De Plein Fouet: Is Strategy Dead?

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Robert Cardillo (RC): We're going to discuss strategy. Judging by the title you chose, I assume you have a point of view.

Richard Szafranski (RS): Yes, sir. *Le tir de plein fouet* is one of the forms of artillery fire—direct fire—described by Lieutenant Gondry in the 1918 *French and English Artillery Technical Vocabulary* for "the use of French Artillery Instructors in the U.S. Army."[1] Let's fire directly at the idea of strategy.

The hypothesis is that strategy is dead, and that's the point of view I'll take. Specifically, the word has become meaningless in the diffusion of its use; the notion causes dilution of organizational effectiveness when any entity subordinate to the corporate parent asserts a strategy; and a much simpler framework is evident in

successful organizations, thus supplanting the idea of *strategy*. We'll discuss that simpler framework later.

Search on *strategy*, and the pointlessness of the word is quickly evident. There are dating strategies, lawn-care and pest-control strategies, child-rearing strategies, and strategies for every lofty and mundane human endeavor. Hundreds of millions of dollars—maybe billions—are spent annually on crafting visions and strategies as well as creating or updating strategic plans worldwide. Publicly traded corporate entities must have a corporate strategy to satisfy the oversight requirements of their board, and government entities have strategies "because." In government a subordinate-entity strategy is analogous to the battalion-company-platoon each having a strategy.

I suspect you may disagree since you lead and manage a large, complex global intelligence agency—the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA)—with, according to the press, 9 or 10 legions of people and a multibillion-dollar budget. Doubtless, as is the practice, you have or you have inherited "a strategy."

RC: Suspicions confirmed. Even before I became the director in October 2014—during the transition period—I reaffirmed the NGA vision and the NGA strategy for 2013–17. Published in 2012, the NGA strategy aligns with the nation's strategic priorities, goals, and objectives as outlined in the *National Intelligence Strategy*, the *Defense Intelligence Strategy*, and the secretary of defense's strategic guidance—*Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense.* Our strategy specifies two strategic goals and seven strategic objectives. An unclassified version is on our public website. [2] I affirmed the vision and strategy for at least four reasons.

First, and above all else, tinkering with the vision initiates a chain of activities that sets everyone's hair on fire. The vision we have is good enough. We all have to make choices about how we spend finite time resources, so I choose not to spend time debating a fundamental statement. I prefer to use that time on implementation—how we will act within that strategic framework. Second, it would have been plain wrong to reject thousands of hours of thoughtful effort to tweak the strategy here or there. Third, I can't agree with your battalion-company-platoon analogy. Our strategy interprets and translates the guidance of our corporate parents within the context of the domain we command—the around-the-clock, moment-by-moment creation of geospatial and geotemporal intelligence to make our customers successful. My subordinate elements do not have separate strategies, but they do indeed have various approaches to achieve the strategy—some helpful, some not. Fourth, change is a constant. In February 2015, the president issued a new *National Security Strategy*.[3] Consequently, changes will be forthcoming to the *National Intelligence Strategy*, the *Defense Intelligence Strategy*, and the secretary of defense's strategic guidance. The NGA has to be aligned with all of those, so while the word *strategy* may be misused in some quarters, neither strategic thinking nor strategy is dead in the NGA.

RS: I'm not sure that what you're describing, sir, is a strategy as much as it is the "implementation plan"—the translation and interpretation, as you said, for the "guidance" that comes from the defense and intelligence hierarchy beneath the president. Isn't what you described really an implementation plan?

RC: Yes, exactly. All too often people equate the strategy with the result. To the contrary, the conversations that are required to land on a strategy can (and should) be a very beneficial exchange of views of the current state of the business and,

more importantly, where the business needs to go. The NGA is a large, complex outfit with a highly sophisticated mission that drives everything. We exist for one reason—to serve global customers whose operations don't allow for error. Our adversaries are agile and attempt to operate outside our sights. We have an integrated workforce that includes specialties and disciplines that others don't have. We use words like *geodesy* in sentences that make sense, for example. Consequently, although our strategy does help ensure that we implement the guidance we get from those above us, it also has unique and nonimitative components regarding our globally distributed workforce, our workplaces, and the way we will acquire, sustain, and modernize.

Should I be interpreting what you're suggesting as that there should be only a national security strategy and that everything cascading from that strategy is an implementation plan?

RS: If I were suggesting that, how would you respond?

RC: Right now, I would politely reject it. To move from national strategy to agency implementation is a bridge too far. By definition, everything and everyone on our national security team fits inside that umbrella document. Even though it's useful (and necessary) to ground our efforts in that document, it is insufficient to focus us on our discriminate value proposition. All large, complex organizations have to attend to matters of organizational maintenance and hygiene that must be thought of strategically—matters that no one else can think about. To me, that's a part of our strategy. My friend Gen Mark Welsh has an Air Force strategy that looks 30 years into the future.[4] It's difficult for me to envisage how one would focus 140,000 people on singular objectives without a strategy that aligns them. I visited the National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC) in Dayton, Ohio, recently. Like the NGA, the NASIC is in the intelligence business. It gets the same guidance or strategy that all of us in intelligence receive; additionally, it supports the Air Force strategy. The NASIC requires its own corporate process to help implement the Air Force strategy and—through its boards, panels, and councils—to act strategically.[5] If your point is that one needn't have a formal, published strategy at every level of the organization to act strategically, then we agree.

RS: That was one point. Another comes from looking at wildly successful start-ups in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. I imagine that their "strategy" is something like "develop a really cool app and get acquired or go public."

RC: I imagine the same. I would also think from the outset that the start-ups have a laser-like focus on their discriminate value. In other words, they seek separation so as to show their unique business and customer value. I would argue that separation in the intelligence business is a dangerous proposition. Rather, the NGA seeks to convey contextualized content in a way that makes our partners in the intelligence community more valuable to our customers—which I prefer to call their consequence. Thus, the need for a strategy is a matter of scale, scope, standards, and sustainability. Three people in a garage working on the instantiation of a brilliant idea may not need a strategy beyond the one we both imagine. The NGA—the elegant integration of its predecessor organizations with the addition of some important new things—has been around a long time. Scale: we're large. Scope: we're everywhere. Standards: we're accountable to the American people, our overseers, our

customers, our partners, and our Team NGA. Sustainability: we're not going to be acquired or go away. We'll be around for a long time. Like General Welsh, I'm obligated to have the long-range optics which ensure that our enterprise can sustain and enhance the value we provide customers over the long, long term. So I don't think I'm persuaded that NGA doesn't—or organizations like ours don't—need a strategy.

RS: Then let me try another angle—millennials. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, millennials will comprise 75 percent of the workforce by 2030.[6] Few studies suggest that they're a homogeneous group, yet a number of studies cite similar attributes. Millennials are the most well educated generation in American history; they are unrealistic in their expectations for the workplace, including a desire for bosses who are friendly; and they disdain red tape and processes they consider superfluous.[7] Some data suggest that retaining them in an organization will be difficult; they'll come and go. How confident are you that the millennial generation will take the same view of the importance of strategy that you take?

RC: I agree with you that millennials have a particular worldview and their own set of expectations as they build their careers. Further, I would say that what's not changed is that everyone (and I mean everyone) has a certain demand, almost Maslowian, for a basic compact with any career—who are we, and how do I fit? To me, strategy is part of the answer to "Who are we?" The implementation of that strategy answers the question "How do I fit?"

As we attend to professional development, we should be educating the entire workforce on the value of planning, careful execution, performance metrics—all of the things that relate to maintaining standards and promoting sustainability for organizations of tremendous scale and a large scope of responsibilities. That said, I can't predict the future. Perhaps those who take our places will find some substitute for strategy, or maybe the Internet-of-Things will allow everything to become automatically self-correcting like a self-driving car. I don't see that coming, or coming very soon, though. Remember, we exist because we support people in harm's way and because the people capable of doing that harm—active, creative, and rarely perfectly predictable—are very cunning and inventive. It takes people to understand people.

RS: I wanted to fire at the notion of strategy—first, because the meaning of the word has been so polluted that it needs a good scrubbing, if only for millennial successors; second, because every layer in a hierarchy doesn't need a strategy to support the next higher layer; and third, because there may be a simpler way to think about strategy.

RC: What way would that be?

RS: Bear with me, please. As I reflect on what I know or have seen in great, successful organizations and those not so great, the outstanding ones have common attributes. Take the religious movements and their many adherents. It's difficult for me to believe that their founders had any notion of strategy. Yet these movements successfully became both global and durable.

RC: I believe that may be an unfair comparison. I am neither a religious scholar nor a historian, but the theological issues and influences associated with a religion

or a religious movement are far more involved. Do you have a better comparison you'd like to make?

RS: Yes, the common attributes of winners. The common attributes I've observed are world-changing objectives, inspirational leadership, a keen sense of priorities, and the ability to apply the right resources at the right time.

World-changing objectives are the big and audacious goals that are socially valuable and transformational because they stretch the organization to grow its contributions and its value to customers. Inspirational leadership is the kind of optimistic, never-flagging leadership that summons everyone's very best in moving as a team toward meeting those world-changing goals. A keen sense of priorities is the ability to use the goals as a touchstone and a filter to discern both what the organization needs to do and what it needs to stop doing or start doing in a dramatically different way. Finally, a winning organization manifests the ability to apply the right resources at the right time to secure the momentum and the forward movement by allocating and reallocating time, money, people, and energy consistently, even as the resource stream changes. If an organization has all of those, why would it need "a strategy"?

RC: I see that as a false choice. Let me rephrase the question or answer a different question. What if the question were, "If the inspired leaders of a large, complex organization had—and used—a strategy for changing the world by applying the right resources to the right priorities at the right time, would they be more or less likely to succeed and endure?" My answer is that they would be more likely to succeed and to continue to contribute than an organization without a strategy.

I don't know if I've persuaded you, and I thank you for helping me talk through this and conclude that strategy or the notion of strategy is not dead. Are we in the same place?

RS: We are, and thank you. Should we change the title to "*Ricochet*: Is Strategy Dead? Not"?

RC: Let's leave it as is. It's a catchy title, and *Journal* readers are smart enough to decide for themselves. ✪

Notes

1. Lieutenant Gondry, *French and English Artillery Technical Vocabulary* (Paris: Henri Charles-Lavauzelle, 1918), https://archive.org/details/frenchenglishart00gondrich.

2. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, *NGA Strategy, 2013–2017* (Springfield, VA: National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, May 2012), https://www.nga.mil/about/NGAStrategy/Pages/default.aspx. See also Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America, 2014* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2014), http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2014_NIS_Publication.pdf; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Defense Intelligence Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2008), https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=486157; and Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2012), http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

3. President of the United States, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, February 2015), http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf. See

also Tanya Somanader, "President Obama's National Security Strategy in 2015: Strong and Sustainable American Leadership," *White House Blog*, 6 February 2015, http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/02/06/president-obamas-national-security-strategy-2015-strong-and-sustainable-american-lea.

4. Headquarters US Air Force, *America's Air Force: A Call to the Future* (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Air Force, July 2014), http://airman.dodlive.mil/files/2014/07/AF_30_Year_Strategy_2.pdf.

5. National Air and Space Intelligence Center Instruction 90-103, *NASIC Corporate Process*, 15 May 2014, http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/nasic/publication/nasici90-103/nasici90-103.pdf.

6. Alastair Mitchell, "The Rise of the Millennial Workforce," *Wired*, 15 August 2013, http://www.wired.com/2013/08/the-rise-of-the-millennial-workforce/.

7. Shama Hyder, "Study Reveals Surprising Facts about Millennials in the Workplace," *Forbes*, 5 December 2013, http://www.forbes.com/sites/shamahyder/2013/12/05/study-reveals-surprising-facts-about-millennials-in-the-workplace/; and Jacquelyn Smith, "8 Things You Need to Know about Millennials at Work," *Business Insider*, 18 November 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/what -you-should-know-about-millennials-at-work-2014-11.

7. Shama Hyder, "Study Reveals Surprising Facts about Millennials in the Workplace," *Forbes*, 5 December 2013, http://www.forbes.com/sites/shamahyder/2013/12/05/study-reveals-surprising-facts-about-millennials-in-the-workplace/; and Jacquelyn Smith, "8 Things You Need to Know about Millennials at Work," *Business Insider*, 18 November 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/what -you-should-know-about-millennials-at-work-2014-11.

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