



John Lewis Gaddis. *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. viii + 150 pp. \$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01174-8; \$14.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01836-5.



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American Diplomatic History Made Easy

This is a small book, short in length—some 118 pages of text. As a matter of fact I read it closely on a flight from Chicago to California. The book is, however, rich in analysis and clarity, the kind that comes from an author who is without doubt the leader in his field. That said, the essay that is presented here is an effort to provide some sort of context, perhaps a first stab at a “theory” of what has motivated and influenced the overall development of American diplomacy since the founding. This can be a dilemma for the historian. As Gaddis freely admits, the accuracy of historical writing diminishes as it approaches the present due to a short perspective and few sources. However, he argues, the immediacy means that its relevance increases.

Gaddis is motivated to attempt this feat, he tells us, by the new and unprecedented events of 9/11. Rather than allow the pundits and journalists to capture the high ground on searching for “meaning” in these events by looking at the present, Gaddis forces the reader to consider the September attacks in the context of all of American history. To accomplish this he breaks the book into three nearly even sections, each possessing something

like a theme that allows the reader to see consistency in the development of policy as a reaction to threats, perceived or real. Following the brief introduction are three chapters, the second dealing with the nineteenth century, the third with the twentieth, and the fourth with the twenty-first century.

To begin, Gaddis reminds us of C. Vann Woodward’s thesis that America has always derived a strong sense of security from the proximity of three oceans, the Atlantic, Pacific, and the Arctic. While fighting wars, Americans have not had to exhaust themselves in defensive measures. Even the Cold War, with its notion of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), had a real level of physical security. But, as the reader is reminded, Woodward mused that the day might come to pass when this would change, and Americans would no longer be able to count on feeling secure in their daily existence. Gaddis posits that this insecurity arrived on September 11, 2001, prompting not only a national security crisis but also a national identity crisis.

The event that inaugurated the need for an American foreign policy, at least according to Gaddis, came on Au-

gust 24, 1814, with the British burning of Washington, D.C. The defeat led the fledging nation to conclude that “safety comes from enlarging, rather than contracting, its sphere of responsibilities” (p. 13). The attack was a surprise, and the defeat a shock. It proved to many, most importantly to John Q. Adams, that Thomas Jefferson’s earlier policy of “retreat,” a self-imposed embargo, was a failure. It is really Adams, then secretary of state to James Monroe, who is cast as the hero here, creating a method “by which expansion could be made to provide security” (p. 15). Gaddis also introduces three key terms: pre-emption, unilateralism, and hegemony.

Initially the United States resorted to “pre-emption” since it was surrounded by potential enemies: England, Spain, Native Americans, and pirates. For example, Adams used Andrew Jackson’s execution of two British citizens accused of organizing raids into American territory as a reason to take action. The United States had the right to act (pre-emption) in the area of a failed state (Spanish Florida) in order to protect itself. The same reason is given for dealing with the Native Americans; security came with removal. The Mexican Southwest is seen as a derelict state, and U.S. security required control of the Pacific coast and Texas to prevent European intervention. Polk followed Adams in a “pre-emptive war.” Some sixty years later Dewey’s attack at Manila Bay pre-empted the Germans or Japanese from taking the Philippines. Gaddis cites the famous quote by Theodore Roosevelt that a civilization that loosens its binding ties “may force the United States, however reluctantly ... to the exercise of an international police power” (quoted, p. 21). And thus the justification for the Platt Amendment (1901) and the Panama Canal.

John Quincy Adams also set the stage for acting unilaterally. He favored no alliances in peacetime, except interaction through treaties and trade. As examples of the avoidance of long-term commitments to any one country, Gaddis cites the Monroe Doctrine and John Hay’s Open Door Policy for China. Adams also clearly saw that without a single unified state, America would be subject to endless petty fights like its European antecedents. Borders were set to the north (Canada) from mutual exhaustion and agreement, and to the south (Mexico) due to racism. Hegemony, as Adams defined it, meant secure borders and their proximities, but not going out into the world “in search of monsters to destroy” (p. 110). Adams’s legacy, as perhaps the greatest secretary of state, was to last until the Second World War and new geopolitical realities.

In the second section Gaddis moves directly to the Second World War. He allows that while there are some similarities between 9/11 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, there are many critical differences, such as the latter representing an attack by the military forces of one legitimate state against those of another. But the war that Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) declared was rather different than the one declared by George W. Bush. FDR declared a national mobilization that would affect all Americans. Bush asked for a partial one, to effect a “global police action against terrorism” but not change Americans’ day-to-day lives (p. 37).

Gaddis here suggests that 9/11 was in many ways more similar to the attack of 1814 than to Pearl Harbor, and that Bush’s reaction more closely resembled Adams’s ideas of pre-emption, unilateralism, and hegemony than it resembled the course taken by FDR. A key difference was that FDR had to consider America’s increased vulnerability as a result of the transportation revolution. Roosevelt’s responses were also different from the course plotted by Woodrow Wilson, who clearly looked to intervene in a war that posed no real threat to American national security. Rather, Gaddis sees Wilson as an anomaly, and his efforts at creating a world system a short-lived failure. Roosevelt, by far the better president, accepted the need for America to engage in a system of international security, but he always kept his “proclaimed interests from extending beyond actual capabilities” (p. 47).

The realities of the Second World War now made the old unilateralism impossible, as Gaddis points out. First, the United States was under attack on two fronts, and FDR intended for the bulk of the fighting to be done by allies (Great Britain and the USSR), supplied by the “Arsenal of Democracy.” Allies had been born of necessity rather than affinity, so FDR worked at the apparently inconsistent idea that national interests could be embedded within a “cooperative multilateral framework.” His creation of the United Nations, with China as a surrogate vote (and the idea of a Security Council veto), and the Bretton Woods system were meant to retain, respectively, American political and economic dominance. When it finally became clear that the USSR would be the next enemy, why did America not take pre-emptive action? Gaddis offers that because such action carried the risk of the United States losing the moral high ground, if there was to be a war, FDR wanted the Russians to fire that first shot.

The Cold War saw a continuation of sorts of the

changes that had come about during the previous war. For America, again the challenge was to maintain its interests without firing the first shot. Although the Truman Doctrine might have amounted to that shot, the Marshall Plan saved matters. By offering assistance to all, including Eastern Europe and the USSR, who refused it, the United States gained the moral high ground. Also, the horrendous potential of nuclear weapons made military pre-emption unthinkable—hence John F. Kennedy’s reluctance during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Gaddis believes the Cold War resulted in an “asymmetry of legitimacy,” or two spheres of influence, which established American hegemony as the better of two options compared with the Soviets (p. 64). To maintain it required a near end to pre-emption and unilateralism.

Moving into the present, Gaddis’s argument is at the same time insightful and dated. Since the book came out in 2004, events on the ground have compromised his observations concerning Bush’s foreign policy and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. That said, this reviewer believes that Gaddis makes a very evenhanded assessment of Bush’s goals, as well as his potentially numerous failures, in light of historical precedent.

Gaddis starts with things that are not always made evident. First, the surprise attack on 9/11, was importantly different from those on Washington in 1814 and Pearl Harbor in 1941. The perpetrators were not from a state or in uniform, but rather, as he puts it, a gang. Also, the damage they inflicted was out of proportion to the resources deployed—nineteen lives and a few hundred thousand dollars—a real shock. The 9/11 attacks were truly novel in that they changed our notion of security and how to maintain it. The Cold War system and its outcome had bred a certain complacency toward threats. As a result, the power of the state itself was in many ways diminished, and America under the Clinton administration moved to a diplomacy that assumed this new “peace” was perpetual. Without doubt, 9/11 would force the United States to reassess its assumptions about security at all levels. To understand the response that came out of this, Gaddis makes use of Bush’s report on national security and the West Point speech of June 1, 2002.

Again, the three terms re-emerge: pre-emption, uni-

lateralism, and hegemony. As most will recognize, Gaddis has now tied Bush into the continuum that he sees in American diplomatic history. For him Bush is in many ways more similar to John Quincy Adams (although not nearly as successful) than to FDR or others. Bush is (or maybe now, was) willing to be pre-emptive in his effort to confront terrorism. Even the attack on Iraq, whether it was right or wrong, is cited as a pre-emptive effort to forestall a future terrorist attack. The establishment of a democratic Iraq would, theoretically, pre-empt future terrorism by eliminating the motivation for so many disgruntled young Muslims. Bush is unilateral, obviously, in his willingness to go it alone, contrary to UN or general world opinion. Finally, Gaddis says, Bush’s policy is ultimately based on American economic and military hegemony and the assumption that the world would prefer an American policeman to a series of local oppressors.

The assumptions behind this policy have the potential to backfire, as Gaddis points out, because they go too far and assume too much. American foreign policy in the nineteenth century was built on staying within the hemisphere and having limited goals. None of its initiatives, such as the Mexican War, brought international involvement. In the twentieth century foreign policy was balanced carefully on the fact that there was always something that made America the better option. In the first case, Nazism or Japanese imperialism was worse; in the second it was Soviet communism. It is the “grandness” of Bush’s grand strategy that has been its undoing. Another insight is Gaddis’s suggestion of “shock and awe” as a diplomatic idea as well as a military one. But it is one that requires momentum, and when that is lost, the strategy is crippled. Given the situation in Iraq, America is no longer perceived as the stabilizer, but as the de-stabilizer. This has ruined the perception of relative protection that America provided in its “hegemony.” The American “Empire of Liberty” is then suffering from the two great ills that all seem to undermine empires, or so says Thucydides: hubris and overextension.

To conclude, Gaddis’s little book is a masterpiece for its length and topic. The book provides a great introduction to the history of American diplomacy. If nothing else, it will certainly provoke a good deal of discussion, which is always worthwhile.

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