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'On Grand Strategy' Review: The War Against Decline and Fall

The wisdom, temperament and courage that create great leaders and enduring empires—and the mistakes that may lead to ruin. John Nagl reviews "On Grand Strategy" by John Lewis Gaddis.



Adolph Northen's depiction of Napoleon's retreat from Russia. PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By *John Nagl*

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The most important book I read as a student at West Point was a weighty tome titled "Makers of Modern Strategy." It covered the evolution of strategic thinking from Machiavelli to the nuclear age, explaining the rise and fall of states as a result of choices made by statesmen and generals about how, where, when and why to employ military force to achieve political objectives. It was an edited text—no one person, it seems, was erudite enough to be an expert across such a broad range of history—and hence suffered from differences in writing style and inconsistencies in theme, but it was the best education in grand strategy available in a single volume.

Until now. Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his 2011 biography of George Kennan, has compiled a lifetime of thought about success or failure in statesmanship into "On Grand Strategy." Like "Makers of Modern Strategy," it explores the facets of wisdom, temperament and courage that create great leaders and enduring empires. Unlike its storied predecessor, Mr. Gaddis's book has the advantage of being a long walk with a single, delightful mind, which makes it much easier for the reader to comprehend the lessons that cohere across continents and

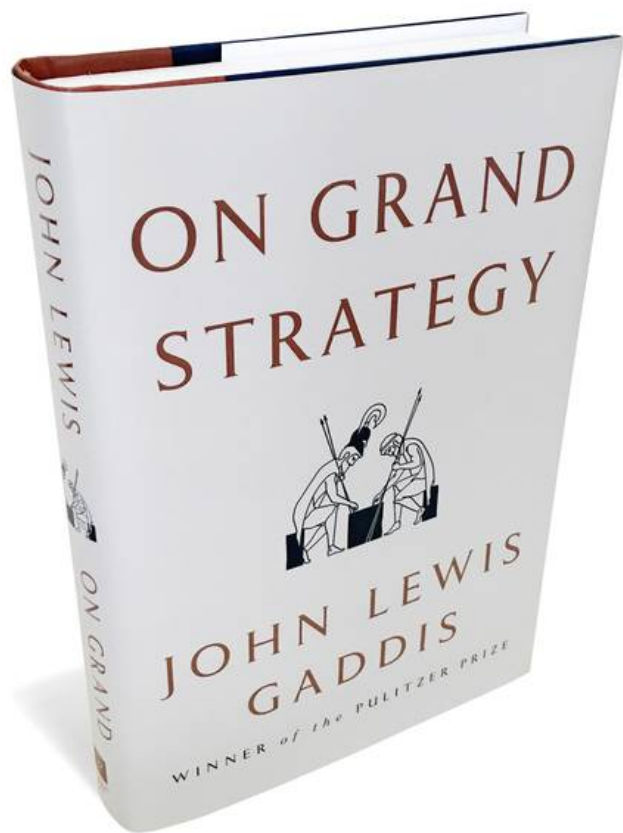
millennia.

“On Grand Strategy” begins with the Persian king Xerxes’ invasion of Greece in 480 B.C., an invasion that went spectacularly wrong. Xerxes suffered from an inability to connect the ends he desired—control of Greece and ultimately all of Europe—with the resources available, the very essence of strategic thought. He discovered, upon crossing the Hellespont, that his huge armies exceeded the carrying capacity of the Greek countryside, that the topography favored the defender, that late-summer storms were battering his fleet in the Aegean Sea. Greek triremes sank his ships at Salamis, and Xerxes fled back across the Hellespont, abandoning his army to destruction. The moral of the story, as written by Aeschylus eight years later: “Never, being mortal, ought we cast our thoughts too high.”

Xerxes was not the last warrior-king to suffer from that particular affliction. Philip II of Spain off the coast of France, and Napoleon and Hitler in Russia, fell prey as well. Mr. Gaddis notes that Philip, after conquering Portugal and its colonies, believed that he could defeat the world’s greatest empire since Rome, but the English Channel and the Royal Navy sent his armada to ruin. Napoleon underestimated the Russian winter and the hardiness of the Russian peasant even before he met defeat at Waterloo. Hitler, in his obsessive pursuit of *Lebensraum*, had his troops invade Russia in summer uniforms expecting a swift victory, but they were swallowed up in the vastness of the Russian steppes and another cruel winter.

PHOTO: WSJ

To borrow from Isaiah Berlin, these figures were hedgehogs, over-focused on one doctrine or objective and unable to adapt their plans to meet the needs of the day. Mr. Gaddis has more respect for foxes, who, while holding fast to their objectives, are able to adjust their



tactics in the face of various challenges and difficulties—geography, weather, time, public support. Although desires may be infinite, the means available are not, and good commanders set priorities, build alliances and husband their resources.

Mr. Gaddis presents an array of

leaders who mastered strategy in such a way. Octavian (soon to become Augustus Caesar), while aiming to seize sole control of

the Roman Empire from his rival Mark Antony, shifted his plans constantly, redistributing land in Rome to gain popular support, seizing control of legions in Gaul when the opportunity arose, even marrying off his sister to his chief rival. Queen Elizabeth I grasped the strengths of British geography and British seapower to keep her country safe behind walls of oak.

Abraham Lincoln, Mr. Gaddis observes, adjusted his thinking on slavery during the Civil War, moving from merely wanting to block its expansion to arming free blacks in 1862 to emancipating slaves held in Confederate territory in January 1863. In the modern period, Franklin Roosevelt decided to focus on “Germany First” rather than Japan, attacking the greater strategic threat rather than the one that had struck first. All chose to tether their practices to strategic principles that had worked in the past—and, Mr. Gaddis suggests, will work in the future.

“On Grand Strategy” is not a perfect book. It gives short shrift to the Eastern tradition, with only a brief nod to Sun Tzu, whose writings

ON GRAND STRATEGY

By John Lewis Gaddis
Penguin Press, 368 pages, \$26

emphasize indirect rather than direct conflict. “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting,” he proclaimed. And the book doesn’t adequately examine the impact of the nuclear revolution on military strategy. Arguably, the invention of nuclear weapons has leveled the strategic playing field among states that possess them in much the way that the invention of firearms made hand-to-hand combat less important tactically. The result is a world in which strategic options are limited in scope and scale by the prospect of Armageddon.

One lesson of “On Grand Strategy” is that statesmanship is hard. Sadly, as Mr. Gaddis shows, history is replete with examples of leaders who were weakly skilled in the art of strategy and who thus drove their countries to ruin. 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 drain our national treasure and take the lives of our young men and women—“On Grand Strategy” is a book that should be read by every American leader or would-be leader.

Peace and prosperity are not guaranteed; nurturing and maintaining them require wisdom, a sense of history, and a sensitivity that “respects time, space, and scale,” as Mr. Gaddis puts it. In these perilous days, the last thing we need is an untutored hand at the tiller of our ship of state.

Mr. Nagl is the headmaster of The Haverford School. A retired Army officer, he saw combat in both Iraq wars and is the author of “Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice.”

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