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## Strategic Culture and American Empire

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### Abstract

This article considers the ideational fabric of American empire. Section one discusses why liberal democratic empires are not particularly peaceful. Section two highlights the analytical value of a focus on U.S. strategic culture in explaining U.S. military practice. Section three looks more broadly at the role of identity in giving meaning to the U.S. imperial project and in giving reasons for the use of force in support of it. Throughout, comparisons are made with the British Empire and consideration is given to the meta-theoretical options and methodological challenges for the social science of strategic culture.

# Strategic Culture and American Empire

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Empires are supreme acts of human imagination. They are as much about social as material dominance. They involve the creation of new identities, including those that span the usual “self-other” boundaries of nation-states. Even at a tactical and more technical level, ideas about what works and is right define the instruments of empire—including, critically, the place and purpose of military force. In this article, I consider the ideational fabric of empire. I focus on the concept of strategic culture, on the U.S. case, and on questions of why and how the country uses force to sustain this liberal democratic empire. Throughout, I also explore the meta-theoretical options and methodological challenges for the social science of strategic culture.

Section one of this article considers the relationship between liberal democracy and imperial use of force. Liberal democratic peace theory might lead some to expect liberal democratic empires to be peaceful. Looking at the United Kingdom and the United States, I discuss why they are still prone to war. In section two, I make the case for an analytical focus on strategic culture before proceeding to discuss the beliefs and practices embodied in U.S. strategic culture. Section three looks more broadly at the role of identity in giving meaning to the U.S. imperial project and providing a rationale for use of force in support of it.

First, let me briefly introduce the concept of strategic culture. This concept arose during the Cold War to highlight differences in how U.S. and Soviet policy-makers thought about nuclear strategy. Colin Gray famously defined strategic culture as “modes of thought and action with respect to force.” Gray saw cultural beliefs and practices about war as deriving from national historical experiences, national aspirations, and geostrategic circumstances. Applied to the dominant concern of the day for International Relations (IR) scholars—nuclear war—strategic culture was a powerful analytical device for understanding variation in superpower nuclear behavior.

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