Book review: "On Grand Strategy" by John Lewis Gaddis

By Glenn C. Altschuler  Apr 8, 2018

‘ON GRAND STRATEGY’
“I don’t know anything about diplomacy,” Abraham Lincoln wrote in 1861. “I will be very apt to make blunders.”

In fact, according to John Lewis Gaddis, a professor of history at Yale University, “he made very few.” Lincoln understood, intuitively, that successful strategists, in war and peace, align “potentially unlimited aspirations and necessarily limited capabilities.” They strike a balance between ends and means, practicalities and principles, current location and intended destination. When appropriate, they seize opportunities. When necessary, they rethink core assumptions while preserving existing world views. And they realize that common sense is like oxygen, “the higher you go, the thinner it gets;” and that however awe-inspiring they may seem, such ascents are subject to the laws of gravity.

In his book “On Grand Strategy,” Gaddis assesses the theory and practice of strategy employed by, among others, Xerxes, the Persian King; Octavian/Augustus; Machiavelli; Queen Elizabeth of England; King Philip II of Spain; Napoleon; John Quincy Adams; Carl von Clausewitz; Leo Tolstoy; Lincoln; Woodrow Wilson; Franklin D. Roosevelt and Isaiah Berlin (the political philosopher who distinguished between hedgehogs, who know one big thing, and foxes, who know many things). Based on presentations he gave at a yearlong seminar at Yale, “On Grand Strategy” is a splendid introduction to its subject.
Like many hedgehogs, Gaddis suggests, Xerxes and Napoleon, “like carriage horses wearing blinders,” failed to align means with ends by perceiving risks at every point. Ignoring the substantial challenges posed by logistics, climate, the morale of their troops, they fell into the traps the Greeks and Russians laid for them. Similarly, Woodrow Wilson did not pay sufficient attention to how his admittedly well-intentional Fourteen Points, “might align with histories, cultures and precedents.”

By contrast, Lincoln balanced law and justice against military necessity. Putting the Union first, he sought — and found — the means by which an endangered state could save itself and save its soul, tainted by slavery. To these ends, he retained the allegiance of border states, in part by ordering his commanders not to grant freedom to the slaves their troops captured. Equipped with political antennae “of the greatest possible delicacy,” Franklin Roosevelt made “pacts with the devil” to guide the United States through the Great Depression and World War II.

Along the way, Gaddis notes that “counterfactuals, like ghosts, should haunt historians.” Following his lead, critics, no doubt, will argue that he assesses his strategists as successful or unsuccessful based on how things ultimately turned out. Gaddis’ interpretation of Queen Elizabeth’s “dithering” and King Philip’s unshakeable determination to restore Catholicism to England, for example, might be different if the Spanish Armada had not been forced, in part by unfavorable winds, to disperse.

Some strategists, including radicals in the 1840s and ’50s who viewed the immediate abolition of slavery as a moral imperative, I would add,
advanced their cause by insisting that their ends float above their means. Although they might agree that “adaptation to incompatibles” is often necessary, for them, “On Grand Strategy” does not offer the guidance they seek.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.