Truly Grand Strategy

AARON MACLEAN | 9 MIN READ

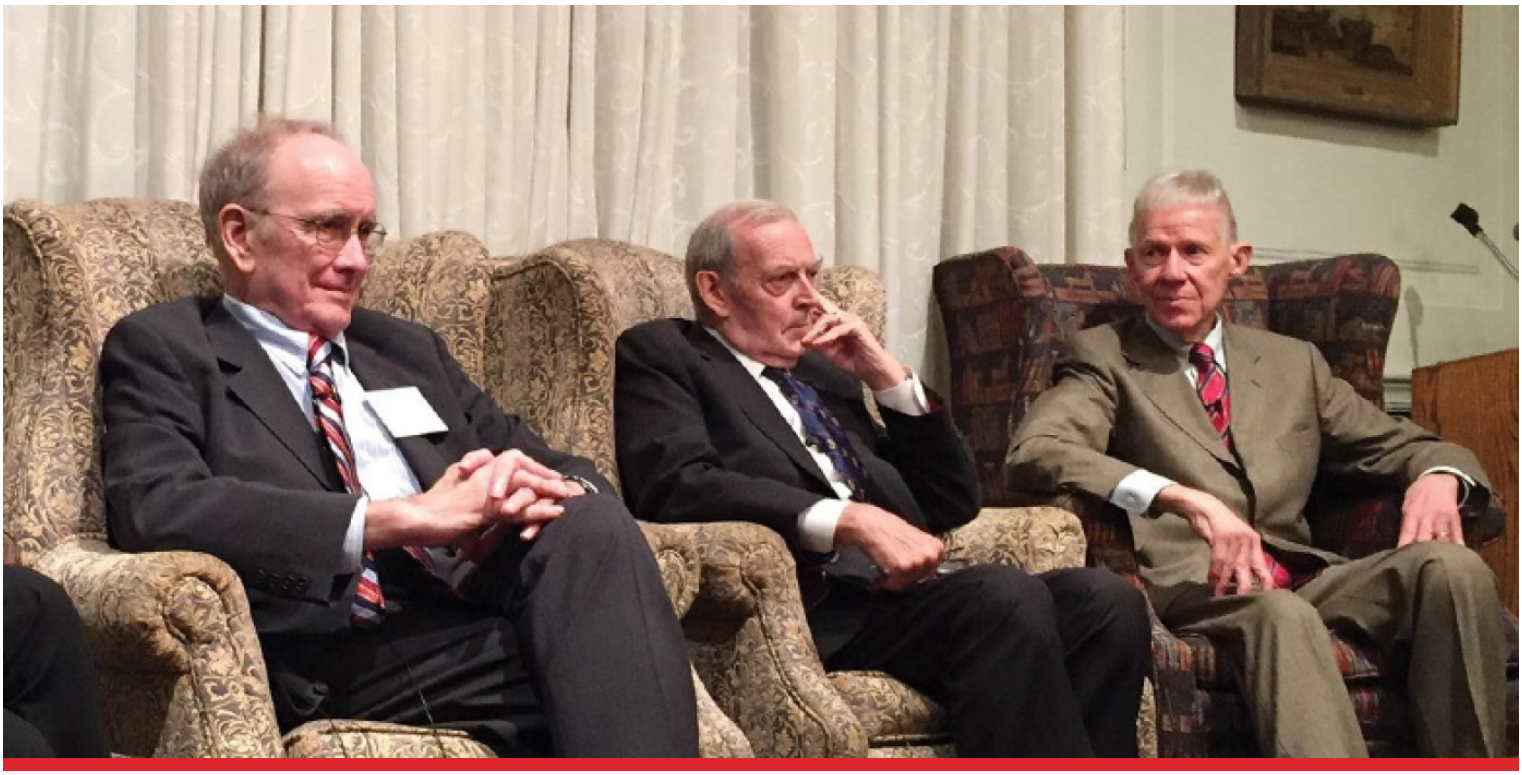

Photo credit: Harry Bishop / Courtesy of Yale University
Historian John Lewis Gaddis (left), with Paul Kennedy and Charles Hill, with whom he teaches grand strategy at Yale.

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Drawing on the wisdom of history, philosophy, and literature to inform foreign policy.

Until the late 1990s, John Lewis Gaddis enjoyed a reputation among his fellow historians for careful—even exquisitely careful—evenhandedness. His early books—1972's *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, which grew out of his doctoral dissertation, and 1982's *Strategies of Containment*—had struck what appeared to be a virtuous balance between the kind of boosterism that tended to absolve the United States of all responsibility for the onset of the Cold War and the rising New Left revisionism that pinned the whole regrettable affair on the capitalists. By 1997, the year he started teaching at Yale University, the *New York Times* called Gaddis "the respected dean of cold war historians."

But around that same time, some of his fellow academics began to feel that Gaddis risked becoming an embarrassment. In his 1997 book *We Now Know*, which drew on materials released from Communist archives after the Soviet Union's fall, Gaddis argued that Stalin's ascendancy had made the Cold War inevitable—even at that late date a not entirely welcome view among his peers. Then, in 2005, he published a one-volume history of the Cold War in which he came across as, well, pleased that the United States and its allies had ultimately prevailed. This was going too far. Still more troublingly, Gaddis had become associated with a program at Yale devoted to educating future masters of the universe about geopolitics. Surely the whole thing was ethically questionable at best—and at worst, somewhat neoconservative. This last suspicion was only aggravated when Gaddis wrote articles and a short book that were generally supportive of the Bush administration's response to 9/11 and when he became an occasional visitor in those days to the Oval Office.

It almost seems that for some of Gaddis's critics his apparent rightward drift was ipso facto evidence that his research was shoddy. An extreme version of the indictment was laid out by Tony Judt in the *New York Review of Books*, writing with respect to Gaddis's 2005 Cold War history:

> "While it may seem tempting to dismiss John Lewis Gaddis's history of the cold war as a naively self-congratulatory account which leaves out much of what makes its subject interesting and of continuing relevance, that would be a mistake. Gaddis's version is perfectly adapted for contemporary America: an anxious country curiously detached from its own past as well as from the rest of the world and hungry for "a fireside fairytale with a happy ending."

Few of Gaddis's critics rose to quite the same altitude of dudgeon—but among the community of professional scholars of foreign policy, a sense of distaste persisted, generally expressed in terms of more-sorrow-than-anger, even as Gaddis produced a volume widely considered to be a masterpiece: a 2011 biography of George Kennan, some three decades in the making, that was deservedly awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Gaddis's thought-provoking new book, *On Grand Strategy*, is lighter fare, albeit dealing with grave matters. Inspired in part by his experience co-teaching in Yale's Program in Grand Strategy (for two decades as its ostensibly centrist instructor, flanked on the left by Paul Kennedy and on the right by Charles Hill, who has produced a comparable book), it is a series of essays organized along similar chronological and thematic lines as the course. The approach is highly idiosyncratic and the structure loose; it has something of the feel of a personal manifesto or intellectual memoir. Sometimes the chapters concern canonical authors who wrote explicitly on strategy, sometimes

Gaddis's own 20th-century intellectual influences, sometimes the careers of pivotal statesmen. Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Tolstoy, and Isaiah Berlin jostle for space with Augustus Caesar, Elizabeth I, and John Quincy Adams, with mentions of people like Hermann Broch, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, and Milan Kundera dusted throughout.

This highly personal approach— in which general strategic principles are developed and honed dialectically through a method best described as literary anecdotalism—will do little to improve Gaddis's standing among those already inclined to dislike his work. Neither will the unironic mention of "timeless principles," the balanced treatment of topics like the American legacy of slavery, and the generally favorable view of the way in which the United States has acted to secure the geopolitical balance of the Old World.

Justifying his method of exploring grand strategy—which he defines as the activity of aligning "potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities"—across "space, time, and scale," Gaddis writes:

> "We need to see change happen, and we can do that only by reconstituting the past as histories, biographies, poems, plays, novels, or films. The best of these sharpen and shade simultaneously: they compress what's happening in order to clarify, even as they blur the line between instruction and entertainment."

This is why one encounters Gaddis exploring Lincoln's combination of moral principle and operational flexibility as much through Tony Kushner's 2012 screenplay for *Lincoln* as through the historical record itself, or looking at the struggle between Elizabethan England and Habsburg Spain with substantial reference to the 20th-century novels *Orlando* and *Pavane.* Both discussions advance Gaddis's admiration for leaders who have an apparently super-rational ability to remain flexible in situations wherein a host of moral and practical imperatives are in conflict with one another. On Elizabeth, Gaddis, relying on A. N. Wilson, who is in turn relying on Shakespeare, writes:

> [Hamlet and Elizabeth] hardly at first seem similar. Shakespeare's prince, dressed like Philip [II] always in black, lacks Elizabeth's lightness—except in his mad scenes, where he feigns irresponsibility, even lunacy, to smoke out his enemies. Elizabeth used dithering, which looks irresponsible, in something like the same way: to remind her advisers for whom they worked; to hold off her suitors, thus balancing their states; and, when the balance at last turned against her, to lure the Spanish Armada into the English Channel where, by trusting her admirals, she sprang a massive mousetrap. Precision and decisiveness, in each of these situations, could have entrapped her.

This sort of gnomic insight—that precision and decisiveness are of the utmost importance, except when they are not—is characteristic of the book. In Gaddis's account, Elizabeth's patience, ideological flexibility, and capacity for gaining leverage over powerful entities by playing them off one another contrast with Philip's prioritization of his religious calling (to unite Europe under the church) and an arrogance born of his empire's abundant resources; as a consequence, the future belonged to the British, not to Spain.

Absent from *On Grand Strategy* is the sort of specialized, "bottom-up" history that focuses on broad economic or social trends within highly circumscribed subject areas. The only absence more conspicuous is of the fruits of two disciplines that concern strategic issues: political science and its close relation international relations theory. Gaddis implicitly addresses such omissions early in the book, suggesting that his own discipline of historical research has grown too narrow, while the work of the theorists has suffered from a deleterious envy of the hard sciences. What is needed is a kind of healing synthesis:

> 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. Historians, knowing that their field rewards specialized research, tend to avoid the generalizations upon which theories depend: they thereby deny complexity the simplicities that guide us through it. Theorists, keen to be seen as social "scientists," seek "reproducibility" in results: that replaces complexity with simplicity in the pursuit of predictability. Both communities neglect relationships between the general and the particular—between universal and local knowledge—that nurture strategic thinking. And both, as if to add opacity to this insufficiency, too often write badly.

Gaddis does not linger on the fact that the current state of play gives the theorists the upper hand, and that the kind of young person who wants to be relevant outside the academy will naturally gravitate in the direction of theory.

Moreover, young people interested in geopolitics are very likely to get their first meaningful exposure to the subject not from a history department or a classics-oriented course in grand strategy like the one at Yale, but from an introductory course in international relations. A yet-unpublished study by the Alexander Hamilton Society—an organization dedicated to promoting debate on the first principles and contemporary dilemmas of American foreign policy—reviews the syllabi of such courses at the 10 universities atop the 2017 *U.S. News & World Report* rankings and finds that of the most commonly assigned readings, only one author (Thucydides) was not born in the 20th century; the other nine are contemporary or near-contemporary political scientists of

the likes of John Mearsheimer and Robert Jervis. Such a pedagogical approach implies that our knowledge of statecraft, like our knowledge of materials science or of how to treat cancer, is steadily accumulating. Each generation of theorists will know more, or at least will know better, than the last.

The inclusion of Thucydides on these syllabi is indeed the exception that proves the rule: In general, the students are only reading the same cherry-picked excerpt, the Melian dialogue. This passage has come to serve as a kind of ur-text for the predominant intellectual school among international relations theorists: "realism," which holds that states behave rationally and naturally seek to expand their power, regardless of the nature of their domestic political structures. The academic adherents of realism tend these days to be associated with calls for American "restraint." As a set of arguments, the realist theoretical approach deserves something like the robust attention that it receives; but as a primary basis for educating ambitious young people interested in foreign affairs, it has obvious shortcomings.

Far from rejecting any role for "theory" in strategic thinking, Gaddis insists it is essential. He holds up Clausewitz as an exemplar of a useful theoretician, one whose theory is deeply concerned with the "limitations of theory itself," who keeps the enterprise tied closely to experience, who sees it more as a way of training the mind than as a tool to be employed at moments of decision. These moments tend to involve factors so complex, with information so imperfect, that consistent success within them seems to require an uncanny ability to grasp intangibles: Clausewitz's famous "*coup d'oeil*." A theoretical education can help prepare one for such moments, but so, Gaddis holds, can the study of history and literature. The mediated experience to be gained from reading Tolstoy is of such value that a strategic education (we might add, a liberal education) ought not to ignore it.

Gaddis does not address the Cold War at any great length, noting that he has said plenty on the subject elsewhere; he also doesn't discuss recent American strategic dilemmas, presumably for the same reason. On the evidence of the results of the last 25 years of American foreign policy, it seems as though the question of how to educate strategists ought to be acute for us. In particular, Gaddis's general hostility toward dogmatism of any variety deserves attention: He gets a great deal of mileage out of one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's glittering and somewhat glib aphorisms, that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and

still retain the ability to function." For Gaddis, the strategic value of such an observation is the suggestion that one might take "the best from contradictory approaches while rejecting the worst."

Fitzgerald's remark ultimately leads Gaddis to the observation that terrible strategic dilemmas can only be resolved by "stretching them over time. We seek certain things now, put off others until later, and regard still others as unattainable." The American project of self-government began with a compromise between the high moral principle of the Declaration of Independence and the barbarity of slavery, a dilemma that took a century to resolve; we redressed the balance of power in Eurasia three times in the last century, and on two of those occasions succeeded through cooperation with an ideologically hostile power (with Stalin to defeat fascism; with Mao and his successors to defeat the Soviet Union). Each resolved dilemma, each geopolitical success, vindicated the reputation of our bold project of self-rule. Acting creatively within such tensions—between the dreams of "idealism" and the demands of "realism"—is the very stuff of the

there are other worlds in which all principles are harmonized, but 'it is on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act.'"

BOOKS AND ARTS

AARON MACLEAN

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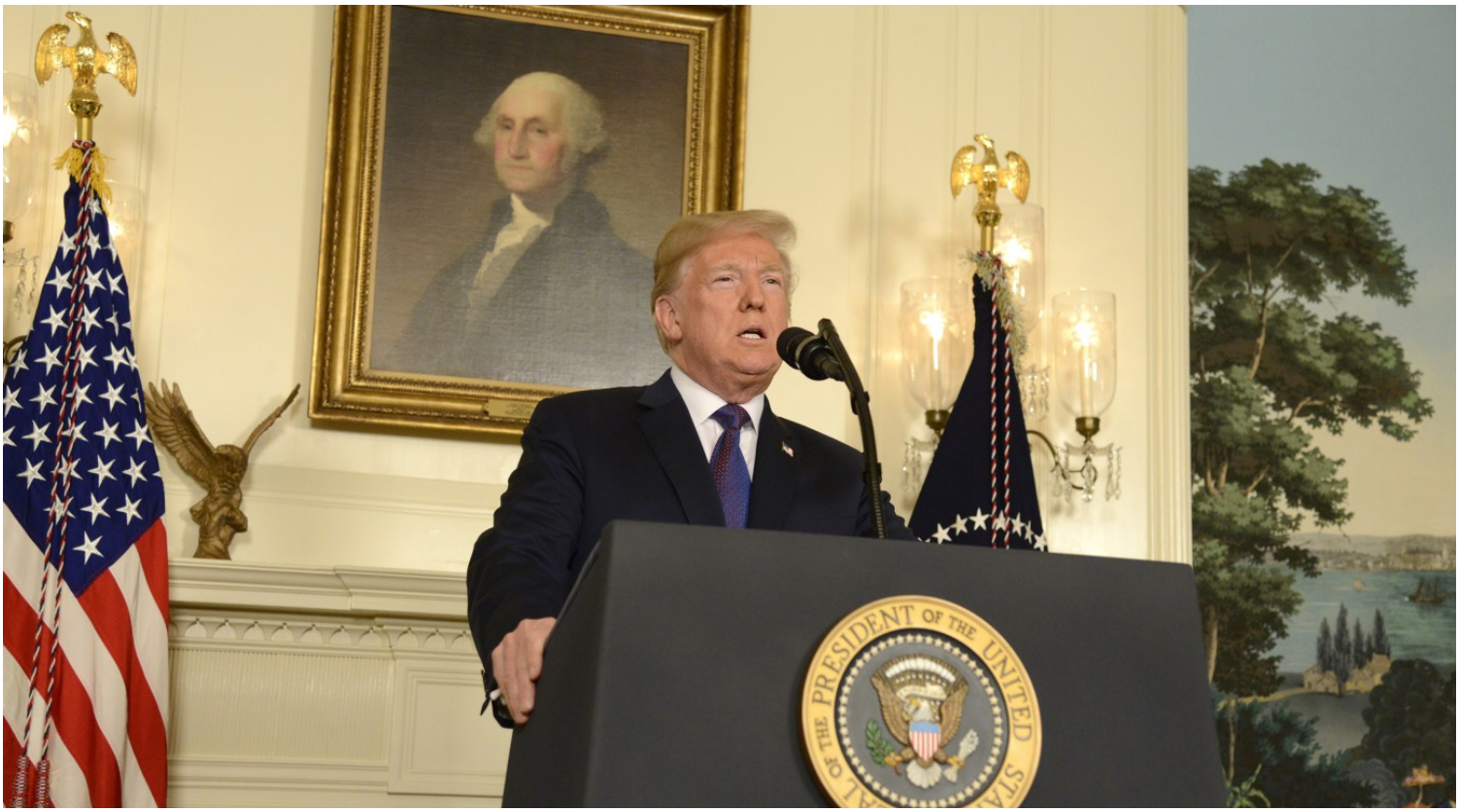
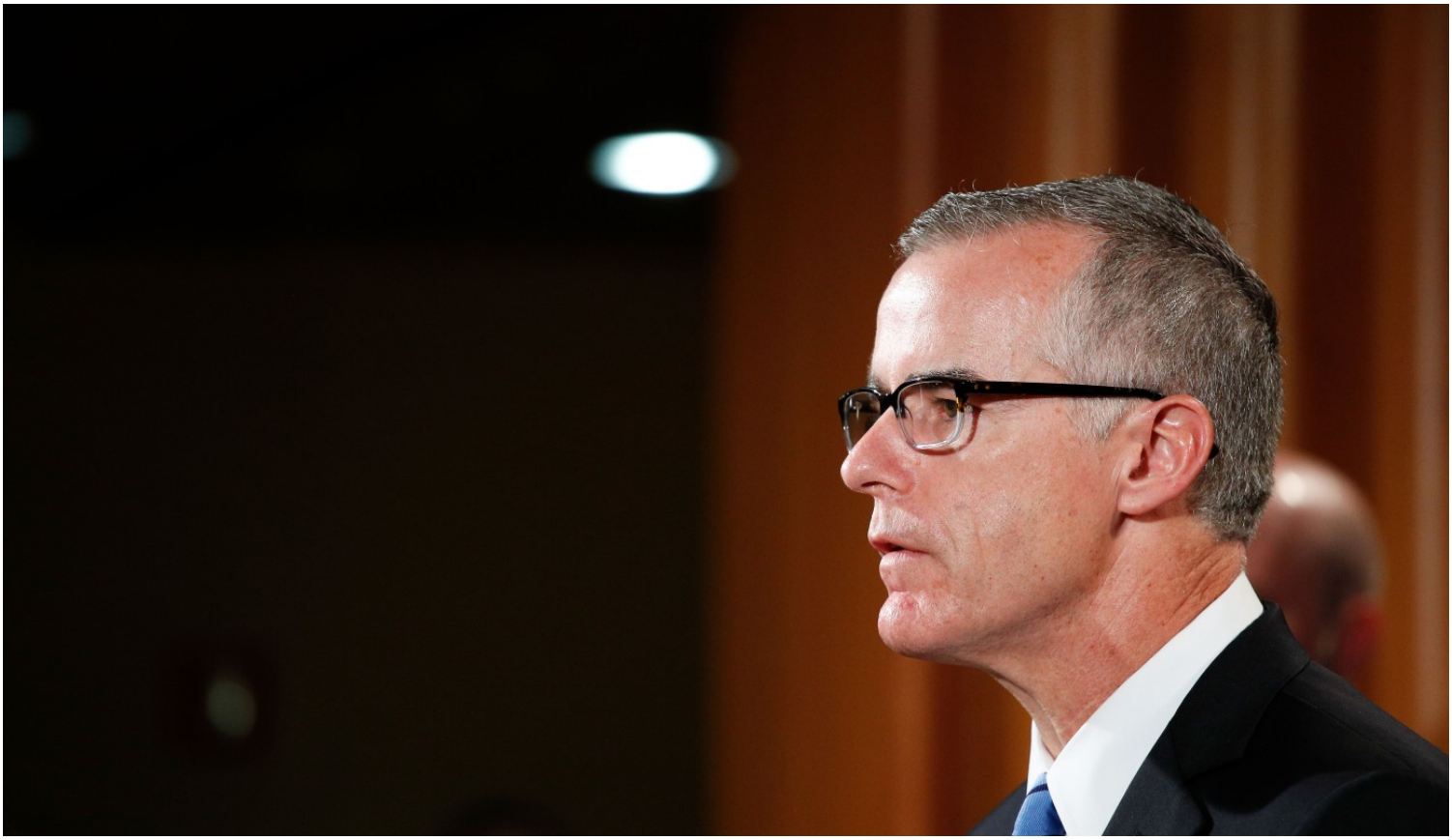
IRWIN M. STELZER 5 MIN READ



U.S. and Allies Strike Syria

JENNA LIFHITS 2 MIN READ



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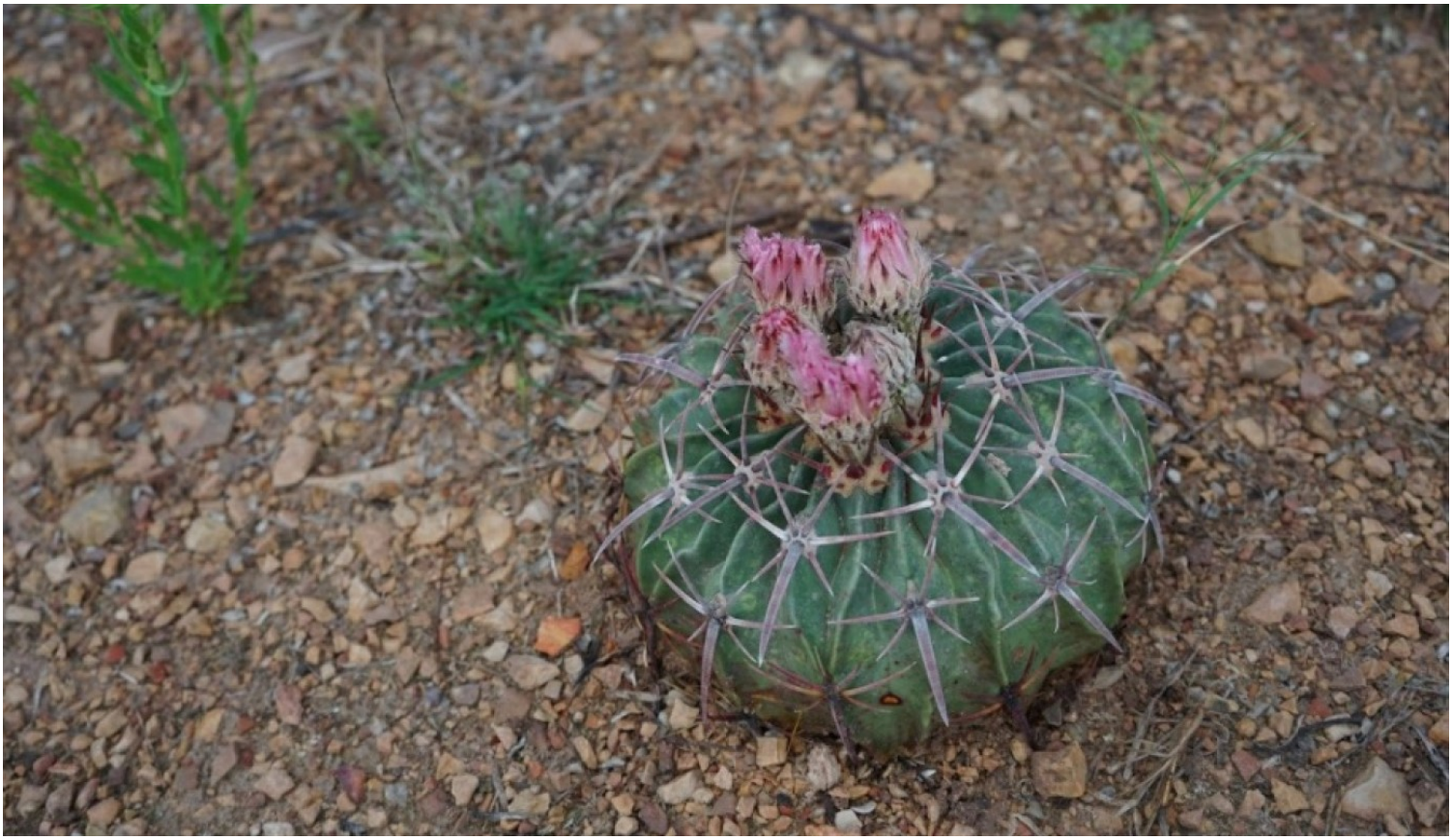
ANDREW EGGER 2 MIN READ



Border Bike Trip, Day 28: Rolling in the Rain

GRANT WISHARD 4 MIN READ

Kristol Clear: On Trump, Libby, Mueller, Syria, and Ryan

TWS PODCAST 1 MIN READ

Prufrock: Books and Baseball, Why Fastballs Won't Get Any Faster, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Remains

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The Libby Pardon

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