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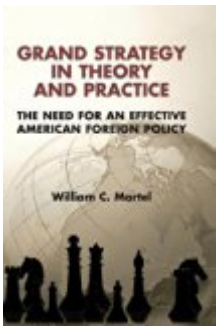
William C. Martel. *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 530 pp. $115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-08206-9.



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In *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy*, William C. Martel examines the history of grand strategic thought—both internationally and in the United States—to draw lessons for contemporary US policymakers. Such a review is both timely and necessary, Martel argues, because the United States has failed to formulate a coherent grand strategy since the end of the Cold War, when the strategy of containment expired alongside its primary inspiration, the Soviet Union. In Martel's view, countries unable to adapt their foreign policies in times of transition inevitably suffer. Thus, the grave stakes of getting grand strategy wrong warrant a comprehensive reevaluation on the level of first principles, a return to the drawing board—not just for US policy but in our overall conception of what grand strategy *is*, and what it should be.

Martel's ambitious book fills the blank drawing board with all of the information a person might want to analyze if rebuilding American grand strategy from scratch. Remarkable in breadth and scope, it does this in three parts. First, the book defines the concept of grand strategy and traces its intellectual lineage from Sun Tzu and Thucydides to Henry Kissinger and Bernard Brodie. The goal of the exercise is to provide a general framework applicable to all great powers across time and space. Yet, because Martel rejects universal theories and embraces American exceptionalism, his review of grand strategy in general terms cannot suffice to get him where he wants to go—namely, to offer recommendations for present-day US policymakers. Consequently, the next section of the book takes a second sweep at history, focusing this time on the grand strategies of pivotal American presidents beginning with George Washington and concluding with Barack Obama. This is the heart of the book and perhaps its strongest part. Whereas the first section largely synthesizes from existing approaches, here Martel develops the three principles that, he argues, represent the essence of a specifically "American" grand strategy: a strong nurturance of the domestic foundations of national power, an interest in

preserving the status quo international order, and multilateralism in confronting the "sources of disorder" challenging the system. These are the basics to which Martel urges a return in the third and concluding section, where he lays out his recommendations for future grand strategy.

Martel defines grand strategy as "a coherent statement of the state's highest political ends to be pursued globally over the long term" (p. 32). The means of achieving political ends include not just military forces but all aspects of a state's capabilities that can be brought to bear for the declared purpose, such as diplomatic, technological, and economic efforts. These nonmilitary means are left vague, unfortunately, and Martel offers no examples or guidelines on how to differentiate them from run-of-the-mill policies. In other words, whereas in the military realm, strategy can be distinguished from operations, tactics, and technology, no ready hierarchy exists to separate, say, a "grand strategic" economic policy from lower-order policies with mundane origins. Nor does Martel construct one. Resultantly, whereas Martel can chide historical figures like Napoleon for the mistake of confusing grand strategy with operations, nearly anything a leader does in the nonmilitary arena can be swept up into grand strategy. The author himself commits this error by arguing in the concluding chapter that infrastructure ("world-class roads, bridges, electric power grids, national broadband, and mass transit systems") and the social safety net ("education, health care, and retirement systems") among other things count as grand strategy because they form the domestic foundations of national power (p. 355). These claims resemble campaign-speak more than grand strategy.

Another element absent from the book, aside from a clear rubric to sift grand strategy from the soil of mundane policy, is a discussion of how policymakers should think about uncertainty, chance, and tradeoffs. Leaders operate with incomplete information in an unpredictable world. Martel would not deny that, yet he provides no real discussion of risk or how policymakers might evaluate strategies under uncertainty. Martel also glosses over the problem of making tradeoffs in achieving political objectives. Instead of acknowledging that tradeoffs are an inescapable part of policymaking, he seems to assume that technocratic solutions can allow leaders to have their cake and eat it too. Put together, grand strategic success is achievable—and countries can attain their full range of goals—simply if competing objectives are properly balanced and means finely calibrated. When strategy fails, in the sense that political objectives are not achieved, it is because leaders failed to find the correct balance of policies, not because of unlucky breaks, incomplete information, or a high propensity for risk. As a result, it is impossible to distinguish poorly designed grand strategies from well-designed ones that simply came up unlucky at the craps table.

The best part of Martel's book is his discussion of American grand strategy since the country's founding. Here, Martel succinctly lays out the core challenges facing presidents from Washington onward and explains the grand strategies chosen by each. Though he largely synthesizes from secondary sources rather than primary accounts, Martel presents the long and complex history with admirable clarity. Anyone looking for a primer on historical US grand strategy would learn a great deal from this book. Yet the section does more than simply sum up the American experience. It distills from the history what Martel argues are the three common principles underlying US grand strategy across changing times: a strong emphasis on the domestic sources of power, a status quo disposition, and multilateralism in defending the status quo. These three principles are Martel's most original contribution and they merit consideration and debate by scholars with competing views.

An obvious point for criticism of Martel's three principles, for which he surprisingly offers

no “pre-buttal,” is his characterization of the United States as a status quo power from its founding. Such scholars as John J. Mearsheimer point out that the United States acted quite aggressively to push European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere up through the end of the nineteenth century.[1] Only after the United States achieved regional hegemony by ejecting Spain from the Americas in the 1898 Spanish-American War did it transform into a status quo power. Curiously, Martel writes extensively about Manifest Destiny, or the belief that the United States should annex territory all the way to the Pacific Coast, and the 1846-48 Mexican-American War, which accomplished this vision by wresting New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, and California from Mexico. He even admits these are cases of expansionism. Yet he classifies them as efforts to “build the domestic foundations of the nation’s power”—sweeping them into the same category as social spending and infrastructure projects (p. 195). These territories were not “domestic” until they were conquered, which means forcibly overturning the status quo. In light of this, it is odd, to say the least, that Martel proceeds to argue that the United States is, at its essence, a status quo power.

In all, while not perfect, Martel’s book provides a magisterial history of grand strategy since ancient times with a particular focus on the nature and origins of American grand strategy today. Commendable in breadth and ambition, it offers students of American statecraft a handy, readable account from which they will learn much.

Note

[1]. John J. Mearsheimer, ***The Tragedy of Great Power Politics***, updated ed. (New York: Norton, 2014), 238.

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