

Naval War College Review

Volume 33
Number 5 *September-October*

Article 11

1980

Set & Drift: The Danger of Ambiguity

Joseph R. Weisberger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Weisberger, Joseph R. (1980) "Set & Drift: The Danger of Ambiguity," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 33 : No. 5 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol33/iss5/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.



SET AND DRIFT

THE DANGER OF AMBIGUITY

Remarks by

The Honorable Joseph R. Weisberger

Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island

Naval War College Graduation Exercises

25 June 1980

Admiral Welch, Distinguished Guests, Members of the Graduating Class of the Naval War College in this Year of Grace and Anxiety, 1980:

First of all, it is appropriate to extend to all of you sincere congratulations upon your completion of a rigorous and, to a degree, unparalleled intellectual effort in meeting the requirements the college has placed upon you during this course of instruction. Doubtless the average citizen of this country would be deeply impressed by the quality and variety of this academic program. Most people, even educators unfamiliar with this college, would expect the course of instruction to be limited to military subjects, use of modern weapons, war games and some exposure to the principles of grand strategy. Of course, all of this has been a part of your experience at this institution.

However, in addition to these professional subjects, you have gained mastery of the analysis of Thucydides in his great account of the Peloponnesian Wars in the 5th century B.C., the

thoughts and spiritual agonies of the great philosophers from Plato and Aristotle down to the present time, and the *weltanschauung* or world outlook that can be derived only from wide-ranging literary, philosophic and historical discipline.

Even under the rubric of military studies, the works of Admiral Mahan and General von Clausewitz are in themselves philosophic and geopolitical treatises in which breadth of vision, stringent analysis and logical thought are demonstrated and applied to historic analogies. Probably no graduate students in any of our institutions of higher learning are subjected over a comparable period of time in fields outside their narrow area of specialization to such massive reading requirements and lofty expectations from faculty and administration as are the students of this college. When one comes to the war-gaming part of the course, one is applying a synthesis of economic, strategic, philosophic and political information into an ultimate

implementing of perceived national policy, but this represents the apex of the honing of the mind into an instrument of rational behavior under exacting conditions of stress. Only such an elite, highly motivated and basically outstanding group of persons could be expected successfully to meet these demands.

It may seem like carrying coals to Newcastle for me to talk of national policy and strategic considerations to such a group. Nevertheless, I would like to share with you some thoughts drawn from the same historic readings that have occupied your attention during the past year. As you have contemplated cause and effect in the study of prior conflicts ranging from the Peloponnesian Wars through the Roman-Punic struggle, the strife of the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and down into modern times, you may have been impressed by the elusive forces that impel human beings into courses of self-destruction.

I know that as one views the Athens of Pericles losing the support of her allies and yet intervening in a dispute between Corinth and one of her colonies that set the stage for the war with Sparta, one must consider how many other alternatives would have been open that might have postponed or eliminated the great war of the Greek city states, but yet underlying all of these activities seemed to be a belief that conflict between the Athenian League and the Spartan League was inevitable.

Similarly, when one moves forward in time over the centuries, one is struck by the apparent lack of logic in the determination of Kaiser Wilhelm to underwrite the questionable adventure of the Emperor of Austria in deciding to attack Serbia, even after his humiliating ultimatum had been accepted by that country. Perhaps underlying the Kaiser's willingness to bring the proud towers of royalty throughout Europe tumbling down was an ambiguous belief

that conflict was inevitable, or that bluff and bombast would stifle opposition. I am sure that the last thing the pride of the Hohenzollern family would have wished to achieve was the result attained—a complete destruction of the royal and imperial thrones occupied by most of his relatives.

I think it would be shortsighted for us to assume that Pericles and his contemporaries, or Kaiser Wilhelm and his contemporaries, were essentially less intelligent, less rational and less aware of their own interests than national and international leaders who direct our policies of today.

Probably all of these individuals suffered from a series of human frailties endemic in every age. Foremost among these frailties are the vices of ambivalence, ambiguity and fragmentation of interests. Certainly, none of the principal actors in the events leading up to the fateful opening of salvos of the guns of August 1914 wanted a protracted world war. Few of them could even contemplate the ramifications of such a struggle. They substituted slogans for thought and posturing for analysis. It is to be hoped that we and our adversaries would not repeat the tragic mistakes arising out of ambivalence and ambiguity. Nevertheless, in order to avoid these vices, it is necessary to determine in advance the vital interests of the nation and her allies and to determine the steps and means by which these vital interests should be preserved. Unmistakable signals of our perceptions of these vital interests should be communicated both to our allies and our adversaries—a simple formula, perhaps, but one not easy of attainment. It is here that the issue of fragmentation must be addressed. We, like the Athenians, are a democracy. Although essentially we are a representative democracy, our institutions of government have sought to become more and more participatory and more responsive to interested groups across a

86 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

wide spectrum of opinion upon every subject. It definitely has developed, however, that the special interests on all subjects, not excluding defense and national security, are so numerous, fragmentary and contradictory that they tend to cancel each other out and make the adoption of affirmative policy difficult if not well-nigh impossible.

Great debates rage in our universities whether we should defend ourselves at all under any circumstances, whether we have any vital interests and whether, if we do, we should under any circumstances defend them against anyone with the necessary enterprise and nerve to interdict us anywhere in the world. There are those who would simply disagree about the identity of our vital interests and those who would disagree about the means of implementation of whatever policy we may have.

For example, our government has been greatly criticized for its failure to achieve a comprehensive and coherent energy policy. Nowhere is the fragmentation by special interests of the decisionmaking process more formidable than in the field of energy. Special economic groups find price rises anathema in this field. Other equally powerful groups preach the doctrine that economic forces represented by pricing are the best means to achieve rational conservation. Other groups whose orientation is social rather than economic advocate rationing as a fairer system of apportioning the burdens of conservation among the rich as well as the poor. Opponents of big government decry rationing as the creator of swollen and inefficient bureaucracy. Still others would place faith in the establishment of alternative sources of energy through the use of coal, extraction of oil from shale, and the development of nuclear power. For each of these alternative sources there is a dedicated environmentalist group prepared to oppose by all available means the development of such an alternative because of its effect

on the quality of life. Even such a cursory recounting of the multifaceted, disparate viewpoints is likely to discourage all but the most stouthearted legislator. Certainly in these days of the ascendant special interests, the formulation of coherent policy is no work for the shortwinded.

Thus comes forth the picture of the post-Vietnam era of the United States of America as a pitiful, helpless giant groping in various directions but effective in none. This is indeed a dismal portrait. Nevertheless, the prospect is not without hope. Our realization of conditions of fragmentation, ambiguity and ambivalence constitutes the first step in combating them. Your professional training enhanced by the broadening and deepening experience here will constitute a great resource. Your advice and counsel will contribute to the current of ideas in clarifying and crystallizing our national goals and priorities.

Although in this country it is rightly our constitutional philosophy that the military is limited to implementing national policies rather than formulating them, it is of course generally realized that civil leaders call upon senior military commanders to advise them concerning the ability to implement policy. In turn capabilities are central in formulation of goals. Many of you will in a few years occupy those posts of senior military advisors. You will be called upon to put your knowledge and intellectual abilities at the disposal of the leaders of civilian government. Your experience here has not only increased your knowledge but sharpened your tools of analysis. In your advice be forthright, rational, direct and, above all, unambiguous. Do not tell civil leaders what you think they want to hear but what they must know. Do not make promises you cannot keep. Do not suggest entry into dangerous adversary confrontations in which you are unable to project power that will be

effective in achieving the policy goal desired.

With all of the vices inherent within any political system, and with all of the frailties inherent within our constitutional system of checks and balances, we and our allies of the free world undoubtedly constitute the most beneficial society to the greatest number ever known on the face of the earth. Whatever arguments might be made in favor of the workers' paradise created by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its satellites, it is notable that the great exodus of mankind has been made from them to us. We do not have thousands of individuals fleeing from the United States to the sunny shores of Cuba; we do not have thousands of emigrants lined up on our shores for transportation to the great Russian heartland; we do not have the citizens of Western Europe straining to taste the delights of life in those countries dominated by the Warsaw Pact. To those who suggested that the Vietnamese under their communist overloads would create a peaceful and thriving society, the struggles of the "boat people" and the Cambodians who flee from their tender mercies give persuasive evidence of the values of that which we have to defend. Nevertheless, history teaches that a superior society

may fall prey if inadequately defended to less sophisticated and cultured but militant and single-minded adversaries. We must constantly remind ourselves that while a full-scale nuclear war between the superpowers is unthinkable, it is not impossible, given the right circumstances of sudden confrontation brought about by miscalculation on both sides of the perceived vital interests involved. It is the task of all of us to preclude such a miscalculation leading to a universal holocaust.

Thus, as you return to your duties afloat and ashore to apply with greater precision the knowledge and training you have received here at Newport, you may do so in the secure knowledge that never has an armed force had a nation more worthy of preservation than this one. Upon this score no ambivalence can reasonably arise. Our Lady with the Lamp still raises her torch as the symbol of freedom and opportunity to the huddled and oppressed masses of the world. You are the defenders of this system, this nation, the free world and all it represents—freedom, individual dignity and basic human worth. No greater opportunity, no greater honor could be bestowed upon any military force, nor, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, never have so many owed gratitude to so few.