



H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*

William Collins, 2020. 545 pp. ISBN: 978-0-00-841040-7

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Readers who are familiar with *Dereliction of Duty*, H. R. McMaster's account of how the United States became entangled in a disastrous war in Vietnam, will read *Battlegrounds* with high expectations.¹ They will not be disappointed. McMaster served for a time as President Trump's National Security Advisor, but *Battlegrounds* is not a tell-all account of what it was like to work for one of America's most controversial Presidents. Instead, what is on offer here is a perceptive, compelling, and readable analysis of American foreign policy and national security strategy by a distinguished soldier, historian, and strategic thinker.

McMaster pulls no punches, and his take-home message can be briefly summarized: since the end of the Cold War, the balance of power has shifted against the United States, largely due to its failure to understand the emerging challenges to its own security, prosperity, and influence. In the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War, in which McMaster fought, American foreign policy was overconfident and over-optimistic. After 9/11, and especially after 2008, this gave way to pessimism and resignation. Both mind-sets led to serious missteps, and both result from 'strategic narcissism'. What is needed is a fundamental reassessment of U.S. policy, helped by a 'strong dose of strategic empathy' (p. 92).

Strategic narcissism and strategic empathy are McMaster's core analytical tools. The first of these notions, borrowed from Hans Morgenthau and Ethel Person, consists in 'a preoccupation with self, and an associated neglect of the influence that others have over the future course of events' (p. 10). The strategic narcissist attributes outcomes almost exclusively to his own actions and decisions. In effect, he denies agency to the Other by underestimating the extent to

which decisions made by the Other will influence the course of events. Strategic narcissism is linked to wishful thinking, and McMaster's discussion raises questions about how the two are related.

The antidote to strategic narcissism is what the historian Zachary Shore characterizes as 'the skill of stepping out of our own heads and into the minds of others' (2014, p. 2). This is the 'strategic empathy' that 'allows us to pinpoint what truly drives and constrains the other side' (2004, p. 2). For McMaster, strategic empathy is America's best hope of understanding the emotions, motivations, cultural biases, and aspirations of its rivals. In its dealings with its rivals, America must 'move from strategic narcissism to strategic empathy' (p. 198).

Strategic narcissism is an example of what philosophers would describe as an 'epistemic vice'. Epistemic vices are roughly attitudes, character traits or ways of thinking that get in the way of knowledge or understanding.² Examples might include intellectual arrogance, gullibility, and wishful thinking. McMaster makes extensive use of epistemic vice concepts in his analysis. As well as strategic narcissism and wishful thinking, he accuses U.S. officials and politicians of delusional thinking, naïveté, overconfidence, willful ignorance, and serial gullibility.

The catastrophic impact of each of this catalogue of epistemic vices is illustrated by reference to six key battlegrounds for the United States: Russia, China, South Asia, the Middle East, Iran, and North Korea. Initially, McMaster focuses on Russia new-generation warfare (RNGW), a mixture of 'disinformation, denial, and disruptive technologies for psychological as well as physical effect' (p. 2). The aim of RNGW is to accomplish Russia's objectives without eliciting a military response from America. These include the subverting of Western democracy by fomenting polarization

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¹ McMaster 1997.

² Cassam 2019.

in Europe and America. McMaster argues that America's failure to develop an effective response is the result of wishful thinking, in the form of the assumption that after the collapse of the Soviet Union Russian leaders would accept a unipolar status quo in which America was militarily and economically dominant.

Although McMaster presents this analysis as an illustration of the impact on American thinking of strategic narcissism, it is unclear what role a preoccupation with the self is playing in the story. Wishful thinking is thinking in which one's desires are more influential than cognitive or evidential considerations. There are varieties of wishful thinking that have very little to do with strategic narcissism. Thinking that Russia would accept American dominance might be one of them, since over-optimism about Russia's behavior need not be based on a denial of Russian agency. It is quite possible to view the decisions of Vladimir Putin and his generals as having a significant impact on the course of events but, because one is more influenced in one's thinking by one's desires than by the evidence, still believe that their impact will be positive. This would make one a wishful thinker but not a strategic narcissist.

A different question about strategic narcissism is raised by the contrast between America's pre-2008 over-optimism and its excessive post-2008 pessimism and resignation. It is easy to see the former as an effect of strategic narcissism. A classic expression of strategic narcissism and overconfidence was the statement attributed to a senior official in George W. Bush's team: 'we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality'.³ On this view, there is no need for America to pay any attention to the decisions and actions of its rivals because the only actions and decisions that count for anything are its own.

It is less obvious that strategic narcissism explains America's post-2008 defeatism. President Obama's foreign policy was 'based mainly on his opposition to the Iraq War and animated by a worldview skeptical of American interventions and activist foreign policy abroad' (p. 15). It is natural to interpret this approach as a reaction to the realization that America could not create its own reality or shape events in the manner envisaged by President George W. Bush. This is not strategic narcissism but its polar opposite: a preoccupation with the limitations of America's ability to determine the course of events. It is underconfidence rather than the overconfidence of the true strategic narcissist. It is hard to see how the very same strategic narcissism that leads to excessive optimism and overconfidence at one time can lead to underconfidence and excessive pessimism at another.

Whether or not McMaster is right to represent strategic narcissism as being at the root of two diametrically opposed mind-sets, he makes a compelling case that wishful thinking played a significant role in President Obama's foreign policy. Like several of its predecessors, the Obama administration based its China policy on the assumption that greater engagement would foster co-operation. In Afghanistan, it assumed that the Taliban was distinct from Al-Qaeda, and that Pakistan was serious about no longer supporting Afghan terror networks in pursuit of its own strategic objectives in the region. Most egregious of all was the assumption that, once it was welcomed into the international community, Iran would evolve into a force for stability in the Middle East. Wishful thinking is detectable in all these cases, and strategic narcissism in some. As far as Iran is concerned, McMaster agrees with President Trump that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal was deeply flawed ('the worst deal ever').

However, it would be wrong to give the impression that McMaster is an apologist for Trump. He is scathing about Obama's approach but far from uncritical of Trump. Indeed, one comes away from McMaster's penetrating discussion with a strong impression that Trump's foreign policy was much less iconoclastic than is often supposed. Like his predecessors, he believed that America's relations with Russia could be improved by appealing to mutual interests, that conciliation with the Taliban could provide an easy way out of Afghanistan, and that the United States could withdraw from the Middle East while remaining insulated from conflicts there. In each of these respects, Trump displayed more or less the same naïveté and wishful thinking as his predecessor in the White House.

The temptations of wishful thinking are vividly illustrated in McMaster's account of China, which he describes as a 'technology-enabled police state' (p. 148) and as a greater threat to America than Russia. In recommending a shift from engagement to competition with China, McMaster takes it for granted that America's freedoms and protections under the law give it a competitive advantage, both in terms of hard and soft power. However, he is aware that China 'views its statist economic system as bestowing advantages, especially the ability to successfully coordinate efforts across government, business, academia and the military' (p. 135). From this perspective, America's free-market system renders it unable to compete effectively.

These competing pictures of the state of play between the two systems cannot both be correct. Time will tell which system will prevail, economically and militarily, but McMaster is unwavering in his assumption that free and open societies enjoy a competitive advantage. It is no doubt comforting to many to think that this is the case, but could this be another example of wishful thinking? Nothing in the evidence presented by McMaster rules out this possibility, though he is prepared to concede that America needs to up its game if it

³ Quoted by Ron Suskind, 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.

is to compete effectively with China's 'authoritarian capitalism' (p. 101).

What accounts for epistemic vices like wishful thinking and strategic narcissism? The former is a common enough human failing but the latter raises a distinct set of questions. For example, one might wonder whether strategic narcissism is an inevitable consequence of great power status and, if so, whether it afflicts the political leadership of China today. Did Great Britain in the heyday of its empire display strategic narcissism? The temptation for great powers to think 'we are an empire now, and we create our own reality' must be considerable. If this is what the ancient Romans had thought at the height of their empire, they would not necessarily have been mistaken.⁴

Strategic narcissism becomes especially problematic when states that do not create their own reality think that they do. In these cases, strategic narcissism is a form of false consciousness or delusional thinking. Neglecting the influence that others have over the course of events may be a less than catastrophic failing when the influence that others have over the course of events is limited. The attribution of a problematic form of strategic narcissism to successive American administrations implies that they overestimated America's influence in comparison to that of rival powers. Yet some administrations have been far more isolationist than others and more skeptical about an activist foreign policy. It is unclear whether, as McMaster implies, this is a form of strategic narcissism or is a practical antidote to it.

In *Battlegrounds*, the recommended antidote to strategic narcissism is strategic empathy. The importance of empathetic knowledge of one's enemy has been widely recognized. Writing in 1979, Ken Booth remarked that 'the inability to recreate the world through another's eyes, to walk in his footsteps and to feel his hopes or his pain has been the cause of a plethora of strategic failures and problems' (1979, p. 38). In this formulation, knowing one's enemy means grasping his emotions as well as other aspects of his psychology. According to McMaster, this is exactly the type of knowledge of its enemies and rivals that the United States must seek. The relevant knowledge is of one's enemy's 'emotions, ideology, and worldview' (p. 198).

'Strategic empathy' is a label for a particular means of acquiring this kind of knowledge. To characterize strategic empathy as the skill of stepping out of our own heads and into the minds of others is not yet to explain *how* such a thing is possible. The substantive explanatory work remains to be done. It is no criticism of McMaster to point out that he lacks a developed theory of empathy. However, there are questions about the nature of empathy that have a bearing on McMaster's discussion. Among other things, a more detailed

understanding of empathy may cast much needed light on an issue that McMaster does not address: what accounts for the lack of empathy that has proved so problematic for U.S. leaders and policy makers?

A distinction is commonly drawn between cognitive and emotional empathy.⁵ The former is coldly rational and does not draw upon the empathizer's emotional resources. Its objective is prediction, and it is only in this sense that it is concerned with making sense of the Other. This is how Shore conceives of empathy. He represents empathizing with the Other as an intellectual exercise. The empathizer focuses on patterns of behavior and relies on 'pattern breaks', that is, deviations from the routine, to get into the head of the Other.⁶

Emotional empathy requires one to mirror the mental states of the Other. To empathize in this sense with another person's emotions is to share them. This means encountering their situation through what the philosopher Olivia Bailey calls 'the appropriate emotional lens' (2018, p. 144). This type of empathy draws on the empathizer's emotional resources and is not coldly cognitive or bloodless.⁷ This leads critics of emotional empathy to argue that it is biased since it is easier to empathize with people who are like us than with culturally distant Others.⁸ This would explain why, as Booth argued in 1979, ethnocentrism is an important source of mistakes in the theory and practice of strategy: effective strategy requires emotional empathy, and this is subject to ethnocentric bias.⁹ On this account, the lack of empathy of successive administrations is best accounted for by their failure to view their adversaries through the appropriate emotional lens.¹⁰

McMaster does not deploy the distinction between cognitive and emotional empathy and does not rely on pattern breaks in support of his conclusions about the mind-set of foreign leaders. It is unclear whether McMaster regards himself as encountering the predicament of figures like Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin through an emotional lens or whether he conceives of strategic empathy more as a matter of calculation or inference from behavioral evidence. What is clear is his unflattering assessment of America's rivals.

⁵ Bloom 2018: 16–17.

⁶ Shore 2014: 6–8.

⁷ Bailey 2018: 143–4.

⁸ Bloom 2018: 9.

⁹ Booth 1979: 18.

¹⁰ 'Empathize with your enemy' is the first lesson that Robert S. McNamara drew from America's failure in Vietnam. McNamara realized too late that lack of empathy had led senior figures in the Johnson administration, including McNamara himself, to misunderstand Ho Chi Minh's objectives and methods. See McMaster 1997 and Blight and Lang 2005.

⁴ For a wider historical perspective, see Kennedy 1988.

For example, Putin and his colleagues in the Kremlin are described as ‘motivated as much by emotion as by calculations of interest’ (p. 36). Their foreign ambition is driven by ‘fear and the sense of lost honor’ (p. 36). Xi’s outer confidence masks ‘a sense of foreboding that he might suffer a similar fate to that of previous rulers’ (p. 95). His obsession with control reflects his fears and ‘deep insecurity’ (p. 97). Pakistan’s military leadership is portrayed as devious and incorrigible. The United States should assume that ‘the Pakistan Army would not change its behavior’ (p. 201). Iranian political and religious leaders are viewed as implacably hostile to America and its allies. The regime’s behavior is driven by ‘historical memory, emotion, and ideology’ (p. 302), all of which make it impervious to displays of goodwill.

These are psychological judgements with serious policy implications that McMaster spells out: the United States must take steps to deter further aggression by Putin and develop an ‘active defense’ (p. 74) against RNGW. In the case of China, competition without confrontation should be the aim. The United States must confront Iranian aggression and do everything possible to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. It should also do more to target Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies. McMaster does not explicitly comment on Trump’s decision to authorize the killing of the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, who was behind deadly attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, but he does not condemn it. Indeed, the missile strike on Soleimani looks like a concrete example of the hard line recommended by McMaster.

Among the many questions raised by this approach, one concerns its strategic appropriateness given McMaster’s pessimistic assumptions about the motives and objectives of America’s enemies. McMaster has sometimes been criticized for prioritizing force and coercion over cooperative diplomacy and compromise, but this line of criticism is hard to sustain if these assumptions are correct.¹¹ The more cynical and malicious one takes one’s enemies to be, the easier it is to make the case for the iron fist; one cannot compromise with adversaries who are unwilling to compromise.

A prior question is whether McMaster’s reading of the psychology of Xi, Putin, and others is correct. On the one hand, one might wonder whether McMaster underestimates the hazards of the type of speculative mindreading in which he engages. On the other hand, he makes a strong case that his confidence in his psychological judgements is not misplaced. His view of critics who have a more optimistic view of the motivations of people like Xi and Putin is that they are naïve and gullible.

From a methodological standpoint, the most interesting question about McMaster’s perspective concerns the extent to which his assessment of the motives and objectives of America’s rivals relies on empathy. Is it empathy (strategic or emotional) that tells McMaster that Xi is insecure or can his insecurity be directly inferred from his preoccupation with control? Is it empathy that reveals Putin’s motives or can they also be discerned in other ways, say from viewing his behavior in the light of what we know about his and his country’s history? In neither of these cases does empathy look like an indispensable route to relevant knowledge.

This is not to deny that empathy, especially in its emotional form, can be a source of insights about the mind of the Other. For example, one might rely on empathy to work out Putin’s motivations, but one might equally rely on the testimony of former allies who have fallen out with him, or evidence uncovered by the intelligence community. Indeed, one might regard the latter as more reliable than empathy. When it comes to the mind of the Other, there are multiple sources of understanding and insight.

A possible response to this might be to argue that what I have represented as alternatives to empathy are themselves *forms* of strategic empathy. For example, to infer Putin’s motives from what we know about his history and the history of his country *is* to exercise what Shore and McMaster mean by ‘strategic empathy’. On this reading, anything that gives us knowledge of one’s enemy’s motives can be called ‘strategic empathy’. However, this deprives the idea of strategic empathy of much of its initial interest, given the sheer multiplicity of different ways of knowing someone else’s motives.

The claim that political leaders and strategists need empathy is most interesting when one has a substantive conception of empathy on which it refers to a *distinctive* source of knowledge or understanding that differs from more mundane sources. To conceive of empathy as emotional rather than merely cognitive is to conceive of it as a distinctive way of coming to know what another person is thinking or feeling. However, it is an open question whether empathy in *this* sense is something that political leaders cannot do without if they are to know their enemy.

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