

REVIEW ESSAY

GRAND STRATEGY AND WORLD ORDER

Karl Walling

Brands, Hal. *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2014. 273pp. \$26.95
Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. New York: Penguin, 2014. 420pp. \$21.60

From the end of the Cold War in 1989–91 and with increasing urgency in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001, perhaps few subjects seemed more important to those who frame and study strategy than developing a new American grand strategy for the twenty-first century. Who would play the role of George Washington in his Farewell Address advising Americans to steer clear of permanent alliances (he did not say “entangling alliances”—that was Thomas Jefferson’s phrase in his first inaugural message; Washington’s brilliant speechwriter, Alexander Hamilton, accepted that temporary alliances might be necessary or advisable from time to time, but feared to

be tied to any other country on a permanent basis, lest partiality and partisanship sacrifice American to foreign interests)?

Who would be the next John Quincy Adams and James Monroe, insisting that the Western Hemisphere was now off limits for future European colonization, all the while knowing the Americans did not have the blue-water navy capable of enforcing this new doctrine but that the British did and were willing to uphold it to continue their lucrative trade with Latin America? Who would be

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the next Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan watching the simultaneous decline of the British Empire and rises of imperial Japan and imperial Germany? Who would warn Americans that they would need to take responsibility to protect their maritime trade and enforce the Monroe Doctrine by developing a navy second to none, one that might often work in concert with other states in a “naval consortium,” a proto-NATO, so to speak, of great powers? Who would be the next Harry S. Truman, Richard Nixon, or Ronald Reagan, each proclaiming his own doctrine, to aid free peoples against external invasion or internal subversion in Truman’s case, or to demand that other peoples supply the ground forces for their own defense in the case of Nixon, or to insist that what is good for the goose is also good for the gander, that the Americans might use insurgents in a proxy war in Afghanistan to bleed the Soviets just as the Soviets had used insurgents in a proxy war to bleed the Americans in Vietnam? Above all, who would be the next George Kennan advocating containment of the Soviets as a Sun Tzuian strategy to win a global conflict without fighting a third world war?

So far, no one has been able to explain a viable grand strategy for America in our time, though not for lack of trying. The two books under review supply some insight into why we have failed so far and what would be necessary to craft such a strategy, however, so they deserve careful analysis.

Hal Brands has written a “breakout” book, the sort any mere assistant professor in America today would love to have written. He begins by asking, “What good is grand strategy?” Is it possible to have grand strategy in a world of exponentially increasing flux? Might not a case-by-case approach be better, something like the maxim “Don’t do stupid stuff!” espoused by some in the Obama administration? Would it even be desirable to have such a strategy if it became a doctrine that prevented adapting to events and trends not merely beyond American control but also beyond anyone’s power to predict? And what, precisely, do we mean by grand strategy anyway? Not without reason, Brands observes, experts—perhaps practitioners especially—often laugh at the very idea of anything like grand strategy as either a “quixotic” or even a “pernicious” pursuit. “The result of all this is that discussions of grand strategy are often confused or superficial. Too frequently, they muddle or obscure what they mean to illuminate” (page vii).

Following Clausewitz, Brands sees the purpose of strategic theory as clarifying “concepts and ideas that have become confused and entangled” (page 1). After a brief history of the development of the concept of grand strategy in the works of such writers as J. F. C. Fuller, Edward Mead Earle, Basil Liddell Hart, and Colin Gray, he defines grand strategy as “the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy. . . . From this intellectual calculus flows policy, the various concrete initiatives—diplomacy, the use of force, others—through which states interact with foreign governments and peoples” (page 3). In other

words, it is the conceptual framework, a mental map, so to speak, that helps states determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there, all the while accepting that chance, friction, and the reactions of foreign governments and even nonstate actors, not to mention partisan politics at home, compel statesmen to tack, like sailors, trying to steer a constant course to reach their desired destination.

With this understanding of the purpose of grand strategy in mind, the bulk of Brands's book is about helping us tell the difference between good and bad grand strategy, so we can embrace the former and reject the latter the next time either is proposed. In further refining his definition, he establishes some provisional criteria for critical analysis. Grand strategy is the "conceptual logic" that ensures all the instruments of statecraft, including particular foreign policies, are orchestrated to maximize benefits to a nation's core interests—including and with highest priority in the United States, a free way of life at home. Grand strategy provides a crucial link between medium- and long-term goals. It is obsessed with the relation between means and ends, capabilities and objectives. It is as much a process as a single principle—and an interactive process especially, because to stay on course, it requires constant reassessment and adaptation to the initiatives of adversaries and unpredictable, or at least unpredicted, events. It operates no less in peacetime than in wartime, because one must go to war with the tools developed in peace and using those tools well can make war less likely or necessary. Because resources are always finite, and overstretch a constant danger, grand strategy must establish priorities, like defeating Germany first in the Second World War. With such a holistic perspective, it can liberate statesmen from doctrine, dogma, and "theateritis" (page 8), all of which might lead to sacrificing higher ends to lower means. And it is not a magic bullet. All statesmen work within constraints, sometimes from domestic politics, sometimes from bureaucracies, sometimes from allies and other foreign countries, and not least of all, from their very humanity. As human beings, their fate is bounded rationality, the limits to their ability to understand a protean universe (pages 4–16, 190–206).

These criteria did not arise like Athena from Zeus's head. They arose from experience, or rather, an interrogation of history. Although never perfect, they provide a rough-and-ready basis to evaluate grand strategy, which Brands does by holding up to these standards the administrations of Harry S. Truman, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. Brands has two success stories, more or less: the Truman and Reagan administrations, the bookend presidencies of the Cold War. The Truman era is sometimes treated as a "golden age" for American grand strategy. Giants seemed to walk the earth: George Kennan, George C. Marshall, Paul Nitze, Dean Acheson, and many others who were "present at the creation" of the grand strategy of containment, a

middle ground between appeasement and war. Bit by bit and year by year, the leaders of the Truman administration created “situations of strength.” They revitalized Europe with the Marshall Plan, built NATO, brought Japan into the greater American coprosperity sphere, and generally ensured that in the age of industrial warfare, the key centers of industrial power outside the Soviet Union were aligned with the United States. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they followed Halford Mackinder in their determination to prevent any single country from dominating the Eurasian landmass. A concomitant danger was overextension, with the United States, in the words of one American official, “stretched from hell to breakfast” around the globe. That containment meant restraining the United States, not merely the Soviet Union, was a Kennanesque subtlety many did not understand. So Americans had to learn the hard way from overextension in Korea that they needed to set priorities (some theaters—Europe and Japan—were more important than others, like the Asian mainland, including China and Korea). And money was often more important than arms, especially if it enabled allies to take on the burden of defending themselves, and the strength of the American economy was always the American comparative advantage, or Clausewitzian center of gravity, in the Cold War. Perhaps most important, the Truman administration was capable of learning from its mistakes and adapting to unanticipated challenges, like the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949 and Chinese intervention on the side of North Korea in the Korean War. Timely reassessments led to enacting much of NSC-68, calling for the largest peacetime military buildup in American history, and to settling for limited objectives in Korea, thus enabling the United States to refocus on Europe, the primary theater of the Cold War.

The opposite bookend for the Cold War is the Reagan administration from 1981 to 1989. Did this administration have a grand strategy? Some dismiss Reagan as a mere ideologue, or even caricature him as an anti-intellectual buffoon more fortunate in his timing than skillful in his statecraft. Brands demurs. After American defeat in Vietnam, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Soviet expansion in such far-flung places as Angola, the momentum of the Cold War appeared to many, not merely Reagan, to have shifted in the Soviets’ favor. Yet Reagan especially had an acute understanding that the Soviet Union was far weaker than it had looked in the late 1970s. Reagan and his advisers sensed that the United States could take advantage of that weakness by exerting military, economic, political, and ideological pressure—not to bring about the regime’s collapse, though some hoped this might happen, but rather to provide diplomatic leverage to moderate Soviet behavior and reduce Cold War tensions. Thus, for example, the Reagan-era arms buildup was designed not merely to close the “window of vulnerability” presumed to arise from Soviet advances in missile technology but

also to increase the economic strains on the Soviet system, which spent at least 20 percent of its GDP (and probably much, much more) on the military in the early 1980s. Henry Rowen at the CIA, and Caspar Weinberger and Andrew Marshall at the Pentagon, developed what Marshall called a “cost-imposing strategy” that would confront the Soviets with a painful dilemma: concede defeat in the arms race or overstretch their economy in an effort to keep pace (page 112).

For Reagan, the Strategic Defense Initiative, a.k.a. “Star Wars,” was an end in itself. He deplored the doctrine of mutual assured destruction, was determined to find an alternative to it, and would never bargain it away, even when Soviet leader Gorbachev offered generous concessions. Nonetheless, those concessions arose, in part, from Gorbachev’s own awareness that the arms race was moving in a new direction in which the Soviets could not compete at a price they could afford. And Gorbachev was not the only one to change. From the ABLE ARCHER crisis of 1983, in which the Soviets misinterpreted a NATO exercise as the beginning of a surprise nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, Reagan learned to recalibrate American policy. He understood that the successful negotiations he sought would be possible only if he toned down his rhetoric (pages 124–25). This reassessment led to five summits between Reagan and Gorbachev between 1985 and 1988. Although the administration’s accomplishments were sullied by the Iran-Contra scandal, the results of Reagan speaking more softly while carrying an ever bigger stick were stunning. By the time he left office, the world was a much safer place, with the Soviets agreeing to eliminate all intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe, accepting deep cuts in their strategic arsenals, withdrawing from Afghanistan and other third-world conflicts, unilaterally reducing their conventional forces, and signaling a commitment to self-determination in Eastern Europe and liberalization at home.

Brands also looks at two cases that deserve to be counted as failures. For Brands, President Nixon and his brilliant national security adviser (later Secretary of State), Henry Kissinger, failed because they were too heroic; President George W. Bush and his national security team because their strategy was too grand. It is difficult to imagine a more unlikely team than Nixon and Kissinger. The former began his political career as the sort of red-baiting demagogue Kissinger could only detest. As a European émigré and Harvard intellectual, Kissinger represented everything in the so-called East Coast establishment that Nixon despised. Yet they had one important thing in common. They believed that extraordinary individuals could change the course of history, so Nixon was fascinated by the drama of the “big play” (like the opening to China) that could cut through the daily morass of politics. Kissinger, the archpolitical realist, had an almost romantic vision of the lonely statesman imposing his vision on his time (pages 59–60). To be fair, few American leaders have faced such extraordinary

challenges. Management of the end of the Vietnam War, negotiation from weakness with the Soviet Union, and the implosion of American society in the late 1960s limited their flexibility. They were dealt a weak hand, and, one might conclude, played their few cards as best they could.

Their chief goal was to decrease American burdens and increase American flexibility, while at the same time maintaining global order and keeping radical forces in check (page 60). The key was triangular diplomacy, especially the opening to China, as a way to balance against the Soviets, and *détente*, as a means to create a structure of legitimacy, an agreed set of rules for superpower competition, with the Soviets especially. This experiment was partially successful, but it came at a terrible price. Heroic statesmanship, as practiced by Nixon and Kissinger, led to a conspiratorial ethos that required working outside the constraints of the American political system, and sometimes in opposition to those constraints, to international law, and to the traditional American commitment to democratic governments, in Chile, for example (pages 76–79). This effort to circumvent the system was bound to produce a backlash on both the right and the left, with Democrats tying their hands and undermining their credibility against North Vietnam and the Soviets, and many Republicans, like Reagan, denouncing *détente* as appeasement. By the end of the Ford administration in 1976, it is fair to say the structure of peace Nixon and Kissinger had sought to establish on the model of the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was close to collapse. Not only had their efforts produced enormous domestic opposition but also the Soviets themselves did not buy into the theory of “self-containment” that *détente* had been designed to produce (pages 69, 82). They refused to “link” ongoing competition in the third world to trade concessions and arms control. Partisan politics at home and the Soviets’ refusal to play by the proposed new rules of the game made the heroic approach look increasingly quixotic.

Brands bends over backward to be fair to the George W. Bush administration, but his final judgment of that administration’s grand strategy is damning. Quite rightly Brands observes greater continuity than is commonly acknowledged between the Bush administration and that of President Clinton. In the aftermath of the Cold War, American grand strategy, if there was one at all, was “enlargement” of the world’s free community of market democracies. Under the Clintonites, that meant hegemony on the cheap. Americans would globalize free institutions and economic interdependence, but would not commit substantial military forces anywhere, thus leading to a variety of ineffective half-measures, in Somalia and Kosovo, for example, which made hawks on the right see the Clintonites as amateurs (pages 145–49). Nonetheless, like Clinton before him, it appeared President Bush would be a domestic-policy president primarily. The “Vulcans” surrounding him did not gain substantial influence until 9/11. Within months of that

atrocities, however, the president was proclaiming his intention to preserve lasting American military hegemony, to strike preemptively—and unilaterally—against gathering threats, and to treat “rogue states” seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as no less a danger than terrorism (page 151). Promoting democracy in places where it had few cultural roots, if any at all, was not the primary objective of the Bush administration’s grand strategy. That is better understood as making an example out of noxious regimes that might support terrorists, but democracy promotion was a serious secondary objective and one that loomed larger as a pretext for war after the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In the course of eighteen months President Bush embarked on a path that was breathtaking in its neo-Wilsonian scope and ambition. He would democratize not only Afghanistan (hard enough), but also Iraq, a country that had nothing to do with 9/11 and whose ethno-sectarian cleavages made democratic consensus unlikely and democratic pluralism downright dangerous. Indeed, the Iraq war was intended to launch a campaign to democratize the entire Middle East on the erroneous assumption that revolutionary change would make Middle Eastern states more stable, less violent at home, and less likely to support terrorists or become havens for them. Worse still, the declared objective of perpetual hegemony risked producing the very international resistance—including among allies, not merely adversaries—it was meant to avoid.

Many blame the postinvasion anarchy in Iraq and resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan on failures of strategic planning among Bush’s advisers (for “phase four” peace and stability operations especially). Under Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the United States was notoriously unwilling to commit forces large and long enough to have a chance of achieving its ambitious objectives in nation building. Brands concedes these problems, but concludes that the fundamental problem was poor assessment of the capabilities and limitations of American power. Hyperpower offensives were justified with worst-case scenarios (rogue states passing WMD to terrorists), but the strategies to pursue them were based on best-case scenarios about the ease of establishing any kind of order, much less a democratic one, in the wake of merely military victory. If so, grand strategy in the Bush administration was conceptually flawed from the beginning, because it overestimated what American power could achieve and underestimated the costs, risks, uncertainties, and unintended consequences inherent in trying to transform a large portion of the world in the American image (pages 164, 176–80).

What ultimately is the object of grand strategy? This question invites reflection on the latest book by the most famous American grand strategist alive today, *World Order* by Henry Kissinger. This is not Kissinger’s best work, but at age ninety-one, it may well be his last. Indeed, it is fair to say that Kissinger has been

rewriting the same book, focused on the same problem of establishing a balance of power and a structure of legitimacy, for decades, ever since the German émigré, appalled by the devastation of the Second World War, wrote his doctoral dissertation at Harvard. When revised as his first book in 1954, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problem of Peace, 1812–22*, the dissertation established his place as one of the foremost students of peace and peacemaking in the twentieth century. Arguably his best book is *Diplomacy*, which surveys efforts to blend legitimacy and balance from the Treaty of Westphalia to the present. With one important exception, readers will find little Kissinger has not already said (and often better elsewhere) in *World Order*, but the exception is so huge that some might even think Kissinger has defined what American grand strategy ought to seek to accomplish in the twenty-first century.

Missing from *World Order* is a silent, now deceased interlocutor. As the book comes to an end, Kissinger appears to be in a conversation with Samuel Huntington about the possible clash of civilizations and what, if anything, can be done about it. In particular, he is worried about the rise of China. Says Kissinger, “To strike a balance between the two concepts of order—power and legitimacy—is the essence of statesmanship” (page 367). International crises that can lead to major wars tend to occur as this balance unravels. China is a potential problem not merely because of its growth in power but also because it does not share all or even most Western conceptions of legitimacy. The Westphalian system, based on the principle of sovereignty, that Kissinger admires was designed by and for European states. It is partially enshrined in the United Nations Charter. If there is anything like a universal code of legitimacy in international affairs, it is in that charter, but it is largely a creation of the West in 1945 at a time when Wilsonianism was resurgent in the United States and the United States was powerful enough to be a global hegemon setting the terms of future world order. Understandably, those who did not partake in framing that order, or were marginalized as it was framed, do not necessarily have the same stake in its preservation, or any stake at all. They may be more inclined to pursue its transformation, which is inevitable, with the great question being how to do so peacefully.

Not surprisingly, when many wonder whether interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere produced strategic overextension for the United States, Kissinger aims to strike a balance between American leadership and restraint, a process he sees as “inherently unending. What it does not permit is withdrawal” (page 370). As he sees that matter, “a reconstruction of the international system is the ultimate challenge to statesmanship in our time” (page 371). The penalty for failure will not necessarily be a major war between states; perhaps more likely is an evolution of spheres of influence identified with particular domestic structures and forms of governance (for example, the Westphalian model of the

West versus an Islamist model in the Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan, and elsewhere). A struggle between regions, a.k.a. Huntington's clash of civilizations, could be even more debilitating, and protracted, than the struggle among nations has been. While never careless about the balance of power, Kissinger is close to Huntington in claiming that the "quest for world order will require a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order *within* the various regions, and to relate the regional orders to one another" (page 371).

To paraphrase Basil Liddell Hart, the object of war is a better state of peace, if only from our own point of view. In like manner, Kissinger is suggesting that the object of grand strategy is a more favorable world order, at least from our own point of view. "The United States needs a strategy and a diplomacy" to serve that end. Without setting prescriptions, Kissinger does list the questions a coherent grand strategy would have to address. What do we seek to prevent, no matter what happens, and if necessary alone? What do we seek to achieve, even if not supported by *any* multilateral effort? What do we seek to achieve, or prevent, *only* if supported by an alliance? What should we *not* engage in, even if urged by a multilateral group or alliance? Above all, what is the nature of the values we seek to advance? What applications depend in part on circumstances (page 372)?

The same questions apply in principle to other societies, but American universalism and sense of mission may cause unnecessary conflict with regions and states that do not share similar premises. Kissinger's preferred solution is a kind of international pluralism, which is not to be confused with multiculturalism. As a quest for truth, especially about the highest and most important things, Western philosophy requires considering whether there is one best way of life, but the quest for peace allows, even demands, that there can be many civilizations—Western, Sinitic, Orthodox, Muslim, etc., each with its own sense of legitimacy. "To achieve a genuine world order, its components, while maintaining their own values, need to acquire a second culture that is global, structural, and juridical—a concept of order that transcends the perspective and ideals of any one region or state" (page 373). Few students of Kissinger's work will be surprised that, at this moment in history, Kissinger sees this second culture, or weak universal civilization, as a "modernization of the Westphalian system informed by contemporary realities" (page 373).

Attractive as this might seem to citizens of the West especially, one must not underestimate the difficulty of the task. As Brands reveals, Kissinger and Nixon failed in their efforts to get the Soviets to buy into the structure of legitimacy they sought with *détente*. If they failed when dealing with just one major power, one must wonder about the possibility of doing so with a multiplicity of civilizations. And of course, what people consider legitimate does change over time. The Concert of Europe established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 seemed to many

in 1848 and on other occasions to lock in an illegitimate order for the benefit of the ruling elites, and its seeming illegitimacy contributed to the origins of the First World War. Moreover, Kissinger's call for order within, not merely among, civilizations seems to imply a need for regional hegemons, though Nixon and Kissinger's vision of "regional sheriffs" failed dismally for the United States when the Iranian Revolution led to the overthrow of the shah of Iran. Indeed, at times Kissinger seems nostalgic for a world of "classical diplomacy," when states seemed to be all that mattered and diplomacy appeared to be made only by cabinet ministers, that has long since passed away; in more than a few ways, that world is often more the creation of contemporary academics seeking order than of the increasingly disordered period following the Congress of Vienna. On the other hand, the perfect must not be the enemy of the good, or even the merely satisfactory. If Kissinger's understanding of statesmanship sometimes seems unduly romantic, he deserves credit for pointing out the best possible objective, to be pursued bit by bit as time and opportunity allow, for American grand strategy in our century: a world in which we are safe to live according to our own principles based on the shared international culture of sovereignty, which would allow others to live according to their own principles, free from outside intervention, however distasteful their way of life might seem to us, so long as they do not threaten us and allies essential to our security. This *leben und leben lassen* approach would guard against the sort of liberal-democratic jihad feared by Brands while allowing for the continuing engagement with the world Kissinger quite rightly sees as necessary to geopolitical balance.

In sum, neither of these books lays out a complete grand strategy for our time, but each pushes the conversation in a useful direction. Kissinger's potential "last hurrah" represents his attempt to square the circle of Huntington's clash of civilizations and compels us to ask what grand strategy is for. Brands's fine work establishes him as a major-league strategic thinker whose book deserves multiple readings. It would grace the curriculum of any program in grand strategy.