

Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom

Doyle Hodges

In his introductory essay for Volume 5, Issue 2, our executive editor looks at the role of emotions in war, the anxiety of the current moment, and how to have serenity about it all.

I have been thinking recently of Thomas Schelling and the serenity prayer. This may seem an unlikely combination, but the wisdom in those short verses seems to encapsulate much of the essence of deterrence and coercion theory: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” A person or state confronted with a situation, whether actual or threatened, can either accept it or try to change it. If they do not try to change it, they will have to learn to live with it. If they do try to change it, the success they enjoy will depend largely upon their wisdom in assessing whether it was within their capacity to do so.

But wisdom is more than discerning what is possible from what isn't. There are some things a state clearly has the capability to do but ought not, such as invading a peaceful neighbor. States bind themselves through treaty commitments to take other actions, such as collective defense, making these actions things they must do even if success seems dubious, or else face negative consequences for failing to meet their commitments.

In January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson spoke at the National Press Club. He outlined what many interpreted as a definitive statement of American commitment to use force in the Pacific when he described a “defensive perimeter [running] along the Aleutians to Japan and then ... to the Ryukus [It] runs from [the] Ryukus to the Philippine Islands So far as the military security of other areas in the Pacific is concerned, it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack [I]nitial reliance must be on the people attacked ... and then upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the charter of the United Nations.”¹ Acheson's speech is often seen as giving communists a “green light” to invade South Korea by signaling a lack of U.S. commitment to defend it against attack.² The fact that the United States chose to fight the Korean War (albeit un-

der the auspices of the United Nations) is cited by James Fearon as an example of how a state may have private information about its willingness to fight and an incentive to misrepresent that information in order to hide its true strength and capability to fight from other potential adversaries. This is what Fearon calls a “rationalist” explanation for war.³

Force and Feeling

This explanation, while logically sound, seems sterile. When Thucydides sought to explain the Peloponnesian War, he did not refer to private information or commitment problems, but to something more primal: “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.”⁴ As Samuel Zilincik argues in this issue, emotions — fear, anger, hope, love — are integral to human endeavors, and especially to the cause, conduct, and conclusion of war. As he writes, “emotions enable strategic choices by drawing strategists' attention toward what matters to them in any given moment.” This observation seems to explain why the American ambassador in Moscow would cable to Washington on the day of the North Korean invasion of South Korea that the invasion

constitutes [a] direct threat [to] our leadership of [the] free world against Soviet Communist imperialism. ROK [The Republic of Korea] is a creation of US policy and of US-led UN action. Its destruction would have calculably grave unfavorable repercussions for US in Japan, SEA [Southeast Asia] and in other areas as well. We feel therefore, that we are called upon to make clear to the world, and without delay, that we are prepared upon request to assist ROK [to] maintain its independence by all means at our disposal, including military help and vigorous action in UNSC [U.N. Se-

1 As quoted in an unsigned and undated memorandum: “Secretary Acheson and the Defense of Korea,” Truman Presidential Museum and Library, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/remarks-dean-acheson-national-press-club>.

2 For an example of this argument, see Youngho Kim, “The Origins of the Korean War: Civil War or Stalin's Rollback?” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 10, no. 1 (March 1999): 202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592299908406115>.

3 James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 400–401, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706903>.

4 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), bk. I, 23.



curity Council]. ... Delay could suggest to Soviets possibility their precipitating with impunity further immediate action against Indochina et cetera.⁵

Viewed through the lens of emotion, one can better understand why the same Acheson, who, six months earlier, had intentionally excluded South Korea from his description of a U.S. defensive perimeter, could later urge strong U.S. military support to South Korea and lobby for passage of the U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing military action to expel the invading forces. Fearon is correct that Acheson and others worried about whether American forces could fight in both Europe and Asia simultaneously, as well as about what message the Soviet Union might infer from U.S. action or inaction. But the urgency of the ambassador's message and the diplomatic campaign that followed suggest that the resolve to fight was less a case of private information that was carefully concealed to hide perceived military weakness than it was genuine outrage at the invasion and fear of its potential consequences.

Of course, even when a nation can act with little fear of repercussions, the question remains whether military actions will achieve their desired result. U.S. forces have carried out a campaign of drone strikes against al-Qaeda leadership in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan for many years. Bryce Loidolt asks a simple question with a complex answer: What has that campaign achieved? After all, history is replete with examples of instances when campaigns intended to degrade an opponent's capacity and break its morale have had the opposite effect of sparking resilience and innovation.⁶ Communities have often shown an ability to find their greatest strength in the face of the greatest adversity. While Loidolt demonstrates, using captured al-Qaeda documents, that the drone campaign does appear to have been effective, he also illuminates the limitations and risks inherent in this approach to counter-terrorism.

The role of emotion in war and strategy is important, but emotions have also figured prominently in the American response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The last two years have highlighted the way in

which disease and other natural disasters are an integral component of security. The implementation of the all-volunteer military has meant that the government can act with wide freedom of action in military matters abroad without arousing fear or resentment among most of its citizens. But government actions related to public health measures at home are both far more narrowly constrained and far more likely to generate an emotional response because they affect every American. Balaji Narain's examination of the legal landscape surrounding disaster preparedness and disaster response helps to clarify just how emergency action authorities and other statutory measures both empower and hinder federal disaster response.

Whatever the legal authorities, America's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been indelibly influenced by a partisan political environment that seems more fraught and polarized than at any time in the past 50 years. Partisan identification is the strongest predictor of whether a U.S. resident is vaccinated against COVID-19, and the death rate from COVID-19 in counties that gave over 60 percent of their vote share for former President Donald Trump in 2020 is over 2 ½ times higher than in counties that voted for President Joe Biden.⁷ In some states, such as Michigan, protests against COVID-19 mitigation measures have been the catalyst for armed militia groups to threaten the governor and lawmakers.⁸ The threat of political violence and domestic terrorism broadly has grown in recent years, challenging law enforcement and intelligence officials.

Former U.S. Attorney Barbara McQuade examines the Biden administration's recent strategy for countering domestic terrorism, with an eye toward both the protection of civil liberties and development of more effective tools to protect against political violence. Her analysis details the history of civil rights abuses behind the restrictions on intelligence and law enforcement personnel and offers some suggestions for ways to move forward that bring different portions of the community together to cooperatively anticipate, identify, and mitigate potential causes of terrorism before political disaffection metastasizes into political violence.

When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United

5 Alan Goodrich Kirk, "The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Kirk) to the Secretary of State," June 25, 1950, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Vol. VII, Doc. 72, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d72>.

6 See, for example, Edgar Jones et al., "Public Panic and Morale: Second World War Civilian Responses Re-examined in the Light of the Current Anti-terrorist Campaign," *Journal of Risk Research* 9, no. 1 (January 2006): 57–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669870500289005>.

7 Daniel Wood and Geoff Brumfiel, "Pro-Trump Counties Now Have Far Higher COVID Death Rates. Misinformation Is to Blame," *National Public Radio News*, Dec. 5, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/12/05/1059828993/data-vaccine-misinformation-trump-counties-covid-death-rate>.

8 Kathleen Gray, "In Michigan, a Dress Rehearsal for the Chaos at the Capitol on Wednesday," *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/politics/michigan-state-capitol.html>.

States in the 1830s, he marveled at the degree to which Americans could both fiercely value their individual rights and freedoms and be bound together as a community.⁹ He spent much time discussing how life in a democracy shaped the emotional bonds between citizens, or what he called, “habits of the heart,” a phrase later used by Robert Bellah and a team of sociologists in a study of individualism and commitment in modern America.¹⁰ Their question essentially asked, how do individuals who prize their individualism and separate identity come together to form a cohesive whole? Salamah Magnuson, Morgan Keay, and Kimberly Metcalf look at this question in the context of how social contracts bind individuals and communities to their identity as citizens of a state. In particular, they examine how this may work in the face of concerted efforts by a foreign power to sow division as part of a hybrid warfare campaign. Using a tool developed by one of the authors, they evaluate which connections are successful in making an especially vulnerable group — ethnic-Russian Estonians who speak Russian at home — feel integrated into the Estonian state. The results are sometimes surprising, as well-intentioned initiatives have at times increased the sense of division, while efforts undertaken without any political goal by a local soccer team have brought the community closer to the Estonian state.

Feeling Anxious

As I write, 100,000 Russian troops are massed on the border with Ukraine and the threat of invasion looms. While a low-intensity war has simmered in this part of Eastern Europe for almost a decade, the prospect of the conflict spreading beyond the Donbas region and Crimea sparks anger, fear, and concern. What does Putin want? Is this a bluff? How will China react to a U.S. response or lack of response? Partisanship dominates much of the discourse about potential U.S. responses, as lawmakers and commenters chastise leaders of the other party for failing to show resolve, risking war, or encouraging an adversary. Meanwhile, the omicron variant of COVID-19 has recently surged through the United States, causing spikes in hospitalizations, infections, and death. The news is filled with stories of high-profile legal processes, which raise afresh

wounds from a summer of civil unrest surrounding racial justice in 2020 and an assault on the U.S. Capitol building that disrupted the peaceful and orderly transition of power in 2021. Other legal developments have brought to the fore divisions over social issues that have long been treated as settled matters of law, even if divisive. Tensions, both domestic and international, seem to be strained to near breaking. As one commenter writes,

What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one’s unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action.¹¹

Though the comments feel disturbingly apropos, that commenter was Thucydides speaking of the civil war in Corcyra. The authors in this issue offer a somewhat fresher, more contemporary take, but one that is still achingly relevant to the pressures facing America and the world today.

In Thucydides’ description of Pericles’ funeral oration, he praises the greatness of Athens: “[O]ur system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbors. It is more the case of our being a model to others than of our imitating anyone else.”¹² Later in the speech, Pericles argues that Athens is “an education to Greece” and that Athens, “alone of the states we know, comes to her testing time in a greatness that surpasses what was imagined of her.”¹³ The United States shares with Athens this sense of exceptionalism, destiny, and exalted self-image. Though there is no direct evidence that Lincoln was inspired by Thucydides, many have found echoes of Pericles’ funeral oration in the Gettysburg Address.

Yet, though Athens’ self-image never changed over the course of a plague, a long war, an ill-advised campaign in a foreign land, and the rise of populist demagogues, Athens did change. An example of the change that came over Athens may be seen in the reply of the Athenians to the leaders of Melos, who plead with the commanders of the Athenian forces camped outside their gates

9 See broadly Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Collins, 2000) Vol 2, Part 2, chaps. 2–4.

10 Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

11 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk. 3, chap. 82.

12 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk. 2, chap. 37.

13 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk. 2, chap. 41.



for Melos' right to remain neutral. The Melians are famously told, "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept."¹⁴ The Athenians who had once been "an education to Greece" now provide a different type of education as they baldly tell the Melians, "You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you."¹⁵

The Athenians' answer to the Melians contains all the elements of the serenity prayer: accept what you cannot change, change only what you can, and be wise enough to know the difference. But few, in reading the Melian dialogue, find themselves rooting for the Athenians or seeing in them much of the ideal society that Pericles invoked in his oration. Instead, one is reminded of the popular meme in which a British comedian playing the part of a Nazi officer asks his companion, "are we the baddies?"¹⁶

In December, the world of political science lost a giant with the death of Robert Jervis. Jervis, a founding member of the editorial board of this journal, will be remembered for his contributions to an astounding number of disciplines, as well as for his warmth, kindness, humility, and imagination. One of the most useful insights from his landmark 1976 book, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, is that — thanks in large part to the effect of emotions upon reason — no nation is likely to see themselves as "the baddies."¹⁷ I hope that, in the spirit of Bob Jervis, the articles in this issue may help all those who make, study, or are affected by policy in these turbulent times to approach the urgent questions they confront with a sincere desire for serenity, courage, and wisdom. 🏰

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14 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk. 5, chap. 89.

15 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk. 5, chap. 93.

16 "The German Soldiers, Part 2: Are We the Baddies?" *That Mitchell and Webb Look: Are We the Baddies?* Youtube, accessed Feb. 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JOpPNra4bw>. There are certainly those who argue that the Athenians are correct in their assessment, but few would encourage such bluntness which seems heedless of the reputational effect, perhaps leading other states to see wisdom in balancing behavior, rather than bandwagoning.

17 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).