

## National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear

By David J. Rothkopf

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and

## What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush

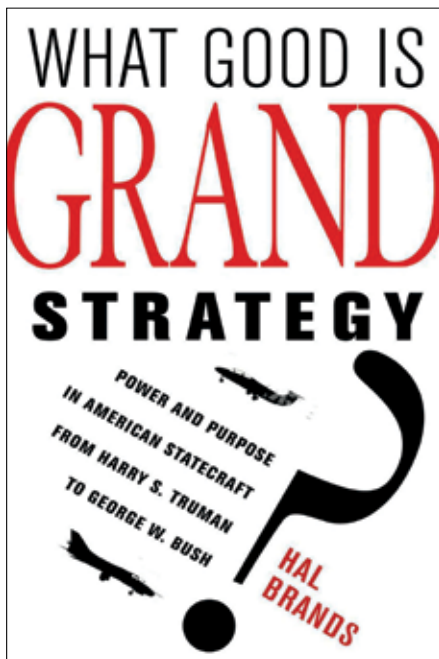
By Hal Brands

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Reviewed by Brian C. Collins



Imagine the following scenario:

The President of the United States commits our military to confronting a difficult challenge in the Middle East. With mounting losses and growing economic costs, the American people and their representatives in Congress become increasingly critical of and vocal in their opposition to administration policies. This criticism centers on charges that the President and his advisors are operating without a clear plan of action and have no strategy to speak of.

It is a scenario that has played out numerous times: in 1983 in the wake of President Ronald Reagan's decision to intervene in Lebanon; in 2006 as the U.S. occupation of Iraq, under President George W. Bush, ground on; and now as President Barack Obama grapples with how to confront and defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). What should we make of these examples? Is having a strategy as important as many presume, or is claiming a lack of strategy simply an overblown excuse to score political points? Two recent books make the compelling case that not only is having a strategy important, but it must be adaptable and modest if it is to consistently produce positive policy outcomes.

While it would be correct to label David Rothkopf as a historian and a keen observer of the U.S. national security apparatus, such a simple description does

him much injustice. He has also proved that he can clearly and dispassionately determine what makes for an effective foreign policy process and, conversely, what practices lead to inevitable disappointment. This reputation is reinforced with the publication of his latest book, *National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear*. While Bob Woodward has access to senior sources for his books, Rothkopf has the trust of—and therefore access to—the Bush and Obama administrations in order to tell their stories.

Rothkopf recounts the challenges faced by subsequent U.S. administrations, beginning with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and continuing to the current confrontation with ISIL, and examines America's inconsistent response in this new era in which, he states, "Our nation [sees] threats everywhere." Furthermore, he shares the views of national security advisors who almost universally attribute the policy missteps of the last decade to the inability of the wider national security community to embrace creative strategic thinking.

Strategic thinking manifests itself as, of course, strategy. The strategic hurdles faced by the Bush and Obama administrations in the Middle East—"the place where," according to Rothkopf, "good intentions go to die"—were many and are particularly noteworthy. Bush, for example, embraced a two-state solution as a means for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only after he realized that there was little choice otherwise if peace were to be achieved. The lack of a consistent plan and a sporadic approach to engagement with both parties, however, resulted in upset allies (Israelis) and the electoral legitimization of a stated enemy (Hamas).

Rothkopf argues that inconsistency has likewise plagued the reaction of the Obama administration to the events of the Arab Spring. Despite delivering an inspiring speech in Cairo near the start of his first term, the promise the people of the Middle East perceived failed to materialize. In particular, the Egyptian people found the official American response to the revolution that began in their country in 2011 to be confusing and somewhat schizophrenic. Rothkopf describes an

administration struggling without a clear plan for what it should do. Expressions of support by the Obama administration for the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak were followed by rhetorical support for the opposition democracy movement, creating an atmosphere of incredible frustration and confusion. Despite Obama's good intentions, the Egyptian military, proponents of secular democracy, and Islamist factions today share a common mistrust of the United States.

Strategy is meant not only to define intention, but also to articulate the ways and means to achieve stated aims. In *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Hal Brands helps readers understand the fundamental elements of an effective strategy. A renowned academic at Duke University and an accomplished author, Brands answers the question "What does a good strategy look like?" He begins with a working definition of *grand strategy* and examines the difficulties common to its formulation and execution. He then examines in detail four cases, centered on the administrations of Presidents Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, that outline strategy from birth to execution and through to assessment. Even more critically, they bring into sharp focus the advantages of a clear and concise grand strategy, and the deleterious consequences of a poor—or even absent—strategy.

The foreign policy of the Bush administration, for example, illustrates the disastrous results of a poorly planned and executed strategy. Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, Bush implemented a new grand strategy of aggressive democratization in the Middle East generally and in Iraq specifically. Although U.S. goals in Iraq were clearly communicated, Bush and his advisors failed to apply appropriate resources and take the required actions to achieve the goals that had been set. This included an American military victory in Iraq that "was incompatible with the type of war it wanted to wage."

The incompatibility of desire and reality was not unique to the Bush administration, however. Indeed, for all of their foreign policy acumen, Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, also are cited by Brands as having aspired to unattainable goals. This proves to be the strongest theme of Brands's book and is best captured in the last of his 10 suggestions for approaching the challenge of strategy development and execution: Keep expectations realistic. As he writes, "Strategy . . . can never be a game of perfect; it can only be a game of good enough."

Together, these two books clearly demonstrate that having a clear and concise strategy increases the chances for policy success. Any strategy, however, must also be nuanced enough to permit flexibility and modest enough to be achievable. Both Rothkopf and Brands do an admirable job—intentionally or not—of confronting cynics who claim that strategy development is a wasted effort because of the dynamic nature of world events. JFQ

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