



The Free Congress Commentary

The Next Conservatism #38: The Next Conservatism Grand Strategy

By William S. Lind

April 18, 2006

One of the goals of the next conservatism should be to restore the American republic rather than continue our march toward empire, with the loss of liberties that inevitably entails. Restoring the republic, in turn, means restoring the grand strategy America followed through most of its history. That grand strategy was defensive, not offensive.

The Washington Establishment seems to think that wars can be won only by taking the offensive. Over and over, we hear that in the misnamed “war on terror,” America is on the offensive (which guarantees more war). We are all supposed to accept this as something good.

Clausewitz, the great Prussian military theorist, would disagree. Early in his book On War, Clausewitz wrote,

. . . defense is simply the stronger form of war, the one that makes the enemy’s defeat more certain . . . We maintain unequivocally that the form of warfare we call defense not only offers greater probability of victory than attack, but that its victories can attain the same proportions and results.

What would an American defensive grand strategy look like in a 21st Century that is likely to be dominated by Fourth Generation war, war waged by non-state entities such as al Qaeda? Before we can answer that question we first must address two others. The first is, what do we mean by grand strategy?

The greatest American military theorist, Colonel John Boyd USAF (whom I knew well), defined grand strategy as the art of connecting yourself to as many other independent power centers as possible, while isolating the enemy from as many independent power centers as possible. Connection and isolation is the essence of the art of strategy.

The second question is, in what environment must we seek connection and isolation? Looking outward from the United States and the West, in a century whose most important feature will be the decline of the state, we will find a world divided into centers of order and centers or sources of disorder. As I wrote in an earlier column on the Next Conservatism, those centers of order may reflect our traditional culture or they may derive their order from the “soft totalitarianism” of Brave New World. The latter is a deadly enemy to conservatives and all we stand for, but as an internal threat it is not our focus here.

Putting these two answers together, we can see what a defensive grand strategy would look like. It means we should seek to connect our country with as many other centers of order as possible, while isolating ourselves from as many centers and sources of disorder as possible. In simple terms, this means we would leave centers and sources of disorder alone, militarily and in other ways, unless they attacked us. But if they did attack us, our response would be Roman, which is to say annihilating.

The Washington Establishment will immediately howl in protest at any “isolation,” even when we are talking about isolating ourselves from dangerous disorder. That Establishment lives richly off playing the Great Power game and it has no desire to lose its meal ticket.

The next conservatism should not allow itself to be scared away from sound strategic thinking by bogeymen. When a plague is raging somewhere else, as the plague of violent disorder will rage throughout most of the world as the state fades away, prudence calls for a quarantine. American intervention in centers of disorder will not return them to order; it is more likely to import their disorder here, in the form of refugees and immigrants. Nor does a defensive grand strategy call for “isolationism.” We would not only maintain but

strengthen our ties to other parts of the world that remained centers of order, of which China may emerge as the most important.

A defensive grand strategy is what America followed through most of its history and it served us well. It helped keep the federal government small and it allowed our capital to go into industry rather than armaments. As conservatives we know that what worked once can work again. In the Fourth Generation world of a disordered 21st Century, we will do well to maintain both order and liberty here at home. Crusades to “make the world safe for democracy” will render neither the world nor our own country safer for anything.

William S. Lind is Director for the Center for Cultural Conservatism for the Free Congress Foundation.