Grand Flattery

BY THOMAS MEANEY AND STEPHEN WERTHEIM

In 1909 a group of men met on an estate in Wales to save Western civilization. Troubled by the erosion of British world power, they believed the decline could be reversed if statesmen turned away from the mundane tasks of modern diplomacy and channeled the wisdom of ancient Greece instead. The Greeks, in reconciling rulership with freedom, had made the West great, and supplied a model for their Anglo-Saxon heirs. No longer should the empire run itself; members of the group, including Lloyd George and Lord Milner, would train men of penetrating insight to direct imperial affairs more self-consciously than ever before. Drawing protégés from Oxbridge, the Round Table, as the group called itself, aimed to impart the lessons of enlightened leadership to a new generation. They produced countless articles and monographs. Chapters of the society flourished all over the empire. Ten years later, they had disappeared: nationalism had swept away their plans to knit the colonies closer together. British ascendancy ended sooner than any of them could have imagined.

The mantle of world leadership soon passed to the United States, and it's here, where the ruling class is now experiencing its own crisis of confidence, that the Round Table is having something of a second act. Anxiety about America's place in the world intensified after 9/11 but first became acute in the late 1990s, when the ills of the post–cold war world no longer appeared transient and seemed to demand concerted US leadership in response. This was the moment when liberal interventionism and neoconservatism ascended to the political mainstream and the grand narrative of "globalization" entered into wide circulation. In New Haven, historians John Lewis Gaddis and Paul Kennedy put forth a different response. Opposed to the Clinton administration's ad hoc policymaking, they conceived a series of "grand strategy" seminars at Yale that aspired to train the next generation of leaders.

Joined by former diplomat Charles Hill, a onetime adviser to Henry Kissinger, Gaddis and Kennedy taught select students—those lucky enough to be accepted into the yearlong seminar—that lessons of leadership should be gleaned less from the social sciences dominant in US policy circles than from the humanities, beginning with Thucydides and plunging forward through the Romans, Machiavelli, Metternich and finally Ronald Reagan. Grand strategy, as Gaddis has explained in a recent speech on the subject, exposes students, "in a properly distilled form, to the accumulated wisdom of those who have gone before," all of which is supposed to instill in its recipients the sensibility to formulate the grand strategy that has eluded Americans since their cold war enemy collapsed. Such a strategy would relate the broadest possible ends to the means of achieving them and therefore invigorate US global leadership with a new, singular purpose.

Ten years on, grand strategy is flourishing. Not only has the Yale seminar grown into a campus juggernaut, securing a $17.5 million, fifteen-year endowment in 2006, but since 2008 it has inspired spinoffs in half a dozen top US universities, funded in part by right-wing financier Roger Hertog. Kennedy has likened the spinoffs to Benedictine monasteries, "all doing their own versions of grand strategy but still belonging to the Order of Saint Benedict." For $4,448 you can even send your high school "scholar-leader" to Yale for a two-week Grand Strategy summit on the fine arts of "critical and strategic thinking, social networking, professional etiquette, financial and asset management" and more. Grand strategy is now a popular idea, too. A string of op-ed writers, including Jackson Diehl, Niall Ferguson and Fareed Zakaria, have criticized the Obama administration for lacking one. The charge was repeated during the Republican primaries by Newt Gingrich and, in effect, answered by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who presented the administration's revised military posture as a new "American grand strategy in an age of austerity."

Though grand strategy went national only recently, the term gained currency in the run-up to World War II. Another Anglo-American duo, the military strategist Basil Liddell Hart and the historian Edward Mead Earle, reasoned that states needed strategies not just during wars but also in peacetime. Through

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"grand strategy" a state might prevent wars from breaking out and prevail in any that did. The original concept of grand strategy, then, despite extending temporally into peacetime, remained centered on the problem of warfare. And it was pioneered in a mid-century world where major threats were readily identifiable, coming from large states able to amass industrial power and mobilize vast populations. The radical contribution of Yale's program is to make a grand strategy out of everything—from national security to economics, the environment, even culture and ideology. The Yale syllabus touts grand strategy's use in "any future leadership role in which you may be called upon to connect desired ends with available means." Gaddis says he regularly gets papers on "the grand strategy of falling in and out of love" and of "achieving success in soccer, football, and especially rowing." (The last sport "particularly attracts the members of our class, probably because of its ancient echoes in Herodotus and Thucydides.")

The focus nevertheless remains on US foreign relations and the needs of the present. After romping through the great strategists in history, the course turns to contemporary policy challenges for its second semester. At the end, students dress up like national security officials to brief their professors, who play the president. Least conventional of all is the "summer school of surprise." Gaddis encourages students to embark on a "Patrick Leigh Fermor experience" in obscure locales around the world, "the great classical texts still fresh in their mind." "Why not go to China, speak only Chinese, and check out the places they won't let you see when you become ambassador?" Gaddis says he tells students. "Why not go live in a yurt somewhere, and teach your yurt-mates to sing songs from 'Oklahoma,' or 'Guys and Dolls'?" A cappella as soft power, or maybe just for fun.

Yale's grand strategists openly long for the intellectual certainties they associate with the cold war, when the Soviet threat made strategy seem indispensable. Grand strategy is "endangered," Gaddis laments, "for in the absence of sufficiently grave threats to concentrate our minds, there are insufficient incentives to think in these terms." But then why think in those terms if the conditions that seem to have called for them no longer exist? Gaddis and company are remarkably untroubled by the possibility that the incessant push to strategize grandly might construct the threats it seeks to meet. Strategy likes enemies. It has traditionally addressed military affairs because war is an inherently adversarial condition and tends to produce a simpler range of outcomes than do most other areas of life. Kennedy, following Liddell Hart, suggests that the Clausewitzian dictum that "war is a continuation of politics" implies the opposite, but grand strategy turns Clausewitz on its head, squeezing all of politics into an analytical method best suited for war. It assumes that a grand strategy is necessary all the time, whatever the circumstances. That's why not having a grand strategy becomes a sin. Yet is there a single, overarching purpose, much less strategy, around which a world power should orient everything it does? Certainly, if an all-consuming threat truly exists, but otherwise grand strategy becomes a recipe for simplifying the world and magnifying threats—in which case the best "grand strategy" may be no grand strategy.

Books Discussed in This Essay

George F. Kennan
An American Life.
By John Lewis Gaddis.
Penguin Press. 784 pp. $39.95.

Strategies of Containment
A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War.
By John Lewis Gaddis.
Oxford. 484 pp. Paper $19.95.

Grand Strategies
Literature, Statecraft, and World Order.
By Charles Hill.
Yale. 368 pp. Paper $18.

No one lays bare the pretensions of grand strategy better than its greatest practitioner in the history of US diplomacy, George Kennan. Author of the cold war doctrine of containment, Kennan achieved mythical status in policy circles long before his death in 2005, at age 101, but Gaddis, his authorized biographer, has done the most to secure Kennan's reputation as a grand strategist. If Kennan's example looms large in American discussions of grand strategy, it's because containment is the most inarguably grand strategy the United States has ever pursued. America scarcely needed a grand strategy as a rising power, and after the cold war it had something resembling a grand strategy only in the handful of years when terrorism appeared to supplant the Soviet Union as an encompassing threat.

Gaddis's recent biography of Kennan [see "Solving for X," November 14, 2011] elaborates on his seminal *Strategies of Containment* (published in 1982) by casting its subject as the Cassandra who in 1946 and 1947 foresaw the policies that the cold war would, and would not, require. In Gaddis's hands, Kennan prescribed both sustained action to block Soviet expansion and restraint in picking which battles to fight. This prescription flowed from Kennan's diagnosis that the Soviet Union was driven to expand by purely internal forces. If checked by outside resistance, however, it would desist and eventually implode. Gaddis thus positions Kennan between two unpalatable extremes: the timid isolationism of ceding the world to Soviet domination and the crusading globalism of the Truman Doctrine and NSC-68, a classified report issued by the National Security Council in 1950 that demanded action against Soviet-backed communism wherever it advanced. Gaddis insists it was those expansive interpretations of the containment strategy that led the United States into disaster in Vietnam and beyond. Kennan's original version of containment, by contrast, was a sober grand strategy, carefully calibrating means to ends.

Except that it wasn't, as Kennan very nearly came to see. Kennan's initial idea of containment, explained in his Long Telegram of 1946, rested on the breathtaking assumption that the Soviet Union was implacably driven to expand its power mainly because it inherited a "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" dating back centuries to when Russians were agriculturalists surrounded by fierce nomadic tribes. Kennan mixed in other explanations, involving Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Kremlin's desire for internal stability, all to the same effect: the United States was doing nothing—could do nothing—to stoke Soviet fears. Rather, the Soviet system was paranoid by its very nature, and an enemy so childlike it could only be slapped around until it finally changed its ways. "Impervious to [the] logic of reason," Kennan wrote, the Soviet Union "is highly sensitive to [the] logic of force." Kennan had conjured up the sort of threat most amenable to grand strategizing: a foe bent on conquest, for reasons entirely its own, that nonetheless would be brought to heel and even defeated by outside pressure. That cultural stereotypes underpinned Kennan's framework should have raised more doubts at the time. In any case, Gaddis's uncritical stance toward Kennan's characterization of Soviet conduct, long after most scholars perceived its crudeness, is no less breathtaking.

Almost as soon as Kennan realized what he had helped to unleash, he recanted. By

1948 Soviet behavior appeared to him a predictable response to American provocations. Cold war antagonism now seemed to come less from the nature of Soviet society than from the interaction between the two superpowers. From then on, Kennan called for precisely what he once proscribed: negotiations with the Soviet Union, aimed at securing the mutual withdrawal of forces from central Europe and thus the end of intense conflict. He opposed creating NATO on the grounds that it would ossify Europe's bipolar division. He criticized US wars in Vietnam and, just before his death, Iraq. In his memoir, Kennan wrote of rereading his Long Telegram with "horrified amusement." It sounded, he admitted, "like one of those primers put out by alarmed congressional committees or by the Daughters of the American Revolution, designed to arouse the citizenry to the dangers of the Communist conspiracy."

Kennan, however, never appreciated, let alone articulated, the full extent of his reversal. This has made it easy for Gaddis to present Kennan as a master grand strategist. Gaddis does so by suppressing contradictions within the containment doctrine devised by the Kennan of 1946 and 1947 and by yoking the initial doctrine to the critique of its implementation that Kennan delivered soon after. American excesses therefore look like unnecessary deviations from the original strategy, corruptions of the good cold war. But neither Kennan nor anyone else ever developed a truly limited strategy that would have prevented the cold war from becoming a global military competition. One way Kennan tried to restrict US intervention was by emphasizing the need to secure only the major industrial centers of the world, namely the United States, Britain, Western Europe and Japan, but American policy-makers soon discovered that keeping those centers free of communism seemed to require securing the flow of oil from the Middle East and raw materials from Southeast Asia. Why accept spatial restrictions anyway if Soviet penetration into new land, however trivial in and of itself, would provide a base from which to launch the next inevitable conquest? Why wait until vitally important territory was under immediate threat? Against nonstop expansionism, Kennan's limitless prescription of 1947 made sense: "confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world."

Small wonder that Kennan struggled to apply containment in any restrained fashion. When in March 1947 President Harry Truman requested $400 million to aid Greece and Turkey, Kennan famously objected that whereas the stakes in Greece were high, Turkey did not warrant help. Less known is that two weeks later, Kennan changed his mind—even though he saw little danger of Turkey coming under Soviet sway. "The reason was psychological," Gaddis writes. "A failure to act might convey the impression that 'the Western Powers were on the run and that international communism was on the make.' Such a 'bandwagon' mentality could cause Europeans to *choose* communism, in the belief that they had better climb on board while there was still time. That could shatter American prestige in the Near East, East Asia, and elsewhere." Kennan's statements foreshadowed the obsession with "credibility" that drove the presidents Kennan later condemned to send soldiers and spies into jungles and deserts remote from US interests. His inability to set limits shows that containment was itself uncontainable. Grand strategy, despite having posited a clear, single enemy, could not resolve the central conundrum of the cold war. In the end, the United States needed fewer grand strategists, not better ones. It needed more people willing to question whether the Soviets were bent on world domination and fewer people predisposed to view the world in adversarial terms. Rather than straightforwardly demanding a grand strategy, the cold war was in part created and sustained by the American desire for one.

Absent the overriding threat of the kind attributed to the Soviet Union, what would grand strategy consist of? An indication may be found in the diplomatic conduct of a frequent visitor to the Yale seminar, Henry Kissinger. Kissinger operated as a grand strategist par excellence, even though he saw the Soviets not as emotional zealots intent on world domination but rather as rational power-seekers like everyone else. Thanks to this "realism," his project of détente had the potential to be vastly different from the cold war foreign policies that preceded it. Yet that is not how it turned out. Seeking to be one of history's great statesmen, Kissinger continued to subordinate all priorities to bipolar competition. He needed to believe everything that happened in the world was deeply connected to everything else—lest he be rendered unable to leverage local events in Latin America, the Middle East or Asia in the larger game of power maximization against the Soviets.

"Linkage," as Kissinger called his method, made him act like any old cold warrior. He supported the coup against Salvador Allende even though the Chilean president's Soviet ties were scant. He resisted European attempts to practice détente and gain independence in world affairs, because pulling back the iron curtain might weaken America's grip on its alliance and thus upend Kissinger's bipolar framework. He held arms-limitation talks with the Soviet Union hostage to concessions by a North Vietnamese government over which the Soviets had little control. Kissinger's handling of Vietnam was telling in another way. Despite investing the country with little intrinsic importance, and despite resigning himself to an American withdrawal, Kissinger prolonged the war for three years because "confidence in American promises" was at stake. By being in Vietnam, he reasoned, the United States had created an interest there. Grand strategy again produced an amplified enemy and a simplified world.

The realism prized by Kennan and Kissinger foundered on their ambitions to strategize grandly. That's why Kennan, in a White House meeting in 1994, told senior diplomats to stop trying to sum up US foreign policy in a single word. Containment had been a mistake, Kennan said. It had produced "great and misleading oversimplification of analysis and policy." The president should state American foreign policy in a "thoughtful paragraph or more, rather than trying to come up with a bumper sticker."

The more the output of grand strategists is examined, the more the enterprise comes down to a desire by statesmen, and their would-be tutors, not so much to understand the world as to stake their place in it. What Kennan, Kissinger and Yale's grand strategists share is a deep respect for the exercise of human judgment at the highest echelons of power, along with a faith that far-seeing individuals can rise above structural forces and political exigencies to shape history. In this regard, grand strategy is nostalgic less for the cold war than for a fabled earlier age when citizens trusted their leaders and leaders heeded their intuition. The grand strategists prefer to quote *The Art of War* or *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* than to busy themselves with policy briefs. Refreshingly, they speak the language of neither social science nor wonkery, but they shrink their hallowed humanities down to a repository of "accumulated wisdom," in Gaddis's phrase. Starting with the Greeks and Romans, culminating with policy presentations on national security and finance, the seminar invites its members to become the latest bearers

of civilization's torch—a presumption not made any prettier by its overt instrumentalization of the humanities. The Round Table, at least, counted dedicated classicists in its ranks and cogitated on the ethics of rule. Yale's seminar impresses everything into the service of strategy.

This is the treatment Charles Hill gives the literary canon in his *Grand Strategies* (2010), the *reductio ad absurdum* of the grand strategy project. Hill has inspired a cult following among Yale undergraduates, one of whom scribbled "Charles Hill is God" on her freshman notepad and later wrote a book to explore the insight. In his book, Hill fishes for grand strategies throughout the centuries and catches them everywhere. What exactly is it that unites all the great strategists across history? Hill calls it a "sixth sense." He might not be speaking metaphorically. "Even Tolstoy," Hill writes, "portrays Marshall Kutuzov as making sound strategic decisions because he senses the course of history. This is Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil*. If you have that sixth sense, you can size up the situation at one glance and decide how to incorporate it, or not, into your grand strategy." With grand strategy reduced to ineffable instinct, there's not much left to say about it. Instead Hill strings together free associations inspired by the great books, forcing almost any author to speak to present-day quandaries. The blood feud in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* leads Hill to a discussion of the family feud in *Huckleberry Finn*, which in turn reminds Hill of a recent discussion "at the bar in the country club of Rochester late one evening" when an old hand from the Middle East delivered this nugget of wisdom about the region: "It's all clans." Those not blessed with the Clausewitzian *coup d'oeil* might get the impression that Hill has distilled classic literature into a series of chauvinistic clichés—"Only a novel in English can encompass all Indian reality," he comments at one point—except that by the end Hill turns away from the classics in favor of a speech by Pope John Paul II, whom he presents as a prophet of world order before pronouncing on the need for the international system to make more of its foundations in the divine.

Nostalgia this mawkish will not resonate widely. Grand strategy, however, already has. Its proponents are correct about one thing: sometimes a handful of well-positioned men can change history, especially when they are backed by millions of dollars and peddling an alluring message to a superpower fearing decline. Grand strategy flatters the egos of politicians and policy-makers who hold their nation responsible for the fate of the world. It presumes the persistence of a global dominance, the future of which no longer seems assured. Grand strategy's influence might not, in fact, be merely potential. After Gaddis, writing in *Foreign Policy* in 2002, hailed George W. Bush's national security strategy as a sophisticated plan for bringing the Middle East, "once and for all, into the modern world," he went to the White House to help draft Bush's second inaugural address. Gaddis even suggested that the president speak of "ending tyranny," which Bush then made "the ultimate goal" of the United States. Gaddis's fellow professors were rankled, but more telling than his collaboration with power was that he served an administration singularly bad at relating ends and means. When push came to shove, aspirations of grandeur proved stronger than the labors of strategy.

Those hoping for a new American grand strategy will have to wait out the Obama presidency. The president seems unmoved by the grand-strategic ethos, recognizing perhaps that taking things more or less as they come is a logical course for a world leader with no major adversaries. The administration's recent pivot toward China entails not a grand strategy but a prosaic posture in East Asia that neither guides every action of the United States nor defines its existential purpose in the world. But grand strategy is becoming a more popular idea regardless of Obama's coolness toward it. Superpowers crave sweeping simplifications of the societies they act upon and have little incentive to learn more; they shape the rest of the world more profoundly than the rest of the world shapes them. This is part of the reason that the social sciences, with their policy-ready formulas for slicing and dicing human relations, ascended to prominence as America gained the power to remake the world in its image.

Grand strategy, despite its intentions, is little different. Promising synoptic knowledge, it is less likely to respond to real problems than to enlarge them to "grand" proportions. "To remain broad," Gaddis says, "you've got to retain a certain shallowness." He may be right to think that grand strategy depends on seeing superficiality as something to cling to rather than overcome. If you know a bit about your yurt-mates, you might think twice before belting out "Guys and Dolls" in the middle of the night. ■