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NATIONAL CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP IN NATIONAL STRATEGY

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
16 September 1960

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Professor Hans H. Morgenthau



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As the topic of my lecture is obviously of an intangible nature, when you raise the question as to what the importance of geography for national strategy is, you deal with a concrete, tangible subject. When you ask yourself what the importance of the industrial potential of a nation is for national strategy, you again deal with a tangible subject, but when you raise the question of the national character, you not only deal with an intangible subject, but the first question you must raise is do you deal with anything real to begin with, because there are people who say that the national character is a kind of an illusion, and it is only man living under different social conditions, and if those conditions change, they change. It is, so it is argued, really a kind of a myth to assume that the Russians, let me say, are essentially different from Americans, or the Germans are different from the French. If they were all alike, and if they would only live under the same economic and social conditions -- if they had the same kind of government and act alike -- if this were so, one-half of the subject of this lecture would have disappeared, and there would be really nothing to talk about. But the old evidence to it and you might even say the evidence of our senses argues against the denial of the reality of national character, Especially if you look at American society and at American history, brief as it is, and if you consult, in particular, the judgments of foreigners who have observed carefully and objectively the American scene, you realize

how impressed they were with the different national character of Americans. At the very beginning of American history a French settler spoke of the American as a new man. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French political philosopher and statesman, when he traveled in this country for nine months in the thirties of the last century, wrote a famous and great book, "Democracy in America," in which he outlined that the essential characteristics of the American character were fundamentally different from those of other nations.

Let me give you an example which clearly illustrates the point I want to make. I want to read to you from a report which was made about such a situation in Russia by an American diplomat who reported to the State Department, and he wrote as follows: "Doing the last year it has been evident that the policy of Russia toward foreigners, and their entrance into the empire, is becoming more and more stringent." I heard of several Americans last summer who were unable to procure visas. This arises mainly from political considerations and the fear of foreign influence upon the popular mind. To this it may be added that there is a strong, anti-foreign party in Russia whose policy would exclude all foreigners except for mere purposes of transient commerce. The position of a minister here is far from pleasant. The opinion prevails that no communication, at least of a public nature, is safe in the post office, but is opened and inspected as a matter of course. The opinion also prevails that ministers are constantly subjected to a system of espionage, that even their servants are made to disclose what passed in the household, their conversations, their associations, etc. Seekers see into and cognize everything; nothing is made public that is worth knowing.

A strange superstition prevails among the Russians that they are destined to conquer the world. Appeals to the soldier are founded on his

idea of fatality and its glorious awards are seldom made in vain. To a feeling of this sort has been attributed such remarkable patience as endurance which distinguishes the Russian soldier in the midst of the greatest privations. Nothing is more striking to an American on his first arrival here than the vigor of the police."

Now you might say that Mr. ^{KENNAN} Cannon could have written this dispatch when he was an ambassador in Moscow, or Mr. Bohlen, or Mr. Liewellyn E. Thompson could have written it yesterday. It was written by the United States Minister to Russia, Mr. E.S. Brown in 1851. Now a great revolution had occurred in Russia, the whole social system had radically been changed, but those characteristics -- those qualities of the Russian character which Mr. Brown described ^{one hundred and} ~~only~~ ten years ago are still the prevailing characteristics of Russian behavior. I could go on and give you other examples, especially with regard to Russia, but I think this one example is striking enough to demonstrate the reality of the national character. I am not concerned here with the speculation about what accounts for it, any more than I am concerned with the speculation about what accounts for the differences in character of individuals, but those differences are a matter of experience -- are a matter of fact. And certainly if you look (I will give you another example) at the differences in qualities of character as they are reflected in military and foreign policy of the French or the British, you'll realize again over centuries a fundamental difference which leads the Frenchman toward a logical, systematic, somewhat abstract approach to principles -- to problems of a military or political nature, while the English have generally taken a pragmatic non-systematic approach, but what you call

Now, if we admit that the character of a nation, its typical behavior, is a fact of experience, that different nations act and react differently because of certain predispositions which records the national character,

the next question is what is the influence of those differences upon national strategy? What does it mean for those whose task it is to devise national strategy? The Russians react to the same situation in a different way from that in which Americans react. Now, first of all, let me say that there can be no simple answer to that question, and we all in our private expectations, in our expectations as to what seem the reactions of individuals, are frequently mistaken, and so we are bound to be mistaken when we try to assess the reactions of nations to certain situations. The history of recent years, for instance, of decades, is full of experiences which show how mistaken one can be in assessing the national character of a particular nation and its reflection on foreign and military policy. Take for instance, the consistent underestimation of the American national character by successive German leaders. In the first World War, when the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, I remember very well being then a boy in Germany and how impressed we were with the declaration of a German Minister, who said in the German Parliament, "The Americans can't swim and the Americans can't fly; the Americans will never come."

Now in this optimistic assessment of the American military contribution prior to the first World War, there is implicit, a complete misunderstanding of the American national character based upon certain aspects of it which are prevalent in peace times. That is to say that we are a peaceful people; we are not nationally, collectively, or particularly wedded to foreign adventures. We prefer peace to war. We have probably even a kind of instinctive, negative attitude toward things military. And so from so superficial characteristics of the American character, it is easy to conclude that under no circumstances will we go to war, or that if we go to war it will mean very little in terms of the actual distribution of military power.

Now the very same mistake was made by Hitler. Hitler again did not believe, first of all, that the United States would enter the war. Secondly, he did not believe that its entrance and intervention would amount to much, let alone to be decisive. If you remember after Pearl Harbor it was Hitler who declared war on the United States, not the other way around, then you realize how lighthearted Hitler's assessment of the American national character was. And I think again today there is a very great danger that a new enemy of the United States will again be deceived by certain superficial aspects of the American national character. Again you see satisfaction with material thoughts striving forth; you see a lack of apparent dynamism; you see conduct of foreign and military policy; you see obvious preference for peaceful pursuits over warlike ones; the repeated declarations that we will never fire the first shot -- all of this can easily create in the mind of a foreign observer the impression that this is all there is to the American character, and that he can go further than he would go if he would make the correct assessment of this here national character of America, and it is perhaps in point to suggest ~~that~~ this chapter in the history of the United States from time to time, or to make a demonstration of the other side of its national character -- the topside, the side which comes to the fore when the chips are down, in order to remind foreign observers that they can go so far, but no farther.

Now you have another typical mistake in the assessment of the national character of the foreign people. You can use a kind of underestimation of it and this is, for instance, typically manifested in the consistent underestimation of Russian power, you may say since the beginning of the second World War. Those of you who were in somewhat responsible positions during the second World War may remember that when the German armies invaded the Soviet Union, it was generally believed by responsible observers that the Soviet Union could hold out from six

weeks to six months, but certainly no longer. In any case the staying power of the Soviet Union, or Russia let me say to put it more correctly, which observers found very predominant in the 18th Century and on which Bismarck commented very emphatically and brilliantly when he was ambassador in St. Petersburg in the middle of the 19th Century and which our Minister Brown referred to in the passage which I have quoted -- this staying power, this patience, this ability to endure hardships greater than most other people would be able to endure, ^a is characteristic, which national strategy must take into account, and you have a classic example of this problem in the different reactions of the Chinese and Russian leaders to the possibility of allout nuclear war. The Russian leaders are very reluctant to accept or see the possibility of allout nuclear war because it does not believe that even Russian endurance is strong enough to survive such a war. You see Chinese leaders are much more complacent about it. Mr. Mao Tse-tung has been quoted by different sources as having said only recently that China can endure losses of 300 million of its people, and will then be the only major power left ^{in the world} after a nuclear war.

Now, this is, of course, true that this assessment of Chinese staying power, this in good measure, resulted of the assessment of the social and economic development of China which is, of course, much less vulnerable to atomic destruction than more highly developed industrial nations, and also nations which have a much higher concentration of population, and so it is ^{said in effect} ~~is~~ simply in terms of a material situation too, that China is less vulnerable to nuclear attack than the United States or the Soviet Union, not to speak of the nations of Western Europe or nations using that weapon which would simply be wiped off the face of the earth by a few "H" bombs because of the enormous concentration of its population and industrial centers.

But aside from the assessment of those material factors they certainly, implicit in lots of talks, forecast an assessment of the Chinese national character. The infinite patience of the Chinese, the continuous exposure to enormous physical hardships and natural catastrophies -- if you consider that famine effects hundreds of millions of people at one time and is one of the experiences of the Chinese population which repeats itself every few years, then you realize to what great extent the Chinese are accustomed to enormous natural catastrophies disrupting temporarily the social incapable of restoring it because of that experience. And so one could go on and on to show to what extent they all are making assessments of the national character, which are the bases of our estimate of future events, and which influence our strategic decisions. Take for instance (this is just one of the examples which concerns not only the United States, but a lot of the major powers) the idea of the so-called ~~global~~ ^{broken} back war; that is to say it is a conception that a third world war will be won, will be decided, not through the nuclear exchange, but through the war which will be fought after the nuclear exchange. Now implicit in this idea lies an assessment of the national character which assumes that a modern, highly civilized industrial nation can survive an allout nuclear exchange as a going concern -- say that it is still in a position to fight and organize ~~war~~ after the nuclear exchange has occurred. I don't hesitate to say that I am somewhat doubtful about the implicit optimism of that conception of a ~~global~~ ^{broken} back war, but what I want to point to here is that the idea of the ~~global~~ ^{broken} back war is only conceivable in terms of an implicit or explicit assessment of the staying power of the national character, and of the power of recovery after such a catastrophe has occurred; that is to say you assume that a nation can survive as a nation, as a going concern, such a nuclear exchange, that it therefore has certain national characteristics, certain qualities of character which enable it to survive as an organized entity.

Now let me turn to the other part of my assignment, and that is the importance of leadership. It is, of course, a platitude to point to the importance of leadership in military and foreign policy. It is, of course, obvious that machines don't work by themselves; that weapons don't choose their own positions and their own targets; that even men don't march in the right direction without leadership. But it is more difficult to put one's finger on the exact importance of what leadership actually means -- what it contains, and what its exact role in the field of national strategy is. I would say that, first of all, the task of leadership is the correct assessment of the objectives of one's own nation as against the objectives of another nation; that its certain task is to create the power necessary to achieve those objectives; and that a third task is to create support, especially a democratic nation, for those objectives and the use of power in the term of the population, and finally, in terms of agreed strategy and tactics, it must devise the policies which are most likely to achieve the choosen objectives with the power at the disposal of the nation.

So, in other words, leadership in national strategy is really what the brain is to the body. It is the performance of the choices upon which the success of national policy depends. And here again modern nations, and I should say not only modern nations, but particularly modern nations, are faced with a number of typical pitfalls -- with a number of typical mistakes against which no nation is immune, and which under certain circumstances nations are particularly prone to fall into. One typical mistake is to take the power which a nation has had in a particular period of history as an absolute, as a kind of natural quality, almost of the national character itself, and to believe that since this great power was once the possession of that nation, it is still and will forever be that possession. Take, for instance, the leadership of the Prussian army during the Napoleonic War, culminating in the disaster of the battles of Jena and Auerstadt in 1806. Now this assessment of Prussian vs French power was based upon experiences of the 18th Century, when Frederick the Great was a molder and leader of the Prussian

army, and the great success which Frederick the Great had in his leadership led the Prussian leaders to believe that ~~since~~ the Prussian army of 1806 was still as good as the Prussian army of 1770 had been, that Prussia was still as powerful as it had been a few years earlier. Now this is a typical mistake. It is a fact that some nations are very prone to become the victims of their past successes, and they are more particular that the sources which made for their power in the past are regarded as a permanent of their power. Now in actuality, power as you well know, is a relative thing. The correct assessment of a nation's power is always the result of a comparison -- of a comparison not between your present power and your past power, but between your present power and the present power of your most likely enemy, so it is no good -- it is simply false to say we are more powerful than we were ten years ago -- that we have more rockets, more atomic submarines, more of this or that and the other. This in itself is nothing. The only valid comparison is between our present power and the present power of our most likely enemy, and it is only when this comparison reassures us, that we can say we have sufficient power to protect our interests and to reach our objectives.

There is another typical error into which the leadership of a nation is likely to fall, and to this which is connected with the one I have just mentioned, and which is particularly dangerous in a period of rapid technological change, ~~impinging~~ more particularly upon warfare, and again there is a very strong tendency for leaders to become the victim of past successes because a certain strategy, a certain technological and geographic advantage has been the basis of its past success; so it is believed that it will remain the source of future successes. Take for instance the underestimation of air power of which the British navy was guilty at the beginning of the war against Japan in 1941 (I think it was December 1941) when a strategy, a conception of

national power which had proven to be correct in the past, was applied to a situation entirely different in which a new dimension of weaponry had been introduced and which led to a disaster in the Indian Sea at the beginning of the war against Japan. Or take the classic example of the French strategy in preparation for and at the beginning of the second World War -- a strategy which was based upon the experience of the first World War -- that is to say a rigid line of defense, a physical barrier which would debar the way of an invading army, and indeed if the Margiot Line had existed at the beginning of the first World War, it would have been capable of protecting France against the German armies if it were then constituted, but the Margiot Line under technological conditions, and in view of the strategic conceptions of the German high command, was an anachronism, was a trap worse than useless, really counter-productive in terms of the defense of France. There is a great danger in drawing obsolete conclusions from past experiences, and more particularly from past successes, and this is particularly so in an age as our present age is, of very rapid and continuous technological change, and particularly of technological change which is unpredictable. It is, of course, an enormous task to anticipate technological change, while at the same time retaining a military posture which is adequate for the present and the immediate future. As you well know, the problem poses itself of developing, of putting scarce resources into weapon systems which are likely to be obsolete the day after tomorrow, while at the same time developing weapon systems which will be adequate for the day after tomorrow. This double-barreled effort of protecting yourself today and tomorrow with a weapon system which is in the process of obsolescence, while at the same time fashioning the weapon system which will protect us the day after tomorrow, and then looking at the more distant future even and developing weapons ^{systems} for a period of ten years hence -- this, of course, requires a balance of judgment and a degree of foresight which taxes

both the intelligence and the moral stamina of leadership. And so you see that in our period of history which is characterized by rapid technological change, the requirements of flexibility in leadership and of judgment are much greater than they were in past periods of history, for in past periods of history you had one drastic change at a time, interspersed by long periods of technological stagnation -- for instance, when artillery came to the fore in the late 15th Century and Charles VIII of France invaded Italy and conquered it by using for the first time artillery against heavily fortified places -- this was a great revolution in the history of warfare, but it was not followed by a great revolution (you may say almost for centuries) and the introduction of the machine gun in the middle of the 19th Century was an unprecedented revolution in the technology of warfare which again was not followed by any similar revolution for a long time.

Now in our period of history, a revolution which formerly was a singular event -- an event which might happen once in a century, -~~happens~~ happens to us almost every year, or every other year, and so the requirements of keeping up with the times but not going off on the wrong tangent, to foresee with the highest degree of precision what the general direction of the technological development is, becomes one of the great requirements of competent leadership.

Now let me say in conclusion a word about the whole conception of leadership in a democracy, for whatever I said before about the national character on the one hand, and leadership on the other, converges in this problem of marshalling popular support behind national policies, because it is here that leadership must mobilize the qualities of the national character on behalf of the national objectives and national policies. Now, let me say right away I thought I had been convinced for more than a decade that our conception of what national leadership requires in a democracy is fundamentally mistaken, for we have fallen

victim to a modern conversion of the democratic process in which leadership takes its lead from public opinion -- tries to assess what public opinion is willing to support before it decides upon national policy. That is to say when -- let me say the Department of State - considers a new foreign policy, it frequently commissions a public opinion poll at short notice from a private organization, to find out what public opinion will support, and when it has this report and other reports and what not, it will then decide what foreign policy it can afford to pursue without losing the support of public opinion. And wherever you look -- and you have only to look at the papers in an election campaign -- you realize to what extent the actions of our actual and respective leaders are determined by what they think they have discovered by the scientific method of polling concerning support of public opinion they can expect.

Now this method, it seems to me, reveals a complete misunderstanding of the nature of public opinion, and of the nature of leadership in a democracy, for public opinion is not, as the philosophy of polling believes, a fact which preexists policy. There's no such thing as public opinion, let me say, today about the reform of NATO, to give an example of a policy over which the State Department at present is concerned and which is also needed. If the State Department were tomorrow, as it will or perhaps has already done, make a public opinion poll, asking what kind of reforms in NATO are we willing to support, this or that or the other, it would get some kind of a result which would be completely misleading, for the man in the street has no conception of the problems with which NATO is faced -- he has no conception of the policies which the United States could pursue with regard to NATO. He gets an answer simply because he has been assigned as an expert and he is not going to refuse the flattering position of being an expert with regard to so complicated a problem of which he knows exactly nothing.

I had a personal experience in regard to this once a couple of years ago. A charming lady came to my office and stayed there two hours inquiring about my attitude toward earning statements of corporations in which I hold stock -- very few stocks in very few corporations -- but all of a sudden I, an unworldly professor, was put in a position of a capitalist, of an investor, of a colleague of Mr. Morgan or whoever it is, and I was subconsciously flattered and gave the most competent answers to the most impertinent questions. After the lady left, I asked myself, "What will I actually do when I get an earning statement from a corporation?" There are colored pictures and I look at them and then compare the earning statement of the last six months with the earning statement of the preceding six months (if the corporation is willing to give that information, which not all corporations are willing to do), and then I throw the whole thing into the wastebasket. That is what I do. But she was assigned a role which I unconsciously was unable to refuse to play, and I played it and, of course, it was a kind of fiction, a kind of novel, a kind of short story which I would like to play perhaps if I had the money and the interest, and she financed the capacity.

And the same is true with regard to public opinion polls, about policies which are still in the making. To put it briefly, and of course I have no time to go into details here, public opinion is the result of a policy which somebody has put forward. It does not preexist policy and if the government, if the executive branch in particular, refuses to put forward a policy before it has asserted whether public opinion will support it, it really abandons -- it foregoes the leadership which only it can exert, and either there is no leadership at all, or some other more likely or not an irresponsible will assume leadership by putting forward other kinds of other policies to which public opinion will respond. I think this is a crucial problem, for leadership

in a democracy which is really required not to follow a non-existing public opinion, but rather to mold and create public opinion by leading, and it is the real essence of democratic leadership to put forward a policy which the leaders believe to be sound and then try to create popular support for that policy, rather than to try to find out before a policy is enunciated what public opinion is willing to support, and then to train its policies to the alleged and actually imaginary preferences of public opinion. And this ties in with the problem of national character, for at the bottom of this fear of the leaders to lead, there is an underestimation of the American national character; there is a fear that the people will not support world policies; that they will not support policies which require sacrifices. They prefer to play it safe, to pursue the routines which proved to be useful yesterday and its a short one, at least we gloss over the deficiencies and failures of national policy, so this failure of leadership, this fear to lead which as I have indicated before is not a matter of recent years, but what goes back to the immediate postwar period. This failure to lead, this fear to take risks which the leaders themselves are convinced ought to be taken, is the result of an underestimation of the moral fibre of the American people, that is to say of a misunderstanding of the American national character. And so at this point the two themes which have been assigned to me this morning merge, and while on the face of them they are intangible and imponderable, at this point ^{of} what is required of democratic leadership in America today, I think they become concrete and they become something with which we can deal in our daily lives and ^{with} which our leaders can deal, and is a task which confronts them in the future.