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The basis of a nation's capability to exert power is found in its national cultural characteristics—people are the “heart,” the “nerves,” the “emotions,” the “intellect” that create power. In evaluating these characteristics, one must consider them not in light of an arbitrary scale of values favorable to a particular culture, but in light of the values and environment of the subject culture. The failure to do this has often resulted in erroneous estimates, the inadequacy of which has been ascribed to irrational behavior.

NATIONAL CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NATIONAL POWER

An article

by

Professor Clyde B. Sargent

Chair of Comparative Cultures

The word “culture” has several meanings. Sometimes it is written with a capital “C,” sometimes with a small “c.” When written with a capital “C,” Culture means everything that you and I regard as good, correct, and gentlemanly. An acquaintance of mine quips that “Culture” represents “indoctrination in prejudice” and includes what “nice” people believe and do. When written with a small “c,” culture refers to patterns of learned behavior shared by a particular group of people over a particular time. For the purpose of this article I wish to discuss culture with reference to the latter definition.

There are many basic similarities among *all* people—similarities in fundamental interests, in basic human objectives, and in basic institutions. The differences commonly observed represent differences in the methods of

pursuing four very basic goals—security, productivity, harmony, and dignity. Differences in culture are normal, desirable, and appropriate. These differences include different methods of thought, decisionmaking, and action.

Every cultural system is valid within the environment within which it developed. Cultures cannot be *simply* compared or *comparatively* evaluated. Cultures are not comparable. Each culture was created out of a *unique* set of circumstances to accomplish the objectives of one people. Each culture is or was superior for *that people with those goals in those circumstances at that time*. A particular culture would be unsuitable for another society, and another society's culture would be less useful for it. Therefore, we may not grade and compare cultures as superior or inferior. We can say only that certain

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cultures are or are not effective in the pursuit of the society's selected goals. Many people grossly err by comparing cultures on the basis of *selected criteria* favorable to one culture or another. Is chess a better form of recreation than golf? This question is unanswerable; it depends upon what you want to accomplish. What is the best restaurant in town? The answer depends on your desires and tastes. Cultures can be evaluated only in terms of their own values and goals.

Culture comprises all of the things, both material and intangible, that man has created to assist in pursuing his basic objectives. In addition to his material creations for comfort and production, culture includes forms of communication, man's beliefs, his values, the way he behaves, his organization of society, the determination of "rules" for the functioning of society, protocol, and a variety of institutions. It includes language, thought and philosophy, fears and confidences, aspirations and goals, and certainly views of oneself, the world, and one's role in it.

Cultures develop from three primary sources: (a) cultural heritage and tradition, (b) environment, and (c) historical experiences. Cultures reflect the way people cope with these forces as they seek security, prosperity, harmony, and dignity. A long history of isolation will produce attitudes in a people quite different from the attitudes of a people constantly threatened by attacks on their borders or continually engaged in trading activities. The physical hardships of North American colonial life in the 17th century produced cultural values and attitudes that today's more prosperous society rebels against. Another important ingredient in the creation of culture is the periodic appearance of a sage, of several in sequence, who synthesize experiences and vocalize for the people a system of philosophy—such as a Buddha, a Confucius, a Jesus, a

Mohammed, a tribal sage, or a Mao Tse-tung.

Just as people create culture, so culture molds the personality and character of the people under its influence. I resemble a North American *not* because my parents were North Americans, but because I was raised in North America and molded by the values of this society. Had I had the same parents but been raised within the society of China, England, or the Arctic, I should behave like a Chinese, an Englishman, or an Eskimo.

Cultures impose upon all of their members massive, intense, and continuing "brainwashing" to mold and shape thoughts and feelings. From birth until death our cultures are molding us. The agents of culture who influence us are our parents and families, our playmates and peers, our teachers, the social group with which we associate, our churches and religious systems, our professional group, and the state. We cannot escape. We are induced to conform, to behave and think like other people of our culture. And then, in turn, we do the same with our children.

Culture is learned, patterned behavior shared by a large number of people and communicated generation after generation—learned from predecessors and transmitted to descendants.

Cultures determine and define the values, the standards, and the modes of behavior in which people are indoctrinated. Cultures define acceptable behavior on the part of their members. The total of cultural values defines the framework and parameters within which a people *think, make judgments, make decisions, and behave*. People usually are unaware of the influence of these values.

Time, social change, the growth of knowledge and technology, and the introduction of new goals create obsolescence for every culture. Cultures cannot be static, cannot stand unchanged. Culture is, in some ways, essentially a

“problem-solving” device. It is a people’s system for creating and maintaining a desired social order. The solution of problems creates other problems, and cultures and societies must develop new methods for new problems.

Wherever we look today in the world, we see change. The tremendous increase over recent decades in knowledge, technology, interpersonal and international relations, human socialization within cultures and among cultures, and ideological concepts has created such a dynamic drive for change that most vital cultures in the world today are in the throes of upheaval. Not only China, but most of the rest of the world is involved in a dynamic Cultural Revolution. This is very notably true in the United States.

It is inevitable that any given cultural system will become obsolete if society is alert and dynamic, and every cultural system becoming obsolete must struggle for new perspectives and new values to solve new problems. Our old cultures were not geared to handle our new problems. Moreover, with the need for change, every people is faced with the need to surmount the resistance of tradition and familiar ways. Cultures for suitable living, satisfying in the past, must be modernized in order that we may have new cultures suitable for satisfying living in this century and the next.

We tend to think of “culture” and “nation” as synonymous. However, culture is not necessarily synonymous with “nation” or with “society.” A culture may encompass more than one nation—as “Eastern culture,” “Western culture,” “Latin culture,” or “Moslem culture,” “Buddhist culture,” and “Christian culture.” Culture may relate to people who are less than a nation or society—as “southern culture” or “black culture.” Culture may encompass *segments* of populations of numerous nations and societies—as “youth culture.” We might even speak of an international “Navy

culture.” People may be “sliced,” as it were, in different ways and grouped by a sharing of dominant traits and values; each group, in effect, represents a “culture.”

Popularly we equate “culture” and “nation”—as “French culture,” “Chinese culture,” or “Russian culture.” But within each nation there is great diversity, and in generalizing about a national culture we must admit many variations. We recognize what are called “subcultures.” Nevertheless, for convenience we can speak of “national cultures” and “national culture values.”

An understanding of culture provides insights essential for effective international relations. A major element of culture, of course, is people and their motivations. The dominant values and characteristics reflected by large segments of the population are called, by UNESCO, national culture values. The product of these values is national character.

I venture into this topic with an awareness of controversy and a recognition that there is no decisive consensus regarding the nature, value, or even existence of national character. It is my view, however, that the concept permits us to focus upon and understand the attributes of the people of the various societies in a way not otherwise possible. And in our world affairs today we need every tool of comprehension.

These are my views—influenced by many scholars, shared by some, denied and rejected by others. Do not accept them because they are expressed here. If these views broaden your insights in understanding people and nations, use them. If they confuse or seem esoteric, then set them aside. I hope these views will suggest tools by which we can better understand people and can increase our effectiveness in intercultural and international relations.

You have no doubt considered national power from various perspectives. Many considerations are used in

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evaluating a nation's power, but one factor remains clear. People, exerting and expressing power, are the primary and ultimate sources of a nation's strength. People are the *heart* and the *nerve* and the *emotions* and the *intellect* that create expression of power. Only people can activate material resources for power. The effectiveness of a nation's power depends *not* primarily on material instruments, *but* on how people use the instruments. A nation may possess instruments of power, and its people may use them; this nation expresses power. Or a nation may have the instruments of power but chooses not to use them; this nation does not exert power. We frequently speak of a nation's "intentions and capabilities." "Capabilities" refer principally to a nation's material assets for power. "Intentions" relates primarily to the desires and will existing within the people.

Scholars and strategists often identify "the elements of national power," and they admit *people* are a significant element of power. Hartmann, speaking of the power of nations, refers to "the behavior patterns of nations" and includes people in his fifth element of national power as "psychological-social." Mahan includes "the character of people." Farragut stated, "One of the requisite studies for an officer is *man*." Mao Tse-tung is unrestrained in his emphasis upon the importance of people, stressing that people are more important than all the sophisticated institutions and hardware of modern societies.

Although we consider people as an element of national power, we often do so only in a quantitative sense. We count them and evaluate their job skills in terms of warring capability. This is not sufficient, for people are different in other ways. The forces that motivate them cannot be assessed statistically, nor interpreted by criteria suitable for assessing the American people.

Not all of the components of power are relevant in each and every case of power evaluation. Rich natural resources or navigable rivers may or may not be present. People are the sole (one and only) *sine qua non* of power. Thus, we need to increase our understanding of people, and we need to identify their role in the use of the instruments of power. This involves the study of cultures.

If people are the *heart* and the *key* to power, we must, as far as possible, analyze, evaluate, and determine the crucial and core element of *people* as the principal force of power. This is extremely difficult for people, as individuals and as groups, are complex. They reflect great variety. In addition, we are not certain of the attributes of people that are significantly related to power. It is even possible that these attributes can differ from culture to culture.

Characteristics of people cannot be quantitatively or qualitatively *measured* and expressed *statistically*. Evaluating human characteristics cannot be turned over to computers; this task must be tackled with the resources of human intelligence, imagination, insights, and experience. Estimates of the relation between cultural characteristics and the capacity for expressing power require (as in most professional activities) persons with certain aptitudes.

Perhaps the most important of these is intellectual empathy, the capacity to see the role, function, and suitability of beliefs and practices that may not make sense or be acceptable in our own society. Also necessary is a disciplined imagination that can see beyond the impersonality of statistical data and facts and grasp the human factor.

In simple terms, Chet Huntley, in one of several "swan songs," reflected this accomplishment when he wrote, "I believe I have been able to work the necessary transformation of mind, and to undertake the required purge of

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prejudice to the end that I can advance to every other fellow person the assumption that he possesses sensitivity and human dignity."¹

But, even as students of the nature of power, we must live with our dilemma. We must pursue, with the best of knowledge and insights we can acquire, our understanding of people. Even though we cannot identify and statistically measure "people power," we know that it exists. We are dealing with unmeasurables. We cannot mathematically represent love and hate, courage and cowardice, confidence and fear, optimism and cynicism, national patriotism and local provincialism. But we know that all these characteristics of people exist, and we need to consider them. Similarly, with "people power" as a whole, though often we cannot represent it mathematically, we know that "people power" is a controlling force, and we need to evaluate it to the best of our ability. This involves a study and analysis of cultures.

At the level of the nation, these patterns of national culture values often are called national character. I hold that the concept of national character is valid even though we cannot measure it statistically. We continue our search for understanding. Similarly, we must continue our quest to understand national character; only as we increase our knowledge can we understand the prime role of people as determinants of national power.

National character is a working hypothesis. That we do not amply understand it does not negate its reality. Research tends to demonstrate that nations do have both uniqueness of character distinguishing them one from another and similarity of character shared by most nations.² Our concern for national character must encompass *our own* culture and nation. Most of us are not very aware of "what makes us tick" as a people, of why we behave as we do, or why we have certain beliefs,

attitudes, motives, and goals. This awareness is essential, for an understanding of national character becomes meaningful and purposeful when we observe interaction between and among cultures. Only by understanding our own character can we understand the essentials of another culture or nation and the experience of interaction between our nation and other nations.

What is national character? My own definition, at this time, is that national character is: One or several distinguishable mosaic patterns of human, cultural, and personal/psychological (especially motives) *attributes, widely possessed* by significant proportions of the population, having a degree of durability or continuity, that *tend to determine* behavior or action as a *nation*.

The attributes include intellectual, physical, and emotional characteristics (including attitudes, aspirations, motives, and culturally created human and social values).

Before working with this definition, we must note that national character is *not* computed by identifying the significant attributes of a large number of the people and multiplying by the population. Two characteristics of populations dictate this caution.

First, the national character of a *people* may differ from the national character of a *nation*. The leadership may create a national attitude and a national character that differs from the

¹ *TV Guide*, 1-8 August 1970, p.8.

² Hundreds of studies—scientific, intuitive, and otherwise—related to national character have been done over the past 30 years by anthropologists, political scientists, psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, and others. A splendid survey of these studies is reported by Alex Inkeles and Daniel J. Levinson in "National Character: the Study of Modal Personality and Socio-cultural Systems," in *Handbook of Social Psychology, Vol. IV, Group Psychology and Phenomena of Interaction* (1969), p.418-492.

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character of the people as a whole. Also, people acting in groups often act differently than they would as individuals. Consider the example of the looters in the Detroit riots of 1967 who later returned their loot, and the vandals at the Sino-Soviet Institute in 1969 who later volunteered apologies.

Furthermore, as provided in the definition above, national character may consist of several *distinct* but *overlapping* patterns of attributes. These reflect distinctive groups of people within the society, all having much national culture in common, but each having attributes of distinct diversity. This is true for even small countries as, for example, Belgium. Certainly in all nations there are distinctions between urban and rural, between "white collar" and "blue collar," perhaps between coastal and hinterland.

A study of national character does not imply evaluation or comparison of merit. The national character of a people or of a nation is a creation of that culture. National character reflects attributes that society created to cope with environment and to pursue desired goals. Thus, the only acceptable evaluation of a national character is in terms of its perceptions of its environment and its goals. Attributes of national character might be utterly unsuitable in another society. Should the environment or goals of a society change, its attributes of national character may no longer be suitable for it. Mainland China today is a good illustration of this. In conclusion, the national character of a people can be evaluated only in terms of *their* culture and *their* goals. If, at any given time of evaluation, a society's national character for coping with environment and pursuing goals seems unsuitable, this unsuitability probably is due to the fact that environment and goals have changed, but the elements of national character have not adjusted to the new situation.

Self-evaluation by a nation of its

"national character" at every given time is, however, of great importance *to that nation*. Many tragedies to nations have occurred because of an insufficient awareness *by those nations* of the "national character" of their own people. I suggest that much of the unrest and turbulence in nations today is related to insufficient self-understanding. The United States is outstanding among nations that have failed to appreciate their national character. Much that we see today in the way of turmoil, confrontations, accusations, and recriminations reflects the United States in the agonizing and tortuous ordeal of "deep soul-searching." Self-evaluation is an imperative process for each nation as it seeks to maintain its

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Professor Clyde B. Sargent completed his undergraduate work at Denison University in political science in 1930 and a master's degree in English at Trinity College in 1932. He then took a master's degree in

Chinese language and civilization from the College of Chinese Studies in Peking and taught for 6 years as Chairman of the Foreign Languages Department of Cheloo University in Tsinan, China. During the war years, Professor Sargent served as a special assistant to the American Ambassador in Chungking and as a major in the OSS. In 1946 he returned to the United States and completed a doctorate at Columbia in Far Eastern studies. Since that time Professor Sargent has served in a variety of positions, including Political Advisor to the U.S. Delegation to the United States-U.S.S.R. Joint Commission on Korea (1947-1948), Director of Foreign Area and Language Training with the U.S. Government (1948-1965), and Professor of History with the East Asian Institute, Oakland University (1966-1967). Professor Sargent is presently occupying the Chair of Comparative Cultures at the Naval War College and serving as lecturer for The George Washington University graduate program there.

social order and pursue national goals. Self-evaluation is also imperative as a nation evaluates its national power *vis a vis* other nations.

How is national character created? The basic forces molding national character are: (1) physical environment, (2) cultural heritage (accumulative), and (3) historical experiences. Pressured by the influence of these three forces, men seek to develop a satisfying physical existence and meaning in life. These generally universal desires of all men are reflected in human goals generally pursued by all men, regardless of when and where they live in the world.

People in different parts of the world have created different ways to pursue common goals and solve problems. This is why we have differences among people. Social structure, values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior are all devices created to pursue goals and solve problems. These all contain the elements of national character. These are the things we must understand if we want to know how a people are likely to behave in given situations.

The challenge to all who would

understand the nature and force of national culture values is difficult. We have a problem of perception and a problem of interpretation. The problem of perception is our need to climb out of our vision and perception conditioned by our American "culture training" and try to see the world as our target cultures see it. The actions of a nation or a people are determined by their concepts and perceptions, not ours. Most people "act rationally." If behavior appears to us to be "irrational," usually we are judging others' behavior by American norms and overlooking the perspectives and values of the people whose behavior appears irrational. These can be fatal faults.

In conclusion, national culture values are complicated. They are illusive. They are continuously changing. There are many variables. An approach to understanding is hard work—intellectual and psychological. However, insofar as we can develop insights, we can better manage our own national affairs and increase the sophistication of our involvement in intercultural and international affairs.



A military philosophy and that somewhat more tangible thing—a military policy—are the product of many factors. A philosophy grows from the minds and hearts, social mores and customs, traditions and environment of a people. It is the product of national and racial attributes, geography, the nature of a potential enemy threat, standards of living and national tradition, influenced and modified by great military philosophers like Clausewitz and Mahan, and by great national leaders like Napoleon.

*Hanson W. Baldwin:
In "The New York Times," 3 November 1957*