

## The Grand Strategy of Philip II

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Robin Macpherson

Academics and the general public alike have an understandable fascination regarding the Spanish Armada. The naval confrontation in the Channel in 1588 and the subsequent disastrous Spanish circumnavigation of the storm-lashed British coastline, helped shape world history from the end of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. Spain - the first 'Global Empire' - was bested by Mother Nature and a considerably smaller political power with the result that as her imperial pretensions stuttered, England's flourished. But it was a close run thing. In a fantastic book, Geoffrey Parker gives the reader a wealth of detailed information on how the strategist behind the Armada, Philip II of Spain, thought, worked, administered and went about his day-to-day business. Parker aims to engage three types of reader: scholars interested in Philip II; strategic analysts; and those interested in the rise and fall of great powers. The book will do so and it will engage many more. *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* is a book for everyone from the keenest Armada-wonks to the most frustrated of corporate middle-managers. Numerous illustrations and tables, complemented by full and discursive footnotes, make the volume an accessible tool for the most serious academic and a fascinating insight for the general reader.

Following his excellent *Philip II* (Little, Brown & Co, 1978) and other valuable volumes on Spain and her Empire, this book puts in place an in-depth understanding of the political, administrative and personal attributes of Philip II and his 'Grand Strategy'. Over thirty years of top-class scholarship shine through a masterclass in understanding how governments worked, and how they did not. While it is doubtless only fair to point out that the volume reflects the surviving source material, the fact that the author is Geoffrey Parker makes the reader feel comfortable that this is as near to historical reality as we are readily going to get. The one immediately recognisable problem, in that a sequential book cannot truly express the globalness of Philip's concerns and immediacy of constantly pressing problems, is quickly forgotten as the reader engages in the fluid and fast-paced narrative.

Philip II controlled Spain for fifty-five years in the latter half of the sixteenth century from his appointment as regent for his father, Emperor Charles V, in 1543 to his death in 1598. He was far from solely a Spanish monarch. By 1554, he was also king of Naples and king of England and, although this later title lapsed with the death of Queen Mary in 1558, in 1580, he acquired the kingdom of Portugal and her considerable

overseas possessions. His empire had no common language, no common currency, disparate political institutions and laws, competing economic and strategic defence needs and even some divergent religious convictions. In spite of the seemingly insurmountable difficulties, Philip can truly be said to have ruled the first empire on which the sun never set and, long before James Bond, used the motto *Non Sufficit Orbis* - the World is not Enough!

Parker addresses three key questions in the course of his work: firstly, what strategic priorities underlay Philip II's policies? Secondly, what practices and prejudices informed him and influenced his decision-making? Finally, what external factors affected the achievement of his goals? He looks at the questions by analysing Philip's reign in an obvious, clear and structured manner: in part one of the volume, Parker looks at the strategic culture of the Spanish Empire drawing on the full panoply of Philip's rule. He examines the system of government, the crisis caused by information overload, Philip's strategic priorities and the day-to-day assumptions he employed in exercising his rule. In the second section, three case studies are examined - the Low Countries from 1555-77; Scotland and England from 1558-85; and England from 1585-88. The third part of the volume deals with the flaws which caused the downfall of the Spanish Grand Strategy. There was the failure to prevent foreign intelligence, the failure of co-ordination of logistics and communication and the failure to appreciate change in tactics and technology.

## **Part 1 - Strategic Culture**

If we accept that Philip II did indeed have a 'Grand Strategy' (and this book adds heavy evidence suggesting that we should), then the reader also has to notice that Philip II 'failed to achieve most of his policy goals'. The Spanish king, who was personally blamed for many of these failures, sacrificed lives, resources and reputation to attempt to achieve his aims. He undoubtedly left his main concern, Spain, weaker than when he took office and he failed to inspire unquestioning obedience. This was not entirely his own fault - among other problems, the religious controversies of the later sixteenth century severely restricted his freedom to manoeuvre and his ability to compromise. Despite being flattered as the 'Largest Brain in the World', Parker makes a strong case that it would have taken a genius to cope with all the concerns that confronted the king. That said, some of his concerns were universal: for large parts of the reign the succession to Philip II was far from secure and, at a time when it was generally understood that the king (or queen) equalled the land and the land equalled the king, there would have been catastrophic changes if Philip had died without an obvious heir. He was not alone in having dynastic insecurities - in the period covered by the text Portugal lost their independence (to Spain); France was engaged in bitter civil war; Scotland likewise; and up until 1603, England was only ever one heartbeat away from disaster. The hopes and aspirations of a dynasty and a country all rested on the life-force of a single individual. Somewhat as a reaction to such mortality (and like in England) the populace began to ascribe to their monarch attributes and powers that went beyond the mortal.

Also as in the other western European nations as the century and reign progressed, so the paperwork surrounding government increased. Philip governed with a desire for written communication - personal audiences with the king often ended in procrastination and with no decision being made. The administration of the Spanish Empire was run by a series of councils (totalling fourteen after 1585) with distinct but overlapping membership and direct responsibilities below the king. They suffered from duplication of roles and over-coverage of certain geographic areas. There was no administrative collective responsibility to any Grand Strategy and at times, the secretaries were almost ham-strung by the king's desire to see and judge on every piece of minute business.

Another problem Philip II shared with some of his contemporary monarchs was that, in general, the king did not understand finances. Despite gold and riches from the New World, Philip was forced to endure a series of financial crises with four Castilian decrees of bankruptcy issued during the reign. These were brought about by almost constant warfare, phenomenal military spending and ever increasing debt repayments. Financial stringency meant Philip could not afford to engage in all his theatres of action at the same time - no matter how much he wished to or was required to by the situation.

But Philip II was a realist and recognised that every thing could not be accomplished at once. However, in an empire that spanned the globe, he failed to appreciate that many things did have to be accomplished at once. As bureaucracy slowed and the king insisted on seeing more and more paperwork, so the workings of the empire struggled under the delays. Philip tried a variety of techniques to solve his administrative problems: delegation, prioritisation, condensation and abbreviation. But they all had limited success as Philip II (like any good medieval or early modern monarch) insisted on taking all important decisions in person. Philip II exhibited an unwillingness to compromise and believed he always knew best. Accordingly, although he chose talented subordinates in military matters, increasingly they were those who tended to agree with his personal and strategic viewpoint. At points, he was acutely stressed and, as a result, lost his grip on long-term goals at the expense of the here and now, an attitude Parker summarises as an 'incurable urge to meddle'.

Another problem not unique to the Spanish monarch, but accentuated by the extent of his empire was distance. Despite this, there was an unprecedented quality to the information received by Philip II. The king (and most of his leading ministers) had visited many of Spain's European possessions, while maps, plans, drawings, surveys and questionnaires ensured Philip was one of the best informed monarchs of his period. Good couriers could be expected to cover up to 185km per day and frequently Philip got his European information considerably before his opponents. When it came to Philip's overseas possessions, information was less predictable and more expensive. Many of the correspondents, however, complained of royal impotence - they saw a royal failure to act on information and one even commented that it was the king's 'natural condition never to decide anything'. Parker is generous to Philip II: he says that the king made deliberate decisions to do nothing, was not a 'terminally inefficient bureaucrat' and constantly reviewed his decisions and voiced doubts as to the course of action to be taken. This is perhaps too generous: Elizabeth of England and James VI of Scotland both exhibited similar traits towards procrastination and indecisiveness. The suggestion that sixteenth century monarchs sat like rabbits staring into lights coming ever closer is an image of bureaucracy which, although it rings true, does not make for good monarchy. A man ruled by self imposed deadlines, a 'zero defects mentality' and artificial priorities (and even this may be an over-generous interpretation), who could not concentrate on items specific to individual ambassadors indicates a poor strategic manager.

Like other of his fellow monarchs Philip occasionally felt alone and isolated. His Grand Strategy was conceived and executed in his interests and at his behest. Although Emperor Charles V had left detailed instructions to his son on how to rule, Parker argues that these were not the whole basis for the Grand Strategy. Over time, Philip's Grand Strategy developed but it was hindered in a number of important ways - increasingly it was dictated by the needs and policies of Spain; in other areas, such as Italy and the Netherlands, political structures caused trouble in that the countries were not as centralised as Spain; increasingly Philip took on the role to defend Catholic Europe (and beyond) against Turks and Protestants (this was a massive undertaking) and engaged in 'messianic imperialism'. On top of all the structural problems for the strategy, there was also the constant fear of the domino theory. Philip felt that if England (in 1558) and then the Netherlands (from 1574) were lost then the other arms of his diverse empire would soon follow. He had to prevent the dyke bursting by plugging the first leak, no matter how much time and resources this took.

## **Part 2 - Formation of the Grand Strategy**

The three case studies chosen by Parker to demonstrate the formation and implementation of Philip II's grand strategy all deal with North Western Europe and all are concerned with areas which troubled the Spanish Empire for a considerable period during the later half of the sixteenth century. That the case studies do not deal with the Mediterranean, the Turks or the Indies reflects both the available evidence and the areas of most interest when it comes to the English speaking historians of Philip II's Spain. This is not a criticism: the concentration on the North West of Europe lends a cohesion to Parker's argument over an extended timeframe and a set geographic area. Where there is criticism, it is that the analysis stops in 1588. Taking a case study dealing with England, Scotland and the Netherlands to Philip's death would have allowed for

wider discussion of fifth-columnists, sponsored Jesuit infiltration of enemy territory, the situation following the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots (and the claims to the English throne - rumoured and real - of Philip II and the Infanta) and other abortive armadas. Parker recognises to give you too much of a good thing is to spoil the reader. This reader wanted to be spoiled more and more!

As the situation unfurled in the Netherlands, Philip's Grand Strategy developed along lines already outlined as 'classic' by Parker in the first part of his book: Philip, being a control freak, sought to 'micromanage policy' and left detailed but restrictive lists of how the Low Countries were to be dealt with by his regent, Margaret of Parma. Philip had not taken advice to rule from the Netherlands and, as such, soon became out-of-touch with concerns and interests there. He managed to antagonise many sections of the Netherlands community and individuals who had previously been at each others throats saw the opportunity to unite against a common threat. When Philip and his regent were perceived to have retreated on their policy concerning the Netherlands, this was seen as governmental weakness and led to an increase in opposition. In the early 1560s, Philip neglected the Netherlands for the Mediterranean and failed to respond to increasing provocations. The classic concern of too many identifiable problems to deal with at one time is demonstrated clearly and with verve. Philip was unwilling to undertake action necessary to solve the solution. In the politically correct twenty-first century, his humanity is seen as a virtue - he refused to open the sluices and flood the troublesome area. Humanity is, however, subjective - to early modern contemporaries, Philip was too weak to undertake the (admittedly unpalatable) action required to quench the threat of rebellion. Admittedly he received conflicting advice - 'I do not know the truth of what is happening' - but his indecision and ultimately limited response only stored up problems for later in his reign.

Some of the problems faced by Philip in dealing with England and Scotland in the period 1558-85 were the same as were witnessed in the Netherlands, others were different. Distance was an obvious problem (although little mention is made of the sea barrier between Spain and the two countries); religious intransigence another and the familiar failure to establish acceptable policy alternatives a third. England and Scotland had seen major transformations in the later half of the sixteenth century: both countries had seen religious zealots prepared to abandon state rules; both states had seen religion complicate regular political alliances and diplomacy (although here Parker may be over-playing the real significance of this factor); and religious rifts challenged traditional power alliances. Because of his experience as king of England, Philip felt he was an expert on the subject but it had to be noted the Spain and the Turks in the Mediterranean remained the priority; there was a perennial lack of money; he was unwilling to ally with the equally Catholic France to unite against the Protestant realms of the north; and both Spain and the Netherlands had differing agendas when it came to dealing with both England and Scotland (principally because of long-standing trade relations) but also because of religious similarities.

It is perhaps a little cheeky of Parker to claim this section of the case study deals with England and Scotland. In reality, it deals with England and Scottish implications on English policy with Spain. It does not deal with Scoto-Spanish relations in any way and many of the changes in the Scottish polity of the period 1585-1588 are ignored. The exception is the imprisonment and attitude towards Mary, Queen of Scots. Within Scotland, Philip was prepared to support Mary diplomatically but, ironically, outside Scotland, although Catholic, as Mary represented French interests (she was daughter of the French Mary of Guise and dowager Queen of France following her short marriage to Francis II), Philip II supported his sister-in-law Elizabeth instead of the Scottish queen. In the 1560s he would not sanction Elizabeth's deposition, even though this would strengthen his hand in other areas of conflict (notably the Netherlands). From 1568 there was almost a Cold War with England as discourse between two countries effectively ceased. With problems in Spain, Philip considered removing the English problem and delegated its solution to Alba (who did not agree with Philip's policies so sabotaged them). The king and his foremost lieutenant had separate agendas and despite Alba's periodic successes in the Netherlands, he could not be persuaded to follow the king's directions. Indeed after the unsuccessful Ridolfi Plot in England (when Elizabeth took a more aggressive policy against Philip) Alba even felt she was justified in her actions. Where the early period of relations between Spain and England were hindered by Philip's problems in the Mediterranean and the Netherlands, the later 1570s were troubled by Philip's altered focus to Portugal and his attempt to unite the Iberian peninsula. Only after this unification

was achieved, in the 1580s, was Philip finally able to concentrate on North West Europe as his main centre of operations (centred on the Netherlands). However, he under-estimated Elizabeth and his own problems: he was isolated from Northern Europe - in reality out-of-touch with the sentiments of the region; he was, still, diverted by other events; and he lacked good information. Alba urged Philip to ignore England - advice Philip was not minded to accept. In the end he meddled - intervening too much to be ignored but not enough to be effective.

Parker considers that the way Philip viewed 'The Enterprise of England' was not based in reality. Philip still wanted to deal with one problem a time. The most pressing problem was the Netherlands but Philip needed to counter the influence of England in order that he could solve the more serious problem across the channel on the continent. Despite Philip's impression, his Roman Catholic zeal was not in question. His desire to prove his religious credentials did not require his countering of Protestant England on the field of battle. For once, Philip allowed himself to be provoked by Drake raiding Galicia and threatening America. The armada project of 1588 was not really at a time of the king's choosing (although he felt he could do it when he wanted) and, despite considerable background preparations, he had other concerns with the Turks, French, Dutch and in the Indies. Most pressingly, Philip wished the Pope to pay heavily for his demonstration of the Catholic Church militant Haggling over gold did not convey a sense of crusade to the crew and military leaders of the campaign. There was poor communication between Philip and his commanders and despite giving it his undivided attention, as usual he was hampered by indecision, the desire to micro-manage actions and financial difficulties. Also, as usual, there were a host of other concerns and, by late 1587, the Enterprise of England - widely discussed in the courts of Europe - was in almost total disorder. That the final storm-lashed chapter of the armada is taken as the end of Philip's enterprise is a mistaken quirk of history. Spain would continue to be a political threat to England into the first year of the reign of Elizabeth's successor, James I. However, the failure of the armada to exploit favourable opportunities during the course of their advance up the channel accurately demonstrated Philip's problems with his Grand Strategy as a whole.

### **Part 3 - Execution of the Grand Strategy**

The third part of Parker's volume is an essay in understanding early modern western Europe and, in particular, Philip II. Diplomacy, financial inducements, economic pressure, deception, propaganda are undercurrents through the section but Parker postulates four specific causes of failure which are outlined and discussed in detail. Philip II's Grand Strategy failed due to a lack of secrecy (which meant Elizabeth was able to construct a suitable defence strategy); due to Parma's inability to join the fleet; due to technical and tactical disparity of the fleets (the English fleet being superior in the conditions of the Channel); and due to that scourge of all historical leaders, chance.

The problem of secrecy in early modern Europe was not specific to Philip II's court. All his contemporary monarchs had access to spy networks which attempted to gain vital information to strengthen the position of their state. Philip II also played this game - he attempted to gain access to secret information from London, Paris, the Netherlands and Rome. That his court leaked more information than it received was partly a problem of the administrative complexity of the machine, partly a problem due to lack of finance to reward loyalty and partly down to the volume of detail available to be passed on. In reality, although general information of the armada was available, specific and important detail was lacking. For example, Parker points out that although Elizabeth knew an armada was to be launched against England, she suspected that Essex would be the target (not the intended Kent). If lack of secrecy was not solely to blame for the failure of the implementation of Philip's Grand Strategy against England then could it be argued (as it has been) that the project failed due to the fact that Parma was not ready? In a thorough and masterly section, Parker proves beyond reasonable doubt that it is Medina Sidonia whose reputation deserves more detailed examination (he misinterpreted Philip's instructions on more than one occasion and had an inaccurate conception of communication possibilities) rather than Parma (whom Parker partially exonerates from blame). Parker pinpoints the disparity in naval technology and the poor weather conditions as more crucial factors that mattered more than the decisions and actions of any one of Philip's armada lieutenants. That Medina Sidonia was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time is perhaps going a little too far but Parker

recognises that the Duke suffered from Philip's constant interference and unending desire to micro-manage leaving no latitude for individual action and providing no contingency plans due to his over confidence of success. In the end it was a number of factors which led to the failure of the enterprise of England and perhaps the biggest factor in it all was chance.

After the loss of the Armada, the principles and practice of Grand Strategy remained fundamentally the same. Philip was blamed personally for the reverse of the fleet and not for first time, he hoped to die (although this temporary phase passed). Philip knew that he had to rely on Spain's own resources and hope to rely on God's intervention but he continued to retain unrealistic goals. Just because Spain had suffered an ignominious defeat at the hands of nature and a inferior political power, it did not mean that problems elsewhere in the Spanish empire disappeared. Internal riots in Spain over taxation and supply brought discontent to the very heart of the empire and disorder in the Netherlands and France threatened the Empire's cohesion and security. As Philip grew older, he grew more and more tired. He spent more time ill and was bed-ridden or chair bound for the last two years of his life. Philip's life descended into a cycle of sleep and prayer. Increasingly, his Strategy was placed in the hands of others (including his eventual successor Philip III).

## **Conclusion**

At the end of a powerful and persuasive book, the author presents the reader with a tightly argued conclusion where nothing comes as a surprise as all the points have been amply demonstrated in the preceding pages. Again, Parker turns to comparisons and makes excellent use of modern political theory and contemporary and modern historical comparisons. Early Modern monarchy was not just about acting but about how those actions are perceived by others: Philip failed to recognise that his gains represented threats to others but when he was faced with a number of no-win situations, he came extremely close to winning them. Parker argues that Philip was very nearly the imperial leader his empire needed. Very nearly but not quite. As noted in the text, 'no power exists that can maintain continuous wars' and Philip was personally blamed for the failures within his Grand Strategy principally his failure to defeat England, his failure to defend Catholicism and his failure to be fiscally prudent. All these failures impacted not only in the individual theatres of operations but in the empire as a whole and in Spain in particular.

It could be asked why Philip stuck with his Grand Strategy despite obvious failings. Parker offers three reasons - no leader likes to lose; he expected God to provide success and he was over-confident of his own abilities. To be fair, Philip was rarely in control of events. This is nothing startling - Elizabeth of England, Henry III in France, Mary in Scotland and the various Popes in Rome were no more in control of events than their contemporary in Spain. Like his contemporaries and other great political leaders, Philip found that he had to react to events and could not always dictate outcomes. One of the stark differences however, was that while Elizabeth, Henry, Mary and the Holy Father may have had considerable diplomatic and political interests on many fronts, only Philip had dynastic, political, diplomatic, military, social and economic concerns that affected his everyday policies over a vast range of differing arenas.

The criticisms of the book are minor - you could claim it was too Euro-centric; you could say it stressed the weaknesses of Philip's strategy at the expense of the successes; and you could say it failed to represent the admiration and fear felt by fellow monarchs of Europe when it came to dealing with Philip II and his agents. In the end, however, the only conclusion possible is that this book is an essential read for all historians and, in particular, for all early modern scholars and people interested in the fun and games of the later sixteenth century.

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be providing a response.

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