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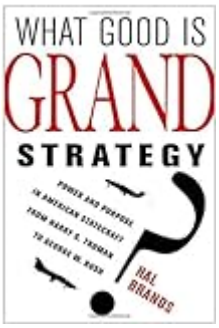

Hal Brands. *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. 273 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5246-8.

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In a surprisingly brief book for its subjectâtwo hundred pagesâDuke Universityâs Hal Brands attempts to define the concept of a âgrand strategyâ in foreign policy and makes recommendations for its implementation. Brands dismisses the idea that in todayâs complex and dynamic, post-Cold War era a set of defined priorities and goals to guide international relations is an antiquated concept, the world too complicated and diffuse for any single set of guiding principles. Despite the claims of some, Brands argues, the United States does not have to react to developments on the world stage in an ad hoc way or on an individual basis. For Brands the key is to learn from the successes and failures of four post-World War II presidents who attempted a grand strategy: Harry Trumanâs initial construction of containment; a reinterpretation of those principles during the Richard Nixon-Henry Kissinger years; Ronald Reaganâs efforts to end the Cold War; and, finally, the post-Cold War policies of George W. Bush.

Brandsâs book begins appropriately enough with the problem of definition. âGrand strategy,â he suggests, is a rather nebulous term that has changed since it emerged a century ago during the First World War. If one is to argue for a grand strategy, a clear sense of the term is necessary at the outset. According to Brands a grand strategy is the âintellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy.â It is a âconceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there.â It is the âtheory or logic that guides leaders seeking security in a complex and insecure worldâ (p. 3). This involves the integration of a realistic assessment of the nature of the world and the threats it poses, the resources and abilities of the nation to operate toward its goals, and the various policy options available for success. It is not just diplomatic or military but the sum of the nationâs interactions with the outside world, including, for example, such aspects as humanitarian aid and economic relations. It considers internal costs and cohesion as well as the politics and appeal of policies, and thus always involves some form of a trade-off. Far from a single policy that dictates short-term actions, a grand strategy should allow for considerations of changing circumstances and thus evolve itself. It is interactive and operates in peacetime as well as war. It does not require official codification or endorsement. If a nation does not realize its limitations and prioritize its overriding objectives, Brands suggests, it may find individual actions unsuccessful or even counterproductive. Given all of this, therefore, the formulation and implementation of a grand strategy is no easy task for

any leader, more so for an American president operating within a limited time frame and within the demands of a democracy that often prioritizes short-term advantage at the expense of long-term gain.

Brands agrees with previous scholars that the Truman era represented the golden age of grand strategy. Nevertheless, while Truman successfully established continuity and stability for the postwar period, he did so imperfectly and often with forgotten costs. Brands brings into his discussion the expectedâGeorge Kennan and NSC-68âbut he also notes that Truman operated on a series of evolving assumptions and priorities. Truman, Brands illustrates, demonstrated that grand strategy needed to be adaptive. Truman understood the basic tenets of containment by 1947 but lacked specific policies, which came through both design (i.e., National Security Act) and improvisation (i.e., Marshall Plan in reaction to crisis in Europe). With the development of the Soviet bomb and the fall of China, Truman revised his policies (i.e., tighter containment, more military), but these, in turn, contributed to new problems. Truman had difficulty maintaining Korea as a limited war while struggling to match ends with means. In the end, Brands concludes, Truman was largely successful at grand strategy. There was âreal purpose and innovation,â but it was a âmessy affair, and in some ways a deeply problematic one,â which left a number of issues unresolved (pp. 56, 57).

The Nixon and Kissinger era had a different challenge. The world had changed and the United States was in a more perilous position. Moscow was now nearing strategic parity while countries like Germany and Japan were gaining economically. New powers, such as China, were also wielding more diplomatic and military influence. This shifting global balance required a recalculation of containment. The result was Nixonâs famous triangular policy (overtures to China), dÃ©tente and the use of linkage between issues in dealing with the Soviet Union, and the increased reliance on consolidated power and control within the executive branch. This produced some successes but also many failures as Nixon wrestled with Vietnam, a Third World âoften resistant to the logic of the Nixon-Kissinger grand strategy,â and growing domestic restrictions (p. 89). While a number of scholars applaud Nixon for his foreign policy prowess, Brands appears less enthralled. The lessons of the Nixon-Kissinger era, Brands suggests, include a realization that there are limits to what any grand strategy can achieve and that while the efforts of individual âheroic statesmenâ may offer more flexibility and boldness in policy, they can also create a âpoisonous mood within governmentâ and limit the âcollective wisdom that could be brought to bear on difficult problemsâ (p. 101).

Perhaps surprisingly, Brands appears more sympathetic to Reagan than to Nixon. In a chapter that asks whether Reagan had a grand strategy, Brands acknowledges that while Reagan was âhardly the prototypical strategic savant,â leading more in instinct than true analysis, he still fit the bill (p. 142). Reagan arrived assuming that the Soviet Union was militarily powerful but weaker economically and internally. By building up militarily, the United States could force the Soviet Union into more advantageous long-term agreements. What followed were policies to tax the Soviets on several fronts, including aiding anti-communist regimes in the Third World. When this initially appeared to harden Soviet resistance rather than lead to negotiations, however, Reagan adapted and recalculated his policies. He began to supplement his military hawkishness with more moderate rhetoric and subtle overtures and reassurances. With the help of new Soviet leadership, a rather fortunate development for which Reagan benefited, the result of Reaganâs shift was impressive, including a lessoning of tensions and an arms control agreement. Despite this conclusion, however, Brands is no simple Reagan apologist. Unlike Reaganâs hagiographers, Brands notes that the positives came with negatives. Reaganâs buildup came at its own cost to the United States while contributing to involvement in such areas as Afghanistan, which produced its own negative repercussions. Reaganâs grand strategy was imperfect and difficult but still offered lessons for strategists to come. The use of carrots as well as sticks mattered, as did proper timing and circumstance.

In regard to the last of the presidents analyzed, George W. Bush, Brands appears least sympathetic. Yes, Brands concludes, Bush had a clear âsense of mission and purpose,â his administrationâs belief in an unparalleled opportunity to restructure the world toward freedom (p. 165). This grand strategy, however, resulted from the âstrategic shockâ of the September 11 terrorist attacks, which demonstrated not only that the United States remained vulnerable and needed a new defense posture but also that a new long-term threat existed (p. 151). Reacting to the sudden change in circumstances, Bush developed a highly moralistic worldview, resulting, for example, in the concept of preemptive attack. In the ensuing wars of Afghanistan and Iraq, the administrationâs management style and decision making proved inadequate. It bordered on dogmatism and arrogance and operated on flawed assumptions. While Brands offers a rather perfunctory ac-

knowledgment at the end that history is dynamic and, given future developments, Bushâs legacy may rebound, he stresses that Bushâs failures offer their own insights. âFirst,â he states, âBushâs experience confirmed the truism that there is a long road between the articulation of a grand strategy and the successful implementation of that strategy.â Second, and perhaps most obviously, âa flawed and overambitious grand strategy could be quite dangerous.â There was âgreat peril in trying to be too grandâ (p. 189).

Taken as a whole, Brandsâs book appears as a fair assessment of postwar foreign policy even if some of his points are rather obvious. Brands could have strengthened his argument with additional material. For example, Brands could have explored in more detail diplomacy in the United Nations or the creation of the Bretton Woods System during the Truman years. He could have noted the role of environmental diplomacyâa new field in the early 1970sâas part of Nixonian strategy. He could have added more on the role of technology in the Bush era, or the role of technology in general in facilitating any grand strategy. There is, of course, the whole matter of cultural imperialism related to technology. Brands correctly states that a grand strategy should consider all aspects of international involvement but, without a doubt, technology-driven culture has always been a factor. None of this is meant to detract from Brandsâs book. It is difficult, of course, to summarize the foreign policy of any one president in a short text, much less an interpretive overview of four presidents. Such syntheses are important to history and Brands deserves credit for the book he has written. The narrative is straightforward and easy to follow if a bit dull, and Brands backs up his conclusions well. This is a solid piece of scholarship that should be of great value in modern American history classes, foreign policy surveys, and course work in international relations.

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