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## SET AND DRIFT

### CONTAINMENT, STRATEGIC VALUE, WORLD IMAGE— DIFFERING VIEWS OF NATIONAL SECURITY

by

Thomas I. Dickson\*

When we winnow the never-ending arguments over national security for their essences, three basic competing views remain on the threshing floor. They can be labeled "containment," "strategic value," and "world image." Explicitly, but more often implicitly, one of these three world outlooks lies behind most arguments of those who enter the great debates on security. The immediate issue may be whether the defense budget is too big, too small or just right; whether we should build the B-1 bomber, the Trident submarine or some other piece of military hardware; or whether we should leave troops in Korea or reduce our contingents in Europe. The questions may be technical in form but varying opinions still tend to derive from differing perceptions of men, nations, and the world system that grow out of stressing one or another of the three persuasions.

The matter probed here is not which view is right, if indeed one is, but whether the inherent nature of each places it in opposition to each of the others. The acrimony in national

security debates—those over Vietnam and the ABM, for example—indicates that compromise or amalgamation of contrasting positions is difficult. There appear to be fundamental underlying incompatibilities. To begin the inquiry, each concept is stripped to its bare essentials; it is set up, in effect, as an "ideal" model. There is no implication that any one person or group of persons holds precisely to the form in which these ideas are summarized here.

**Containment.** The doctrine of containment finds its theoretical underpinning in the appeasement theory of war, which sometimes is shorthanded as the Munich syndrome.<sup>1</sup> The basic notion is that if greed is allowed to sit down at one place at the table, it will end up trying to eat the entire board. In the particularly American application the culprit is likely to be a totalitarian dictator. However, the doctrine can accommodate some more broadly

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defined villain, e.g., communism or the Russians. Being overlaid with democratic and moralistic patina, containment has come to be tied to dividing the world between good guys and bad guys, a fact that tends to obscure the essential mechanism of the theory.

Crucial to the understanding of containment is that it is concerned with assumptions about a process. This process is one whereby a nation will move, if not halted at the outset, from one adventure to another in a manner ultimately to yield the kind of confrontation that breeds war. The precise issues or territories involved in each instance do not lie at the heart of the philosophical justification for the doctrine of containment. Rather a notion that might be termed the growth of psychological excitation does. The country that wins limited objectives through limited applications or threats of force, or even through several means short of threats of force, particularly if "territorial" gains are involved, will continue to the point where the once yielding or complacent or frightened potential opposition will say nevermore. But the strength of that cry will not be understood by the "aggressor" in the light of recent history, and conditions for major war are reached. Containment subsumes the supposition that a little war now can prevent a big war later. National interest lies in halting the progression, nipping it in the bud, so that the "critical mass" is not reached.

**Strategic Value.** Strategic value theory is quite different, even though proponents of "containment" often argue using strategic value premises. Strategic value regards national interests to be protected as definable and identifiable "things." They can be known and they are at the core of policy formulation. These interests are imbedded in economic and military requirements, in cultural ties, or in historical relationships. Nobody supposes

that their identification is easy, and they might not have precise boundaries, but it is these "things" that must be protected.

To provide an example, most proponents of strategic value theory would accept that Western Europe is vital to the survival of the United States and the American way of life and, for that reason, must be defended. In American thinking, probably the ultimate reduction of strategic value theory is found in the so-called "Fortress America" concept. It has the added advantages of ruling out having to go to war for foreigners, who probably are not very virtuous anyway, and of representing the simplest application of the moral principle that war is justified only in self-defense.

Inherent in strategic value thinking is that there are things that need *not* be protected. Not that their "loss" would be good, but only that they can and should be sacrificed because they are not so important as to justify the cost and effort of protecting them. South Vietnam is an apt example of something that, in the minds of many Americans, did not merit defending. The *place* was not, in and of itself, important, or at least not very important, to the United States.

**World Image.** Obviously, the United States pursuing containment of strategic value policies projects a world image. But the proponents of the world image thesis believe it is the wrong image and that it is counterproductive. Militarism is what they see as the U.S. stance. This generates antagonism and anti-U.S. feelings and actions abroad. Whether it be "revisionist" versions of the cold war or the strained relations of the United States with the Third World, we are tending to create our own enemies. The answer then, lies in ways to make friends, not enemies.

The means may be various, but those that seem to attract attention are those

that serve as an example for the rest of the world in dealing with the problems of modernization—pollution and urban blight, for instance—and working to obliterate poverty, suffering and racism at home and abroad. World image advocates rely on humanist principles and apply their moral values directly to the wellbeing of individuals.

**Can the Views be Reconciled?** At one level the answer to the question has to be "Yes." There is no law that requires foreign policy to conform rigidly to the canons of formal logic. Adding apples and oranges is common political practice. It is evident that there have been elements of all three world outlooks in U.S. approaches since World War II. But pursuing part of all three has led to some inconsistencies, as was pointed out by domestic and foreign critics alike when the United States gave Europe formal priority in foreign policy because of its strategic value and then drew on the resources earmarked to defend Europe in order to wage a war in Southeast Asia in the name of containment.

Even if these concepts can be combined politically, conflicts that exist among their basic principles cannot simply be glossed over while we assemble any combination of them we want and call the resulting melange U.S. national security policy. Conflicting fundamental premises seem certain to emerge even if they fail of explicit recognition in the course of argumentation. To the extent that containment, strategic value, and national image are so different that they do not allow of accommodation, the possibility of solutions short of one side or another "winning" is restricted. And, to the extent they are so different that they do not allow of accommodation, "compromise" solutions are likely to contain basic inconsistencies that adversely influence implementation of the decisions reached. If indeed, each outlook is

basically incompatible with each of the others, then the duel of monologues that has characterized disagreements over national security is little likely soon to be substituted for by a true dialogue.

To start with, can containment and strategic value be joined? In one sense, strategic value includes an aspect of containment in that it draws boundaries that the "aggressor" may not transgress without fear of reprisal, assuming he understands and accepts the limitations placed on him. But basically it is different in that it is concerned with the identification of more or less "concrete" national interests that must be defended, while containment is concerned with halting a process associated with another state's propensity to national aggrandizement. For containment the process must be short-circuited, the assumption being that the "aggressor" will not be able to perceive clearly the restrictions placed by the identification of items of strategic value or, if he does perceive them, he cannot abide by them. For this reason the two concepts cannot logically be joined but must be in conflict with one another.

To the extent that containment and strategic value stress the presence and use of military force to abort the process of aggrandizement or protect high value items, they both are in conflict with national image. To gain peace by eschewing force as an instrument of national policy lies at the heart of national image theorizing even though few proponents of the idea have been willing to espouse unilateral general disarmament. Military force itself tends to be at the root of the international relations problem in the eyes of the advocates of national image.

Thus it can be concluded that each of these three basic theories of national security is at base in conflict with each of the others, even though few persons seek to apply any one of them to the exclusion of the other two. We also may

surmise that the attempt to use a little bit of each in the creation and justification of a U.S. national security policy for today's world guarantees the continuance of a form of debate that

cannot lead to a consensus. Such consensus on national security remains unreachable so long as different national leaders hold in differing degrees to basic premises that defy being melded.

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#### NOTE

1. The terms "appeasement theory of war" and "strategic value theory" as used in this essay are taken from James Payne, *The American Threat* (Chicago: Markham, 1970).

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## 76 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

### WASHINGTON ALUMNI MEETING

Approximately 75 Naval War College alumni stationed in the Washington area met for lunch at the Arlington Hall Officers' Club on 30 June and heard Vice Admiral Stockdale, president of the college, tell of programs initiated in Newport this past year.

The meeting was conceived and arranged by Army Col. Paul Hurley, College of Naval Warfare 1976, with the assistance of Dean of Students Capt. Dave Denton. Some informal photographs taken at the meeting are included here. Another luncheon is planned to be held at Fort Myer in October in an attempt to keep graduates informed of college events and to elicit their comments regarding the college's curriculum.

Admiral Stockdale, stressing the desire of the college to "keep in touch with our graduates," discussed curriculum revisions, an expanded electives program for the Class of 1979, and the recent establishment of the Cooperative Masters Degree Program with the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School.

Graduates in Washington and in other areas of high alumni concentration who are interested in alumni meetings should call the new Dean of Students, Captain Al Kruger, at 401-841-3262 (AVN 948-3262).





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**J. William Middendorf II Award for Advanced Research**

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Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McConville, U.S. Army

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