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Essay by **Ryan Irwin**, University at Albany-SUNY

The Beginning of Wisdom

“It’s hard to read Herodotus’ account of Artabanus and Xerxes at the Hellespont without sensing, in the advisor, an uneasy fox, and, in the monarch, an unapologetic hedgehog.”

- John Lewis Gaddis (6)

“As an abstract noun, *hegemonia* first appears in Herodotus, to designate leadership of an alliance of city-states for a common military end, a position of honour accorded Sparta in resistance to the Persian invasion of Greece.”

- Perry Anderson (1)

Where does wisdom begin? The question lingers in the background of new books by John Lewis Gaddis and Perry Anderson, two men who have spent their lives writing and thinking about power in different ways. Gaddis came onto the scene in the 1960s, disrupting the field of U.S. foreign relations by marrying diplomatic history with strategic studies. His post-revisionist synthesis, articulated in the 1980s, provoked a flurry of criticism but uprooted the consensus that economics determined U.S. foreign policy. The best way to comprehend power, he argued, was to see the world through the eyes of powerful people. Anderson also entered academe in the 1960s, challenging the British Left with insights from European theorists like Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Louis Althusser. Like Gaddis, he earned opprobrium, tangling with historian A.J.P. Taylor, among others, and successfully changed the way his colleagues understood the relationship between class, culture, and the state. The study of power, Anderson asserted, had to be entangled with the study of empire. Although Gaddis and Anderson have worked in separate intellectual milieus for most of their careers, in recent years Gaddis has ventured into the history of knowledge, and Anderson has turned to U.S. policymaking. Their latest books, *On Grand Strategy* and *The H-Word*, converge on the same argument: To understand a thing, you have name it correctly. Wisdom begins with a name.

Curiously, Gaddis and Anderson start *On Grand Strategy* and *The H-Word* with the same story. The year is 480 B.C.E. and the place is the Hellespont. If you close your eyes, Gaddis writes in his introduction, you can almost imagine Xerxes, the self-anointed King of Kings, readying his armies for the invasion of Greece. Persia's subsequent defeat, Gaddis explains, seemed impossible when Xerxes began that invasion, yet circumstances changed and Xerxes refused to moderate his ambitions, prompting the question at the heart of *On Grand Strategy*: How should a powerful person align his aspirations and capabilities? The answer, Gaddis suggests, is found in grand strategy, a field of study dedicated to this exact riddle. Anderson looks at the same moment and fixes his eyes on the Greeks. As they scrambled to forge the Delian League—to beat back Xerxes's hordes—the city-states stumbled into a debate about their relationship with each other. The “h-word” in Anderson's book is *hegemonia*, which Herodotus coined in 480 B.C.E. while describing Sparta's initial preeminence within the Delian League. As Gaddis squeezes meaning from Persia's unexpected defeat, Anderson looks to the Delian League to understand the relationship between consent and coercion. Is consent possible, he asks, without military supremacy? For answers he looks to those who took Herodotus's words and elaborated the meaning of hegemony.

Grand strategy and hegemony are different words, and *On Grand Strategy* and *The H-Word* are different books. Yet they speak to each other in unexpected ways. Gaddis's main point is that good leaders carefully balance ends and means. With Xerxes's shadow looming over each chapter, Gaddis tells a tale about great men (and a few great women) who navigated the twin perils of hubris and inflexibility. There are aphorisms aplenty, but, for the most part, bad things happen to stubborn people who do not adapt to changing circumstances. Oftentimes, these people assume that an initial success—on the battlefield or in a political arena—will lead to an inevitable triumph, and their overconfidence causes them to abandon the pragmatic outlook that is so essential to good living and smart leading. As Gaddis guides us through the nuances of this lesson, we see entire societies rise and fall through the eyes of influential individuals. Otto von Bismarck unifies Germany deftly; Adolf Hitler destroys this creation with a foolhardy war of annihilation. America's rise is explained via Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, two presidents who saved democracy and capitalism, respectively, by exploiting their opponents' weaknesses and adapting to conditions they could not control. Sainthood and strategy, Gaddis explains, rarely work in tandem. Lincoln freed America's slaves as his armies decimated the American South and Roosevelt defeated Hitler by allying with Joseph Stalin. But you don't have to be perfect to do good; you merely need common sense.

Isaiah Berlin is Gaddis's muse, and hedgehogs and foxes gambol over the pages of *On Grand Strategy*. If you are unfamiliar with the parable, the hedgehog relates everything to one central vision, while the fox pursues multiple ends simultaneously, and Gaddis uses Berlin's version of the story to explore the morality of leadership. Since there are dualities within good and evil and between cultures in the past and present, lambasting the plans and actions of our predecessors in the name of our latest, greatest truth is a self-indulgent exercise that cloaks genuine insights about the human condition. For Gaddis, the wiser course is to study the habits that make leaders effective. It is revealing that he makes this point with Berlin's famous reinterpretation of the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. In Berlin's hands, Machiavelli was a moral pluralist who recognized that Christianity's toleration of suffering would doom Italian republicanism. God, Machiavelli reasoned, would forgive a little ruthlessness if it preserved a superior form of government. From the seeds of this observation, Berlin concluded that most interesting questions have several right answers, and Gaddis similarly equates virtue with the act of balancing contradictory claims without surrendering to careless relativism. Because universal truth is an oxymoron, moral leadership is the act of blending hedgehoglike ideas with foxlike methods. To be good is to be effective in the pursuit of a fair-minded end.

Anderson cut his teeth criticizing Berlin's work. By the 1960s, Berlin's takedown of Karl Marx—as another one-trick hedgehog with delusions of a conflict-less world—reigned at Oxford, where Berlin taught and Anderson studied, and Anderson turned to a different Italian to rehabilitate Western Marxism. Antonio Gramsci died in a fascist prison in the 1930s, but not before penning *Prison Notebooks*, which argued that consequential political action happens not just in political arenas, but in cultural realms where power is maintained and challenged.¹ Armed with this insight, Anderson turned the tables on Berlin. Although Oxford's great don imagined himself standing astride history, he was actually a political actor, masking the violence of imperial rule with tropes about plurality. It took a special kind of genius, Anderson observed sardonically, to interpret Machiavelli, the envoy of princely crime, as a herald for tolerant liberalism.² A quarter century later, Gaddis found himself on the receiving end of a comparable critique, blasted by Anderson for having found virtue in the writings of policymaker George Kennan, whose recommendations, Anderson argued, disguised the scope, scale, and logic of America's imperium.³ If Western Marxists were on their heels, it was not because they were wrong; they had been outmaneuvered by pious liberals using common sense to naturalize capitalism and meld into its ruling aristocracy. Anderson used Gramsci's insights to draw a very different conclusion about power and morality. Coercion, not class consciousness or modes of production, and certainly not consent, determined who rules and why. With civil society, consumer culture, and higher education conspiring to hide this simplest of universal truths, the critics' job was to expose the foibles at the heart of liberal democracy. Empathy be damned.

The H-Word extends and amplifies this argument. As Anderson unfurls his conceptual genealogy of hegemony, he shows that military supremacy—more than any other single factor in human history—has determined who gets to coerce whom under what circumstances. When Athens had a surfeit of military might, the Delian League (and contemporary orators) bowed. Athenians discovered self-reflection after they lost the Peloponnesian War, and that pattern has repeated itself a few times since the Germans repopularized the h-word in the nineteenth century. As a general rule, if you're talking about hegemony—agonizing over your empire's legitimacy—your country's military is probably embroiled in a quagmire it can't win. Like Gaddis, Anderson unfurls this lesson through the eyes of politicized men and a few politicized women, and the two books cover comparable temporal and geographic terrain. We hear from Bismarck and Hitler again and ponder the United States' rise a second time. Anderson is more interested in ideas than Gaddis, so *The H-Word* reads differently than *On Grand Strategy*, and it maneuvers toward a much darker conclusion. Liberal democracy, Anderson suggests, the hegemonic project of our times, is coming apart because it rests on the false premise that consent can be disentangled from force. This claim has generated doubters within and enemies abroad, leading to tensions that have blossomed into a full-blown crisis. Anderson is not interested in reform, nor does he promise revolution, and his final conclusion is stoic: You're welcome to believe things will get better, but hegemony is not going anywhere.

On Grand Strategy and *The H-Word* complement each other well. Grand strategy, as a pedagogical enterprise, has been criticized for valorizing imperialism and there is certainly a neoliberal quality to Gaddis's writing, which Anderson's work dramatizes. Although Gaddis gracefully defends common sense, he rarely asks why

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vols 1-3* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

² Perry Anderson, "England's Isiah," *London Review of Books* 12:24 (December 1990), 3-7.

³ Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers* (New York: Verso, 2015), 44-46.

certain people have had so much influence at their fingertips at different moments in history. His critical eye is focused on individuals, not the settings within which they operate, and Anderson problematizes one of Gaddis's biggest assumptions. Are we really the masters of our fate, living in a world where forethought and flexibility determine failure and success? When read alongside *The H-Word*, Gaddis's implicit optimism feels misplaced. In Anderson's world, plenty of people harmonize their inner-hedgehog with their inner-fox and get crushed by those with more money and access to powerful institutions. Even if the retort is stylized for effect, it makes you rethink *On Grand Strategy*'s conclusions. Anderson repurposes common sense as a self-serving rhetorical instrument that camouflages the workings of subjugation and exposes grand strategy as a ploy to turn victors into virtuosi, so that the status quo feels logical and therefore just. You can almost hear Anderson's response: One does not praise magicians for misdirection.

Like most abstractions, this argument works best at a distance, and if *The H-Word* suggests *On Grand Strategy*'s flaws, Gaddis returns the favor in equally useful ways. While Gaddis valorizes those who rule, Anderson vilifies them with equal haste and more vigor, leaving readers with a portrait of world history that occasionally recalls William Goldings's 1954 dystopian novel *Lord of the Flies*. Anderson's interpretation of Kennan, for example, is comically one-dimensional. By drawing his subjects so close, relishing in the way they changed the milieus within which they operated, Gaddis pinpoints the problem at the heart of the *H-Word*. Can you study power and despise the people who wield it? If consent and coercion are one and the same, then intentions don't matter and politics is pointless, meaning that Anderson has traded elitism—Gaddis's great sin—for a fatalism that is unapologetically cynical and more than a little naïve. Gaddis's decision to differentiate power and maleficence creates a useful middle ground between acquiescence and self-destruction, and surely there has to be an alternative to accepting hegemony passively and fighting all authority everywhere in the name of transcendent fairness. Gaddis calls this middle ground grand strategy, but he is talking about good government—the oldest of all liberal projects—and his insights imply a response to his critics: If you can't tell the difference between someone like George H.W. Bush and Donald Trump, you nurtured the latter's ascendancy.

On Grand Strategy and The H-Word illuminate each other's flaws, but they do not cancel each other's arguments. Studying power is a bit like studying the elephant in the parable about the six blind men. Each person laid a hand on a different part of the elephant, and together they came to totally different conclusions about the object before them. There is value in seeing the world through the eyes of influential people, and merit in critiquing power abstractly at arms-length; Gaddis and Anderson tap into perspectives that have enjoyed a long, creative friction. Faced with the vagaries of industrial life in the mid-nineteenth century, John Stewart Mill once espoused utilitarianism, arguing that prosperity came to those who worked hard without flouting the greater good. Confronted by the same conditions, Karl Marx theorized the existence of capitalism, historicizing the invisible forces that delimit freedom and separate society's ruling and working classes. Utilitarianism and capitalism are different words and, as sources of wisdom, they evoke different truths than grand strategy and hegemony. Yet the echoes are apparent. Gaddis, like Mill, invites his readers to accept the world as it is, and Anderson channels Marx by asking why things aren't better. The tensions between these mindsets—between *On Grand Strategy* and *The H-Word*—reflect a debate with deep roots in the intellectual life of the West, and one author does not have to be wrong for the other to be right. Although wisdom begins with a name, it doesn't end with a single word. Conversations require vocabularies.

Why create a dialogue between *On Grand Strategy* and *The H-Word*? Arguably, we're as blind today as those "Six Wise Men from Indostan." Gaddis and Anderson's books exemplify why it has become so difficult for liberal-minded elites and left-leaning activists to find common ground when they discuss power. Gaddis's

H-Diplo Review Essay

glorification of individual initiative—his framing of grand strategy as an end in itself—and his casual disinterest in the public good—suggests why so many people find their leaders intolerable. Today’s liberals actually pride themselves on not believing anything. Meanwhile, on the Left side of this chasm, speaking truth to power has become a cottage industry, and while *The H-Word* is brilliant, its main point—that consent and coercion are indifferentiable—is self-defeating. When power is the taproot of every problem, anarchy becomes a sensible solution, which mocks the concept of good government and opens a door for those who would fetishize violence. Gaddis is not a narcissist, nor is Anderson a nihilist, but their books gesture toward opposing ends of an essential spectrum that isn’t going anywhere soon. Bringing these two poles into conversation is more than a thought experiment; it is a first step toward understanding the paradoxes of the Resistance.

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