

Mr. Robert D. Steele, OSS CEO

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE IN AMERICA—THREAT OR DREAM?

Interview by Dr. Philippe Baumard

Mr. Robert D. Steele is known in France as two different people—for some he is the great intellectual, and one of a very few people in America able to think strategically; for others, he is “the special action guy”, a devil, and a leader of the American conspiracy to undermine the French economy. He is the Chief Executive Officer of OPEN SOURCE SOLUTIONS, Inc., a small company, which specializes in the theory and practice of harnessing global expertise through overt discovery, discrimination, distillation, and delivery methods and technologies. Mr. Steele spent twenty years in national and defense intelligence assignments, including clandestine espionage, technical collection, counterintelligence, and advanced information technology. He is best known for his famous phrase, “do not send a spy where a schoolboy can go”. His Web site is <<http://www.oss.net>>, and his personal email address is <ceo@oss.net>.

You are the only person we know in America who is talking about the need for a national information strategy. How do you define such a strategy, and why are you alone?

Ha! You would go directly to the heart of the matter! A national information strategy is the foundation for national power in the information age—not having an information strategy today is like not having an army, or a central bank, in the industrial era. There are four elements to an information strategy: 1) connectivity—ensuring that all citizens and corporations in the country can exploit internal information and gain access to necessary external information; 2) content—focusing on the production of intelligence (renseignement) rather than on the collection of volumes of useless information; 3) coordination—of standards and investments which optimize the national information infrastructure and national knowledge power; and 4) security—ensuring that the electronic state does not collapse, and especially that the financial, power, communications, and transportation networks can survive multiple electronic and physical attacks.

As to why am I alone? It is a question I have asked myself with some frequency since I began this crusade five years ago. In a way, I am not alone—I count among my friends many brilliant thinkers who have taught me and others when they have come to address my international conference each year—but ultimately I think it comes down to the fact that Americans, including very intelligent Americans such as Al Gore, simply do not have it in their nature to think strategically and to undertake campaigns where the results may not be visible or appreciated by the public for a decade or more into the future. The Clinton Administration has done well with connectivity, because it involves technical toys and visible profits. All other aspects of the information strategy are relatively intangible, have long periods of gestation before payoff, and require a sustained intellectual, financial, and political commitment, which is not easily mustered within America.

Let me follow up on this by asking a related question. We sometimes feel in Europe that Americans have lost their sense of geopolitics and seem today to have lost touch with reality—and especially the realities of maintaining a strong social welfare foundation and of avoiding catastrophe in the electronic welfare state. Your comment?

I agree that Americans have lost touch with reality and with geopolitics, at least at senior governmental levels. In senior corporations, there is a good understanding of economic reality, but perhaps no understanding of how the nation-state is in fact a vital safety net for global economic relations. I was listening last night to former Secretary of State George Shultz, speaking at the Virtual Diplomacy conference in Washington, D.C. (1-2 April, <<http://www.usip.org>>) and I was struck by his wisdom when he noted that the American government today is too willing to negotiate everything, and even willing to pretend to negotiate simply for the sake of appearing to reach a consensus even if it is false and unenforceable. We are abandoning many of our principles, and turning into an “MTV” kind of government where the “reality” is the good television coverage that same day, and we only worry about what the coverage will be like from one evening to the next.

Let me address the social welfare state from an intelligence (renewed) point of view. I am very concerned about the fact that the U.S. government is seriously deficient in both its access to necessary information and its ability to process that information in order to arrive at strategic generalizations or strategic intelligence—this is at least as important with respect to domestic realities as it is to international threats and opportunities. Let me briefly mention four examples: education, drugs, defense reorganization, and Chinese economic espionage.