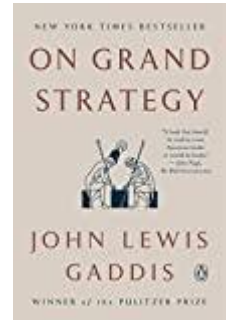


**John Lewis Gaddis.** *On Grand Strategy*. New York: Penguin Press, 2018. xiv + 368 pp.  
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In *On Grand Strategy*, Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis compiles a lifetime's worth of reflection on what makes a statesman successful or unsuccessful. It investigates the components of knowledge, temperament, and bravery that produce great leaders and resilient empires, similar to Peter Paret's 1986 collection, *Makers of Modern Strategy*. The advantage of this book over its illustrious predecessor is that it is a more welcoming narrative, which makes it far simpler for the reader to understand millennia's global strategic teachings. However, *On Grand Strategy* does not convey the breadth of classical strategic historical analysis comprehensively as the work by historians like Lawrence Freedman, Angelo Codevilla, Edward Mead Earle, Edward Luttwak, and Williamson Murray.[1]

At first glance, “grand strategy” and “strategy” may not differ semantically, but the nuance is quite stark. Whereas strategy focuses on a singular end state goal in a specific context, grand strategy is indicative of leveraging all resources a state has at its disposal (politics, economics, cul-

ture, and the military) to further national interests, globally. Gaddis acknowledges that “grand strategies have traditionally been associated, however, with the planning and fighting of wars” (p. 22). Therein, the general theme in the examination and development of grand strategies is centered in successful warfare. Gaddis poignantly defines the concept directly as “the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities” (p. 312). He expands on highlighting the difference between the two aforementioned concepts that “grand” is the holistic aggregation of what is being risked by a nation. In quoting the political scholar and philosopher Isaiah Berlin on his anecdote of the hedgehog and fox, “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one large thing,” Gaddis reinforces the necessity for strategic leaders to cultivate adaptability, imagination, and perception.[2]

*On Grand Strategy* opens with the warrior-king Xerxes and his disastrous invasion of Greece; it was not the last instance in history where ends were misaligned. Napoleon and Adolf Hitler in

Russia, Philip II of Spain off the coast of France, and others were victims. Gaddis points out that after capturing Portugal and its territories, Philip II thought he could defeat the nascent English Empire, but the English Channel and the Royal Navy destroyed his armada. Even before he was defeated at Waterloo, Napoleon misjudged the severity of the Russian winter and the fortitude of the Russian peasant. Hitler sent his men into Russia dressed in summer garb expecting a quick triumph, but they were suffocated by the vastness of the Russian steppes and another brutal winter in his compulsive pursuit of *Lebensraum* (the concept of settler colonialism promulgated by Nazi ideology toward eastern Europe).

The peril of recurring conceit in dismantling strategic success is prevalent in many of Gaddis's case studies. Wild card events, such as the great plague of Athens, Russian winters, and tribal factionalism in Iraq, show how disruptive they can be to a war machine of all sizes. Disconnects in strategic thinking are displayed in some of Gaddis's examples that prompt hypotheticals: Why did Athens, a democratic power, attack another democratic but neutral power, Syracuse? Why did Philip II's conceit drive him to deploy the Spanish Armada, a massive but ineffectively commanded task force, against England? These hypotheticals usher forth one of Gaddis's lessons: leaders must understand the infrequent utility of irony in decisions—a tool that could have avoided the military disasters experienced by Athens and Spain in 415 BC and 1588 respectively. Gaddis posits that the most capable generals are talented at dealing with fluid paradoxes and responding in kind to them.

Although it may give a leader the appearance of being resolute, the big thing—an obsession or abstract ideal—will probably stifle creativity. According to Gaddis, “assuming stability is one of the ways ruins become formed” (p. 155). The unexpected can be accommodated by resilience. By “reigning without marrying, accepting (within limits) re-

ligious divisions, and letting a language gloriously bloom,” Elizabeth I, whom he admires, broke conventional expectations (p. 155). Instead of imposing a great plan, she skillfully adjusted to her world's shifting circumstances. To keep her country safe behind walls of oak (the English fleet), Queen Elizabeth I made the most of English geography and sea power. That was not the case with Xerxes and Napoleon, whose campaigns were doomed to failure due to their restricted peripheral vision, which prevented them from recognizing the factors of “landscapes, logistics, climates, the morale of their men, and the plans of their foes” (p. 204).

These individuals, to paraphrase Berlin, were hedgehogs who were overly fixated on one doctrine or goal and unable to modify their plans to suit the demands of the time. Gaddis has more regard for foxes because they may change their strategies in response to a variety of obstacles and problems, including geography, the environment, time, and public opinion, while remaining steadfast in their goals. Although one's wants may be limitless, one's resources are not; therefore, competent commanders establish priorities, form alliances, and manage their resources.

The case studies presented by Gaddis highlight the importance of having primary and alternative plans. Students of strategy are required to develop a thoroughness of attention and understanding of details with fitting modesty. What would the strategist's opponent devise in response to their stratagem? Are the plans developed by the strategist equipped with the appropriate tools to reach the end state? Which plans were warped by ego and emotion rather than reason? With these questions coming to mind, the prudent approach for the grand strategist is to adopt the way of Berlin's fox instead of its hedgehog counterpart.

Gaddis notes that during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln changed his position on slavery, going from just desiring to prevent its extension to arming free Blacks in 1862 and emancipating

slaves kept in Confederate territory in January 1863. Lincoln “controlled polarities: they didn’t manage him” (p. 236). He was self-taught and incredibly intuitive. The author frequently refers to Leo Tolstoy and Carl von Clausewitz because they respected philosophy and practiced “without enslaving either” (p. 213). Specificity and abstraction reinforce each other but never in fixed ratios. Gaddis contends that both authors approached historical paradoxes and ironies with “the grandeur, inventiveness, and honesty” that made them “the grandest of strategists” (p. 216).

By winning two major wars and the Cold War, America became the dominant world power of the twentieth century, and this is the implicit message they are sending to the best and the brightest Americans of today. Contrarily, throughout the past seventy years, the often-haughty abandonment of grand strategic thought has torn the nation apart through postwar quagmires, deadlocks, and other disasters that have drained American resources for either unattainable or irrelevant goals.

*On Grand Strategy* has drawbacks. With only a passing mention to Sun Tzu, whose teachings place an emphasis on indirect rather than direct combat, it pays little attention to the Eastern tradition. Additionally, the book does a poor job of analyzing how the nuclear revolution has affected military planning. In a similar fashion to how the development of firearms reduced the tactical significance of hand-to-hand combat, it may be argued that the development of nuclear weapons has leveled the strategic playing field among powers that possess them. The end outcome is a society where the possibility of Armageddon restricts strategic options in terms of scope and size.

Gaddis postulates that the best route to cultivating strategic thinking is to understand the relationships between history, literature, and philosophy from both Western and non-Western thinkers—not just mastering the axioms of Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz. The key quality

of effective grand strategists is being a realist who is adaptable and perseveres to exploit chances in events as they materialize instead of attempting to distort situations to fit pre-written narratives to a preconceived stratagem. Gaddis implies through these case studies that risk is not directly proportional to danger yet caution and bravado formulate risk’s essence in formula. The outwardly apparent reality that Gaddis keeps highlighting is that “if you seek ends beyond your means, then sooner or later you’ll have to scale back your ends to meet your means” (p. 21). Any grand strategist must prune away emotion, ego, and conventional wisdom to accept this universal principle. If so many leaders, many of them geniuses, had not forgotten his repeated comment about proportionality, it could have seemed banal. In the ignorance of this universal grand strategy axiom, all of the generals who led the Athenian expedition to Sicily, Julius Caesar at the Rubicon, Alexander the Great at the Indus, Napoleon and Hitler on the Russian border, and Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam all believed that their material or spiritual advantages were uncontested, and as a result, they all died, were humiliated, or were defeated.

*On Grand Strategy* teaches us that statesmanship is difficult. Sadly, as Gaddis demonstrates, history is rife with instances of leaders who were inept at the art of strategy and who consequently led their nations to destruction. Every American leader or would-be leader should read *On Grand Strategy* at a time when conventional war with China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are all very real possibilities—even as irregular wars against insurgents and terrorists continue to deplete our national resources and claim the lives of our young men and women. It takes wisdom, historical awareness, and sensitivity that respects mutable factors like time, space, and scale to nurture and maintain peace and prosperity, as Gaddis envisions. In a way, *On Grand Strategy* is a classic defense of the importance of classical education in

general, which highlights the importance of gaining what you can rather than what you desire.

#### Notes

[1]. Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Angelo Codevilla, *Informing Statecraft: Intelligence for a New Century* (New York: MacMillan, 1992); Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001); Edward Mead Earle, *The Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943); and Williamson Murray, *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[2]. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 1.

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