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Weinberger: Athens, Sparta and today's military crisis

The following is excerpted from the address of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger at the National Defense University at Fort McNair, Washington, D.C., on July 29, 1986.

... I thought I'd make a little detour through history and try to demonstrate that what we have now, and what we are doing now, is not all that unique. And there are a number of lessons always from history, and some astonishingly apt ones in this situation.

When Thucydides was in the midst of writing what he had believed would be his account of the Peloponnesian War, he thought that it would be important to put in and consider two basic values, two basic ideas and ways of thinking that are of considerable value today. And the first was to look for the linkages between the apparently distinct and separate events. And he originally set out, as you know, to write about the first Peloponnesian War, although he didn't call it that at that time because it was the only one they had. But while he was writing, the uneasy peace that had ended that first war ruptured and the Second Peloponnesian War broke out and he had to make a lot of revisions in his book, among other things.

His writings occurred in the second war—in an era that was not unlike the inter-war years of our own century. During the peace, which did not allow even time for a generation to mature, the major adversaries were concentrating on strengthening their alliances, changing the alliances in some cases, for the next round. Thucydides was the first to see that the two seemingly separate wars were really one and the same.

His other method was to look beyond the immediate cause of the war. He attributed the underlying, long-term antago-

nism between Athens and Sparta not to any particular quarrel or set of specific events, but to the vast differences in the two systems that really made it very implausible that they could co-exist. One was a democracy, the other a hierarchical state ruled by a select few. Thucydides was very adamant that his readers appreciate the pervasive influence that different forms of government have on military matters—not an unfamiliar point.

Earlier in his history, Thucydides quotes Pericles as saying that there is a difference between us and our opponents in our attitudes towards military security. Our city, meaning Athens, he said, is open to the world and we have no regular deportations in order to prevent people finding out secrets which might be of military advantage because we rely not on secret weapons, but on our own real courage and loyalty. Thucydides' observations are very important for us today, and valuable, not just because there is a close correspondence between our nation and the democracy of Athens, but because there is a lasting wisdom in all of his discoveries and in all of his thinking about strategy.

I don't think we should see the 20th century conflict as a series of sort of discrete and separate events, but we should step back and look at the whole picture. When we do that, as Thucydides made clear in his history, the successes and failures of Sparta and Athens were intimately connected to the nature of the political systems which guided them. I've talked frequently about the military advantage that the communist system gives the Soviets. That's the only advantage that they have, but it does give them advantages. We want to think about that in this same context of Thucydides' comments about the difference between Athens and Sparta.

Some have failed in our discussions of strategy to take this into account. They fail to recognize that democratic societies cannot create and execute grand strategies in the same way that totalitarian nations do. For example, there is a common view today that America doesn't have a strategy. However, when some people say lack of strategy, what they really mean is that the administration hasn't adopted their particular policy. Lack of strategy really means, "I don't agree with your strategy."

Then there is another group that charges us with being much too ambitious. "Your outreach is too far. You have a mismatch," they will frequently say, "between your strategy and the available resources." They don't finish that circle by telling us what we have to give up, what it is we should no longer be interested in in the world. They don't look at the other side of the equation, that we can deal with that mismatch by increasing resources.

They have frequently said that we can't contain aggression everywhere, and so we don't have a realistic strategy; realistic meaning, presumably, smaller. We must, of course, be clear at the outset, as we always should in gatherings of this type, what we mean by strategy. I have used, as a sort of shorthand definition, the employment of means to achieve specific ends. In that connection, strategy is a concept that attempts to bring together a nation's goals and values with its capabilities, its resources, and perhaps most important of all, its political will.

As a democracy, our ends and goals are clear. We have a very modest agenda. But our employment of means is limited by the give-and-take of free politics in an open society. To a large extent, those who look back at the operation of American strategy since 1945 conclude that we have no strategy today, because they seem to expect a consistency and an aggressiveness of execution, which is really impossible for democratic systems.

Totalitarian regimes are capable of designing and carrying out very long-term ideological strategies. This isn't to say they're good; but it is to say that they have that capability. They do it because they do not have to deal with the rough-and-tumble of public opinion. They don't have to deal with that, because there is no public opinion in these societies. They have what they believe is the mandate from history to bring under their sway every nation in the world. Some of the more recent Soviet speeches are denying that they feel this way, but that certainly is a denial of all of the communist dogma since the beginning of the Soviet state. They have a great deal of predictability and regularity with single-party rule, and ideological restrictions that give consistency to their foreign policy. It's not a very good consistency, but it is consistent. It doesn't recognize the moral obligation to be guided by the consent of the governed. I'm not arguing that democratic nations cannot have a strategy, but that we shouldn't judge strategy by criteria that are foreign to our brand of free government and are reprehensible to popular

conscience and are not based on public opinion or consent of the governed.

One does not have to be a particularly learned professor to define our goals and principles. They are simply deterrence of war, containment of Soviet aggression and their totalitarian systems, defense of freedom where it exists, and the promotion of conditions in the world so that liberty and happiness can prosper, can continue. It's a very modest agenda. It's an agenda that doesn't involve any aggression or any first strikes or anything of the kind. It is an agenda, however, that has bound us together for a very long time. Despite all that was self-destructive in the fortunately ended Vietnam era and post-Vietnam era, there remains a basically bipartisan consensus on these goals. It's obvious that we haven't always executed our strategy in a consistent fashion. It's obvious that we haven't always developed the means to fulfill the ends which we have to seek, which do not change.

But again, we're a democratic nation. Public opinion shifts and administrations come and go, and what we have to remember is that our basic goal remains constant and its execution shifts with international or changing circum-

Athens versus Sparta: the heart of the issue

The distinction which Secretary Weinberger draws between the oligarchical tradition of Sparta and the republican tradition of Athens, was most sharply defined in "The Legislation of Lycurgus and Solon," by the great German poet Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805).

In it he contrasts the Spartan state of the ruler Lycurgus—who fostered patriotism and the military arts, at the expense of "the most natural and most beautiful affections of the human heart"—to Solon, the lawgiver of Athens.

Lycurgus "undermined the highest destiny of humanity by arresting, through a cunningly devised political system, the minds of the Spartans where he found them, and preventing every possibility of progress." As for Solon, Schiller wrote, his "respect for human nature was a beautiful trait in his character. He never sacrificed man to the state, or the end to the means, but he caused the state to be subservient to the high purposes of human existence. His laws served as yielding bonds, by whose guiding but gentle and scarcely perceptible support the minds of the citizens were enabled to move with freedom and ease in every direction; whereas the laws of Lycurgus operated like iron fetters, against which the bold heart chafed until it sank bleeding and oppressed under the heavy yoke."

stances, or with the dynamics of public opinion, with the levels of funding that may be provided from time to time. The very complex nature of policy-making in a democracy upsets many people. They sort of secretly admire the stolid consistency of the Soviets.

But why should we admire a consistency that so often has led to oppression and violence?

Defending allies

No one is more familiar than I am, really, with the fact that gaps can develop between a commitment of a great nation such as the United States and, not necessarily our capabilities to carry out those commitments, but the resolution and political will to enable us to do that. It has always been the case really—there was a Truman Doctrine that you may remember a while back, that held that we would assist free peoples everywhere. It did not specify the exact way that we would lend that support, and so we fulfill our commitments in ways best suited to particular circumstances, particular times. . . .

Some believe this dedication to help defend allies is too great a task for us. I strongly disagree with that. So long as we maintain the political will and adequate resources, our pledge to contain aggression will be believed. Aggression cannot be contained or kept from America if America stays home. We're never going to be able to save America if Europe is overrun. So it's enormously to our own advantage to be a part of NATO and to be a big contributor to NATO. It's not something that we're doing altruistically, or because we like to help people. We're helping ourselves by being there. We are also helping our allies. It is very much the same thing.

But if Congress doesn't give us the means to deter war and contain the Soviets, and sustain democracy in the world, then our words, our doctrines, and our strategy will be really quite hollow. The problem isn't a lack of strategy. It's the danger and the complexity of the world we live in and the unwillingness of democratic nations to recognize the threat. Free, open, liberal democratic societies do not like military spending. They never have and they never will. I'm one of the leading American authorities on that subject. It is unfortunately true, but it's been true since the days of the revolution, and I think it will always be true.

Dean Acheson said dangers and crises are with us not because the right policy eludes us, but from the very nature of the situation we face and the nature of the society we are. So we must rid ourselves of the belief that grand statements of purposes and goals will accomplish anything if they're not coupled with a sustained commitment to adequate resources for defense. . . .

Comparing the 1930s

Prior to World War II, England had a strategy that could most simply be termed balance of power. No nation, this strategy held, should be allowed to gain a predominance of power on the European continent. Through judicious shifts

of alliances and support, Great Britain saw that equilibrium was maintained in Europe. A host of global threats faced the British empire, from southern Africa to the Far East to the Balkans to Afghanistan. In all those areas, Britain acted to secure its interests and maintain a global balance. D'Israeli said to those counseling budgetary restraint in his day, and counseling retreat, that the true economy will need to be always ready.

The balance of power was a thoroughly articulated strategy. It was widely accepted; it was brilliantly applied. By 1939, however, despite all the warnings of Churchill and others, Great Britain couldn't execute that grand strategy because they no longer possessed the military means to weigh in against aggression, and they didn't possess the military means because their political will and resolution had been sapped by a lot of counsel to the effect that they did not need to do it, that the danger really wasn't there, and that the rationale for not doing it was glibly phrased and glibly accepted by those who did not want to make the sacrifices required.

As it faced the British economy and democracy in the 1930s, so we now face the prospect of a potentially hollow strategy in which commitments outstrip capability. What makes this weakness in our ability to execute strategy the more threatening is that warfare is changing so rapidly. The world is not becoming more peaceful.

Prudent strategy has to comprehend a vision of the future; at the same time, it sustains us in the present. Since the onset of the Cold War, our strategy has taken into account the very obvious fact that world politics undergo shifts and changes over time. But the strategy can never really be self-executed. It does require national leaders with the foresight to make it work. It requires resources.

It was discovered late in the sixties that the world was changing and becoming more complex and interdependent. That came about 20 years after this fact was actually understood by the architects of our postwar foreign policy. For all of those, many of them in academic circles, this complexity was supposed to herald the end of the Cold War and the beginning of an era of accommodation between conflicting nations. The error was not in the major premise; for the world surely was complex and interdependent. But the difficulty rested in the idea that there was something new in this, and in a rather unrealistic view of the world as it then stood.

The SDI

The national strategy of our government has always attempted to take into account significant changes in any kind of global dynamics. In recent times, we've had to consider the growing influence of the Third World and the advent of parity between the United States and the Soviet Union; and the limited military usefulness of nuclear weapons. As we plan our force structure now for the future, we have to be certain that we take into account both continuity and change. We must maintain a vision of the future that prudently as-

sumes and assesses the dynamic nature of world politics, and there must always be foremost in our minds the ways in which new technologies influence the whole face of battle.

The most obvious and threatening weaponry, of course, is the one to which we are completely vulnerable, nuclear missiles. I suspect that years from now, historians will undoubtedly be baffled by our willingness to have remained so long completely undefended against the most potent weapons of our enemies. It's a very curious philosophy that we have: We're only perfectly safe when we're perfectly vulnerable.

The first task of American strategy as it looks to the future is, of course, to assure that the deterrence of nuclear war remains credible. We recognize that technology can rapidly outpace our ability to control it. We recognize that almost overnight, technology can change credible deterrence into incredible postures. That's another way simply of saying that deterrence is not a fixed, but is a dynamic and moving and changing concept, and we have to change with it to maintain deterrence.

This is why President Reagan called on the scientific community to see if it is possible to defend ourselves against missile threats. It had previously been dismissed. It is not dismissed now. We have made enormously rapid and very valuable progress on the Strategic Defense Initiative. It is not a mere add-on to American strategy. We can't give up our offensive deterrent capability until we know if we can have and until we do have strategic defense secured.

Democratic nations will always be uneasy, however, with a policy that deters only by threatening destructive retaliation—the mutual suicide pact, as the President calls it. The SDI embraces the area of one of our very greatest strengths, one of the areas in which we are most able to compete with the Soviets, and that's technological creativity and innovation. Indeed, it's a program that really is made for what we always used to call Yankee ingenuity. It is clearly the outgrowth of the basic ideas in American strategic thought. What is outside those basic ideas is the notion that our current doctrine of mutual vulnerability must last forever, that somehow anyone who suggests tampering with it is either basically unsound or ignorant or both.

But the President has never been afraid to challenge conventional wisdom—never when he was governor of California and never when he was President. He is challenging conventional wisdom now, and challenging American science and world ingenuity and world technology to see if there is not a better way than this mutual suicide pact. I think it's extremely important to keep in mind the future of conflict in this connection, that we are not alone. We don't pretend to meet matters alone. We have to look at what it is that the Soviets are doing. It's strategic defense effort has been vigorously pursued for at least two decades, including very vigorous research into strategic defense, almost from the day the ABM Treaty was signed. Given the size of the Soviet land-based missile force and the accuracy of the new generation of their missile, it is clear that they are not interested in

a purely retaliatory nuclear arsenal.

We have to look at their writings, too, and their doctrine, and the amount they spend on civil defense and refiring capability and all of the other things that demonstrate that they believe a nuclear war can be fought and won. We do not. We feel the nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. We have to understand that if we are to keep our deterrence robust, we have to counter the Soviet offensive and defensive military build-up with our own offensive and defensive military build-up, with our own offensive and defensive modernization.

The United States constructs strategies conceived to meet particular threats from specific adversaries, and in this sense, our strategy must always be comparative. Its goal must be to counter and to confound the strategic objectives of the enemy, since we have no territorial or aggressive other ambitions. If strategic defense proves feasible, and I believe it will, it will counter the Soviets most potent weapon. It will confound their hope of neutralizing our deterrent forces.

As we attempt to mold and shape our strategy to meet the changing demands of a very dangerous and rapidly changing world, we have to remember that our role today is not unique for us. Only slowly did we come to realize after World War II that it was America that had to assume the role of leader of the Free World, or there would be no leader. Only slowly did we create a comprehensive strategy to meet these new and awesome responsibilities.

But as we debate the character and the scope of our strategy, I think we have to bear in mind that it is a strategy grounded in democracy; that it is a strategy that, as with our constitution itself, derives from the consent of the governed. We have to live with shifts and changes in that particular, and carry out our foreign policy not in isolation but in response to and because of the nature, or the changes, or the growth of the threat against the very modest agenda that we have.

That shouldn't lead us to despair. It shouldn't lead any to conclude that we have no strategy. It does mean that, without an aggressive strategy, without an offensive strategy, without any desire to expand or to do anything but live in peace and keep our freedom for ourselves and our allies, we have to be extremely alert to people with forces in countries who have other plans.

When the Civil War was just months away, Abraham Lincoln was pleading with the South not to abandon the Republic. The questions that he then posed, I think are very relevant and very vital for us today. He said, "Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or any equal hope in the world?"

So, I think that if we all do our part, if we maintain our resolve to stay strong, militarily and in other ways, if we continue to place a high value on our freedom and our peace, and if we're willing to make the sacrifices that these noble goals require, then the future of conflict, I think, will be that there will be no conflict.