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## On Grand Strategy

By John Lewis Gaddis

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Reviewed By James MacDougall

With an historian's keen eye for detail and nuance, John Lewis Gaddis surveys a variety of case studies from the Peloponnesian War to World War II in his new book *On Grand Strategy*, identifying in the process several general precepts that may help guide modern-day grand strategists. The book is not, however, a how-to guide for formulating grand strategy or conducting statecraft. It is rather more an examination of select strategic leaders and the ways in which they pursued priority objectives; some successfully, some not so. In focusing on individual leaders and not states, Gaddis' approach to the topic echoes the view of Machiavelli whom he quotes from *The Prince* identifying the fundamental importance of the "knowledge of the actions of great men, learned by me from long experience with modern things and continuous reading of ancient ones."<sup>1</sup> The book adds meaningfully to the growing literature on grand strategy, particularly as regards strategic leadership and its historical context.

In his book, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy*, William Martel usefully identifies four distinct professional approaches to the study of grand strategy: historians; social scientists; practitioners, and military strategists.<sup>2</sup> He places Gaddis, based on his impressive body

of scholarship on post-World War II American foreign policy and strategies of containment, squarely in the camp of "historians." As a rule, the historians' approach to grand strategy proceeds inductively, reviewing historical cases and deriving appropriate insights and lessons. In contrast, social scientists proceed deductively, identifying theories of grand strategy and citing relevant historical examples. Rounding out Martel's general typology are practitioners whose views on grand strategy are based on practical professional experience and military strategists whose principal focus is the use of military power to achieve national objectives.<sup>3</sup>

In this his most recent book, Gaddis remains firmly in the historians camp. To begin, he defines grand strategy as, "the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities."<sup>4</sup> He examines a range of historical case studies to arrive at his central insight that "You *proportion* aspirations to capabilities. These are opposites—the first being free from limits and the second bound by them—but they must connect." This counsel appears throughout the book, in case studies on Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Augustine, Hamilton, and, most prominently, in the book's conclusion. There Gaddis quotes Edmund Burke: "in all fair dealings . . . the thing bought must bear some proportion to the price paid."

This conclusion echoes the thinking of Walter Lippmann:

*Without the controlling principle that the nation must maintain its objectives and its power in equilibrium, its purposes within its means and its means equal to its purposes, its commitments related to its resources and its resources adequate to its commitments, it is impossible to think at all about foreign affairs. . . . An agreement has eventually to*

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*be reached when men admit that they must pay for what they want and that they must want only what they are willing to pay for.*<sup>5</sup>

And how are states or leaders to align ends and means? The context for Gaddis' answer is provided in metaphorical terms by reprising the dichotomy between hedgehogs and foxes described by Isaiah Berlin.<sup>6</sup> Hedgehogs, Gaddis quotes, "relate everything to a single central vision" through which "all that they say and do has significance." Foxes, in contrast, "pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way." Gaddis identifies the trouble with hedgehogs in his first case study, on the Persian King Xerxes: "Xerxes failed, as is the habit of hedgehogs, to establish a proper relationship between his ends and his means. Because ends exist only in the imagination, they can be infinite . . . Means, though, are stubbornly finite . . ." Foxes, on the other hand, seem to err at the other end of the ends-means spectrum by failing to establish a fixed objective. Failing, in the memorable description by Dean Acheson, "to look ahead, not into the distant future, but beyond the vision of the operating officers caught in the smoke and crises of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to come and outline what should be done to meet or anticipate them."<sup>7</sup>

Gaddis's answer to this conundrum is "to combine . . . the hedgehog's sense of direction *and* the fox's sensitivity to surroundings." By the end of the book he describes individuals able to combine the two qualities as "foxes with compasses" and includes, from his case studies, such figures as "the younger Pericles, Octavian Caesar, Machiavelli, Elizabeth I, the American Founders, Lincoln, Salisbury and especially Roosevelt [FDR] . . ." Their strategic genius, in Gaddis's assessment lay in having had, "the humility to be unsure of what lay ahead, the flexibility to adjust to it, and the ingenuity to accept, perhaps even leverage, inconsistencies." In addition, Gaddis attributes to many of the successful

strategic leaders, (particularly U.S. Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt) the quality of coup d'oeil or "the ability to take in the whole of a situation at once and know almost automatically how to proceed."<sup>8</sup>

While these conclusions, representing as they do wisdom distilled from many case studies over many centuries, are important in their own right, for social scientists and practitioners they leave more to be desired. Grounding grand strategy on the strategic genius of the leader runs a high risk. As Kissinger noted with reference to Bismarck and Germany, "A system which requires a great man in each generation sets itself an almost insurmountable challenge . . ."<sup>9</sup> Further, one of the characteristics typically attributed to grand strategy is its long-term nature. Paul Kennedy, a colleague of Gaddis in the Yale Grand Strategy Program, noted, for example, "It [is] about the evolution and integration of policies that should operate for decades, or even for centuries."<sup>10</sup> Focusing analysis on the behavior of individual strategic leaders runs the risk of overlooking broader grand strategic approaches pursued by states over the long-term and based on a set of organizing principles derived from the state's history, geography and culture.

To the question of how states or leaders might align ends and means to craft grand strategy, political or social scientists would respond differently, based on an approach that seeks generalizable theories or strategic principles. Framing the challenge in terms of commitments and power, Samuel Huntington offered the following ways an imbalance of the two might be addressed: redefine interests; reduce threats through diplomacy; enhance the contributions of allies; increase resources; substitute cheaper forms of power for more expensive ones, and devise more effective strategies for using existing capabilities.<sup>11</sup> To illustrate this range of strategic and diplomatic

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responses, Huntington cites the case of Great Britain and the imbalance in aspirations and capabilities it faced in the late 1890s and 1900s, a case often used by both social scientists and historians in examining grand strategy.<sup>12</sup> What emerges from this example, is the fact that the different disciplinary approaches to grand strategy yield quite different prescriptions on how grand strategy might be conceived.

In this regard *On Grand Strategy* is as much a discourse on the relative merits of approaching the subject through the different disciplinary approaches of theory and history as it is a study of grand strategy itself. Seen in this light, one can perhaps explain one of the more perplexing parts of the book. In a chapter titled “The Grandest Strategists” Gaddis juxtaposes the thinking of Clausewitz in *On War* and Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. While each wrote lucidly on strategy and war, neither actually bore responsibilities for aligning or proportioning aspirations and capabilities; that is, for making grand strategy. What makes the chapter central in the book is their competing perspectives on the explanatory power of theory and history. Clausewitz approached his subject from a theoretical perspective; Tolstoy from an historical perspective; albeit an unconventional one. Appearing in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Clausewitz and his theories of strategy are dismissed by Prince Andrei as “not worth an empty eggshell.”<sup>13</sup> It is rather to the “sum of men’s individual wills” and the more elemental characteristics of the Russian nation and people that Tolstoy attributes the outcome of Napoleon’s war in Russia.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, based on his disdain for theory, Tolstoy has been described by other scholars as an “anti-strategist” and a “strategic nihilist.”<sup>15</sup> In his own views on theory, particularly international relations theory, Gaddis echoes some of Tolstoy’s skepticism. Yet, in the end, Gaddis recommends not a choice between theory and history, hedgehogs and foxes, but a synthesis. This conclusion is reached early in the book, “. . . the academic mind

is itself divided. A gap has opened between the study of history and the construction of theory, both of which are needed if ends are to be aligned with means.” Some years ago, in a seminal article assessing the role of international relations theory and the end of the Cold War, Gaddis reached a similar conclusion:

*My point, though, is not to suggest that we jettison the scientific approach to the study of international relations; only that we bring it up to date by recognizing that good scientists, like good novelists and good historians, make use of all the tools at their disposal in trying to anticipate the future. That includes not just theory, observation, and rigorous calculation, but also narrative, analogy, paradox, irony, intuition, imagination, and not least in importance-style.<sup>16</sup>*

This is sage advice and should be taken to heart by all those involved in the evolving study of grand strategy be they historians, social scientists, practitioners or military strategists. *On Grand Strategy* likely will take an important place in the future study of grand strategy, deservedly so, alongside other works from the associated disciplinary approaches. **PRISM**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 23.

<sup>2</sup> William C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>3</sup> The four approaches and some representative examples are discussed further in Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice*, 7–19.

<sup>4</sup> In a useful article on the semantics of the ‘grand strategy’ concept: Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies*, 27:1, the author identifies three broad categories of meaning: grand plans; grand principles, and grand (patterns of) behavior. (34–45, summarized on 49.) With its focus on the relationship (alignment) between ends and means, Gaddis’ definition fits most closely into the patterns of behavior category, or, as Silove says on page

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49, “. . . a state’s distribution and employment of its military, diplomatic, and economic resources towards ends.”

<sup>5</sup> Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (1943) quoted in Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power Culture and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), Epigram.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 214.

<sup>8</sup> Gaddis quoting Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 3–4.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Kissinger, “The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck,” *Daedalus* 97, no. 3 (Summer 1968), 921.

<sup>10</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “Coping with the Lippmann Gap,” *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 3 (1987), 456.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Aaron Freidberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010) and

John Gooch “The Weary Titan: Strategy and Policy in Great Britain, 1890-1918” (Chapter 10, 278–306) in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, Alvin Bernstein, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1982), 920. The translation Gaddis uses renders the Russian as “not worth a tinker’s damn,” 185. “Not worth a brass farthing” is also a popular translation. At all events, the sense conveys that theory is worth little.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2015), 99. Dominique Lieven, in *Russia Against Napoleon: The True Story of the Campaigns of War and Peace* (New York: Viking, 2010) describes Tolstoy’s focus as “elemental Russian patriotism as uniting in defence of national soil,” 10.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, 307 and Elliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 234–235.

<sup>16</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 17, no. 3 (Winter, 1992–93), 57–58.

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## Peace Works: America’s Unifying Role in a Turbulent World

By Ambassador Frederick D. Barton

Rowman & Littlefield, 2018

312 pp., \$35.00

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Reviewed By Ambassador Lawrence E. Butler

**P** *Peace Works* is two things: an impassioned argument on why the United States should involve itself in conflict prevention, management and peace-making; and an important contribution to the practitioner’s tool box for dealing with conflict situations. Ambassador Barton’s

first-person description of efforts in places like Rwanda, Bosnia, Haiti, and Syria merits study for use in responding to future humanitarian tragedies. While *Peace Works* has two obvious weaknesses—a political partisan bias and a predilection for humanitarian intervention, even when by his own guidelines, we should not—the book should be required reading for conflict management practitioners (diplomats, development experts, NGOs, the military—especially components most likely to be confronted with stabilization tasks) and Congressional staff.

Ambassador Barton, a political appointee in Democratic administrations including two international organizations, created two *potentially* important and more agile tools for conflict prevention and management, USAID’s Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI) and the State

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