



Books review

by **Martin Skold**



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The most challenging conceptual aspect of grand strategy is determining of what it consists. The second most challenging conceptual aspect is the question of how to practise it, and how to advise future practitioners. Two recent books, John Lewis Gaddis' *On grand strategy* and A. Wess Mitchell's *The grand strategy of the Habsburg Empire*, offer substantive direction in both these regards. Gaddis initially considers the first before turning to the second; Mitchell offers a rich contribution to the second and in so doing offers perspective on the first.

Turning first to Gaddis' work, there are at least two understandings, and possibly a third overlapping understanding, of grand strategy. The most limited in scope is purely military: the process of allocating military resources at the highest levels of command in a major war, in pursuit of the war's objectives. At the other end of the spectrum, grand strategy can also be understood as a near-synonym for statecraft: the process of determining a state's objectives in the international realm and aligning its material and non-material resources (including its policy decisions) in pursuit of those objectives. An overlapping understanding of grand strategy refers to peacetime defence decision-making: grand strategy can be about planning the next war or allocating national resources in preparation for war.^[1]

Gaddis has adopted the statecraft version of the concept in its broadest sense. In so doing, he begins to fill an under-explored gap in the literature. There have, assuredly, been works published in the field of grand strategy that do not simply discuss military preparation and actually engage with the higher levels of statecraft. They have tended, however, to fall short of the mark when it comes to actually addressing the principles of running a state in the real world.

Where grand strategy is concerned, the tendency has been to argue about politics. Barry Posen (1996–1997 and 2014) and Robert Art (1998–1999 and 2003) are typical examples, as are the works of the American former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997 and 2012 are two notable examples). Mitchell's own previous work, with Jakub Grygiel, *The unquiet frontier: rising rivals, vulnerable allies, and the crisis of American power* (2016), is another well-written example. All of these are valuable and often insightful works (and with which this author often finds himself agreeing), and they frequently offer useful contributions to American discourse on foreign policy. However, they are attempts to address America's world role (the authors generally being Americans) at a specific time in history, rather than advise a policy maker (one is tempted to say a prince) more generally about how to play the game of high politics in a broader sense. Notable exceptions that at least employ historical experience are Edward Luttwak's *The grand strategy of the Roman Empire* (1976) and *The grand strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (2009). As Luttwak notes in a jacket comment for Mitchell's work, it is fortunate that another scholar has picked up where Luttwak's own studies left off. Paul Rahe's *The grand strategy of Classical Sparta: the Persian challenge* (2015 – the first of a projected three-volume series) is closer to the purely military, as opposed to holistic, sense of the term, but is another example of an attempt to study the subject from a practical standpoint.

[1] An exhaustive review of definitions of strategy and the scopes thereof would fill an article twice this size; for a general range of opinion, see Luttwak (2001, p. 269; 2009, p. 409), Strachan (2013, p. 16) and Paret (1986, p. 3). The authoritative work on the subject in recent years is undoubtedly Freedman (2013), who discusses the full range not only of understandings but also of applications of the concept.



Such examples are few and far between. When it comes to a manual for high politics in particular, Machiavelli – mentioned below – is often cited as the best guide, but he is at the very least in need of an update, if not a sequel.

Gaddis is attempting to address this. As befits a work understood to have been derived from his famous undergraduate class on grand strategy, his book is a rich, sometimes chaotic, always thought-provoking mix of historical analysis and philosophical precepts. In putting all of this together, Gaddis – long known as the doyen of historians of the past century's greatest geopolitical competition – has articulated something like a personal political philosophy. He is attempting to show leaders, present and future (perhaps some of whom have taken his class) how a wise leader manages a state in the real world. 'Grand' for him, is what it appears: it is high-level decision-making that not only determines how to pursue state goals, but sets them. Gaddis is actually even broader on this point: any worthy goal can take on the need for a grand strategy. 'Strategies become grander even as they remain within the beholder's eye. It's wrong to say, then, that states have grand strategies but people don't' (Gaddis, 2018, p. 21). But his book is a study of statecraft, first and foremost, if not exclusively (readers looking for advice on running a business as opposed to a government should look elsewhere) – particularly as Gaddis expressly states (p. 22) that he is not limiting himself to the question of how to wage war well.

This advice – in some ways the work resembles a handbook – is a welcome addition to a discipline that too often appears to have difficulty setting a strategy for itself. A major criticism of the strategic studies field is that it appears to tend toward inanity. The business strategy theorist Richard Rumelt once famously opined that while it would take years to train a strategist to be an automotive engineer, a weekend's worth of study could transform an automotive engineer into a strategist (Stewart, 2010, p. 179).^[2] By this criticism, strategy is simply not that complicated, or at any rate is not susceptible of serious study. Anyone can do it; few, if any, do it well, and in any event it cannot be taught – and therefore, implicitly, it cannot be reproduced. It is at best an art, not a science, and at worst an art without aesthetic principles.

This, however, is a misunderstanding. Strategy is indeed an art, but it is most crucially a dark art. As the fate of Machiavelli famously illustrates, practitioners of high politics – and strategy is not far removed from high politics – expose their profession to the light at substantial professional and personal risk. As the famous saying has it, those who speak do not know, and those who know do not speak. The reasons for this are themselves often best left unremarked upon, but can be boiled down to the simple recognition that strategy, in a fluid, no-holds-barred game (be it politics, business or war) involves deception, mental manipulation, and moral sophistry, and that these practices are difficult to discuss among those without a firm grasp of their utility...and when known are secrets often best offered to a chosen few.

Strategists, therefore, are often reduced to commentators or even lexicographers. At worst, as in terrorism studies, definitional arguments hamstring discussion before it gets going. A famous instance in a business strategic context that can be extrapolated to questions of statecraft is probably Henry Mintzberg's 'Four "P"s' – strategy as 'plan', 'pattern', 'position', or 'perspective' (Mintzberg, 1994, pp. 23–32), each a different conceptual understanding of what a strategy does.^[3] One can thus see how discussions of 'how' are superseded by arguments about 'what'. Even Clausewitz was not immune to this, insofar as the more noted parts of his work – and far and away the most famous parts – concern a discussion of what war is and what it is about, rather than how to win it.

[2] Stewart, a trained philosopher and historian, has little patience for the concept of strategy writ large, an understandable reaction but not a helpful one for someone trying to run a state.

[3] Mintzberg (p. 27) draws for 'position' on the work of the corporate strategist Michael Porter (1980; 1985). One could also mention Porter (1996, pp. 45–59). Mintzberg alludes to the management theorist Peter Drucker with regard to 'perspective' (p. 32).



In his discussion of military genius, Clausewitz in effect admits to this problem, noting that because genius can never be truly comprehended, the rules by which it operates cannot be discerned. For a work famously inspired by a desire to learn from Napoleon's example, this is a discouraging beginning, which is not to say that it is not insightful (e.g. Clausewitz, 1993, p. 117). One may note, here, that skillsets diverge at this point: the ability to dissect what war is all about – or in a broader sense how statecraft is defined – does not necessarily exist in the same brain as the ability to win a war or run a government. One point often made across differing subfields of strategy is that the only true strategist is the organisation leader (cf. Andrews, 1980, p. 5 and Clausewitz, 1993, p. 207). Thus, the person who perfectly understands the rules of poker may not necessarily do well at the card table.

It is here that Gaddis has made a significant contribution to strategic studies, since he has offered his own prescription in the form of an elaborate conceptual analysis drawing on an ancient proverb. The proverb was originally a line of poetry ascribed to the quasi-mythical lyric poet and soldier of fortune Archilochus. As Gaddis notes, its context and even its authenticity cannot be known now. On face, however, it reads, 'The fox knows many tricks. The hedgehog knows one big one.' Gaddis invokes this line of poetry by way of the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin and the political forecaster Philip Tetlock. (Cf. Gaddis, 2018, pp. 8–9; Tetlock, 2005, pp. xi, 73–75, 118, 128–129, cited in Gaddis, 2018, pp. 8–9 and 316. See also Tetlock and Gardner, 2015, pp. 69–72. The original essay is Berlin, 1953.) As with any good aphorism, there is a great deal to unpack in such a simple and concise statement, and this author begs Gaddis' indulgence in advance if an oversimplification results. It is possible, however, to elucidate and analyse at least some of what is meant by this pithy statement, which drives a sizeable portion of Gaddis' teaching.

Briefly, to be a fox is to be at one with the present. It is to be constantly seeing what is going on, taking in not only bits of data from diverse sources but different ways of interpreting that data. It is to be constantly acting on those inputs, shifting course as necessary, blowing with the wind or at least adjusting course constantly as it shifts. As Gaddis notes, a person whom one would identify as a fox is at home in a fluid, dynamic, constantly changing situation (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 9, 309). The concept can be understood in a Jungian sense: a fox is engaging their mental perceiving functions, using their senses and intuition to absorb, understand and spontaneously adapt to an external environment (Jung, 1976, pp. 178–269, esp. 215–229). In short, a fox is a tactician. The archetypical fox is probably a fighter pilot in a dogfight or an infantryman assaulting an enemy position; the diplomatic equivalent is probably a survivor like Talleyrand or Bülow; the domestic political equivalent is perhaps the unprincipled and otherwise ineffective representative who nevertheless keeps getting elected. But a fox, as Gaddis points out, risks going nowhere in particular, giving up too much to obtain too little, or losing sight of the bigger picture by only seeing the pieces.

The hedgehog, by contrast, fixates on goals or received wisdom. Even if that wisdom comes from an internal conviction rather than tradition or external pressure, it is an internally embedded notion of how things are supposed to be. A hedgehog is a dogmatist, an inflexible and obstinate individual who refuses to be dogged by what they see as trivialities that come up (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 9–14). There is the way forward and one must batter on. In Jungian terms, a hedgehog engages their mental judging functions, using reason or raw emotion to form opinions about things: how they are, how they are going to be, how they should be, or what one should do about them (Jung, 1976, pp. 178–269, esp. 192–215). Archetypically, the hedgehog may be the politician who sets policy based on core ideology, takes a firm stand for or against a person or issue, demands the unconditional surrender of an enemy...or the 'château general' who sends his men over the top of the trench repeatedly despite horrendous casualties, believing they will win through eventually.



While it would appear that Gaddis prefers the fox, and while he notes (p. 9) that, in Philip Tetlock's formulation, foxes are better at prediction (because they absorb more information) and therefore potentially make better strategists, it would be very 'unfoxlike' to boil matters down to such simplicity. For, in fact, Gaddis appears to argue that the great strategist is that rare person who is *both* fox and hedgehog – the person who can see both the forest and the trees simultaneously, or, as Gaddis argues by way of a line from Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln*, the one who has both an accurate compass for direction and who can successfully dodge obstacles while navigating (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 16–17). This mirrors an insight of the strategic scholar Colin Gray: strategy, in Gray's formulation, is neither policy (what must be done – perhaps the province of hedgehogs) nor tactics (what one does to get there – ideally a job for a fox), but the 'bridge' (Gray's famous term) between them (Gray, 1999, p. 17).^[4]

Gaddis quotes Berlin as initially arguing that fox and hedgehog were not to be sought in the same person, before admitting (from late retirement) that perhaps this was not so (Gaddis, 2018, p. 15). Echoing Gaddis' hedgehog-fox dichotomy, Clausewitz [1993, pp. 172–173] had also devoted a couple of paragraphs to noting that 'perception' – the province of foxes – and 'judgment' – what hedgehogs do – merge in warfare as in all art. If one translates strategy from the strict realm of warfare to broader politics, one readily sees the point.) Certainly, the person with this kind of mental balance is rare, something Gaddis repeats and returns to several times, but this is in fact the point. Gaddis may – though he does not quite say it – have come upon a working definition of political greatness.

To that point, and to return to the understanding of strategy in politics as fundamentally a dark art, the challenge would appear to be how to teach it. One does not teach any subject merely by defining it. Clausewitz, to whom Gaddis devotes a chapter, famously threw up his hands at the question of deriving fixed principles for strategy, and Gaddis hammers this point through to the reader in multiple places: a good theory will pertain to reality but never describe every facet of it, and strategy exists in the realm of dynamic, interconnected, chaotic environments that are not reducible to fixed laws as positivist social scientists might wish (cf. Gaddis, 2018, pp. 185–216, esp. 213–215; see also Clausewitz, 1993, pp. 172–174).

How, then, does one teach strategy? Gaddis (p. 22) asks this exact question. Assuredly, great statesmen have had mentors, although Gaddis points out that many of those he considers the best – Augustus Caesar, Elizabeth I, Abraham Lincoln – appear to have been self-taught (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 66–67, 126–149, esp. 132, 221–235). Whatever the case, the key seems to be learning pattern recognition – not learning fixed lessons from history (that would be too hedgehog-like), but learning when and how to apply knowledge gained from the past (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 32, 108). To that end, Gaddis takes his readers on a tour of world history, not trying to teach them everything that can be known about creating sound strategy, but giving them some idea of the mental processes of the people who have managed to pull it off. It is difficult to summarise all of these lessons, and it is better to read the book and savour them. Nevertheless, a few examples of Gaddis' approach will be useful here.

The first is what not to do. Gaddis begins with the classical world before moving forward to almost the present day (he stops where he began, with Isaiah Berlin and the Cold War political environment that drove his thought) (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 4–6, 295–305, 315).^[5] His first stop is at the Hellespont in 480 BCE, with Xerxes preparing to invade Greece. Despite his advisors' pointing out that his expedition's failure is overdetermined from the start, Xerxes is intent on invading, come what may.

[4] Gray is concerned with strategy solely in a military context.

[5] Gaddis wryly notes (p. 315) that he stopped at the Cold War because he had already written too much about the strategy of that competition.



A long string of Pyrrhic victories and unrecoverable defeats – famously, at Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea – await him, and in the back of his mind he may know this, but he barrels ahead in any case, on a rendezvous with destiny if not with success. Xerxes, Gaddis summarises, is a hedgehog with no foxlike instincts to balance him. Whatever else one does, Gaddis hints, one should not do this (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 10–14, 25).

What does work? Learning from mistakes while keeping the final goal in mind, Gaddis suggests, using the political autodidact Octavian Caesar (later Augustus) as a model (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 66–91). Avoiding ideological purism and following one's principles over a cliff is also important – to oversimplify Gaddis' analysis not only of Machiavelli but, improbably, of St Augustine (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 93–119).^[6] Also important is keeping one's options open while playing enemies and even friends off one another – Gaddis' model is Elizabeth I, who mixed toleration with police state tactics and avoided following any one advisor or faction too much (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 132–149). So is the *coup d'œil* (here Gaddis borrows from Clausewitz): the act of choosing one's moment and taking advantage of a critical development, whatever that may be (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 201, 203, 239–240; see also Clausewitz, 1993, pp. 117–119). In this, he cites Lincoln, who time and again used unexpected developments to their utmost effect (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 239–240). The ultimate lesson, if there is one, is to be neither ideological nor cynical, but pragmatic. One cannot have everything, and one cannot be perfect by any definition of the term; one, however, can achieve a lot if one knows how to use what one has (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 112, 312).

The question of how it has been done before, however, is of vital importance. There is a real need for a compendium of case studies in statecraft that offer more concrete precepts and models for how to apply the intuitions collected in Gaddis' book. Until such time as a more comprehensive set of case studies emerges, we can make do with analyses of individual cases, particularly as they occur over time. This is what A. Wess Mitchell has done in his groundbreaking work, *The grand strategy of the Habsburg Empire*.

Unlike Gaddis, who often presents his insights in a Socratic manner and occasionally in tentative rhetorical questions (as befits a book drawn from a celebrated university course), Mitchell approaches his subject as one on a mission. (To borrow a metaphor from another essay on the great strategists [Peters, 2000], Mitchell is a 'seeker' looking for answers to the great questions of statecraft, while Gaddis is a 'sage', offering wisdom but also riddles.) Mitchell is a long-time resident of the policy world (he recently served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs), and although he disclaims (p. xii) any application to present-day American policy, he is clearly approaching grand strategy as a person in search of answers. On this he delivers. While the insights he ultimately draws are open to some debate, they are the well-reasoned product of a look at history in search of applicable lessons.

Mitchell begins with a survey of his subject. The Habsburg Empire – whose story he picks up with the wars of Louis XIV and leaves off with the Empire's final demise in the First World War – is understood as a family enterprise: not a nation-state or even a typical empire, but a collection of possessions that an ancient royal family had agglomerated over the years (Mitchell, 2018, p. 2). For all this, as he shows with laborious and rigorous analysis, its existence was not happenstance and its form was not the product of chance: geography – particularly the placement of rivers and mountains – and ethnography – particularly the size, structure and location of various ethnic groups and especially their leaders – shaped the Empire, made it possible, determined to a great degree its internal governance structure and external security policy, and ultimately haunted its decision-

[6] In his discussion of divine commandments and a leader's relationship to ethics, Gaddis could also be evoking Sun Tzu, who asserts that the *dao* – the way forward or the sense that one is right – is a critical component of strategy but leaves the details open to interpretation (cf. Sun Tzu 1963, p. 63 and Sun Tzu 1993, p. 73).



makers and drove its destiny (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 2, 21–81, esp. pp. 29–41, 52–58, 69, 60–61, 77, 304–305). For, as Mitchell shows, the Empire, as in any great story, was a tragic character living on borrowed time: its policy and strategy were principally driven by the need to forestall its doom, to kick numerous fiscal, diplomatic and military cans down the road – ultimately, to struggle against fate itself, to ‘rage,’ if we may borrow from Dylan Thomas, ‘against the dying of the light.’

In showing this, Mitchell reminds us of the time-honoured lesson (also alluded to by Gaddis) that geography is a major driver of geopolitics. He demonstrates with rich detail the degree to which mountains made the Empire possible by shielding it from invasion, even as they delimited its expansion; how river networks created trouble spots that the Empire had to guard, even as they brought in taxable riches; how the distribution of farmland and commercial zones among the various ethnic groups clashed with the degree to which the central government could impose effective taxation upon them and, in so doing, determined the degree to which they could cooperate (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 26–35, 57–67). The Empire was a river basin partially protected by mountain ranges, with an agricultural and food base dominated by one ethnic group (Magyars), a commercial hub dominated by a coalition of groups (Germans, Slovaks and Czechs), and a Byzantine governance structure left over from older systems of feudal governance, partially buffered by smaller states and peoples on its periphery – but not everywhere (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 21–33, 38, 55–61). It was perennially courting bankruptcy, less because it was poor than because it could not effectively collect tax revenue (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 67–69). It had a large enough population (effectively the second largest of the European empires of its time) but little military participation (again due to inefficient administration stemming from lack of social cohesion and the Empire’s geographic layout – Mitchell, 2018, pp. 77–81).

All of this, Mitchell argues, determined its strategy. Determinism is itself a difficult subject for strategists, because strategy is supposed to involve choices, and choice is the seeming opposite of determinism. Gaddis, invoking his favourite author Leo Tolstoy, argues in his book that even if free will is an illusion, it is real enough if one cannot perceive the drivers of choice (Gaddis, 2018, pp. 211–213). Mitchell, though, places us in the driver’s seat. The Habsburg Empire had been dealt a bad hand, and the rest of the cards were dealt one by one. For all that, it could play the hand it was dealt more or less badly or well. The fact that its decision-making occurred in an international social context did not mean that it did not matter or that – at least from the vantage point of all the information one could ever have on the matter – its decisions were inevitable. On this point, Mitchell is prepared to argue that the hapless Habsburgs did at least tolerably well with what they were given (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 327–329).

They did so, Mitchell argues, by carefully managing space, time, and limited resources – subjects to which Gaddis returns in his own analysis (e.g. Gaddis, 2018, pp. 250–252). In Mitchell’s view, space and time were not merely broad concepts for the Habsburgs – they led to habits of decision-making. The Habsburgs, Mitchell argues (though he presents the point somewhat piecemeal), were schizophrenic on the subject of the duration of wars: they were to be ended quickly and decisively if the state could not afford to prolong them; otherwise, the state would trade time for money, avoiding risks and expensive campaigns that it could not afford, trading off the prospect of decisive victory in favour of maintaining the existence of the army, and accepting less than ideal (in some cases tragically so) outcomes in exchange for enough security to fight another day. The Empire played allies and enemies off each other, used bordering states to absorb would-be invaders’ time and resources, pinched pennies shamelessly, employed informational advantages for everything they were worth (even as prosaic a discipline as map-making became a matter of high security, with detailed maps treated as highly classified information that could provide an edge in wartime), and



struck hard only when it was sure it could win (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 13, 40–48, 67–71, 88, 90, 91, 107, 113, 134, 138, 159, 307, 308).

Mitchell pursues an exhaustive analysis of Habsburg security policy, organised not merely historically, but by political and military theatres (three segments of the Habsburg frontiers, from Turkey, to Prussia and Poland, to France and Italy – Mitchell, 2018, pp. 119–121, 159, 194). Though the details are too involved to repeat in their totality, Mitchell's summation is elegant. Briefly, Austria behaved somewhat like Britain in its period of 'splendid isolation', except without the latter's geographic advantages and from a position of military and political weakness. The difference amounted to a question of options and resources: what Britain did opportunistically, Austria did fatalistically. Thus, famously, Austria backed Britain against France early in the eighteenth century, only to switch to backing France against Britain and Prussia by mid-century after the latter became its greatest territorial threat (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 101, 146, 167). It also employed very adroit court diplomacy, which often came down to personal relationships with individual foreign officials, to keep its running conflict with Ottoman Turkey at a low boil, and to play Russia and Turkey off each other (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 138–139, 149). Rather than merely wait out trouble, Austrian leaders repeatedly preempted it by making the best of gloomy situations and accepting imperfect outcomes. Austria sought alliances that would politically limit the damage potential rivals could do, as when, as Mitchell notes, it allied itself with Russia, not because the latter was a useful partner, but to forestall trouble. The alliance allowed the Empire to use the rhetoric of alliance to prevent Russia from moving too aggressively against Habsburg interests on the one hand, and to ensure that Austria would at least get something of the spoils of the retrenching Ottoman Empire on the other. The Empire's leaders reasoned that not doing so would risk being left out completely – an example of the Habsburgs' fatalistic minimalism (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 149–150). Where diplomacy alone was inadequate, Austria built border fortifications and exploited the willingness of border states to allow it to garrison troops on their territory, combined with a policy of sustained military readiness at whatever level the budget would allow (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 178–185, 189–190, 199–204, 220–221).

Gaddis would recognise this strategy for what it was: a fox taking advantage of hedgehogs. Austria was not attempting to accomplish a fixed goal or implement a preordained plan; it was manoeuvring, reading a situation, absorbing information as it came, modifying not only its ways but even its ends, seeking only to survive by going with the flow. It might have wished to do more, but, as Mitchell and Gaddis would both likely concede, an important part of strategy is knowing one's limits even as one watches for opportunities.

Mitchell's ultimate list of lessons attempts to crystallise specific material from a long and thorough study. In this he differs from Gaddis, who prefers to show his readers how to think about problems of statecraft rather than specifically what to do. As with any specific precepts, Mitchell's lessons are subject to analysis and debate, but they are insightful and offer would-be practitioners some 'news you can use'.

On occasion, Mitchell falls into the trap of strategy by wishful thinking. Notably, in criticising the final years of Austria-Hungary's existence as an empire, Mitchell argues that Austria's weak leaders allowed themselves to fall into less than ideal diplomatic, fiscal and military positions that could best have been avoided (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 297, 303, 313–314, 327). Whether they could truly have done so, as opposed to having encountered a perfect storm of external developments with which they could not contend, is debatable. As one example of poor strategy, Mitchell (p. 297) cites the rapidity of Austria's defeat by Prussia in 1866. Other factors, however, such as superior Prussian weaponry and command and control, were also at work, and far more than mere management would have been required to stave them off. Mitchell's citation (also p. 297) of the post-Napoleonic



coalescence of larger nation-states on the Empire's borders as a factor in the Empire's demise seems to assume that it would have been within the Habsburgs' control to buck powerful international social and economic trends. These are debatable points, and debate on them should not obscure Mitchell's central contention that leaders are not helpless and can make better or worse choices even *in extremis*. The question, however, ultimately goes to the heart of the agency–structure problem in international politics: clearly there are some situations for which no good option is available, and it is not always possible to avoid them.

In his analysis of the Habsburgs' long tenure of power, Mitchell offers substantive guidance: 'prioritize regions that give long-term economic or strategic benefit', '[a]ppease a rival to buy time, not outsource a problem' and '[m]aintain smaller states between yourself and your main rivals' are just a few examples (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 317–329). As for how to apply such guidance, one is back to the strategic mindset that Gaddis attempts to inculcate and cultivate in his readers.

Grand strategy, both Gaddis and Mitchell would likely agree, is not always about implementing a grand vision or achieving a high goal. Sometimes it is simply about taking the helm of the ship of state and steering as best one can. Gaddis offers general words of wisdom for those who hope to take hold of that helm; Mitchell is trying to tell those who already have that duty how others in a particularly tragic position have kept the ship off of shoals when they seemed to lie in every direction. Both offer a refreshing contribution to a sub-discipline that has avoided many of the hard questions of statecraft for too long.



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