

On Grand Strategy

By John Lewis Gaddis

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Reviewed by Peter Dombrowski

John Lewis Gaddis, deemed the “Dean of Cold War Historians” by a *New York Times* reviewer, has published yet another book, at least the 14th in a long and productive career. The latest, *On Grand Strategy*, however, will disappoint those hoping for another learned exposition on the American role in the post-World War II era. Rather, Gaddis, the Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History and Director of the Brady Johnson Program in Grand Strategy at Yale University, has written a wide-ranging essay on strategic thinking that begins with the dawn of recorded history and concludes with the momentous challenges facing American leaders during World War II. As such, *On Grand Strategy* will bring joy to those whose professions depend on strategizing and anyone wanting to rummage through history seeking insights into

how past strategists practiced their craft.

Gaddis takes an unusual approach. In effect, he has written a collective and selective history of various critical periods in history by focusing on individual leaders (like Pericles, Octavian, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt [FDR]); their contemporaries (Thucydides, Agrippa, and Harry Hopkins); their internal and external rivals (Archidamus II, Marc Antony, and Joseph Stalin); and, most unusually, strategists and intellectuals facing similar challenges but separated by time and space, as the primary focus of each chapter. For example, the late Oxford political theorist Isaiah Berlin appears throughout the book; Gaddis uses Berlin in order to examine the difference between strategic “hedgehogs” who know one big thing, and “foxes” who know many.

The reason for this approach is clearly thematic. It allows Gaddis to discuss strategic teaching and religion or judge which strategist was grander—but it can also be disorienting and a bit too idiosyncratic at times. Some readers may be left nonplussed, for example, by chapter 4, “Souls and States,” which begins with a few paragraphs on George F. Kennan’s distant relative, George Kennan, who explored and surveyed Siberia in the latter half of the 19th century. Gaddis uses the example of the senior Kennan to illustrate the theme of chapter 4—that “this fear of understanding roots religion in all great cultures which we know” and thereby introduces a discussion of Augustine (in the 4th century) and Machiavelli (in the 15th century), mixed with a smidgeon of Isaiah Berlin (in the 20th century). Yet Gaddis skillfully ransacks nearly two millennia of Western history to conclude that these strategists prescribed procedures, drew on history, developed “checklists,” and deliberately proportioned “aspirations to capabilities” (pp. 116–117). These are good and useful lessons, but following Gaddis’s logic through the epochs in history and figures might be hard going for all but the most broadly educated strategic thinkers. At its best, however, the mixing of perspectives by Gaddis provides a broad overview on

the challenges and choices facing specific leaders/strategists in today’s world.

As enjoyable as it is to read *On Grand Strategy*, I could not help but feel misled by the book’s title. This is not, strictly speaking, about grand strategy in the way understood by most historians and political scientists researching and writing in the field today. With a few exceptions, most recent analyses of grand strategy recognize the limits of the so-called Great Man of History approach taken by scholars since Thomas Carlyle in 1840s. In the modern era, it is not enough to understand how a supreme leader seeks to reconcile national ends, ways, and means. It is not enough to understand the stratagems of leaders who also led armies in battle (for example, Xerxes), or who undertook personal diplomatic negotiations with their counterparts (for example, the Big Three of Winston Churchill, FDR, and Stalin). Rather, it is critical to recognize that even the best leaders are constrained by the institutions in which they are embedded. Since the rise of the modern nation-state and the decline of absolutist monarchs, even the brightest, most experienced, and most forceful chief executives must rely on the other organs of state for funds, intelligence, analysis, and, most of all, implementation.

This is true of most of the personalities surveyed by Gaddis. As Geoffrey Parker’s fantastic volume *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (Yale University Press, 2000) makes clear, the Hapsburg emperor could convince himself that to fulfill his earthly mission of unifying Roman Catholic lands and stamping out infidels, he should single-handedly exercise command and control in the form of his own person. By the time of Abraham Lincoln or Otto von Bismarck, much less FDR, even their strategic wisdom required vast bureaucracies to implement—not only large armies and navies but also domestic agencies to raise funds and acquire the instruments necessary to wage both modern war and the peacetime preparations for war. Moreover, few of the modern leaders discussed in *On Grand Strategy* functioned without war councils, strategy development groups, or cabinets (constitutional or kitchen)

to help them formulate strategies great and small.

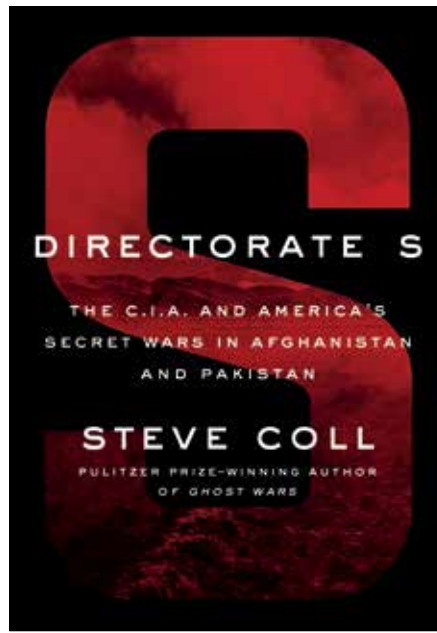
Shortly before defining *grand strategy* as the “alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities,” Gaddis makes the case for common sense—“Common sense, in this sense, is like oxygen: the higher you go, the thinner it gets.”

To much criticism from both the political left and the right, President Barack Obama famously asserted that his first task as President was “Don’t do stupid shit”—a pungent shorthand for “use common sense.” It seems that a U.S. President with little formal training in strategic affairs had stumbled upon a truism Professor Gaddis developed over a lifetime of study. Rather than simply do something that conventional wisdom insisted was required, Obama tried to keep his options open, a strategy that Gaddis calls “pivoting.” The President took so long to make a decision, however, that he was openly accused of dithering. He pivoted to the point where he even changed his policies when he realized the implications of earlier decisions, such as when he decided not to enforce his proclaimed red line against Syria’s continued use of chemical agents.

President Obama might be classified as a proverbial “hedgehog” with an overarching idea that dissatisfied many professional national security scholars and politicians. He pursued what he understood to be common sense and applied Gaddis’s preferred “proportionality,” even in the face of many foreign policy crises and emerging geopolitical developments. He applied this strategy among his many advisors and the Department of Defense, as well.

As frustrating as that was to many observers, Mr. Obama was simply demonstrating the ability to be both fox and hedgehog by combining approaches. This flexibility, Gaddis claims, is the “strategist’s keys to victory.” JFQ

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Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan

By Steve Coll

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Reviewed by Thomas F. Lynch III

Directorates *S* by longtime *Washington Post* journalist, former think tank president, and now dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, Steve Coll, is a seminal book. It is a highly worthy successor to the author’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2004 work *Ghost Wars*. *Directorate S* is impressive in its scope, level of detail, and readability. It successfully fills much of the gaping void in prior literature on the controversial topic of the U.S. role in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a reference for scholars and policymakers, this book is first rate. Although it will not be the final word on the strategic trajectory of South Asia and the future arc of complex U.S. policy choices in that region, Coll’s work makes an indelible mark.

Published in early 2018, *Directorate S* picks up the story of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan on September 11,

2001—the day after *Ghost Wars* culminated—and takes the saga through 2014. In its more than 750 pages, Coll chronicles the complex web of tensions, rivalries, suspicions, and miscalculations that prevented strategic success for the United States and thwarted a long-planned U.S. departure from Afghanistan. Coll shows how a lack of trust and a misappreciation of deeply held security and cultural narratives among the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—as well as between frequently competing U.S. national security and intelligence agencies—made America’s search for decisive victory in Afghanistan languish unrealized for more than a decade and a half.

Directorate S provides an extremely valuable reference for scholars and policymakers working on the complexities of South Asia security. Coll’s story is based on at least 100 interviews with a myriad of critical U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani policymakers and their supporting staffs. His interview-based writing is leavened with the experience of a journalist boasting 3 years as a reporter in South Asia and another three decades tracking and writing astute shorter works on the most critical security topics for the region. The number and quality of sources accessed by Coll during the years of his research are remarkable and unique, going well beyond the tell-all political texts of those like journalist Bob Woodward, or political figures Bob Gates and Hillary Clinton.

Directorate S accurately captures the complexities of strategic analysis and the conflicting policy perspectives from Washington to Kabul to Rawalpindi (the home of Pakistan’s military and intelligence leadership). Coll logically identifies that the relationship between the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) was the most critical in the multimodal strategic dynamic, but one based on a paradox. The CIA needed the ISI and Pakistani army to gain intelligence on the movement and recruitment of Taliban and al Qaeda militants. Yet the ISI was covertly enabling its Taliban proxies from semi-feudal towns, refugee camps, and jihadist safe havens inside Pakistan