia’s refusal to sign the 1999 Rambouillet agreement may involve a difficult chain of causes and events that must be dealt with in relation to the idea of “interest”:

Different people see different risks and dangers. And priorities vary: reasonable people can disagree, for example, about how much insurance to buy against remote threats and whether to do so before pursuing other values (such as human rights). In a democracy, such political struggles over the exact definition of national interests—and how to pursue them—are both inevitable and healthy. Foreign-policy experts can help clarify causation and tradeoffs in particular cases, but experts alone cannot decide. Nor should they. The national interest is too important to leave solely to the geopoliticians. Elected officials must play the key role.²²

The three-tiered approach to assessment of interests as basis for action for policy makers, strategists, and force planners is meant to illustrate this necessarily complex process. The first tier resembles Donald Neuchterlein’s hierarchy of intensity and applicability.²³ This “sliding matrix of interests” (figure 2) suggests that nominal issues under the rubric of “favorable world order” (support for human rights, sovereignty versus individual liberties of the citizen, and control or prevention of intrastate conflict) can also have direct implications for core strategic interests.

Issues such as “favorable world” or “promotion of values” can enter the realm of vital, core strategic interests more often—and more quickly—than is commonly thought.²⁴ When a situation becomes so significant that policy makers are unwilling to compromise, the issue—no matter how seemingly peripheral or secondary—becomes a core strategic interest. Witness Kosovo in 1999, for example: NATO nations, by effectively declaring war against Yugoslavia on 24 March, were acting both in the “self-interest” of NATO and European security and, equally, in support of human rights and individual freedoms. Nonetheless, the world community’s obligation and mandate to stop ethnic cleansing and genocide whenever able—and to ignore the sovereignty of individual states, if necessary—seem far from certain.

FIGURE 2
THE SLIDING INTERESTS MATRIX:
INTENSITY AND LATITUDE OF COMMITMENT



Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright was far less confident when speaking about the potential for such “new” doctrine: “Some hope . . . that Kosovo will be a precedent for similar interventions around the globe. I would caution against such sweeping conclusions. Every circumstance is unique. Decisions on the use of force will be made . . . on a case-by-case basis.”²⁵ Former national security advisor Sandy Berger, a month later, complicated the case for humanitarian intervention by suggesting (in the specific case of East Timor) that the United States should “weigh its national interests” in a country before deciding to use military power.

In practice, “case-by-caseism” and humanitarian intervention anytime/anywhere prove equally problematic. The above examples, far from implying vacillation by decision makers, only suggest how difficult it is *initially* to distinguish between core strategic and significant value interests (or what others have termed “vital” and “secondary” interests).

Thus, aside from determining a first-tier order that provides the decision maker a useful, systematic means to think about interests, there should be a second tier for assessing how aspects of such interest will affect policy decision, implementation, and overall strategy. The table in figure 3 is meant to illustrate this difficulty.

FIGURE 3
NATIONAL INTEREST TAXONOMY
(requiring consideration of second and third-order consequences)

ASPECTS OF INTEREST	LEVEL OF INTEREST	WEIGHT OF IMPACT	EXAMPLES
Importance	Primary	Core Strategic	Long-term U.S. economic prosperity
	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Significant value</i>	<i>Open regional trading blocs</i>
Duration	Primary	Permanent	Ensure the free flow of energy resources
	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>	<i>Support opposition to oppressive regimes</i>
Focus	Primary	Specific	Deny Serbian oppression of Kosovars
	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>Universal respect for human rights</i>
Compatibility	Primary	Complementary	Support for arms control/disarmament
	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Conflicting</i>	<i>U.S. rejects Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty</i>
Influence	Primary	Enduring	American leadership
	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Temporary</i>	<i>Committing military forces overseas</i>

Source: With the exception of the “influence” interest proposed here, these interest types have been adapted from works of Hans J. Morgenthau, “Another Great Debate: The National Interest of the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 46 (1952), p. 973; “Alliances in Theory and Practice,” in *Alliance Policy in the Cold War*, ed. Arnold Wolfers (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 203; and *A New Foreign Policy for the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

Two pertinent examples of how focus, influence, importance, and attention to interests develop over time can be drawn from American involvement in the Balkans during the 1990s. In 1994, as Bosnia-Herzegovina descended into complete chaos and Great Britain and the United States came to loggerheads over whether or not NATO should intervene in the former Yugoslavia, President Clinton declared that “Europe must bear most of the responsibility for solving” problems in the Balkans.²⁶ By 1995, the president was declaring that the former Yugoslavia, being within Central Europe, was “a region of the world that is *vital* to our national interests.”²⁷ During the intervening months, events themselves had not changed so much as the American perspective on the need for intervention in the former Yugoslavia. Put another way, not only had American interests moved from significant to core strategic (or from “secondary” to “vital”) but the focus had shifted from general to specific.

This second-tier “taxonomy of interest” can also point to some difficult recognitions (and seeming weaknesses) in strictly categorizing interests in all specific instances. The United States, for example, felt the sting of the “Kosovo effect” in late 1999 when Russian decision makers informed the Clinton administration that they were following in Chechnya the example of NATO intervention in the Balkans (by declaring both the interest-based need to protect sovereign

Russian territory and the “human rights” of Russian citizens) as Russian airpower systematically destroyed the capital, Grozny, and its vicinity, leaving tens of thousands of refugees and a ruined Chechnyan infrastructure. One Russian diplomat is said (the anecdote may be apocryphal) to have asked a U.S. State Department official what the difference between Kosovo and Chechnya was and to have received the reply: “You [Russians] had nuclear weapons.”²⁸ Similarly, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the Indian defense minister, when asked what single lesson he had learned from the “international community” intervention against Iraq, responded, “Don’t fight the United States unless you have nuclear weapons.”²⁹

Such contentious responses to the application of American power that supports U.S. interests prove useful for appreciating the complexity of national interests under strategic uncertainty. Distinguishing how such second-tier categories of interest conflict with initial first-tier interest-level assessments further sharpens the useful recognition that interests are not always in harmony, policy decisions are difficult and often nuanced, and strategy can at times seem hypocritical. While we do not hesitate to impose economic sanctions against Myanmar for its atrocious human rights record, we refrain from similar sanctions against the People’s Republic of China. The reason is obvious: our economic prosperity interests (of core strategic importance, specific focus, and enduring influence) would almost always predominate over “lesser” interests (of significant value, general focus, and uncertain duration).

In an ideal world, support for human rights would not conflict with “absolute” interests for which Americans would be willing to die. In Iraq in 1991, rightly or wrongly, Americans were willing to accept up to ten thousand casualties, but in 1994 they would not have been willing to accept as many casualties to stem the genocide (over eight hundred thousand deaths) of the Tutsi population by Hutus. There was one specific reason for this: Americans are reluctant to accept casualties, or even to intervene, when their *only* foreign policy goals are “unreciprocated humanitarian interests.”³⁰

Thus, a third-tier approach to addressing potential interests, strategic impact, and decision should include a methodology for assessing the relationship of factors that affect the relative position of first-tier interests. There exists a methodology (see figure 4) that is simple and logical and can reveal how seemingly “lesser” interests can quickly influence “core” interests. A North Korean invasion of South Korean territory, for instance, would be an event that self-evidently impacted core strategic interests. Yet Eritrea’s continuing disputes with Ethiopia, Chechnya’s perpetual struggles within the Russian Federation, Islamic revolutionary movements within Central Asia, the inability of the Colombian government to limit the growing power of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de

Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), or the systematic abuse of citizens (or a sector of a population) by a government—all these require a far more difficult logic chain to determine whether the United States should act or not.

Understanding levels of importance, the relationship between specific and general aspects of this perceived importance, and how a potential chain of linked events might lead to a “reaction” that will impact core strategic interests should improve determinations of whether an issue requires action for the sake of interest. The necessary choices a decision maker might face include the following: How plausible are postulated outcomes? How long is the chain of inter-related events? How far removed are these events from core strategic interests? How, specifically, will the issue affect obvious (and not so obvious) relationships to which the United States is committed? If the United States does not act on a specific issue, what are plausible second, third, fourth, and fifth-order consequences? Ultimately, it is essential to address these consequences with respect to potential interests. The three-tiered approach attempts a more balanced methodology for a complex process.

FIGURE 4
A METHODOLOGY FOR CHAIN REACTIONS:
HOW DOES IT IMPACT “NATIONAL INTEREST”?

Immediacy of threat/challenge/opportunity

Geographic proximity that might affect identified interests

Magnitude of challenge to potential interests

Contagion effect and its ability to degrade interests

Connectivity between event and major detriment to interests
 (the domino effect)

Source: Partially adapted from Robert D. Blackwill, “A Taxonomy for Defining U.S. National Security Interests in the 1990s and Beyond,” in *Europe in Global Change: Strategies and Options for Europe*, ed. Werner Weidenfeld and Josef Janning (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Foundation, 1993), p. 105. Blackwill, however, focuses perhaps too narrowly on “threat” assessment.

Sorting through Interests

At best, the most general set of criteria for which the “traditional” instruments of power support national interests might be expressed as:³¹

- *Militarily*, to ensure American territorial integrity and support for alliances to which the nation is committed; to safeguard American citizens against intimidation or attack; to bolster American external interests in concert with political and economic interests, while fostering a nonbelligerent engagement with other states, regions, and alliances.

- *Politically*, to support and preserve American values of freedom, individual rights, the rule of law, democratic institutions, and the principles of constitutional liberalism.
- *Economically*, to sustain individual and societal prosperity through principles of economic reforms, macroeconomic coordination, and free market practice tempered by agreed rules, labor and environmental rules, and regional/international standardization.

As Robert Blackwill notes, the issue of human rights—as one example—connects “directly to U.S. vital and important national security interests/core national objectives.”³² A national interest may therefore constitute much more than traditional, narrow realist understandings.

Consider, as an example, the declared interest of “defense of the homeland.” Under a schema of liberal internationalism, military forces, both as instruments of national power and in support of other cooperative security endeavors, defend the homeland by supporting American interests *abroad*. American power, as part of a democratic security community, promotes “defense of the homeland” through force presence and involvement outside America’s borders. Thus, in order to ensure the nation’s territorial integrity, forces often will be deployed in instances that do not satisfy, at first glance, the narrow criteria of “survival” or protection of territorial interest. U.S. armed forces frequently support American interests by “playing away games.”

Moreover, whether one agrees with the concept or not, there should be some recognition of how “human security” has entered the arena of state, non-governmental, and international organizational thinking. In an age when nontraditional threats like terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and ethnic conflict are linked to such security challenges as population growth, environmental decline, denial of human rights, lack of development, and poverty rates that foster economic stagnation, social instability, and state collapse, it ought to be obvious that a new set of *traditional* problems has emerged. These problems require a fundamental rethinking of interests.

Ultimately, the requirement to *state*, *define*, and *defend* national interests in a public national strategy should remain. For the United States, stating, defining, and defending interests in the NSS both demonstrate a commitment to democratic process and explain how America sees its role in the world. While the American people by and large wish neither to be neo-isolationist nor to become, by virtue of the primacy of the United States, a global police force, principles as well as power constitute the idea of the national interest. It is as if the ghosts of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were in constant tension, defining who we are as a people and for what achievable ends we are willing to commit our means—and what ends are worth dying for.

NOTES

1. While Miskel repeatedly draws on the metaphor of “Delphic ambiguity” and suggests that contemporary statesmen refuse to define national interests in anything but the broadest terms, there is a basic problem here as well. It is, bluntly, his references to the Delphic oracle are not well grounded in the cultural or historical truths of Hellenism. While oracles often produced (ambiguous) prophecies that had serious consequence for future events, the oracles themselves, over time, became corrupted by political manipulation. Eventually, Delphi was known as a “festival of madmen.” Extending the analogy, Miskel’s prescription here—to deemphasize the importance of declaring national interests and of periodically publishing and revising national security strategies—would amount to the same decline and would likely infect, rather than improve, the national security decision-making process.
2. These statements are taken, in reverse order, from the opening and closing paragraphs of Miskel’s essay, pp. 104 and 96, respectively.
3. Fortunately, Miskel does not directly state, but only implies, that U.S. constitutional principles are so obvious they are themselves “platitudes.” Since many American lives were lost both to secure and to uphold these principles over our history as a republic, and since many nation-states around the globe have patterned themselves on the American constitutional example, Miskel’s argument—had he stated this—would have self-destructed before it even began.
4. George W. Bush, “Preface,” *National Security Strategy of the United States* [hereafter NSS] (Washington, D.C.: White House, 17 December 2002), p. iv. To secure national interests, the Clinton administration consistently emphasized three “strategic postures” in its later national security strategies: “Enhancing Security at Home and Abroad,” “Promoting Prosperity,” and “Promoting Democracy.”
5. President Bush’s first State of the Union address ought to be remembered for a number of reasons other than the “axis of evil” declaration, not the least of which is his opening statement: “Tonight, our nation is at war, our economy is in recession, and the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers. Yet the state of our Union has never been stronger.” For a complete text of the address see BBC News, on-line at news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1790537.stm (17 November 2002).
6. John Lewis Gaddis, “A Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2002, p. 53, sidebar, “Power’s Paper Trail.”
7. Although Rice’s support for the national strategy is a matter of public record, her specific enthusiasm can be found in Nicholas Lemann’s “Without a Doubt: Has Condoleezza Rice Changed George Bush or Has He Changed Her?” *The New Yorker*, 14 and 21 October 2002, p. 175, on-line at www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?021014fa_fact3.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
9. The quote itself is from the Bush *National Security Strategy*. The notion that this might be a disputed “conjecture” is from Ivo H. Daalder, James M. Lindsay, and James B. Steinberg, *The Bush National Security Strategy: An Evaluation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 4 October 2002), p. 7, on the World Wide Web at www.brookings.edu (5 October 2002).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
11. Admittedly, the Clinton administration subsequently publicly acknowledged and apologized for its failure to act in 1994 in Rwanda.
12. The sense in which President Reagan might consider himself as being, according to Miskel’s assessment, of the same “school” as Vladimir Lenin might be a humorous, if fruitless, matter for discussion. Perhaps, for the sake of symmetry, Miskel could have compared the “realism” of Nixon and Stalin to the “idealism” of Wilson and Lenin.
13. One of the most effective reviews of this trilateral analytical tension is Nicholas Lemann, “The War on What? The White House and Whom to Fight Next.” *The New Yorker*, 16 September 2002, pp. 36–44.
14. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Redefining the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (July–August 1999), p. 23.
15. Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 217.

16. *The Economist*, "Where Do American Interests Lie?" 18 September 1999, p. 30.
17. Phillip S. Meilinger, "Beware of the 'Ground Nuts,'" *Chicago Tribune*, 21 July 1999, on-line at ebird.dtic.mil/Jul1999/s19990722beware.htm (22 July 1999).
18. Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Impasse of American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 191.
19. Henry Steele Commager and Milton Cantor, eds., *Documents of American History*, 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988), vol. 1, p. 174.
20. Bush, NSS, pp. 10–11.
21. Arnold Wolfers, "'National Security' as Ambiguous Symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (December 1952), pp. 481–502.
22. Nye, p. 23.
23. Donald E. Neuchterlein, *America Overcommitted: United States National Interests in the 1980s* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky, 1985), p. 15. Neuchterlein also presents this matrix in a subsequent book, *America Recommitted: United States National Interests in a Restructured World* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky, 1991).
24. Neuchterlein admits to the possibility of "promotion of values" as possibly becoming a vital stake or interest; he tends to focus on military security, realist-based conceptions of interest and level of commitment in the examples provided in his work.
25. Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Unlearning the Lessons of Kosovo," *Foreign Policy*, no. 116 (Fall 1999), p. 129.
26. William Jefferson Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 1994), p. 3.
27. William Jefferson Clinton, "Implementing the Bosnian Peace Agreement: Let Us Lead," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 62, no. 5 (15 December 1995), p. 130. The emphasis on *vital* is mine.
28. *The Economist*, "Where Do American Interests Lie?" 18 September 1999, p. 29.
29. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993), p. 46.
30. Nye, p. 32.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 108.