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Introduction by **James McAllister**

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. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5246-8 (hardcover, \$29.95).

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Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

One could not ask for a more timely book than Hal Brands's *What Good is Grand Strategy?* In the same month that Brands's book was published a rather important figure in American political life offered his own answer. As reported by David Remnick in January 2014, President Obama dismissed the need for a new grand strategy with a statement seemingly designed to incur the wrath of political scientists and historians; "I don't really even need George Kennan right now."¹ Frank Costigliola and Niall Ferguson, historians who probably agree on little else, argued in the pages of the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* that the insights of a George Kennan were exactly what the president needed.² Later in the year, Hillary Clinton, his former Secretary of State, voiced the same critical perspective about Obama's supposed lack of interest in foundational strategic principles: "Great nations need organizing principles, and 'Don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle."³

Brands does not put forward a new American grand strategy in his new book. He also does not offer a program for dealing with a resurgent Russia, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or how to manage China's rise in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, what makes the book particularly timely is that Brands takes the question posed by the title of his book seriously. While Brands certainly believes that policymakers can benefit from the process of thinking seriously about grand strategy, he is also quite conscious of the many pitfalls of developing and implementing grand strategy. In his view, "Grand strategy, then, should not be seen as something fixed or finite. Rather it is properly viewed as an iterative, continuous *process*—one that involves seeking out and interpreting feedback, dealing with surprises, and correcting course where necessary, all while keeping the ultimate objective in view. Planning and reassessment are constants, and the work of the strategist is rarely done" (199). Both advocates and critics of the idea of grand strategy can find support for their position in Brands's excellent case studies of the experiences of the Truman, Nixon, Reagan, and Bush administration.

All the reviewers find much to praise in the book. Francis Gavin believes that Brands "provides powerful evidence that the interdisciplinary nature of grand strategy studies offers a common intellectual home to historians, political scientists, and others whose policy interests are not exactly celebrated in their disciplines." Steven Metz argues that the

¹ Obama quoted in David Remnick, "Going the Distance," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014; <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2>

² See Frank Costigliola, "What Would Kennan Say to Obama?" *The New York Times*, February 27, 2014; <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/opinion/what-would-kennan-say-to-obama.html>; and Niall Ferguson, "America's Global Retreat," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2014; <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303945704579391492993958448>

³ Hillary Clinton Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 10, 2014; <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/hillary-clinton-failure-to-help-syrian-rebels-led-to-the-rise-of-isis/375832/>

book is a welcome contribution to the growing literature on grand strategy. In the view of Joshua Rovner, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* “covers a huge amount of intellectual and strategic history without resorting to misleading historical shorthand or meaningless theoretical slogans.” Having assigned the book to my undergraduate class on U.S. Grand Strategy last semester, I would also note that Brands has written a volume that is quite accessible to non-specialists. There is simply no better general introduction to the topic.

H-Diplo/ISSF thanks Professor Brands and all of the reviewers for advancing an important debate over the role of grand strategy in U.S. foreign relations.

Hal Brands is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and History at Duke University. His most recent book is *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (2014). His previous books are *Latin America's Cold War* (2010), and *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (2008). His current book project focuses on the revitalization of U.S. power and the origins of the unipolar moment, from the late 1970s through the early 1990s.

Francis J. Gavin is the first Frank Stanton Chair in Nuclear Security Policy studies and Professor of Political Science at MIT. He is the author of *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012). Gavin received a Ph.D. and M.A. in Diplomatic History from the University of Pennsylvania, a Master of Studies in Modern European History from Oxford University, and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Chicago. He has been a National Security Fellow at Harvard's Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, an International Security Fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, a Research Fellow at the Miller Center for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, a Smith Richardson Junior Faculty Fellow in International Security and Foreign Policy, a Donald D. Harrington Distinguished Faculty Fellow at the University of Texas, a Senior Research Fellow at the Nobel Institute, and an Aspen Ideas Festival Scholar. He is a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Steven Metz is Director of Research at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute and a columnist for *World Politics Review*. He is the author of *Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy* and several hundred articles, monographs, and book chapters. He specializes in U.S. defense policy, insurgency, and future armed conflict.

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Review by Francis J. Gavin, MIT

The term grand strategy can be polarizing. On the one hand, academic grand strategy classes and programs have been quite in vogue among diplomatic historians and security studies scholars in the last decade. Foreign policy journals routinely publish pieces bemoaning or praising the grand strategy of whatever administration holds office at that moment. Since the end of the Cold War, armchair strategists have jockeyed with each other to lay out the bold new vision that would replace diplomat and policy intellectual George Kennan's "containment" doctrine, which, according to legend, wisely guided the United States to a successful victory in ideological and geopolitical struggle with the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, there are critics of the concept, whose complaints fall into four categories. First, grand strategy is seen by some as an avocation of those to the "right of the dial" on the political spectrum, or at least as practiced by scholars who seem a bit too enamored with the military instruments of U.S. power.¹ Second, in an age of intense globalization, where borders of all sort are porous and great-power land wars seem a thing of the past, grand strategy looks old fashioned, quaint, associated with funny sounding names like von Clausewitz, von Schlieffen, and Liddell Hart, not part of the world now overseen by Aspen or Davos men, and explained through TED talks, not military maps.² Third, grand strategy often appears less a rigorous lens for understanding a nation's policies and more a vehicle for proposing the analyst's preferred course. Even in serious journals, the work on grand strategy often *prescribes* more than *describes*.

Fourth, and most serious, many believe grand strategy is a made-up concept that fails to capture the complex but often ad hoc nature of national security policy process. Outside of planning during a major war (and sometimes not even then), skeptics ranging from President Bill Clinton to the historian Bruce Kuklick portray a foreign and national security

¹ See Amy Dockser Marcus, "Where Policymakers Are Born," *The Wall Street Journal* December 20, 2008, found at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB122973925559323583>. For an rather extreme version of this view, see Allen Ruff & Steve Horn "Serving Empire: Grand Strategy at the Long War University, The Long War University, Part I." (Updated, November 30, 2011) available at <http://allenruff.blogspot.com/2011/10/serving-empire-grand-strategy-at-long.html> and reprinted as "How Private Warmongers and the US Military Infiltrated American Universities," at <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/4905:how-private-warmongers-and-the-us-military-infiltrated-american-universities> Though I have been against almost every post-Cold War U.S. military intervention, I actually found it kind of cool to be a key player in the evil military-industrial long war conspiracy; my family takes my teaching career far more seriously now.

² For a hilarious but apt description of Aspen man, see Rosa Brooks "A Call to Rally, 'The Fourth Revolution,' by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge," Sunday Book Review, *The New York Times*, June 26th, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/books/review/the-fourth-revolution-by-john-micklethwait-and-adrian-wooldridge.html?ref=todayspaper&r=0> For Davos man, see Will Hutton, "Davos man thrives while the rest of us pay for his excesses," *The Observer*, January 19th, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/20/davos-world-economic-forum-bad-capitalism> Samuel Huntington is credited with first coming up with the name.

policy process that is less shaped by grand doctrines and documents than the push and pull of bureaucratic interests, unintended consequences, and an often polarized political process.³ Walter McDougall's brilliant meditation on the subject ends with a quote from Samuel Huntington that captures this sentiment well: "the most a wise statesman can do is imagine his ship of state on an infinite sea, with no port behind and no destination ahead, his sole responsibility being to weather the storms certain to come, and keep the ship on an even keel so long as he has the bridge."⁴

I confess that at times I have leaned towards this skeptical view. What exactly *is* grand strategy? Many of the critics can rightly point to the rather loose use of the term by many proponents.⁵ Often the answer to this query has had a sort of Justice Potter Stewart feel to it – 'I know it when I see it.' Is it an activity that only takes place during wartime? Does it only involve military measures, or other implements of power? How does it differ from regular 'not grand' strategy, foreign and national security policy, and statecraft, if it does? Is the ability to conceive of and implement grand strategy a recent historical phenomenon? Is grand strategy better conceived and implemented by certain regime types, like authoritarian governments or democracies? Does a state have to pass a certain size category to move into the grand strategy club?

In his well-researched and engaging new book, Hal Brands does not run away from either these questions or the skeptics: "Grand strategy is the highest form of statecraft, but it can also be the most perplexing." (1) Brands acknowledges that the concept and practice of grand strategy is full of contradictions and complexities. For example, states can have grand strategies without realizing it. Successful grand strategies can be underappreciated by contemporaries – think of President George H.W. Bush's successfully managing of the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany on America's terms without a shot being fired, yet losing his presidential re-election bid.⁶ A policy that is successful for one grand strategy – say, arming the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s or

³ For Clinton, see Brands, p. 14-15. Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton University Press, 2007). For a critique that claims grand strategy, while once important, is not feasible in a post 9/11 world, see Amy Zegart, "A Foreign Policy for the Future," *Defining Ideas: A Hoover Institution Journal*, November 20th, 2013, accessed at <http://www.hoover.org/research/foreign-policy-future>

⁴ Walter McDougall, "Can the United States do Grand Strategy?," *The Telegram*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2010, <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2010/04/can-united-states-do-grand-strategy#note3>

⁵ The oft-given definition of pursuing national interests and matching means to ends is both so obvious and trite as to be banal. It could also serve as a definition of living a sensible life.

⁶ For a recent argument that the Obama administration's grand strategy may be underappreciated, see Michael A. Cohen, "Obama's Understated Foreign Policy Gains," *The New York Times*, July 9th, 2014, accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/10/opinion/obamas-understated-foreign-policy-gains.html?_r=0 How to think about grand strategies that were successful in the long term but hated by contemporaries is an interesting puzzle.

placing U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s – may lay the seeds for a grand strategic disaster years later. Timing is also important: would President Ronald Reagan’s grand strategic ideas have been successful if he had tried to implement them after a victory in a Presidential election in 1968 or 1976, as opposed to 1980?

Brands, while acknowledging grand strategy’s dilemmas and limitations, makes a compelling case that the concept is worthwhile nonetheless. Given the confusion and not infrequent misuse of the term, his comprehensive and convincing definition is worth quoting at length. For Brands, grand strategy is “the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy.” Decision makers undertaking grand strategy,

“are not simply reacting to events or handling them on a case-by-case basis. Rather, a grand strategy is a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so. Grand strategy requires a clear understanding of the nature of the international environment, a country’s highest goals and interests within that environment, the primary threats to those goals and interests, and the ways that finite resources can be used to deal with competing challenges and opportunities.....It is the conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there; it is the *theory, or logic, that guides leaders seeking security in a complex and insecure world.*” (3)⁷

Brands tests this concept by assessing, in depth, how American grand strategy was conceived, debated, and implemented during four post-war presidential administrations: Harry Truman, Richard Nixon (and by focusing on U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, elements of the Ford Administration), Reagan, and George W. Bush. In lively and at times provocative chapters, Brands takes a fresh look at one might have thought was well-trod territory.

Brands reminds us, for example, that the stylized narrative of Truman’s ‘wise men’ taking Kennan’s oracle-like pronouncements from both the Long Telegram and X article and easily putting containment into place could not be further from the truth. The major policy initiatives we now see as well thought out cornerstones of Cold War grand strategy were more often rushed reactions to one crisis after another. The Truman administration ‘lost’ China, was caught off-guard by the Soviet Union’s 1949 atomic test, and was largely viewed as having bungled the Korean War. The United States pursued a risky German policy that could have backfired with disastrous results, and the decision to support the French in Southeast Asia sowed the seeds for a later debacle. This is not to say that Truman’s grand

⁷ This definition builds on much of the excellent work by Barry Posen on this subject. For his most recent work, see Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

strategy was a failure. It was not. Indeed, Brands's account reminds us that, at most, good grand strategy can achieve "second best" solutions.⁸

Other administrations offer important lessons. Nixon and Kissinger had to manage grand strategy under circumstances that were widely seen as American decline, during a time of bitter and polarized domestic cleavages over America's place in the world. The George W. Bush administration's follies revealed how quickly ideas that may sound great in a conference room wither quickly in the harsh light of reality. In what may be the best and most compelling empirical chapter, Brands argues that Reagan pursued perhaps the most successful U.S. grand strategy of the postwar period, despite leading a national security bureaucracy that was often at war with itself. Reagan also possessed what, at first blush, were contradictory ideas – that the Soviet Union was militarily threatening and had to be challenged, but that at its core was weak and would fall behind once what he believed was America's superior technological, political, and ideological superiority were put into play. It was this tension, however, that Brands sees as being part of Reagan's success. In all these cases, Brands emphasizes that successful grand strategy requires flexibility, mid-course corrections, and adaptation as circumstances change (as they always do).

A reader does not have to accept Brands's historical interpretation of the administrations in question to recognize the great merit of this work, which combines archival research and historical sensibility, and is conversant with security studies. In addition to being one of the most promising and prolific international historians of his generation, Brands's scholarship demonstrates that historical knowledge and understanding can be used to help better understand policy, and in the process, contribute to more successful grand strategy. Like Ernest May's *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* and *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers* (co-authored with Richard Neustadt), *What Good is Grand Strategy* argues that policy could be improved (or at least disaster averted) by a more conscious and thoughtful application of historical thinking.⁹ By recognizing both the importance and complexity of the concept, Brands also provides powerful evidence that the interdisciplinary nature of grand strategy studies offers a common intellectual home to historians, political scientists, and others whose policy interests are not exactly celebrated in their disciplines. For all these reasons and more, *What Good is Grand Strategy* is an important book, one that should find a wide readership within diplomatic history and security studies, and should be assigned in any course dealing with the subject.

⁸ Francis J. Gavin and Steinberg, "Mind the Gap: Why Policymakers and Scholars Ignore Each other, and What Can be Done About it?," *Carnegie Reporter*, Spring 2012, accessed at <http://carnegie.org/publications/carnegie-reporter/single/view/article/item/308/>

⁹ Ernest R. May, *The "Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); [Richard E. Neustadt](#), [Ernest R. May](#), *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, (New York: Macmillan USA, 1986).

After years of modest concern from the scholarly community, grand strategy, particularly American grand strategy, is all the rage again. Certainly attention never faded completely-- Yale's project for their study of grand strategy did yeoman's work to keep the intellectual flame burning, and authors like Colin Gray continued to explore the far reaches of strategic theory--but major transitions in American foreign policy and national security strategy always increase the demand for new ideas and a deeper understanding of grand strategy.¹ That is where we are today. The result is a growing literature on both grand strategy in general and American grand strategy in particular.

With his recent book *What Good is Grand Strategy?* Hal Brands makes a valuable contribution to this revival. His core argument is that grand strategy is vitally important but also wickedly hard, particularly in the American political system which, as T.X. Hammes, Distinguished Research Fellow at the U.S. National Defense University, often quips, was deliberately designed by geniuses deliberately to be inefficient. That the public and Congress influence foreign and national security policy as much as domestic policy complicates American grand strategy. Easily understood political bumper stickers simply do not work in a world imbued with complexity, ambiguity, and indecisive outcomes. Hence the architects of American grand strategy always face an uphill struggle.

Brands begins with a powerful and elegant definition, depicting grand strategy as "the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy...a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so...the theory, or logic that guides leaders seeking security in a complex and insecure world...how to get from where one is to where one ultimately wants to be" (3). He continues that "While grand strategy certainly requires a purposeful approach to policy, it does not necessarily have to be formalized, detailed or labeled as a grand strategy in official speeches and documents" (6). Like all good definitions, this one is compact and simple yet rife with implications.

The case studies which Brands uses to demonstrate his points—Presidents Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush--are important, but outside of the Bush chapter, offer little new information. Their purpose is more illumination of the theoretical points than augmentation of knowledge about the cases themselves. Yet as is always true with books based on case studies, their selection drives the analysis in a particular direction; other case studies would lead to a different outcome. For instance, an examination of Dwight D Eisenhower's grand strategy might have set the stage for a comparison of formalized and personalized strategy formulation processes. A Bill Clinton case study could have provided insights about grand strategy when the United States had abundant power resources and thus at least seemed able to do whatever it wanted rather than having to make hard trade-offs and calculating opportunity costs.

¹ See, for instance, Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and idem, *Perspectives on Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

No single book can cover every aspect and nuance of a complex subject, but the better ones hint at important issues for future exploration. Brands's volume does this. One is the fact that American presidents are not selected on their flair for grand strategy, particularly since the end of the Cold War. George W. Bush's initial grand strategy, for instance, included little other than a few general themes before the September 11 attacks despite his administration's depth of foreign and national security policy experience. While noting that some presidents got better at grand strategy during their term in office--Truman and Reagan are the best examples--Brands does not speculate on whether talented strategists are born or made. If it can be learned, should this be done in a formal setting like the military believes or must it be self-taught? More broadly, should acumen at grand strategy--or at least a sound grasp of it--be a qualification for being president?

Along the same lines, Brands touches on the interplay of personality and organization in the development and implementation of grand strategy but does not pursue this at great length. The Nixon case study in particular raises questions about whether personality can overcome the systemic impediments in the American system (and Brands seems to believe that it can only to a limited degree). None of the case studies, though, suggest whether the opposite is true: could a better designed organization for grand strategy overcome a shortage of strategic acumen or understanding by whoever is president?

If there is one topic that probably did merit greater discussion it is the role of the National Security Adviser. Hypothetically this position should be used to overcome the president's shortcomings in grand strategy, whether they are based upon a lack of understanding or a lack of interest. As Brands notes, the National Security Adviser has sometimes been strategist-in-chief such as when Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Anthony Lake held the job. Other National Security Advisers like Brent Scowcroft, Colin Powell, or Stephen Hadley were more national security chiefs-of-staff who synchronized--or at least attempted to synchronize--powerful Cabinet barons. Yet even former generals or admirals were not successful at this job, as the unhappy tenure of former Marine General James Jones during the first part of the Barack Obama administration showed. Clearly the president must deeply trust the national security adviser (and former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's memoir suggests that Obama did not have this relationship with Jones²). But the first George W. Bush administration indicated that trust alone is not enough, particularly when the foreign and national security Cabinet barons are assertive. Observers of the American grand strategy process are often left believing that the national security adviser position is vital but its potential is seldom realized.

Ultimately Brands's book is valuable both for what it says and as a pointer toward other avenues of exploration. He begins with a clear notion of what grand strategy is and why it matters, then illustrates his arguments through generally well-known case studies. The next step for the community of security studies scholars is to push on toward the issues and questions raised by Dr. Brands which were left, by necessity, unexplored in a single

² Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

volume. As they do, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* will serve as both an inspiration and a roadmap.

Hal Brands's new book offers a powerful defense of grand strategy, both as a conceptual tool for scholars and a necessary guide for policymakers. It explains why grand strategy is essential to statecraft without sugar coating the profound problems of implementing a coherent and consistent approach. It describes the evolution of the term itself and provides an overview of different definitions in use today. It covers a huge amount of intellectual and strategic history without resorting to misleading historical shorthand or meaningless theoretical slogans. Those who are interested in Cold War history and contemporary national security should read the book with care.

Brands believes in grand strategy as an organizing concept for scholars and policymakers alike. By using his framework, scholars can ask if policy decisions flowed from a reasonably articulated grand strategy, and if so, whether that strategy was based on reasonable assumptions and logic. Policymakers stand to benefit even more, because grand strategy is the crucial device that forces them to connect national interests and available resources. A good grand strategy forces policymakers to consider possible rival reactions and prepare for contingencies. And because it starts with a set of assumptions about how the world works, it provides a lens for interpreting complex events and ambiguous information. Competent statecraft is impossible without it.

Despite these convictions, Brands recognizes the difficulties in conceiving and implementing grand strategy. Part of the problem is structural and part is psychological. The international system is messy and complicated; reliable information about others' intentions is hard to come by; and individuals trying to make sense of it all are apt to fall back on any number of well-known cognitive biases that get in the way of rational decision-making. Thus "grand strategy is not just a struggle to defeat one enemy or another; it is also a contest against the complexity, disorder, and distraction that inevitably clutter the global scene" (10). And even if leaders can overcome these problems and construct a viable grand strategy, they still need to overcome domestic political hurdles and organize a sprawling collection of bureaucracies in order to put it in motion. As Brands notes, these obstacles have led some critics to question whether grand strategy is anything more than an abstract ideal.

Is grand strategy an illusion? Or is it possible for leaders to overcome the psychological, bureaucratic, and political barriers to success? And if grand strategy is real, is it the product of a deliberate decision-making process, or does it emerge piecemeal from countless uncoordinated actions? Brands provides optimistic answers to all of these questions. His careful chapters on the Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush administrations show that presidents are certainly capable of thinking in terms of grand strategy and that they can formulate grand strategy in a top-down process. The cases also show that it is possible to conduct grand strategy, though implementation often goes awry. Some efforts fail because of errors in conception and some fail because of errors in process. According to Brands, for example, Nixon's attempt to fundamentally reshape U.S.-Soviet relations collapsed in part because of his obsession with secrecy. The

desire to keep his own national security establishment in the dark about key aspects of his grand strategy made implementation difficult and ultimately impossible. George W. Bush's response to al-Qaeda, on the other hand, suffered not because of process errors but because it was too ambitious. Still, the fact that grand strategies do not always succeed does not mean that grand strategy is impossible or not worth the effort.

Strategy and Grand Strategy

Another way of putting the distinction between concept and implementation is to consider the difference between grand strategy and strategy. Brands begins by discussing grand strategy in very general terms, calling it a "purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so" (3). In theory these objectives could include everything from amassing wealth to spreading values to promoting humanitarianism. But as Brands's logic unfolds it becomes clear that grand strategy is really about security: states have finite resources that cause them to prioritize security, without which they cannot hope to achieve their loftier goals. Thus grand strategy is the "*theory, or logic, that guides leaders seeking security in a complex and insecure world*" (3, emphasis in original).¹ It includes basic assumptions about international politics that inform policy decisions about diplomacy, institutions, and economic statecraft. Grand strategy also guides military action by influencing decisions about weapons procurement, force posture, and the use of violence.

If grand strategy is a theory of security, strategy is a theory of victory in war, explaining how states use military violence to achieve their political objectives. It bears some similarities to grand strategy. Both are conducted in conditions of uncertainty, for example, and both are inherently interactive. But strategy is a much narrower concept. A grand strategy describes the questions a state must answer in its search for security: Does it seek to isolate itself or does it seek deep engagement with other states in the international system? Does it believe that a large accumulation of power will deter other states or provoke them? Does it believe that allies are sources of strength or weakness? Does it believe that spreading its own values will make it more or less secure?

A strategy, on the other hand, must answer a different set of wartime questions: What are the political objectives at stake? What are the sources of the enemy's power? What targets must be destroyed in order to erode that power? What kinds of threats and reassurances will cause the enemy to seek a settlement? What military and political efforts are required to create a durable peace?

¹ As Brands notes, this is consistent with Barry Posen's 1984 definition: "a political-military means-ends chain, a state's theory of how it can best 'cause' security for itself." Posen's definition has anchored thirty years of debate among those advocating different theories of security. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 13.

Grand strategy influences strategic judgment by setting limits in wartime. If victory in war only promises a marginal improvement in security, then military commanders should not risk too many resources in pursuing the enemy. Strategic decisions in turn affect the prospects for grand strategy. Brilliant military campaigns allow states to achieve near-term objectives while husbanding resources. Military blunders, however, may force states to alter their grand strategy by doubling-down in places not previously considered vital to national security. Strategies can fail even when a state is pursuing a wholly reasonable grand strategy. Strategies can succeed even when they serve a flawed grand strategy.

Brands offers a generally favorable review of grand strategy in the Truman Administration. Success was hardly inevitable. The United States faced an increasingly hostile and powerful Soviet Union with a collection of allies who were shattered from World War II and struggling to recover. Meanwhile the administration had to deal with tight defense budgets and limited support for anything like an activist foreign policy, all the while building the new organizations that would make up the modern security state and the constellation of international institutions that would define the Western political order in the Cold War. Grand strategy, which is always a “disorderly, iterative process,” was especially difficult under these conditions (58). Nonetheless the administration was able to craft the basic principles of containment that stood the test of four decades.

But if the Truman administration’s grand strategy was sound, its strategy in the Korean War was not. Containment required rebuilding Western Europe and Japan as bulwarks against Soviet expansion. This was an expensive proposition but fundamental to Truman’s emerging grand strategic vision. To the extent that the administration engaged in peripheral fights against communists, it needed to be careful to keep its investment limited and end the fighting quickly, lest it divert attention and resources from the essential task of resuscitating the traditional areas of military and industrial power. For the first few couple of months of the conflict the United States stayed true to this principle. Its strategic objectives were limited to a restoration of the status quo, and it did not seek a UN mandate for conquering the whole peninsula. After General Douglas MacArthur’s landing at Inchon in September 1950, the United States was on the verge of achieving these limited goals. But the audacity and stunning success of the landing encouraged the general (and the President) to abandon limited goals and transform the conflict into an unlimited war for the reunification of Korea.

What followed was a disaster. General MacArthur’s rapid rush to the Yalu River provoked China to enter the war in November, surprising U.S. forces and pushing them back to the south in a thorough rout. The war settled into a bloody and frustrating stalemate for over two years until all sides agreed to a ceasefire in 1953. These years of sinking blood and treasure into a peripheral conflict were precisely what concerned George Kennan and some of the other early architects of containment, and critics of the administration were particularly upset because it represented a conscious decision to pursue a risky unlimited war rather than accepting a limited victory.

Brands concludes that “the failure to settle for a good-enough outcome in Korea was clearly the Truman administration’s greatest grand strategic blunder, one that ultimately incurred

a terrible human and financial cost” (50). But this was more precisely a *strategic* blunder based on MacArthur’s bad judgment about how to end the war. The administration’s fit of victory fever after Inchon caused it to go along with the general, downplaying the danger that its new strategy cut against its emerging grand strategy. Indeed, had the administration ruthlessly applied the logic of containment in the Cold War to its strategic conduct in Korea, it almost surely would not have approved MacArthur’s plea to expand the war. His theory of victory undermined the administration’s theory of security.²

Continuity and Change

Brands discusses the Nixon and Reagan administrations in separate chapters, but they are most interesting in comparison. What emerges is quite different from the long running debate between supporters and critics of détente.

Ronald Reagan was a serious threat to President Ford during the Republican primaries in 1976, rallying support from party hardliners by portraying the president as soft on Moscow. According to Reagan, the hallmarks of foreign policy during the Nixon and Ford years – arms control and détente with the Soviet Union - were dangerous illusions. “Under Kissinger and Ford,” he declared in a representative stump speech, “this nation has become Number Two in a world where it is dangerous – if not fatal – to be second best.” And while U.S. officials might have believed that they were stabilizing the Cold War, the Kremlin knew better. “There is little doubt in my mind that the Soviet Union will not stop taking advantage of détente until it sees that the American people have elected a new President and appointed a new Secretary of State.”³

Reagan promoted an assertive posture towards Moscow, both before and after he took office. His confrontational public rhetoric was startling after a decade of diplomacy designed to reduce tension. Instead of arms control he wanted an arms buildup. Instead of seeking common ground based on overlapping national interests, he looked for ways to subvert Moscow’s influence over its satellite states. Most importantly, he viewed the Cold War in terms of competition rather than cooperation. This meant investing in defense to restore the military balance, where the Soviet Union seemed to have the lead, while taking steps to undermine the fragile and vulnerable Soviet economy (111-112). His underlying assumptions about international politics, and the grand strategic principles which followed, appeared to be a complete reversal from Nixon.

A close reading of Brands, however, reveals that the two administrations had a lot in common. Both pursued grand strategy that sought to modify Soviet behavior in order to make it less threatening. Their ultimate objectives were strikingly similar. Nixon wanted to “structure Moscow’s incentives so that its leaders would gradually come to appreciate that

² Failure to a limited victory is an enduring problem. For a more recent example, see Joshua Rovner, “Delusion of Defeat: The United States and Iraq, 1990-1998,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming).

³ Quoted in Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 373-374.

they had more to gain through moderation than confrontation” (68). Reagan likewise set about “persuading Moscow to moderate its conduct and accept a less confrontational relationship with the West” (116). To be sure, the Reagan administration was more interested in changing the character of the Soviet Union, and in key planning documents it stressed the long-term desire to inject political and economic pluralism into Soviet politics. But such changes would have to happen gradually, and in the meantime Reagan officials sought to reassure Moscow that foreign policy restraint would be rewarded.⁴

There were many other similarities. Neither Nixon nor Reagan was a dogmatic and inflexible anticommunist (61, 117). Both thought in terms of a sequential program to change Soviet behavior, and both agreed on the importance of starting from a position of strength. When Nixon entered office he loudly called for new investments in missile technology and missile defense, despite U.S. economic turmoil and congressional reluctance (68-69). The administration wanted these systems as bargaining chips in future arms control negotiations, but it also wanted to signal strength to Moscow in advance of serious talks. Reagan also argued that an arms buildup had to precede arms control negotiations because the Soviet Union would have little reason to abandon its hard-won military advantages otherwise (110, 116-117). Both leaders were enthusiastic about covert action and willing to deal with authoritarian allies in the Third World, and in both cases this led to a domestic backlash (90-92, 113). Finally, both pursued linkage with the Soviet Union by tying progress in one area of diplomacy to cooperation in others. While Nixon and Kissinger made linkage famous, Reagan applied the same principle. As he told British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1981, a summit meeting could not be “confined to arms control matters” (129).

Despite all these similarities, key differences remained. Nixon sought to reduce U.S. foreign commitments by offloading military missions to allies while pursuing détente with the Soviet Union. Reagan sought to restore the U.S. position through higher defense spending and an aggressive forward military posture, while ratcheting up the rhetoric against Moscow.

What accounts for the differences? Brands suggests that the main reason was the vast difference in context. The international and domestic setting was very different for each administration. Nixon entered office in a period of intense national trauma. Public outrage over Vietnam had morphed into a broader rejection of the prior Cold War consensus in favor of containment. Economic turmoil and congressional assertiveness meant that the administration was going to have to do more with less. All of this was occurring amidst international unrest. The Bretton Woods system was nearing an end, and the future of international monetary coordination was uncertain at best. The same was true for international energy markets, which were witnessing the leading edge of an extraordinary surge in oil demand. Meanwhile, Moscow was halfway through a breathtaking strategic arms buildup, and the signs of economic distress that would doom the Soviet Union were

⁴ See, for instance, National Security Decision Directive 75, “U.S. Relations with the U.S.S.R.,” January 17, 1983; <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-75.pdf>

not yet clear. “Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had the misfortune of governing,” Brands concludes, “as [the Cold War] order was coming undone” (59).

The situation was far better for Ronald Reagan. It was far from ideal - the U.S. was mired in recession – but in relative terms the balance was tilting in the U.S. direction. The underlying pathologies in the Soviet economy were now impossible to hide, but the Kremlin remained in the control of elderly leaders who would not or could not reform the system. Ironically, however, Soviet activism in the Third World had reinvigorated nationalism in the United States and made it possible to argue for a more muscular foreign policy. Reagan thus entered during “a politically propitious time, in that Soviet advances had re-created something of a Cold War consensus at home” (113).

For these reasons, it was possible to do things in 1981 that were frankly impossible in 1969. Conversely, it was much easier to argue for détente in the waning years of the Vietnam War than in the years immediately following the collapse of SALT II and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Brands’s case studies reveal the extent to which historical context constrained the menu of grand strategic choice for both Nixon and Reagan. The stylized debate between détente and confrontation is misleading: while leaders may have preferred one or the other, they were inevitably constrained by the political and military realities of the time.

Brands’s analysis also raises some interesting counterfactuals. Specifically, it begs the question of whether the failure of détente was necessary for the Reagan administration to choose confrontation. Starting in the mid-1970s, hardliners were able to argue that the United States had made a good faith effort to ease mutual hostility and mistrust in the Cold War, only to see its efforts rebuffed by the Soviet Union. But what if Nixon and Kissinger had not invested so much time, effort, and political capital on détente? The narrative of Soviet deception and greed that Reagan used to justify his early grand strategy, not to mention his candidacy, would have been far less persuasive.

Grand Strategy without Enemies, and Statecraft without Grand Strategy

Brands’s book discusses a number of critical issues for students of strategy and international relations, but it is surprisingly silent on two questions. First, is grand strategy possible without an enemy? His case studies all look at how different administrations dealt with dangerous rivals. The chapters on Truman, Nixon, and Reagan detail their efforts to grapple with the Soviet Union, and a chapter on George W. Bush is an extended critique of his grand strategy in the war on al-Qaeda. These cases are instructive for a many reasons. But in an important sense they are irrelevant for current U.S. leaders responsible for conceiving and implementing grand strategy, because the defining characteristic of the international system is the *absence* of a viable enemy. The United States vastly outspends any possible state competitor on defense and enjoys durable economic and technological advantages over all of them. The only realistic great power rival on the horizon is China, but it faces gigantic internal problems that will greatly limit its ability to project power. Meanwhile al-Qaeda has been thoroughly shattered and its original leaders are almost all dead or captured. What remains is a loose ideological network of terrorists who, while

certainly capable of violence against civilians, do not pose a serious threat to national security.

Brands offers useful general guidance for current policymakers (194-206), but he does not consider the historically unique problem of how to conceive of a grand strategy when there is no obvious foil.

The United States today is secure and prosperous, and it has no peer competitor. Thus the goal of contemporary U.S. grand strategy is preserving the status quo. Perhaps this will be easy. The lack of a serious rival means there is no one to adapt to U.S. moves, peel off U.S. allies, and otherwise undermine the U.S. approach. Moreover, America's enormous military and economic advantages give it a much greater margin of error. Mistakes are inevitable but they may not matter as much as they did in the past. But if this is the case, then critics may ask if grand strategy is really necessary. Why bother going through the pain and frustration of trying to coordinate a sprawling national security community around a shared vision if the stakes are low? Why not just muddle through?

This leads to a second unanswered question: What happens when leaders do not try to make grand strategy? In the introductory chapter, Brands notes President Bill Clinton's skepticism about grand strategy. Great leaders did not operate according to some clearly elucidated blueprint, he believed. Rather, they had "powerful instincts about what had to be done, and they just made it up as they went along." Brands concedes that this is a plausible counterargument, given all of the practical obstacles to implementation, and he takes seriously the notion that the task may be "so difficult as to be quixotic or even counterproductive" (15).

Brands responds to Clinton's dismissal of grand strategy by explaining why it is so important. But while he does an excellent job of describing the theoretical value of grand strategy, he does not provide any concrete historical examples of what happens when states fail to try. He includes a short criticism of Clinton's approach toward al-Qaeda, but this is nothing like the thorough treatment of Truman, Nixon, Reagan, and George W. Bush. To be fair, Brands has written about the Clinton administration elsewhere.⁵ Still, a return to the 1990s would help a great deal here, especially given that the book constitutes an extended response to Clinton's belief in ad hoc statecraft. The main argument in *What Good is Grand Strategy?* is compelling, but it would benefit from a description of what bad comes from not having one.

⁵ Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008).

Author's Response by Hal Brands, Duke University

I am very grateful to James McAllister for organizing this ISSF roundtable, and to Francis Gavin, Steven Metz, and Joshua Rovner for their thoughtful commentaries. It is a great pleasure to have one's book reviewed in a forum that has done so much to promote robust dialogue between security-oriented historians and political scientists, and by scholars whose own research has done so much to advance the study of strategy, statecraft, and U.S. foreign policy. It is an even greater pleasure, of course, when they generally say very nice things about one's work. On the whole, I find relatively little to dispute in these fair and insightful reviews. In my response, then, I will simply address a handful of issues where there may be some disagreement, or that may be worthy of further consideration and study.

The first of these issues, which arises in Professor Rovner's review, has to do with the differences between strategic and grand strategic blunders, particularly in the context of the Truman administration's catastrophic rush toward the Yalu river in Korea in the fall of 1950. Rovner very pithily and usefully outlines the differences between strategy and grand strategy, and he is certainly right to argue that the disaster of late 1950 reflected a "strategic blunder based on MacArthur's bad judgment about how to end the war." I do not think it makes sense to draw such a clear distinction between a strategic blunder and a grand strategic blunder in this case, however, because there were obviously errors at both levels.

Yes, MacArthur made a serious misjudgment about how best to use his forces to bring about an end to the war—that is the strategic blunder to which Rovner rightly refers. But the unwillingness to stop short of the Yalu was also rooted in larger, grand strategic factors and miscalculations by the civilian leadership in Washington. These included a widespread belief that a decisive victory in Korea could have momentous regional and even global consequences reaching far beyond the peninsula, for instance, and a failure to keep the amount of risk that the United States was running in Korea in proper proportion to the broader goals it aimed to achieve in Europe and other parts of the world. These issues—which certainly resided at the grand strategic level—numbed the Truman administration to the dangers it was courting in not restraining MacArthur, and played an essential role in setting the course of U.S. policy. The disaster in Korea in November 1950 thus stemmed not only from a strategic failure on MacArthur's part, but from a broader loss of grand strategic equilibrium as well.

A second issue arising from Rovner's review has to do with his inter-related points about grand strategy without enemies, and statecraft without grand strategy. I did not spend more time discussing the 1990s—the historical period in which these issues were most recently salient—partly for reasons of space, and partly, as Rovner notes, because I had earlier written a book on these matters.¹ As I pointed out in that book, however, and as I

¹ Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

discuss, albeit much more briefly, in this one, the empirical record does indicate that a failure to take grand strategy seriously enough can introduce real, concrete problems into U.S. foreign policy. Although the Clinton administration's overall record was hardly as bad as some critics alleged, the president and his advisers did frequently have trouble in setting and adhering to a firm hierarchy of priorities, in allocating their time and energy effectively, in systematically addressing conflicts between competing goals and objectives, in planning for the long-term while also dealing with short-term crises, and in setting consistent and effective standards for the use of force—in other words, in dealing with the very type of issues that grand strategy is meant to address. The consequences of these problems were admittedly somewhat muted during the 1990s, largely because of the enormous surfeit of power that America possessed. But those consequences were significant enough to show that the costs of not doing grand strategy are more than merely theoretical.

On the related question of grand strategy without enemies, Rovner asks whether it is possible—or even necessary—to do grand strategy at a time when the United States lacks a single, dominant adversary of the type it had during the Cold War. As I have written elsewhere, I do think that the lack of an overriding threat does make it somewhat more difficult to maintain the focus and clarity that is essential to making good grand strategy, and to mobilize the domestic support that is necessary to sustaining it. And, of course, the risks of getting grand strategy wrong are probably lower at a time when the United States is not faced with such a challenge.

That said, the idea that grand strategy becomes either impossible or superfluous in such a situation strikes me as taking things too far. As I explain in the book, this idea takes for granted an assumption—that the post-Cold War world is infinitely more complex and unmanageable than its predecessor—that is debatable at best, and that would probably elicit a good chuckle from Dean Acheson, Henry Kissinger, and other officials who had to grapple with the enormous difficulties of doing grand strategy during their own times. Moreover, it risks slighting the fact that grand strategy is not solely about dealing with enemies. It is also about setting priorities, thinking rigorously about means and ends, and devising the core ideas and concepts that will help keep a country's statecraft on course amid the geopolitical squalls. These tasks may indeed be *more* important at a time of severe, concentrated threat, but they are hardly *unimportant* at any time, or in any context.

Professor Metz's review also raises a number of important issues pertaining to the role of the national security adviser, the type of decision-making processes and structures that conduce to good grand strategy, and the way that additional case studies might yield additional or simply different insights about grand strategy writ large. All of these are perfectly valid questions, and all of them represent promising avenues of departure for future work on grand strategy. The scope of my own project necessitated limiting the range of issues and cases considered, and covering some of those issues more briefly or narrowly than other authors might have thought desirable. But if my work helps stimulate research and analysis of the areas that remain, as Metz suggests that it will, I would be very pleased with that outcome.

Metz's review also raises one other point which might usefully be addressed here—the intriguing question of whether grand strategists are born or made. My sense is that in grand strategy, as in every other field of human endeavor, there are some people who are simply better cut out for the task than others. (Ronald Reagan, for instance, might be the best example of a statesman who just had a sort of natural 'feel' for grand strategy.) But I still think it too fatalistic to conclude that grand strategy is all about nature rather than nurture. Reagan, after all, was not just an instinctive grand strategist; he was a person whose core convictions had taken root via prolonged intellectual engagement—through speeches, through letters, through other writings—with the major issues of Cold War statecraft for at least two decades before he became president. Or think about Richard Nixon and Kissinger. Yes, both of them had innate gifts for geopolitical thinking, but both had also spent years sharpening their ideas on foreign policy and grand strategy, either through academic work or through concrete policy experience. And in fact, even presidents who have lacked this sort of intensive intellectual preparation—like Harry Truman—have sometimes managed to do very well by choosing good advisers and, not least of all, by simply taking the process of grand strategy seriously. Indeed, if I could pick a single trait with which to endow future American grand strategists, it would probably not be intellectual brilliance or an encyclopedic knowledge of policy issues, but rather a good understanding of why grand strategy is important in the first place.

I'll conclude by addressing an issue raised in Professor Gavin's review, as to why grand strategy is such a polarizing concept. I think Gavin quite nicely outlines a number of the key causes of this phenomenon. I would simply add that I have occasionally found advocates of grand strategy to be among its own worst enemies. We have all seen the sort of opinion piece that treats grand strategy as a sort of silver bullet, or panacea—the type that argues that all the existing problems in U.S. foreign policy reflect the lack of a grand strategy, and that claims, by extension, that all would be well if the United States had one. This type of argument oversells the benefits of grand strategy, of course, and provides fodder for those who are skeptical of the concept. Grand strategy can indeed help bring coherence and purpose to American statecraft, and I certainly consider it indispensable to good policy. But as I think my book makes clear, grand strategy is not a cure-all: it can't overcome all the problems, dilemmas, or surprises that are inherent in a messy and complex world. In the end, then, providing a robust and persuasive defense of grand strategy—a defense that the concept very much deserves—requires that those who believe in it acknowledge its limits and difficulties as well as its strengths.