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CURRENT U. S. MILITARY STRATEGY

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
on 8 December 1958 by
Major George Fielding Eliot

Admiral Lyman, Gentlemen:

It is an honor and a privilege for me again to have the opportunity of addressing the faculty and students of America's oldest institution of higher military education. In fact, I have never visited the Naval War College, either as a guest lecturer or as a participant in a discussion group, without personal pleasure and professional profit. I have yet to leave your hospitable doors without knowing that I took away with me gifts far more valuable than any that I had brought.

This morning, my assignment is a challenging one indeed: an analysis of current U. S. military strategy and how it supports the participation of our armed forces, either under circumstances of general war or of conflict short of general war.

At the very outset, I had a problem. What is our strategy? What policy objectives is it designed to support? What role are the armed forces assumed to play under current policies in support of these objectives?

Fortune was very kind to me, or perhaps I should say that Secretary Dulles was kind to me, for just four days ago the Secretary of State delivered a speech in San Francisco in which he set forth the clearest thumbnail analysis of our national strategy which I have seen from so authoritative a source in several years.

This speech is of special significance because it indicates so forcefully the increased weight which is being given to military considerations in the formulation of national policy, and this has not always been so. No one would claim for military opinion a preponderant place in the determination of policy. But, as the late Edward Mead Earle once wrote: "Diplomacy and strategy, political commitments and military power are inseparable. Unless

this be recognized, foreign policy will be bankrupt. Strategy, therefore, is not merely a concept of wartime but it is an inherent element of statecraft at all times." With this view, few students of the Naval War College (or any other of the War Colleges) would be likely to take issue. It has, however, not always prevailed at the higher levels of political decision.

I recall not many years ago attending a background briefing session for newsmen in Washington on the subject of "U. S.-Soviet Relations." It was supposed to be a Joint State and Defense effort. Presiding was an Assistant Secretary of State, who introduced his colleagues about like this: "Gentlemen, I would like you to know Mr. Jones, who is an outstanding expert on Soviet foreign policy and one of the principal advisers of the Department of State on that subject. This is Doctor Brown, our leading expert in the State Department on the Soviet economy. And this is Captain Smith, from the Pentagon." That was eloquent of the level of importance which was then ascribed to military considerations in the making of our foreign policy. It is encouraging, today, to find the Secretary of State himself coming around unmistakably to the view that diplomacy and strategy, political commitments and military power are indeed inseparable.

I cannot possibly do better by way of introducing my assigned subject than to quote briefly two portions of Secretary Dulles' speech (incidentally, I think you would find it rewarding to read the whole of it). It is printed in the *New York Herald Tribune* for December 5:

It is our policy to check the Communist use or threat of force by having retaliatory power, and the will to use it, so that Communist use of force would obviously be unprofitable to them.

I emphasize both the power *and* the will. One without the other is useless. Also, that will must be made sufficiently manifest that political aggressors, when they make their calculations, will calculate that they could not aggress without disaster to themselves . . .

It is, however, not enough merely to have great retaliatory striking power. It is necessary to have forces-in-being at endangered points. Nations which are in close proximity to powerful aggressive forces need the reassurance of some visible force within their own territory. They are not content to be wholly dependent upon forces and decisions elsewhere.

Furthermore, vast retaliatory power should not be, and will not be, invoked lightly. There must be an ability to oppose what may be limited probings in ways less drastic than general nuclear war.

A capacity quickly to help Lebanon; such power as was rapidly deployed in the Taiwan area; the presence of United States forces in such areas as Berlin, West Germany, and Korea — all contribute essentially to the peace and security of our country.

These remarks that I have just quoted were in the forepart of Mr. Dulles' speech, which dealt generally with the situation of the Pacific. Then, at the close, he defined the basic objective of American policy:

But history has demonstrated again and again that democracies are almost always stronger than they seem and despotisms are always more vulnerable than they appear. For example: It is impossible for Communist nations to develop into modern industrial states without a large degree of education. But minds so educated also penetrate the fallacies of Marxism and increasingly resist conformity.

Also there are increasing demands on the part of the subject peoples for more consumer goods, for more of the fruits of their labor. These demands cannot be indefinitely repressed or satisfied merely with recurrent promises.

Such internal pressures are bound to alter the character of the Communist regimes, particularly if

these regimes are denied the glamor and prestige of great external successes.

Then, very significantly, the Secretary continues:

To deny external successes to international communism is not merely a negative, defensive policy. It accelerates the evolution within the Sino-Soviet bloc of governmental policies which will increasingly seek the welfare of their own peoples rather than exploit these peoples in the interest of world conquest.

There, in plain words, we have the basic mission of our armed forces in support of U. S. policy objectives as seen by the Secretary of State. That mission is, let me repeat: "To deny external successes to international communism."

It would be outside the scope of this talk for me to try to evaluate the political premises on which Mr. Dulles bases this statement of military requirements. He prescribes a military posture which is essentially defensive in order to deny the enemy any escape by military adventures from the otherwise inevitable consequences of the internal contradictions of Communist doctrine.

The overall policy itself may not be negative and defensive in character, as the Secretary says, but the part to be played by our armed forces is certainly defensive. If there is to be military initiative, under this policy, it will come from the other side.

The military mission defined by Mr. Dulles is to be performed by two kinds of forces: (1) Great retaliatory striking power, together with the manifest will to use it; (2) Forces-in-being to deal with limited aggression, or probings, or to aid our allies in doing so. These forces are to be used, let us note, not only to check the Communist use of force but also their use of the threat of force. Mr. Dulles speaks in one place of a manifest will to react forcibly; in another, of visible power. Our force should be such as to deter the enemy from aggression and to bolster the confidence of our friends in our ability to do so. We must be strong enough not only to deny international communism external success

by actual attack, but also by blackmail and subversion under the threat — latent or explicit — of attack.

Since the military initiative, however, remains with the Communists, and especially as both the President and the Secretary of State have repeatedly pledged this nation never to start a major war, we must begin any analysis of our national strategy by considering the nature of the military threat which we must be prepared to deter or to defeat. That threat resides chiefly in the military and industrial power of the Soviet Union. Without Soviet support, the Chinese Communists offer little present threat to the United States, whatever their potential for the future may be.

Soviet military policy is designed, as is ours, to support Soviet progress toward national objectives. In their case, the principal national objective is simply a conquest of a monopoly of power throughout the world, eliminating all opposition. There is little indication that the Soviet leadership thinks this objective can be quickly attained. It is rather to be reached by steady, unswerving, day-to-day and year-by-year progress — a progress in which the aim of the leadership never wavers from the goal. In the course of this advance, all elements of policy of the Soviet States — political, psychological, economic and military — are consistently made to bear their due share of the total effort as members of the Soviet team.

The influence of Soviet military policy on the overall policy of the Soviet government is gauged by their own cold estimate of Soviet military potential as an instrument of Soviet purposes. This estimate seems to be based not only on what they believe they can do in a military way from time to time, but also on what they hope they can induce others to believe they can do.

For initiating full-scale nuclear war (to take the major case first), the actual Soviet potential today is not as great as it is going to be within the next two or three years. For an attack against the United States bases in North America now, the Soviets would have to depend on a combination of the piloted

aircraft of their long-range air army and such missile-bearing, conventionally-powered submarines as they could manage to deploy and keep alive long enough to launch their birds within striking distance of our coast, supplemented perhaps by a very few ICBM's of uncertain accuracy. In none of these elements is their existing striking power very great.

Our defenses against aircraft and against submarines are also growing more effective with the passage of time. The Soviets must therefore expect to receive very nearly the full scale of retaliatory effort that the Strategic Air Command could deliver from its home bases. Their intermediate-range ballistic missiles, it is true, could strike many of SAC's overseas bases and probably wipe out such aircraft as they caught on the ground there. But from these bases there would still be some aircraft that would probably be able to take off, or that would be already in flight. From the bases in Spain, probably most of the available bombers would get off, since these bases are at extreme range for existing Soviet IRBM's. Finally, the Soviets will have to take the full effect of our Navy's striking power, launched from attack carriers at sea which are moving targets that cannot be zeroed in by ballistic missiles and which the Soviets cannot count on destroying by surprise in any other fashion available to them.

The net amount of retaliatory nuclear weapons-yield, which, under today's conditions, could be expected to penetrate the Soviet defensive system, would add up to unacceptable punishment in anybody's book. Probably a sufficient degree of damage to the Soviet Fatherland would tear apart the tight control system upon which the tenure of power — and, hence, the personal existence — of the Soviet leadership depends.

On the basis of these calculations the Soviets are deterred, for the time being, in seeking to settle accounts with us once and for all by a surprise nuclear attack. This does not mean that the *threat* of such an attack remains negligible. The threat lies not in the realm of military reality, but in another reality: the fact that if it were attempted, an indispensable feature of the operation would be a maximum effort by Soviet intermediate-range missiles

against every overseas U. S. air base and missile base within their reach in Western Europe, Turkey, and the offshore islands of Asia. For such an effort, a significant Soviet military capability exists. Every people which has such a U. S. base within its borders is painfully aware that this is true; every people to whose government a proposal is made by Washington to add to these bases additional launching sites for American intermediate-range missiles knows that these missile bases are to be set up within the arcs of fire of Soviet IRBM's which are already in place and operational.

The facts as to the blast, heat and fall-out effect of hydrogen warheads have been endlessly discussed in the free press of both Western Europe and Japan. They have been emphasized by recent Soviet missile tests — deliberately planned, as it seems, to be the dirtiest of the dirty. On top of this, the Soviet government has publicly warned every nation concerned of the possible consequences of harboring United States bases from which the Soviet Union could be threatened. We should not be complacent because most of the governments concerned have officially rejected these warnings. Every one of them, except perhaps that of General de Gaulle in France, could be upset by a sufficient swing of public opinion to the opposition. Most opposition parties in Western Europe are making hay with this threat of nuclear annihilation, and offering one form or another of appeasement as a panacea.

The bold confidence which the Soviet government has recently displayed — notably, in its virtual ultimatum regarding the future of Berlin — is derived directly from its understanding that our European allies, facing a threat of being turned into radioactive particles, with two to three minutes of warning time, are reluctant to support any "get tough" policy turned up in distant Washington. Soviet diplomats today, says the experienced Drew Middleton of *The New York Times*, "discuss issues in terms of power rather than of Marxian dialectics." One such diplomat the other day calmly enquired, in a public interview, whether we did not realize that the fate of Berlin was already decided by the existing facts of the balance of power in Europe.

It is the intermediate-range missile, in operational quantity, which forms the basis for this confidence and for the extreme distress of many of our European friends. The latter know that if the Soviets do try a surprise attack, their primary targets must be the bases of our retaliatory forces — whether airfields or missile bases. They know that if those bases are located in their lands the fact that these missiles are not completely accurate weapons (in their present stage of development, at any rate) requires the use of high-yield warheads in order to be sure of clobbering the targets at which they are fired and, with consequent result, the surrounding populations, of which they also are very, very much aware. So it happens that of the intermediate-range missiles which we had hoped to establish abroad, we have so far only been able to get the somewhat tough-minded British to accept them. There are reports that there will be some established in Italy, but this is still hanging fire.

For the future, we may well ask: How much actual deterrence are we going to get from weapons of this type, or from weapons of any type, which depend on the concurrence of other governments besides our own for their use? The reaction time to a surprise attack by ballistic missiles is short enough anyway, without undertaking a debate as to whether we are going to shoot back.

Some of these shortcomings of the fixed-base intermediate-range ballistic missile, as an instrument of our current strategy, appear to be taking root in Washington. We are having a cutback in that particular type of missile, and it is quite possible that these programs will not be continued after current commitments have been met. We are told that the reason for this is that breakthroughs in the development of intercontinental missiles make these “increasingly attractive” (I believe this was the term which the Secretary of Defense used) in relation to the IRBM’s.

We can ask whether this is really true in terms of the strategic objective which we are thinking about. In fact, gentlemen, I think we may well ask whether any fixed-base weapon

(especially a fixed-base ballistic missile) is anything else but a target for the enemy under conditions of enemy armament with a high-speed striking weapon *and* the privilege of shooting first.

It is difficult to understand the theory that when we must take the first blow we should adopt armament which requires us to provide the enemy with a locatable target, and stand still to be shot at. We are told that a great dispersion of air and missile bases can so diversify the enemy's target problem that he cannot meet it. This simply means that we think we can build bases faster than the enemy can build missiles to destroy them, which seems a little uncertain. We are told that hardening of these bases — i.e., the provision of massive concrete defenses — will so reduce their vulnerability that the enemy cannot count on destroying them. This is the old argument which goes back, I suppose, to an argument between the battering ram and the wall and continues through gun and armor and various other phases. As long as it is a question of penetrating armor of any kind, and as long as the technological race continues, there is no great security in that seesaw. We still have the really terrible problem of reaction time. This might amount to as little as ten to fifteen minutes for intercontinental missiles, as these become operational in enemy hands in greater quantities, and as little as two or three minutes for the intermediate-range missiles at overseas bases.

The truth is this: in a period of military history where the principal armament of our principal opponent is a weapon which strikes within time limits of that kind, position warfare is dead; the side that shoots last is dead, too, if it adopts a war of position. For the side that shoots last, mobility is the only hope — either of survival or of effective deterrence. The old principle of fire and movement, which I learned as a second lieutenant, included: do not let your men bunch up and stand still to be shot at. Standing still to be shot at when the enemy's weapons are rifles is foolish; standing still to be shot at when the enemy's weapons are nuclear warheads, carried by ballistic missiles, is just suicidal.

Yet, the idea of these giant missiles is taking hold on the imagination of the public to a very considerable extent and, apparently, on the official imagination as well. As an illustration of how far what appears to me to be wrong-headed, wishful thinking can go, I invite your attention to the current issue of *Newsweek Magazine* on the successful firing of an ATLAS test missile from Cape Canaveral:

For all practical purposes, the U. S. now has what Air Force missile strategists call "emergency operational capability" in the ICBM missile field. In other words, if the Russians should attack this country, and President Eisenhower proposed to retaliate by firing an ATLAS at Russia, it could be done from Cape Canaveral.

Then the article goes on immediately to say: "It would take some hours to fuel and prepare the missile."

Question: If the Russians should attack this country under such conditions, what would be their number one target?

It seems to me that the primary requirement of a deterrent force whose object is to deter surprise attacks by ballistic missiles is not to possess the *surprise attack potential* of the ballistic missile but to possess a *survival potential* against surprise attack — not only to possess it, but so clearly to have the ability to survive as to make the enemy certain that retaliation will come, whatever his efforts may be. That deterrent, besides being reasonably immune from surprise destruction, must be sufficient in strength to inflict unacceptable damage on the enemy; and, in order to be believable, it must be situated far away from populated friendly areas. This is so because as the tensions rise it will be less and less believable — either to our friends or to our enemies — that we will take great risks and go to the brink of war under conditions which might produce an enemy decision to strike at the bases of our deterrent force, if these were located in our own heartland. A deterrent operates on the minds of the enemy leadership; if, in their minds, it is not credible and convincing, it is not a deterrent.

Fixed-base confrontation across the Atlantic or across Western Europe immobilizes not only our weapons but our minds and our will. Our alliances are already suffering strains under the pressures thus generated. The will of our own people to resist aggression may progressively weaken as their own safety is brought into question by studding our heartland with fixed targets.

Of course we cannot make drastic overnight changes in the whole aspect of our weapons procurement programs, but we can make changes in emphasis and priorities. I believe that an analysis of our current strategy should include the changes that seem to be indicated by the enemy's policies and the weapons and methods with which he supports them. If we are not going to be able to place many missiles of intermediate range in friendly lands overseas, and if the safety of the air bases overseas (on which a great part of the Strategic Air Command's striking power still depends) are increasingly compromised, in what direction should we begin to make changes in emphasis as we seek to secure the future against the time when the Soviets will have a striking power in their intermediate and intercontinental missiles capable of threatening our bases at home as well as abroad?

I do not see where, for the next few years at any rate, we can hope to deploy a sufficient measure of striking power to maintain our deterrent forces except on the broad reaches of the sea. It may well be that we shall have to take for our own the words which Charles II wrote in the Preamble of the old British Articles of War: "It is upon the Navy, under the good providence of God, that the safety, honor and welfare of this realm doth chiefly depend."

This is said not because I am standing on the platform of the Naval War College. It is said out of a deep conviction that we must find an adequate means, a believable and convincing means, of deterring the Soviets from launching surprise missile attacks upon our country and a visibly effective means of doing so in order to prevent them cashing in upon the blackmail possibilities which otherwise would be open to them as their missile threat increases.

A shift in emphasis, starting now, toward mobile sea-based deterrent weapons does offer a possible (if partial) answer, and is one that we barely have time to make. As you all know, the acceleration and expansion of existing programs, while not always easy, is far easier than starting new ones. We do have a considerable existing and developing capacity in attack aircraft carriers, and in planes and missiles suitable to be operated from them. We have a potential capacity in missile-firing submarines. In the operation of these and of nuclear propulsion plants, we are well ahead of the Russians. Somewhere on the drawing board, we have a nuclear-powered seaplane. It is possible to deploy both atmospheric and, if necessary, ballistic missiles in other types of surface ships; in fact, there has been a proposal to put them in battleship hulls. There is a diversity here of weapons types and of potential tactical combinations which is highly attractive to the imagination and would seem to be suited to the initiative and self-reliance which are inherent in the American character.

We have a great sea tradition; we have a long experience in dealing with the exigencies of sea warfare. While the Russians have some experience at sea, it has mostly been unfortunate and their navy lacks a tradition of victory. Indeed, almost throughout its history it has been handicapped by having been under the control of the army, and considered by dominant army opinion in national policy decisions as a mere adjunct to use in the defense of the army's flanks or for the furtherance of short-legged amphibious operations.

One advantage of a mobile deterrent force of the proposed character — indeed, its principal advantage in this connection — is that the enemy cannot count on destroying it by surprise. This does not mean that it is invulnerable; it means that the weapons available to the Soviet Navy do not permit any calculable safety factors with regard to preventing retaliation by American sea-based nuclear power by surprise destruction. Attacks upon these forces and their defense would be a matter of the chances of war. They introduce an "X" factor into the Soviet calculations which, as their delivery capacity increases, rises to prohibitive levels.

The air defense of the U. S. S. R. under these conditions also becomes increasingly difficult because of the unpredictable directions from which attack may come.

From the point of view of our allies, we have here a visible deterrent power — one where the will to use it can be made far more manifest and believable than the use of a deterrent power based in our own country or in theirs. We return to a freedom of action almost comparable to the days when we had atomic weapons and long-range delivery systems and the Russians had none.

The fixed-base ballistic missile, gentlemen, is just not our weapon — it is their weapon. It is a surprise attack weapon, and surprise attack against fixed targets is its only military use. Its military qualities, however, give it a considerable blackmail value as well. We do not intend to make a surprise attack on anyone; this has been repeatedly laid down as a basic tenet of our policy. We need not a surprise weapon, but a weapon that can survive surprise and live to strike back.

Now we come to the question of limited war; of a need for a means for dealing with local aggressions, or “probing,” as Mr. Dulles called them, where it would be unsuitable to invoke the mighty deterrent and it would not be believable that it would be used.

Remember that the mobile deterrent system, which includes a large proportion of sea-based weapons, must be based on control of the sea. Control of the sea is a very large order, if you consider that 70% of the earth’s surface is covered by salt water. It is generally construed as the ability to establish zones of maritime control where our interests for the time being require us to do so; zones in which we will have a reasonable degree of freedom of action without undue risk and which we will be relatively able to deny to the enemy, except under conditions of extreme risk to him.

If we acquire this capability (this indicates, of course, that we go far beyond deterrent weapons such as POLARIS), and

continue to be able to maintain against any conceivable enemy challenge the ability to go where we need to go — which involves a good many weapons systems and techniques beyond the mere deterrent weapons — and it becomes a condition of our survival in necessarily acquiring it, we have laid the strategic groundwork for a global mobility that will enable us to react very quickly to limited emergencies as well.

Further, it may be observed that to the degree our deterrence system is relatively invulnerable to surprise attack, it can be fitted to our concept of what constitutes in the Soviet mind an unacceptable risk. We do not have to maintain our deterrent on the basis of a margin of survival; we do not have to kill them three or four times. We formerly had to have the ability to do so in order to retain the ability to kill them once after they had hit us. The problem thus tends to level off. To the extent that it does so, resources will be released for other purposes — for research and development in the construction of future weapons, for ground forces, and for other purposes that go along with the need for maintaining the deterrent in all of its forms. Of course the sea-based form is not the only form that we will require.

Looking toward the future, the possibilities are literally fantastic — and no man can say what they will be. I am here concerned with *current* strategy as the limit of my discussion, and current strategy is concerned with staying alive so that we can get to this wonderful future.

We have seen in Lebanon and Formosa cases in which we were able to act with commendable speed and in time, and to present — either directly or by supporting our friends — a sufficient weapons superiority to accomplish useful objectives which have had political repercussions. It is necessary that we continue to do so under circumstances in which the Communist missile threat is increasing.

General Maxwell Taylor, the Chief of Staff of the Army, in a message to the Infantry Conference at Fort Benning, said the other day that “the Communist bloc will continue to wield

the instrument of limited aggression with increasing truculence under the cloak of fear, imposed by mutual deterrence"; that is, the idea of a mutual standoff. Of course the Soviets do not mean to have a mutual standoff; they do not mean to have a balance of terror. They mean to upset the balance in their favor. There will be nothing mutual about deterrence if it originates from bases that are safe from surprise attacks; there will be no "cloak of fear" under which the Soviets can shelter.

Of course the time is *now* to review these matters, to look ahead, to choose the weapons, and to make the right choices. The Soviet missile program, like all Communist programs, has a definite goal. There is some suggestion that they think they have it made; that they think they are now progressing along a path in which they cannot be overtaken.

Mr. Adlai Stevenson, in recording his interviews with Mr. Khrushchev, noted this confidence on Mr. Khrushchev's part. His confidence is justified if we do no more than try to overtake the Soviets in building weapons which are suitable for their purposes but of little value for ours. If we shift to a strategy and weapons of our own choosing, suitable for our purposes, in the end they will be running to catch up if they continue to use military power as an instrument of their policy. They will have to find a means of countering our mobile deterrent forces at sea. This means that they will have to undergo a sea change in their whole concept of strategy — and that will take them quite a while!

Will we do this — are we going to do it? I don't know! There are some things happening to the budget right now that are not too promising. But the final decisions have not been taken, and will not be taken until Congress comes to take a look at the budget.

We may, however, take present encouragement from the very heartening similarity in principle between the words that were spoken by the Secretary of State four days ago and words that were written by the Father of our Country, President Washington, when he proposed a military establishment which should

“appear truly respectable to our friends and formidable to those who might otherwise become our enemies.” This, gentlemen, it would seem, is still the basic purpose of the American government and people. This precept, laid down by a great military genius who won our War of Independence, is a precept which we still must follow in seeking to maintain that independence in a world containing dangers of which General Washington never dreamed.

Thank you very much, gentlemen!

BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH

Major George Fielding Eliot

Major Eliot received his B.A. degree from Melbourne University in Australia in 1914. For the next four years, he served with the Australian Imperial Force in the Dardanelles, the Western Front, and France. He then served in the United States Army for eight years (1922-1930) in the Military Intelligence Reserve, attaining the rank of Major.

After contributing to fiction magazines for several years, he began writing extensively on military and international affairs. He has since become widely known as an author, journalist, radio and television commentator, and lecturer. He was military correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1939 to 1946, and was then a correspondent and columnist for the *New York Post* Syndicate from 1947 to 1949. Since 1950, he has been affiliated with the General Features Syndicate. He was a military analyst for the Columbia Broadcasting System from 1939 to 1947, and since 1950 has been associated with the Mutual Broadcasting System as a commentator.

Major Eliot is the author of *The Ramparts We Watch*, *Bombs Bursting in Air*, *Hour of Triumph*, *The Strength We Need*, *Hate, Hope and High Explosives — A Report on the Middle East*, *If Russia Strikes*, *Caleb Pettengill*, *USN*, and *Victory Without War*, 1958-1961.