



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

E-NOTES

March 2013

THE GATEKEEPERS: GEOPOLITICS AND THE LIMITS OF POWER

By Amos N. Guiora



Amos Guiora is a Professor of Law, SJ Quinney College of Law, University of Utah. He is the author of numerous books and articles addressing national security issues, including [Legitimate Target: A Criteria-Based Approach to Targeted Killing](#) (Oxford University Press, forthcoming April 2013). Guiora served for 19 years in the Israel Defense Forces, Lt. Col. (retired); from 1994-1999 he was directly involved in the implementation of the Oslo Peace Process. He will be speaking under FPRI auspices in New York City (October 28, 2013) and Philadelphia (October 29, 2013).

The Israeli movie *The Gatekeepers*, nominated for an Oscar award earlier this year, serves as extraordinary background for a discussion of critical issues -- and not just with respect to the Israel-Palestine conflict. What makes the movie compelling is the direct, unapologetic and reflective manner in which the limits of power is addressed. What makes the movie *even more* compelling is that six retired heads of the Israeli intelligence agency, the Shin Bet, address the subject. Speaking frankly, without pathos and devoid of undue emotion, the six look directly into the camera to say there is a limit to the effectiveness of power.

Their frankness is particularly noteworthy because all six authorized the use of force against suspected Palestinian terrorists. The second part of their message is that Israel must negotiate directly with the Palestinians -- that the conflict can be resolved only through the pen, not the sword.

The Gatekeepers is particularly relevant to America on two distinct levels: American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and the recently released Department of Justice White Paper articulating drone policy, including against US citizens. Both manifest executive power at its zenith, unchecked by Congress or court. Re-articulated: each reflects Justice Jackson's warning in the 1952 Supreme Court case *Youngstown Sheet & Tube vs. Sawyer* regarding the danger posed by an "unfettered executive."

While the movie focuses on the Israeli dilemma regarding resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, it also serves as an invaluable jumping off point for a broader geopolitical discussion. That is, though the direct focus of the movie is local (Israel-Palestine), its subtext (geopolitics) is of equal importance.

The six retired heads of Shin Bet—Avraham Shalom, Ya'kov Pe'ri, Carmi Gillon, Ami Ayalon, Avi Dichter and Yu'val Diskin—speak compellingly and bluntly regarding the limits of state power. The six do not come from the "faint of heart school": all deployed state power in an effort to protect Israeli society against Palestinian terrorism. None are apologetic or engaged in maudlin mea culpas expressing remorse for authorizing tough measures. That is not their message; that is not the import of the film. The significance of the film lies in the willingness of the six retired Shin Bet heads to engage in reflection and offer this conclusion -- that force alone cannot not resolve conflict.

STATE POWER: TO WHAT END?

Both President Bush's decision to intervene in Iraq and Afghanistan and President Obama's decision to expand the drone policy reflect the implementation of significant US power. The question is why, and to what end. The larger question is whether the force has long-term significance or is its impact limited to the immediate, here and now. Re-phrased: is state power, as implemented by Presidents Bush and Obama, tactical or strategic.

The question is neither amorphous nor abstract; both actions—intervention and the use of drones—directly result in the loss of life. Bush placed US forces in harm's way; Obama significantly enhances collateral damage. The question is: To what end? This was poignantly brought home when I posed to cadets at the US Military Academy the following question: What is the true mission in Iraq? The wide-eyed, deer-in-the-headlights looks told me everything I needed to know; we were sending America's finest into harm's way without a clear sense of mission.

In the aftermath of my talk, Dean (then Professor) Martha Minow and I wrote the following: "the junior leader, armed with an unclear understanding of the strategic objectives, increasingly loses the confidence of his troops. They may fear their superiors recklessly endangering them. He is the representative of the senior commanders, yet he cannot articulate a clear purpose coming down from the top; he is the voice of command, but cannot give a compelling justification for putting soldiers' lives and well-being at risk."

A number of years ago I was invited to give a talk on Homeland Security in Minneapolis, Minnesota. After my talk I was approached by a U.S. military serviceman who shared with me that he was shortly Afghanistan-bound where he would be training local policemen. In response to my question regarding his language skills, the response, with a wry smile was "sir, I barely speak English." While we both laughed (sort of), it was clear that the mission was inherently problematic, if not guaranteed to fail from the outset.

The story has stuck with me for a number of reasons, primarily because it highlights the enormous complexity relevant to military missions where language skills present an enormous challenge. In addition, it raised questions regarding knowledge and understanding of the 'other'; sending US military personnel who speak only English to train Afghanistan policemen raises profoundly important questions regarding both the mission and US understanding of local culture mores and norms. While we both chuckled at his self-deprecating response I think we both recognized the mission had little chance of success.

I recalled that story recently when meeting with a former senior official in the Israeli intelligence community. The official (hereinafter, Mr. M) shared with me the following vignette: when posted with senior Israel Defense Force (IDF) officers in the First Lebanon War (1982) he was deeply struck by their lack of understanding of domestic Lebanese culture and politics and how that dramatically impacted both their intelligence gathering *modus operandi* and subsequent operational decision making process. In addition, Mr. M emphasized that the involvement of IDF officers in Lebanese political issues reflected confusion regarding the proper role of a military in non-traditional conflict when nation states are not engaged in war with other nation states.

To explain the larger, geopolitical implications of *The Gatekeepers*, we will turn our attention first to George Kennan, who, perhaps more than any other American diplomat, truly understood geopolitics and international relations, both philosophically and practically. Kennan's containment policy reflected a different era, one marked by creation and implementation of a policy; that cannot be said with respect to American actions in the aftermath of 9/11. It is for that reason that we later turn to the issue of leadership: the failure to create and implement a policy reflects a profound failure of leadership. That is an issue that the six retired heads of the Shin Bet directly address in their candid comments and profoundly important analysis regarding the relationship between power and leadership in Israel.

GEORGE KENNAN AND THE LIMITS OF SOVIET POWER

In his monumental work, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*¹, Professor John Lewis Gaddis describes in painstaking detail the unmatched contribution by Kennan to postwar US foreign policy. Kennan, the brilliant architect of the "containment" policy that defined US-USSR relations for decades, was a profoundly insightful

¹ John Lewis Gaddis; *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (Penguin Books, 2011).

student of the Soviet Union. Not only did Kennan speak fluent Russian, he had an extraordinary understanding of Russian culture, politics and society. In other words, he was a brilliant student of the Soviet Union, uniquely positioned to develop US policy. (Kennan was a State Department official when Foreign Affairs published his seminal “X” article.²)

In writing the article Kennan, drawing on his insight of the Soviet Union—which was immeasurably more acute than his understanding of US society and culture—was able to articulate an implementable foreign policy that guided American Presidents for decades. Containment was predicated on Kennan’s recognition that while Soviet leaders were not actively pursuing armed confrontation with the US, American policy was best served by an active containment of the Soviet Union.

That is, American policy reflected—as outlined in the containment policy—a two-fold recognition: the Soviet Union was not on “war footing” but there was a need for active and consistent American measures seeking to ensure war did not become an option. The strategic thinking that guided Kennan reflected, then, a keen understanding both of Soviet goals and the limits of Soviet power; recognizing both was essential to development and implementation of the containment policy. Recognizing the limits of Soviet power was essential to the containment policy; unlike others who believed the Soviet Union was firmly committed to military engagement with the US, Kennan understood the powerful limits that constrained Soviet expansionism. While Kennan was not oblivious to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, he understood that the limits of that domination.

The containment policy is in sharp distinction from the lack of articulate and coherent US policy in the post-9/11 world. In direct contrast to the Cold War policy that guided American decision making from 1945 to 1989, the decisions and policies implemented in since 9/11 suggest a lack of clarity and coherence. The distinction between the two is essential; containment reflected a strategic approach predicated on deep understanding of current realities in conjunction with extraordinary perception regarding long-term consequences whereas post 9/11 policy is largely guided by short-term tactical measures.

The difference between the two approaches is monumental; it also cuts to the essence of geopolitics. To that end, in formal and informal conversation with US military personnel the overwhelming sense is that area commanders, regardless of rank, are able to articulate a very specific operational goal but express concern, if not resentment, that the “larger picture” has not been conveyed to them. This approach is both remarkably shortsighted and fraught with danger, as adumbrated in Tennyson’s immortal words:

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”

Was there a man dismay'd?

Not tho' the soldier knew

Someone had blunder'd:

Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why

Theirs but to do and die:

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.³

Precisely because the state/non-state paradigm is immeasurably more complicated than the traditional state-state regime, the inability to convincingly and consistently convey to area commanders a large mission suggests a powerful disconnect between senior and junior leadership. This model was, perhaps, appropriate in the traditional state-state conflict; however, given the ambiguity indigenous to the state/non-state paradigm, the traditional hierarchical approach is, arguably, unsuited.

² George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” (published as Mr. X), *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.

³ Lord Tennyson Alfred, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, available at <http://poetry.eserver.org/light-brigade.html> (last visited Mar. 11, 2013).

GEOPOLITICS AND THE HOME-FIELD ADVANTAGE

Geopolitics requires a confluence between the theoretical and the practical. The former demands national leaders understand a wide range of issues including international law, international relations, finance, geography and military power, particularly its limits. The latter requires the implementation of these distinct disciplines with sensitivity both to domestic politics and the global community while recognizing the importance of tactical and strategic issues alike.

Tactical thinking reflects decision making focused solely on the “immediate” whereas strategic thinking reflects keen understanding of and appreciation for the “long term,” devoid of immediate results and impact. Perhaps circumstances justify, or dictate, a narrow perspective; while that may be the case, effective leadership demands the ability to weigh and consider broadly the ramifications of particular decision points.

In the Vietnam era, the “domino theory” guided American decision makers, and it is clear, in retrospect, that the policy, both in theory and practice, was misguided. Forcefully articulating and implementing the “domino theory” required the Johnson Administration to engage massively the US military in what was, clearly, a misbegotten effort requiring unprecedented and unjustified cost, human and financial alike. In a nutshell, the domino theory held that:

a communist victory in one nation would quickly lead to a chain reaction of communist takeovers in neighboring states. In Southeast Asia, the United States government used the domino theory to justify its support of a non-communist regime in South Vietnam against the communist government of North Vietnam, and ultimately its increasing involvement in the long-running Vietnam War (1954-75). In fact, the American failure to prevent a communist victory in Vietnam had much less of a global impact than had been assumed by the domino theory. Though communist regimes did arise in Laos and Cambodia after 1975, communism failed to spread throughout the rest of Southeast Asia.⁴

In both Lebanon and Afghanistan the militaries (Israel and US respectively) are fighting non-state actors (in Lebanon, Hezbollah; in Afghanistan, the Taliban) with innumerable additional ethnic, tribal and religious forces influencing the conflict. The sheer volume of “actors” who have a stake, regardless of its size and weight, significantly impacts the already tenuous nature of multi-cultural and multi-faceted countries and imposes significant dilemmas on the external nation-state that seeks to influence local mores, norms and culture.

Dialogue with US military personnel over the past years consistently highlights the following reality: very little is known by on-the-ground commanders regarding local culture, much less local language. That troubling paradigm is equally applicable to Iraq and Afghanistan. Not only does this reality present significant practical challenges for commanders but it highlights an additional burden that has, unfortunately, been largely unaddressed: articulating the mission, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan.

This is of particular importance in the broader geopolitical discussion; if national leadership is unable, perhaps unwilling, to articulate a mission, what are commanders expected to implement? President Obama’s prospective decision to leave some number of troops in Afghanistan after 2014 suggests a mission best described as “staying alive”. As a senior US military commander wryly noted to me: “When I was in Afghanistan we built many schools; that was a great achievement on our part. The only problem: we forget that we need to train teachers to fill the new schools.”

In determining government policy, the questions below are particularly relevant; in weighing their relative importance, the commander’s observation is particularly relevant:

- 1) What are the particular and unique characteristics of the local culture?
- 2) What justifies intervention by a state actor?
- 3) What is the cost of intervention?
- 4) When can power be used and what is the cost of using power?

⁴ See *Domino Theory*, History, <http://www.history.com/topics/domino-theory>, (last visited Mar. 4, 2013).

In direct contrast to Kennan's containment theory created in response to a "set piece" paradigm between two known actors, reflecting clear objectives predicated on a model where the "known" significantly outweighs the "unknown," contemporary decisionmakers are confronted with distinctly different realities. The concise containment theory (supplemented by an ostensibly clear domino theory that, in reality, reflected reflexive fear and profound misunderstanding) has been overwhelmingly replaced by tactical decision-making reflecting a profound lack of strategic thinking. If, in the past, the spheres of influence and strategic alliances were largely clear—subject to the inevitable vagaries of national self-interest that affected the longevity of alliances—contemporary geopolitics is significantly more complex.

The state/non-state paradigm is predicated on an important paradox: the limits of state power and the limited ability of militaries regardless of clear superiority in material and manpower. To that end, the ability of the nation-state to impose order and/or to determine the outcome of conflict broadly defined (as compare to a specific act of operational counterterrorism) is, inherently, limited. By example: while the U.S. can kill bin-Laden, al-Qaeda (however defined) is, nevertheless, capable of conducting acts of terrorism, and air travellers are subject to long security lines at airports world over.

Whatever the preferred term of art -- insurgency, guerrilla warfare or non-traditional conflict -- what is of primary importance is the recurring pattern of the nation-state's assumption that it can impose "its ways" on both other sovereign countries and on distinct internal groups.⁵ That assumption is both historically flawed and fraught with risk and arrogance. It also reflects a profound misunderstanding of geopolitical realities: indigenous groups will invariably have extraordinary, built-in advantages because of their deep familiarity with the "lay of the land," literally and figuratively. Perhaps the oft-used sports expression, "home field advantage" is particularly relevant and appropriate in describing this paradigm.

This uncomfortable reality is of particular importance in understanding geopolitics, both historically and now. Precisely because the "forces at play" stretch well beyond the traditional state actor, the requirement to understand local language, culture and politics is of the utmost importance. The attempt to impose one's will by strength alone reflects a profound mistake; yet, it is one that consistently recurs. Whatever the cause, the consequences are enormous; it results in enormous loss of life, significant property damage, unnecessary expenditure of financial resources, hardening of traditional animosities and, ultimately, significant questions regarding the nation-state's success in impacting long-term change in accordance with its stated goals and ambitions.

LEADERSHIP

In his book, "Supreme Command,"⁶ Professor Eliot Cohen carefully analyzes leadership in wartime by examining US President Lincoln (US Civil War), French Prime Minister Clemenceau (World War I), British PM Churchill (World War II) and Israeli PM Ben Gurion (establishing the State of Israel). Cohen's primary focus is on their decision-making in the face of tensions between civil and military leadership. While the four leaders faced, naturally, distinct paradigms what unified them was an ability to understand competing forces while making decisions with both immediate and long-term ramifications. According to Cohen:

It is not, however, only the selection and dismissal of generals that constitutes a politician's chief responsibility in war, nor is it even ...the articulation of goals or the allocations of resources. Rather, a politician finds himself managing military alliances, deciding the nature of acceptable risk, shaping operational choices, and reconstructing military organizations.⁷

⁵ See John Nagl and Peter Schoomaker, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency from Malaya and Vietnam* (Praeger Pub., 2002); Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (Penguin Press, 2006); Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 11, 2001* (Penguin Books, 2005).

⁶ Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command* (Free Press, 2002).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Of Lincoln, Cohen writes:

Lincoln had to educate his generals about the purposes of the war and to remind them of its fundamental political characteristics. He had not merely to create a strategic approach to the war, but to insist that the generals adhere to it. His subordinates did not always agree with him or with one another, and indeed, he often found himself having to arbitrate disputes among general officers at odds with each other over matters weighty or trivial.⁸

Of Clemenceau, he writes:

When Clemenceau became premier Russia was exiting the conflict, allowing Germany to turn its full force on the staggering Allies in the West. The United States had yet to appear in force; Britain had suffered its own hideous losses...Clemenceau saw France through the German offenses of the spring and early summer of 1918....He helped maintain the troubled coalitions with Britain and the United States....Finally he presided over the negotiation of a peace treaty that, however flawed, restored to his country the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, left Germany constrained though not crippled, and provided France, if she had the will to maintain them, positions on the bank of the Rhine to repel a possible future German bid for power.⁹

Of Churchill:

Churchill believed that the formulation of strategy in war did not consist merely in drawing up state documents sketching out a comprehensive view of how the war would be won, but also in a host of detailed activities which, when united and dominated by a central conception, would form a comprehensive picture. This attention to detail stemmed from his unwillingness to put full reliance on military expertise.¹⁰

Of Ben Gurion:

Strategically, the [Israeli war of independence] began as a war of survival, at least from the Israeli point of view: the leaders and people of Israel believed that upon their victory depended not only the existence of an independent Jewish state but the physical survival of its citizens. They fought, therefore, a total war, as all-embracing in its efforts as the conflict that had swept the world in the preceding ten years... Yet the war had another strategic aspect, as a coolly conducted struggle for limited ends among powers who had in mind a peace settlement of a moderate kind. Even at the outset, the leaders of the provisional government of Israel declined to describe the borders of the Jewish state, suspecting that by force of arms they might secure more territory from favorable adjustments to the partition plan of 1947—as indeed they did.¹¹

A leader who cannot consider issues beyond the immediate is incapable of engaging in effective geopolitics. A leader whose focus is exclusively tactical is incapable of identifying future threats and risks.

THE GATEKEEPERS: A FINAL WORD

This brings us full circle to *The Gatekeepers*: the movie is very “Israeli” in that it reflects clear-eyed, straight-shooting analysis, devoid of pathos. There is no “political correctness”, no apology and no weakness in this movie. At the end of the day, what makes the movie so compelling is the unflinching toughness of tough-minded people who authorized killing Palestinian terrorists.

What makes it particularly compelling for the American audience is that it forces the public to ask its leaders to what purpose is force used before we unnecessarily endanger our finest and the other side’s innocent population. That is a discussion sorely missing in the American political dialogue; *The Gatekeepers* poses that question without

⁸ Ibid, p. 58.

⁹ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 127.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 180-81.

blinking and without emotion. If nothing else, it should engender powerful conversation and hard questions.

My conversations with one of the retired heads made clear the point of the movie: there is no alternative but to engage the Palestinians in direct negotiations because the impact of the use of force is, ultimately, limited. That is reflective neither of weakness (the right's criticism) nor war-mongering (the left's criticism). It is, more than anything else, indicative of sobering realpolitik predicated on thoughtful reflection by those uniquely positioned to do so.

To that end, I asked him if the movie had an audience of one, PM Benjamin Netanyahu. While not rejecting my analysis he noted, correctly, "even if Bibi does not see the movie, others would." As Netanyahu's third government takes the reins of power it can but be hoped that the rational voices of the six retired heads of the Shin Bet will be heard. Their straight and direct talk regarding the limits of power is compelling and powerful, making this an extraordinarily important movie.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.