



**The Shaping of Grand Strategy:  
Policy, Diplomacy, and War**

Edited by Williamson Murray, Richard Hart  
Sinnreich, and James Lacey

Cambridge University Press, 2011

283 pp. \$27.99

ISBN: 978-0-521-15633-2

Reviewed by

FRANCIS P. SEMPA

Great powers pursue national objectives and promote and protect national security interests by means of grand strategy. This sounds obvious and simple enough, but as Carl von Clausewitz wrote of war, in selecting and implementing grand strategies, even the most simple things are difficult. That is the common thread that links the nine insightful essays collected by Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*.

As Williamson Murray notes in the opening essay, there is no neat, precise definition of grand strategy. “The closer one comes to understanding what it entails, the more one sees how complex and uncertain in historical terms are the aspects that encompass its making and use” (p. 5). Grand strategy is affected by a nation’s geographical position, historical context, the nature of its government, and the character and capabilities of its leaders, and it encompasses political, social, economic, and military realities. “No theoretical construct, no set of abstract principles, no political science model,” Murray writes, “can capture its essence” (p. 11).

The essence of grand strategy can only be understood by historical examples, which is why seven of the nine essays are case studies of successes and failures of grand strategies at different periods of history. “It is the understanding of the ambiguities and uncertainties that political and military leaders have confronted in the past and will confront in the future,” writes Murray, “that is the basis of any successful grand strategy” (p. 33).

The contributors to *The Shaping of Grand Strategy* examine Louis XIV’s France; Britain during the Seven Years’ War; Otto von Bismarck’s Prussia and Germany; Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; Britain in the 1930s and the early years of World War II; the United States in World War II; and the United States in the early Cold War years. As Richard Hart Sinnreich points out in his concluding essay, these case studies reveal no “patterns” of grand strategy—no precise theories to explain why some strategies succeed and others fail. There are simply too many variables and too much plain luck involved. Sinnreich quotes Bismarck on this subject: “Man cannot create the current of events. He can only float with it and steer” (p. 254).

Louis XIV succeeded in making France the predominant power in Europe in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, explains John A. Lynn II, but his quest for absolute security and his unilateral foreign policies produced concerted opposition among other European powers and nearly bankrupted France. Louis’s grand strategy embroiled his country in wars for 51 of the 72 years he occupied the throne. France increased its continental possessions, but at far too high a cost.

Louis’s grand strategy stands in stark contrast to that of Otto von Bismarck, who skillfully steered the Prussian/German ship of state during the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. “No statesman ever adjusted war to policy with a nicer judgment than Bismarck,” wrote Halford Mackinder. As Marcus Jones notes in his essay, Bismarck waged three short and successful wars, attained Prussian predominance through a united German Empire in the center of Europe, and then formed alliances with other great powers that maintained general peace. Bismarck, unlike Louis, did not seek absolute security nor act unilaterally on the international stage. Instead, after 1871, Bismarck “was at pains to demonstrate that Germany was a satiated state, without ambitions or intentions against her neighbors or territories abroad” (p. 105). Jones attributes Bismarck’s success as a strategist to his “nuanced grasp” of political realities, his “Machiavellian flexibility” in pursuing Prussia’s interests, and his moderation and prudence in conducting both war and diplomacy (p. 83).

Essays by Jeremy Black, Sinnreich, and Murray about British grand strategies during the Seven Years’ War, the decades preceding World War I, and the prewar and early World War II years demonstrate the dynamic nature of “strategic culture,” the impact of domestic

politics on strategy, and the importance of individual leadership to the success or failure of grand strategy.

Britain’s strategic focus shifted to imperial issues as a result of the Seven Years’ War and the struggle with France for control of North America. Its grand strategy in the years immediately before World War I changed from the “splendid isolation” of an offshore balancer to a strategic commitment to continental allies in the face of a growing German geopolitical threat. Later, the horrors of World War I produced British leaders in the 1930s who sought to avoid war at almost any cost. When appeasement of Hitler failed, Britain turned to Winston Churchill, whose grasp of history and understanding of the nature of Adolf Hitler’s totalitarian challenge helped him formulate and implement a grand strategy—husbanding British resources, seeking aid from and an alliance with the United States, and allying with Joseph Stalin’s Russia—that saved Britain and defeated the German threat, but alas, could not save the British Empire.

The final case studies, by James Lacey and Colin Gray, examine how Franklin D. Roosevelt and his military chiefs devised a successful grand strategy for global war by prioritizing the defeat of Germany, invading North Africa, Sicily, then Italy, delaying the invasion of France until 1944, conducting a two-pronged war against Japan in the Pacific, and insisting on the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers while, after the war, Harry S. Truman and his talented advisors repeatedly made the right decisions to contain the Soviet geopolitical threat by “the purposeful building, in succession, of the economic . . . political, and . . . military tiers of Western Security between 1945 and 1953” (pp. 233–234).

When all is said and done, these case studies show that a successful grand strategy depends on the wisdom and character of military and political leaders and their understanding of history as a useful but imperfect guide to navigate the ship of state. **JFQ**

---

Francis P. Sempa is the author of *Somewhere in France, Somewhere in Germany: A Combat Soldier’s Journey Through the Second World War; Geopolitics: From the Cold War to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; and America’s Global Role: Essays and Reviews on National Security, Geopolitics, and War*. He is an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Pennsylvania, an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Wilkes University, and a Contributing Editor to *American Diplomacy*.