CHAPTER 6

NATIONAL INTEREST: FROM ABSTRACTION TO STRATEGY

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> We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual and those interests it is our duty to follow.
>
> Lord Palmerston, 1848

The student new to international relations is often at first intoxicated by the concept of "national interest." It seems crisp, clear, objective: what's good for the nation as a whole in international affairs. (What's good for the nation as a whole in domestic affairs is the public interest.) National interest lies at the very heart of the military and diplomatic professions and leads to the formulation of a national strategy and the calculation of the power necessary to support that strategy.

Upon reflection, however, one comes to realize how hard it is to turn concepts of national interest into working strategy. It requires one to perceive the world with undistorted clarity and even to anticipate the second- and third-order effects of policies. Few are so gifted. Instead of bringing clarity and cohesion, many quarrel over what the national interest is in any given situation. This essay will argue that the concept of national interest still has utility, not as an objective fact but as a philosophical argument in favor of limiting the number of crusades a country may be inclined to undertake.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND.

"National interest" traces its roots at least back to the pessimistic realism of Machiavelli in the fifteenth century.[1] As such, it represents a repudiation of earlier Western sources in Hellenic idealism, Judeo-Christian biblical morality, and the teachings of medieval churchmen such as Thomas Aquinas. You may have splendid moral goals, argued Machiavelli, but without sufficient power and the willingness to use it, you will accomplish nothing. Machiavelli's overriding aim: Italian unification and liberation from foreign occupiers. Nothing could be more moral than the interest of the Italian state; accordingly, seemingly immoral ends could be employed for its attainment. Power rather than morality is the crux of this school.

At least one element of the medieval churchmen survives in national-interest thinking. Humans have souls, and these are judged in an afterlife, they argued. Accordingly, humans can be held to exacting standards of behavior with curbs on beastly impulses. States, being artificial creations, have no souls; they have life only in this world. If the state is crushed or

destroyed, it has no heavenly afterlife. Accordingly, states may take harsh measures to protect themselves and ensure their survival. States are amoral and can do things individual humans cannot do. It is in this context that churchmen such as Thomas Aquinas proposed theories of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*.[2]

Clausewitz also contributes to the national-interest approach. All state behavior is motivated by its need to survive and prosper. To safeguard its interests the state must rationally decide to go to war; there should be no other reason for going to war. Unlimited war, however, is foolish, for it serves no national interest.[3] By this time, concepts of *raison d'etat* or *Staatsraison* were long and firmly embedded in European thinking.

The Founding Fathers practiced a cautious realism in preserving and expanding the thirteen original states, indicating they understood the concept of national interest. Washington's farewell address showed a shrewd appreciation of national interest: "Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns."[4]

During the 19th century the United States pursued its national interests by means of cash and force in ridding its continent of non-hemispheric powers. Less and less, however, it called its actions "national interest," and by the twentieth century national interest in the United States took a back seat to ethical and normative approaches to international relations. If considered, it was given short shrift as distasteful German *Realpolitik* as practiced by Bismarck. As was typical of American political science in its first decades, Woodrow Wilson despised as amoral or even immoral approaches that used power, national interest, and recourse to violence as normal components of international relations.[5] America had a higher calling than that. Wilson's father was a minister, and Wilson trained as a lawyer; he was thus steeped in what George F. Kennan called the "legalistic-moralistic approach" prevalent in America.[6]

REALISM COMES TO AMERICA.

With the flight of scholars from Europe in the 1930s, however, American universities became exposed to what were called "realist" approaches that used national interest as their primary building block. The man who more than any other acquainted Americans with the idea of national interest was the German émigré Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980; no relation to FDR's treasury secretary). He was the truly powerful mind of Realism, as he called his approach. Bringing the wisdom of Machiavelli and Clausewitz with him, Morgenthau told Americans that they must arm and oppose first the Axis and then the Soviet Union, not out of any abstract love of liberty and justice, but because their most profound national interests were threatened. "International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power," he wrote.[7]

Morgenthau's writings immediately sparked controversy and to this day are not uniformly accepted. They go against the grain of the Wilsonian idealism that was and still is taught as international relations on some college campuses.[8] American scholars resisted

what they perceived as Germanic amorality. Many American academics and decisionmakers still prefer "world order" approaches that posit peaceful, cooperative behavior as the international norm. Denunciations of Morgenthau circulated much as "anti-machiavells" had circulated to refute the wicked Florentine. McGeorge Bundy of Harvard, for example, during the late 1950s taught an international relations course devoted entirely to denouncing Morgenthau.

Actually, Morgenthau, a friend and collaborator of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, was deeply moral. His theory was, at bottom, a normative one, a philosophical argument for how states ought to behave. He argued that if states pursue only their rational self-interests, without defining them too grandly, they will collide with other states only minimally. In most cases, their collisions will be compromisable; that is the function of diplomacy. It is when states refuse to limit themselves to protection of their rational self-interests that they become dangerous. They define their interests too broadly, leading to a policy of expansionism or imperialism, which in turn must be countered by the states whose interests are infringed upon, and this can lead to war. When states make national interest the guide of their policy, they are being as moral as they can be. We can't know what is good for the whole world or for country X; we can only know what is good for us.

INTEREST DEFINED AS POWER.

Morgenthau supposed he had an objective standard by which to judge foreign policies: were they pursuing the national interest defined in terms of power?[9] That is, was the statesman making decisions that would preserve and improve the state's power, or was he squandering power in such a way that would ultimately weaken the state? The statesman asks, "Will this step improve or weaken my power?" The foreign policy of any state—no matter what its "values"—can thus be judged rationally and empirically. It matters little whether the national values are Christianity, Communism, Islam, or vegetarianism. Only one question matters: is the statesman acting to preserve the state and its power? If so, his policy is rational.

A policy of "improving" the state's power is not to be confused with territorial expansion, which is the hallmark of dangerous and disruptive imperialist powers, against whom the prudent statesman is always on guard.

With power as a yardstick Morgenthau had no trouble defining the national interest at any given time and under any circumstance. He was uncannily prescient. He also had no difficulty in reading the minds of statesmen both dead and alive. "Using national interest defined as power, we look over the statesman's shoulder when he writes his dispatches; we read and anticipate his very thoughts."[10] Did Morgenthau have this ability because he applied some formula of national interest or because he was tremendously intelligent? Lesser minds have tried to define certain policies as national interest and have thereby committed egregious errors. Overseas expansion, for example, might appear to enhance state power by the influx of new riches. But it may also drain state power by spreading it too thin and engaging too many enemies. A giant empire may actually ruin the state; the Spanish

Habsburgs put themselves out of business. Hitler flung away German power and ruined the state.

There are times when the statesman must move decisively to engage his armed forces in the threat or practice of war. When the borders or existence of the state are threatened by an expansionist or imperialist neighboring state, one must arm and form alliances, and it is best to do so earlier rather than later. Accordingly, one of the great tasks of the statesman is to scan the horizon for expansionist or imperialist threats. Any state engaged in expanding its power is pursuing a "policy of imperialism," wrote Morgenthau. A state merely intent on preserving itself and conserving its power is pursuing a "policy of the status quo." The statesman is able to tell one from the other despite the imperialist's claim to be for the status quo. When you see a Hitler on the march, arm yourself and form alliances. Do not wait for him to flagrantly violate some point of international law, such as the invasion of Poland, for that might be too late. Britain and France, more intent on the details of international law, failed to understand the imperialist thrust behind German moves in the late 1930s.

Potentially the most dangerous policy is one of declaring certain interests to be vital but then not backing up your words with military power. This is a policy of bluff and tends to end badly, in one of two ways: either your adversary sees that you are bluffing and continues his conquests, or you belatedly attempt to back up your words, in which case you may have to go to war to convince him that you were not bluffing. One horrifying example is the U.S. policy of angry words at Japan in the 1930s over its conquest of China, words unsupported by military power or any inclination to use it. Tokyo simply could not believe that China was a vital U.S. interest; the Americans were bluffing. Was not poker, the game of bluff, the Americans' favorite card game?

Something similar occurred in Bosnia: many strong words from the United States and the West Europeans, unsupported by military power or the intent to use it. Quite reasonably, the Serbs concluded we were bluffing. They changed their minds only when U.S.-backed Croatian and Bosnian forces rolled back their conquests in 1995. Always back your interests with adequate power. If you don't have the power, don't declare something distant to be your interest. Thou shalt not bluff.

VITAL AND SECONDARY INTERESTS.

Morgenthau saw two levels of national interest, the vital and the secondary.[11] To preserve the first, which concerns the very life of the state, there can be no compromise or hesitation about going to war. Vital national interests are relatively easy to define: security as a free and independent nation and protection of institutions, people, and fundamental values. Vital interests may at times extend overseas should you detect an expansionist state that is distant now but amassing power and conquests that later will affect you. Imperialist powers that threaten your interests are best dealt with early and always with adequate power.

Secondary interests, those over which one may seek to compromise, are harder to define. Typically, they are somewhat removed from your borders and represent no threat to your

sovereignty. Potentially, however, they can grow in the minds of statesmen until they seem to be vital. If an interest is secondary, mutually advantageous deals can be negotiated, provided the other party is not engaged in a policy of expansionism. If he is engaged in expansionism, compromises on secondary interests will not calm matters and may even be read as appeasement.

Additionally, Realists distinguish between temporary and permanent interests,[12] specific and general interests,[13] and, between countries, complementary and conflicting interests.[14] Defense of human rights in a distant land, for example, might be permanent, general, and secondary; that is, you have a long-term commitment to human rights but without any quarrel with a specific country, certainly not one that would damage your overall relations or weaken your power. Morgenthau would think it absurd for us to move into a hostile relationship with China over human rights; little good and much harm can come from it. A hostile China, for example, offers the United States no help in dealing with an aggressive, nuclear-armed North Korea. Which is more important, human rights in China or restraining a warlike country which threatens U.S. allies? More often than not, political leaders must choose between competing interests.

Two countries, even allies, seldom have identical national interests. The best one can hope for is that their interests will be complementary. The United States and Albania, for instance, may have a common interest in opposing Serbian suppression of Kosovar Albanians, but the U.S. interest is a general, temporary, and secondary one concerning human rights and regional stability. The Albanian interest is a specific, permanent, and possibly vital one of forming a Greater Albania. Our interests may run parallel for a time, but we must never mistake Albanian interests for U.S. interests.

Typeso f National Interest		
		Examples
Importance	Vital Secondary	No Soviet missiles in Cuba An open world oil supply
Duration	Temporary Permanent	Support for Iraq in opposing Iran No hostile powers in Western Hemisphere
Specificity	Specific General	No Japanese trade barriers Universal respect for human rights
Compatibility	Complementary Conflicting	Russian cooperation in Kosovo Russian support for Serbs

Figure 1. The Realists' Taxonomy of National Interests.

It is sometimes hard to anticipate how other countries will define their national interest. They see things through different eyes. Hungary in the 1990s was very cooperative with the West and eager to join NATO. In 1994, however, when the United States and France proposed air strikes to curb Serbian artillery atrocities in Bosnia, Hungary stopped the U.S. use of its territory for AWACS flights. An American looking at this refusal is puzzled: "But don't they want to be on our team?" A Hungarian looking at the refusal says, "We'll have to live with the Serbs for centuries; that border is a vital, permanent interest for us. Some 400,000 ethnic Hungarians live under Serbian control in Voivodina as virtual hostages. The Americans offer no guarantees of protection, but they expect us to join them in an act of war. Sorry, not a good deal." (The AWACS flights were quickly restored as the crisis passed.)

The diplomat's work is in finding and developing complementary interests so that two or more countries can work together. (Better diplomatic spadework would have signaled in advance the difference between Hungarian and U.S. interests in 1994.) Often countries have some interests that are complementary and others that are conflicting, as when NATO members cooperated to block the Soviet threat but clashed over who would lead the alliance. The French-U.S. relationship can be described in this way. Where interests totally conflict, of course, there can be no cooperation. Here it is the diplomat's duty to say so and find ways to minimize the damage. Do not despair in this situation, as national interests can shift, and today's adversary may be tomorrow's ally.

Much national-interest thought has a geographical component; that is, a country, waterway, or resource may have a special importance for your national interest. Britain, for example, had a permanent, specific, and often vital interest in the Netherlands. Who controlled the Low Countries had the best invasion route to England. (For the blue-water types: the northerly winds that sweep between England and the Continent allow a sailing vessel to take a beam reach, the fastest point of sail, west from Holland to England. Here the winds, in facilitating rapid invasion, helped define England's national interest.) Whether the threat was Habsburg emperors, French kings, or German dictators, Britain felt it had to engage to secure this invasion springboard.

Morgenthau found much folly in U.S. policy during the Cold War, some of it on geographical grounds. He thought it irrational that the United States could tolerate a Soviet puppet state, Cuba, near our continent while we engaged in Vietnam on the other side of the globe. Cuba was a vital interest; Vietnam was not. Morgenthau spoke against the Vietnam War as an irrational crusade that did nothing but drain American power in an unimportant part of the world.[15] At this same time, many claimed Vietnam was a vital U.S. interest. How can you tell at that moment who's right?

Morgenthau's favorite contemporary statesman was Charles de Gaulle of France, whom he called extraordinarily intelligent. De Gaulle indeed was able to pursue French national interests without undue sentimentality. When he realized that French colonies, especially Algeria, were a net drain on French power, he cut them free despite the howls of French imperialists. A richer, stronger France emerged from decolonization. De Gaulle also reasoned that no state willingly entrusts its security to foreigners, so he built a French nuclear force and kicked the Americans out of France. (In confining U.S. forces to the narrow width of

Germany, he also pushed them into an implied doctrine of early first use, thus assuring France precisely the U.S. nuclear guarantee that it sought.)

VARIATIONS ON MORGENTHAU.

Gradually, Morgenthau's powerful arguments caught on. Operating independently of Morgenthau, the diplomatist-historian George F. Kennan came to essentially identical conclusions from his studies of U.S. and Soviet foreign policies.[16] Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr insisted that Christians must look at the this-worldly effect of aggression and be prepared to counter it; pacifism is a form of Christian heresy, for it requires the Christian to stand impotent in the face of evil.[17]

Perhaps the greatest damage done to Realism was by those who embraced it but misunderstood and misused it. By the 1960s, Realism was part of mainstream thinking, just in time to be used to support President Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War. Vietnam hawks used Morgenthau's reasoning to justify the war: an expansionist power was swallowing one country after another and would not be stopped until defeated by force of arms. A communist victory in Southeast Asia would destabilize the U.S. defense, economic, and political presence in all of Asia. Stop them there or stop them later. Here the great weakness of national-interest thinking came out with a vengeance: precisely how can you tell when a genuinely vital national interest is at stake?

National-interest thinking also has been misused by idealistic interventionists who wish to expand U.S. interests so that they include some kind of "world interest." They would like to use U.S. power to right wrongs the world over. A "crusade" may be thus defined as the use of one's power in causes unrelated to the national interest. In our day, for example, one hears many prominent people, in and out of government, claim that slaughter of civilians in a distant war is a vital U.S. interest, for if allowed to spread such behavior will eventually threaten U.S. interests. They often use Nazi Germany and Munich as analogies. In defining national interest so broadly, however, they turn it into altruism: "By helping the victims of aggression, we make the world a safer, more stable place, and that redounds to our benefit," they argue. An altruist has been called someone who defines his self-interest so broadly that it includes everybody's interest. On such a basis, Morgenthau would argue, the United States could be engaged permanently in a half dozen wars around the globe, a frittering away of U.S. power that could come to no good end.

True national-interest thinking is rather tightly limited to one's own nation. It is a constant temptation to expand your thinking beyond your nation's interest to include many nations' interests or the world's interest, and under certain circumstances you may wish to do this, but please do not call it "the national interest." If you do, you may soon be "fighting for peace" in many spots around the globe. The great utility of national-interest thinking is to tap the statesman on the shoulder and ask, "Is this proposed effort for the good of your country or to carry out an idealistic abstraction?"

Feasibility is linked to national interest; power is the connecting link. An infeasible strategy—where your power is insufficient to carry out your designs—is inherently a bad strategy. If the type of power is wrong for the setting (e.g., heavy tanks to counter Vietnamese or Afghan guerrillas; air power to stop a civil war), you are undertaking an infeasible strategy.

Further, remember that objectively any country's expansion of its power is a policy of imperialism. If you are expanding your power—even for the noblest of causes, to save the world or to save country X—other nations, even friendly ones, still see it as imperialism. Once we have sufficient power to stabilize conflicts, prevent aggression, and stop nuclear proliferation, we will have accumulated so much power that we are de facto king of the world. For some curious reason, other nations resent this; they can't understand that our power will be used only for good. This is the story of U.S. power both during the Cold War (e.g., French resentment) and after it (e.g., Russian resentment).

One can make as many gradations and subdivisions in the national interest as one wishes. Donald Nuechterlein, for example, saw four levels rather than Morgenthau's two: survival, vital, major, and peripheral.[18] Examined more closely, though, survival interest concerns only destruction in nuclear war (a subset of vital), and peripheral interests are too minor to concern us. Thus we are back to Morgenthau's two: vital and secondary. You could devise a 10-point or 20-point scale of national interests if you wished, but its precision is spurious as it will soon reduce itself to the dichotomy of interests worth going to war for and interests upon which one may compromise. As William of Ockam put it, do not needlessly multiply entities.

WARPING EFFECTS ON THE NATIONAL INTEREST.

At any given time, the national interest may be difficult to define due to the warping effects of ideology, the global system, public and elite convictions, the mass media, and policy inertia.

Ideology. An ideology is a plan to improve society, or at least a claim to be able to do so. Ideology closely parallels religion, except the former aims to improve things in this world rather than in the next. People caught up in an ideology often exhibit religious-like fervor and disregard of empirical reality. The opposite of ideology is pragmatism. Morgenthau and other realist thinkers generally scoff at ideology and claim it is essentially a trick to justify dictatorship. The dictator himself generally takes ideology with a big grain of salt while pursuing a policy of national interests. Did Lenin withdraw Russia from World War I because it was a dirty imperialists' war or to save Russia from further dismemberment at the hands of the advancing Germans? In the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War, Stalin ordered the Comintern volunteers in Spain to adopt an extremely moderate, non-revolutionary line. Stalin was trying to convince Britain and France to join him in the struggle against Hitler. Without such an alliance, Soviet vital national interests were threatened. Communist ideology or Spanish democracy had nothing to do with it; the security of Soviet territory was all Stalin cared about.

Ideology can be changed at the drop of a hat. Stalin stopped excoriating Nazi Germany in 1939 because he couldn't get any cooperation out of Britain and France to secure his western

borders; he turned to Hitler to get a deal for the same end. By the same token, Winston Churchill, a fire-breathing Conservative, explained why Britain was now in alliance with the Soviet Union: "If Hitler invaded hell, I would find a few good words to say about the devil in the House of Commons." Ideological differences or affinities do not matter, only safeguarding one's country matters. Later in the war, the redoubtable Brigadier Maclean reported back from Yugoslavia that Tito's Partisans were communists and would communize Yugoslavia after the war. Churchill took the news without surprise and asked Maclean, "Do you intend to make Yugoslavia your permanent residence after the war?" Maclean allowed as he did not. "Good," nodded Churchill, "neither do I." The ideology of postwar Yugoslavia was not uppermost in his mind, indicated Churchill; the survival of Britain in the war was.

But what of the true believer, the revolutionary who still acts on his ideology? Such people are extremely difficult to deal with because they ignore their own national interests and are thus unpredictable. Typically, their passion does not last long as they become acquainted with the burdens of governing and preserving their country. Lenin started switching from ideology to pragmatism almost immediately upon seizing power, for now he had Russia to take care of. Ideologues who are unable to switch may destroy their entire region, including their own country, as Hitler did. Notice how after the death of Khomeini, Iranian policy has gradually become more pragmatic. Ideology and national interest are at odds; a country caught up in ideology is typically unable to pursue a policy of national interest, which requires a calm, uncluttered view of reality.

Global System. The global configuration of power may also warp national-interest thinking. Late in the nineteenth century, with the globe largely carved up by European imperial powers, many countries felt compelled to grab the leftover pieces to prove themselves major powers. A kind of contagion or copycat effect warped the national interest, leading to the U.S. seizure of the Philippines from Spain. Teddy Roosevelt engineered the move but some years later regretted it when he noticed that the Philippines had become a U.S. vulnerability in the Pacific, one that had to be defended at great cost from the Japanese. It is easy to declare something to be your national interest but hard to back out afterward.

A world divided by many powers is quite different from one divided by just two superpowers.[19] Probably the biggest distortions come in the latter case, that of Cold War bipolarity, a zero-sum game that tended to make everything important. Limited definitions of the national interest fall by the wayside, and the superpowers plunge ever deeper into obscure corners of the world as if one more client state proved they were winning. Laos, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, everything becomes the national interest. Only Antarctica remained outside the superpower competition. Like the Sherwin-Williams paint symbol, national interests "cover the Earth" and thus lose their utility. You must be able to discriminate and rank national interests lest you spread your power too thin and in areas of little importance.

In a bipolar situation, the hegemonic superpower of each camp is forced, in order to hold its alliance together, to take on the national interests of each client state. One of the causes of the 1948 Tito-Stalin split, for example, was Tito's insistence that Trieste belonged to Yugoslavia. Trieste may have been a Yugoslav national interest, but it was not a Soviet national interest, and Stalin was reluctant to provoke the British and Americans over it. The United States was

reluctant to come to French aid in the first Indochina war; it was not a U.S. national interest. To draw France into the common defense of Europe in the early 1950s, however, it was necessary to support French imperialism on the other side of the globe. U.S. involvement in Indochina started as a bribe to get French cooperation in Europe. The care and feeding of the alliance became a dominant national interest, one that blotted out a careful review of military engagement in a distant swamp.

The clients, of course, feel little obligation to make the national interests of the hegemon their own. France did not come to the aid of the United States in Indochina; de Gaulle, in fact, told the Americans they were quite foolish. Aside from the Soviets, no members of the Warsaw Pact had any interest in Afghanistan. The bipolar world thus produces a tail-wags-dog effect in pushing the hegemon to defend the clients with no reciprocity implied. As such, bipolar systems come under great stress and have finite lifespans. This bothers a Realist not at all, for no alliance lasts forever; alliances change as the national interests of their members change. An alliance is not an end in itself; it is merely one device that, for a certain time, may support the national interest.

The collapse of the bipolar world of the Cold War now permits an un-warping or normalizing of national interests. Laos, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan now receive precisely the attention they merit. We are no longer so solicitous of our European friends, whose national interests may diverge from and even conflict with ours. We are not desperate to hold together NATO and may now tell the Europeans to feel free to do whatever they wish; we may or may not back them up, depending on our national interests involved. Notice how the end of the Cold War brought some very tough talk and inflexible positions in trade negotiations. There was no longer much reason for the United States to be especially nice to the West Europeans and East Asians on trade; it seemed to be high time for Washington to look out for U.S. economic interests.

Public and Elite Convictions. While not as explicit as ideologies, the culture, values, and convictions of a country also can warp definitions of the national interest. Every country has national values, but the statesman who acts on them without reference to the national interest risks damaging the nation. The long American missionary experience in China convinced many Americans that China was our responsibility to uplift and defend, a conviction that contributed to war with Japan. The cultural and ethnic affinities of many Americans lead them to automatically support their country of origin and to define its national interests as America's. The Israeli and Greek lobbies are quite influential, even though Israeli and Greek interests sometimes diverge from U.S. interests. The Greek lobby, for example, made Washington hesitate for years before officially recognizing Macedonia.

A lack of interest also can be warping. If left to itself, some analysts believe, U.S. mass opinion tends toward isolationism; that is, it sees no important national interests anywhere. Americans are especially indifferent to Latin America, which is seen as having no influence on the United States except as a source of drugs and illegal immigrants. Americans mistakenly but deeply believe there are few U.S. national interests there.

Elites—the top or most influential people—pay far more attention to foreign affairs than the public at large; therefore they are instrumental in defining national interests. The anglophilia of the WASP elite of the Northeast inclined America to enter two world wars to defend Britain. This inclination was not shared by the Midwest, where elites were more Irish and German in origin; hence the purported "isolationism" of the Midwest.

Economic elites may define U.S. holdings abroad as the national interest. United Fruit saw Arbenz's reforms in Guatemala as a threat to their bananas and hence to the United States. ITT saw Allende's takeover of the ITT-owned Chilean telephone network as a threat to U.S. interests. Some critics wonder if the U.S. war against Iraq was a defense of national interests or of oil-industry interests.

Educational elites may awaken or keep alive issues that do not interest the public at large. By inculcating a "world order" view of global politics, educators may convince students that distant problems are vital U.S. interests. As young officials these students may carry idealistic views with them into government agencies and news organizations. Some young State Department officials resigned when they could not get their way in defining Bosnia as a U.S. interest.

Mass Media. Especially important in awakening the broader public to questions of national interest are the mass media. Unfortunately, they do so on a capricious basis little grounded in calm calculation. One noted columnist made the Kurds his pet national interest. Addicted to good visuals and action footage, television goes where the action is and brings back images of maimed or starving children—"If it bleeds it leads." Implicit in the images is the message that atrocities so terrible automatically become a U.S. interest. But the media can be highly selective, giving extensive coverage to horrors in Bosnia but ignoring similar horrors in Peru, Sri Lanka, or Angola. South America would have to sink before U.S. television would cover it. To have the media set the national interest is to let show biz take over the guidance of the nation.

Policy Inertia. Once a policy is set, it takes on a life of its own and may continue indefinitely.[20] It is the nature of bureaucracy to keep marching in the direction initially set, which may include definitions of the national interest. The situation may change over time, but not the bureaucracy. Dean Rusk testified that South Vietnam had become a vital U.S. interest because we had sunk so much foreign aid into it. Henry Kissinger later said that even if Vietnam had not initially been a U.S. interest, the commitment of American blood and treasure had put U.S. credibility on the line and thus turned Vietnam into a vital interest. On this basis, you can create national interests anywhere in the world where previously you had none.

THE UTILITY OF NATIONAL INTEREST.

If the definition of the national interest can be warped in so many ways, what good is the concept? It's only as good as your ability to perceive reality accurately, a gift granted to few. For the rest of us, to get an accurate fix on the national interest it would be necessary to travel

into the future in a time machine to see how things worked out under a given policy. The real national interest is sometimes knowable only many years after the fact. Second- and third-order effects of a policy are often wildly unpredictable.

In the mid-1960s, Vietnam seemed to most Americans to be a national interest; a decade later few thought it had been a national interest. The victorious communists in Vietnam, having impoverished their country, now seek to enter the capitalistic world market economy. Funny how things work out.

As noted above, the real problem is when reputedly intelligent, well-informed analysts come down on opposing sides in defining the national interest. Whom can the statesman trust? "National interest" is often used on a polemical basis, with each side claiming to have the true picture.

The utility of national interest is not in any formula that can untangle complex issues. Beware of anyone trying to sell you a formula or pat answer; there are none. National interest is useful in training the decisionmaker to ask a series of questions, such as: How are current developments affecting my nation's power? Are hostile forces able to harm my vital interests? Do I have enough power to protect my vital interests? Which of my interests are secondary? How much of my power am I willing to use to defend them? What kind of deals can I get in compromises over secondary interests? The net effect of these questions is to restrain impetuous types from embarking on crusades defined, again, as overseas military actions little related to national interest.

It is Morgenthau's argument that the world would be a much better place if all statesmen would consistently ask such questions, for that would induce a sense of limits and caution into their strategies that might otherwise be lacking. For those who simply will not keep their national interests defined tightly and close to home but instead are intent on expanding their power (imperialism), Morgenthau's approach is also useful. The statesman is constantly scanning the horizon to detect the growth of hostile power centers, and if they seem likely to impinge on his national interests he formulates strategies to safeguard his interests, each step grounded in adequate power.

The national-interest approach is terribly old-fashioned, and some thinkers argue it has been or must be superseded by "world interest" or "world order" approaches, which go beyond the inherent selfishness of national interest. Empirically, however, one would still find national interest a better predictor of state strategy than world order. In a crisis, when it comes to putting their troops in harm's way, statesmen ask themselves, "What is my nation's interest in all this?" It's still not a bad question.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 6

1. The original is still perhaps the best: Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Random House, 1940). For more modern interpretations, see also the explication of 19th-century German scholar Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and Its Place in Modern History,*

trans. Douglas Scott (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957); and of Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (New York: Macmillan, 1956).

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