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Grand Strategy and the Presidency

Foreign policy, war and the American role in the world

C. Dale Walton



Grand Strategy and the Presidency

This book examines the role and importance of the Presidency in the formulation and conduct of US grand strategy.

The text discusses US strategic history, with particular emphasis on the period from the end of the Cold War to the present day. While the United States periodically has enjoyed exceptional presidential leadership in the past, this book argues that few future presidents will meet high standards of leadership in foreign affairs. In turn, this will undermine the ability of the United States to construct and maintain a coherent grand strategy appropriate to the multipolar world of the twenty-first century.

Grand Strategy and the Presidency explores the role that the holders of the presidential office have played in the past development of the United States as a great power. Drawing upon examples from history, the textual analysis is shaped around the description of the long-term strategic development of the United States. The author then considers what the events of recent decades portend for the future of US strategy and foreign policy.

This book will be of interest to students of presidential studies, US foreign policy, strategic studies, and international relations/security studies in general.

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For Shelley, with love

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Preface

The great bulk of *Grand Strategy and the Presidency* was composed before 19 March 2011, when the United States, alongside a coalition of allies, began to involve itself militarily in an ongoing civil war in Libya. Thus, this work makes only passing references to the Libya War, and that conflict has played very little role in shaping the analysis. While the US enterprise in Libya ultimately may prove to have a satisfactory outcome, the author would note his view that, for reasons that the main body of this work hopefully makes clear, the Obama administration's decision to intervene in Libya's civil war was reflective of the deep flaws in US grand strategy that are discussed in this book.

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Introduction

At the present historical moment, the President of the United States has no true peers: he leads the most powerful polity on earth, and in regard to foreign policy and national security decision making his personal authority is enormous and only lightly moderated by law and custom. The US Constitution places deep constraints on presidential influence over domestic affairs, but the power to act as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and control of the machinery of the Executive branch have allowed presidents to minimize Congress' role in foreign policy making, while the Supreme Court has prudently tended to practice self-marginalization by refusing to interfere overly in matters relating to defense and foreign policy.¹

In general, the vesting of “strategic authority” in the Oval Office has proven beneficial, as the other two branches of the US government are not capable of providing coherent strategic leadership. A Congressionally led foreign and defense policy would be whimsical and confused, with over 500 representatives and senators—most of them having little knowledge of strategic theory, military history, or similar relevant subjects—tinkering with policy. (Congressional oversight hearings provide an insight into how problematic Congressional leadership in strategic affairs surely would be. Such hearings often consist of a weird mixture of partisan cheer-leading and accusatory questions reminiscent of a show trial; oftentimes, committee members use all of their allotted question time to make elliptical speeches that do not even contain a clear question.) Given its respect for precedent and relative insulation from partisan politics, the Judicial branch might be somewhat less chaotic if it had responsibility for strategic decision making. However, when the structure of the US court system is considered, it is difficult to imagine how the judiciary might provide timely and coherent strategic leadership even if all judges were defense and foreign policy experts—the American legal process is organized in such a fashion as to make “strategic juristocracy” impractical. Even if this were not the case, for the unelected branch of the federal government to make the key decisions regarding war and peace would be constitutionally and politically unpalatable.

2 *Introduction*

Given the lack of viable alternatives, vesting the president with the right to direct foreign and defense policy is a practical necessity if the United States is to function effectively as a great power, much less the greatest of powers. However, doing so inevitably carries a very considerable risk, as it makes a single individual largely responsible for the success or failure of foreign policy at any given time. This is an enormous potential problem, as a single poor president serving at a pivotal moment in history may immediately and gravely damage the strategic fortunes of the United States. Fortunately, however, such moments are rare. At least for the foreseeable future, a possibly more significant risk for the United States is presented by the possibility of a slow degradation of its international position resulting from a succession of bad decisions by strategically uninspired presidents, with new errors building on the old ones to cause a cycle of failure that, over time, very seriously degrades Washington's global position.

The circumstances that lead to cycles of strategic success or failure are key to the analysis herein, and this work intentionally takes a very long-term view; this is not a "policy book" in any usual sense of the term and does not provide advice on specific future US decisions regarding, for example, Afghanistan or the size of the defense budget. Rather, it focuses on how the United States came to occupy the position that it today has in the global system, how it might decline, and the critical role of the presidency in the rise, and quite possibly the eventual radical degeneration, of US power. The book, therefore, is divided between the past and the future, with the argument regarding the latter deeply dependant on the discussion of the former.

Strategic success considered

This book endeavors to provide an explicitly strategic analysis of the role that the holders of the presidential office have played in the past development of the United States as a great power, and what this history indicates regarding the future of US strategy and foreign policy. The historical examples presented are intended to illustrate the general trajectory of US strategic history and how certain individual presidents have shaped the development of their polity, not to provide a general historical survey. The analysis relies on the description of the long-term strategic development of the United States to provide a foundation for discussion of more recent developments (the period from the Cold War to the present) and then, in turn, to consider what recent decades portend for the future.

The international rise of the United States was, by virtually any standard, extraordinarily rapid, with the country moving in less than 200 years from colonial status to being one of only two global superpowers. This achievement is all the more striking when one considers that the United States was not overtly militaristic (even if it had a pitilessly efficient policy

regarding internal political consolidation). The Constitution was constructed with an eye toward *preventing* the central government from welding the nation's human resources into a mighty war-making instrument capable of endless conquest; the early United States was, in essence, defensively oriented in regard to external states—although, of course, expansion at the expense of Native American tribes was considered desirable. (In some respects, the foresight of the Founders was astonishing; very shortly after the drafting of the US Constitution, Revolutionary France would proceed to undergo precisely the sort of the convulsions that most American leaders feared—an internal bloodbath and the launching of aggressive, expansionist conflicts, both justified by abstract ideological goals, followed by Caesarism and *more* expansionist wars.) This is not to claim that the US government was above occasionally indulging in opportunistic military expansion at the expense of foreign states—northern Mexico did not affix itself to the United States through a mysterious, peaceful process. Nonetheless, the rarity of US expansion through foreign military conquest is notable because it is historically unusual—generally, great polities emerge at the expense of bordering states, either quickly conquering neighbors outright or vampirically draining them of territory and population until they finally are absorbed.

Surely, the largest part of the credit for America's anomalous rise is attributable to its unique geopolitical circumstances, which ensured that during its period of rapid geographical expansion Washington did not present a critical threat to the interests of any of the European great powers; it therefore largely avoided Old World entanglements and all which would result from these. One plausibly might say that, in its early years, America's foremost foreign policy strength was its irrelevance to the great powers; the United States simply did not matter enough that the most powerful states found it necessary to destroy it.

Britain was the only great power whose interests very regularly butted against those of the United States, and this chiefly resulted from the fact that Canada and the United States shared a long, and disputed, common border. Furthermore, British seapower presented a unique potential threat to the United States; as the possessor of the world's greatest naval instrument, Britain could, at will, damage American economic life enormously and, if it desired, threaten invasion by both land (via Canada) and sea. It was not coincidental that vast and underpopulated Canada did not again suffer American invasion after the War of 1812. Britain could make the price of a Canadian invasion prohibitive for the United States, while the inherent vulnerability of Canada and the immense expenses that would be incurred if it were necessary to defend (or, worse still, reconquer) it in a conflict encouraged London's conciliatory instincts.

Acting alone, any of the other great powers were far less potentially menacing to the United States—only France could present a major challenge, and, given the rivalry between Paris and London, a critical French

threat to US security surely would have resulted in British aid to the Americans. Prussia and the Russian and Austrian Empires presented an even less plausible threat, having no major clashes of interest with Washington and, in any case, very little ability to act in North America. Finally, even before its near-complete collapse in the 1810s and 1820s, the decrepit Spanish Empire in the Americas was less a threat to the United States than the latter's potential mugging victim.

Nevertheless, while geography afforded the United States unusually rich strategic opportunities, it did not guarantee long-term success. The excessively reductionist notion that US geopolitical success was foreordained should not be taken seriously. Failure *was* an option for America; it merely was one which, because of fairly good overall strategic judgment, it did not pursue. However, that does not mean that it made no significant missteps; this work describes a number of these and could cite many more. Indeed, in the 1860s the United States government came perilously close to the sort of strategic disaster from which it would never have made a full recovery (and which, moreover, would have had changed world history in unknowable, but certainly radical, ways). Such errors underline the role of contingency in American strategic history.

Again, as noted above, this work uses the United States' past strategic success to illuminate its likely prospective challenges and the likelihood of future disappointment. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary briefly to describe the concept of "strategic success" as it is used herein. Unfortunately, this is not a phrase given to an uncomplicated and readily quantifiable definition. Total failure is easy enough to judge—when Hulagu's Mongols conquered Baghdad in 1258 and (at least according to legend) shortly thereafter rolled Caliph Al-Musta'sim in a carpet and trampled him with horses, it was fairly obvious that the Abbasids had suffered a strategic disaster. Above this baseline, however, there is a degree of ambiguity that is best addressed by examining the goals of the government in question. For any polity, however, assessing strategic success requires judging the degree to which it has been able to shape the global environment so as to enhance its security and influence—most importantly, this implies protection from foreseeable dangers and the power to shape the environment in a fashion that will protect against presently unforeseeable threats. That is at the core of this book's discussion.

Some of the ways in which American policy makers historically have sought to enhance US security are both obvious and, in some form, applicable to any polity at any time. These include diminishing, or, better still, eliminating the threat of foreign invasion; ensuring that the economy thrives—this allows, among other things, generous defense-related spending—and that prosperity is sustainable, thus allowing the state to cope with future threats; preventing the domestic overthrow of the current regime (in the US case, the constitutional order) or the splintering of the state; and so forth. There also, however, are other factors that are not shared by

all states, most notably including the US belief that the spread of its democratic republican form of government would both enhance American security and improve the likelihood of great power peace.

It is not necessary for our purpose to create a highly precise definition and weighting of the factors that US policy makers have used to characterize strategic success over time. Indeed, it would be impossible to do so, as each leader individually assesses such matters somewhat differently, while general elite opinion changes over time: the generation that conducted the War of 1812 surely had a rather different vision of strategic success than did the one that directed the Korean War. Moreover, as noted, a degree of ambiguity is inescapable if one is to discuss such matters realistically—excessive precision actually is misleading, as it implies unattainable certainty in regard to the views and motivations of numerous, complex human beings. Indeed, while “grand strategy” is a highly useful concept,² it would be dubious to presume that most policy makers at most times even have a highly precise vision of how they would prefer the world to be organized.

With that said, it is obvious that, on the whole, the United States enjoyed enormous strategic success from the War of Independence through the end of the Cold War. The US government’s ability to influence global events clearly increased exponentially.³ In military terms, the United States of today is virtually unrecognizable when compared to the one that fought the Spanish–American War, much less the War of Independence; Washington undoubtedly possesses the world’s most powerful overall military capabilities and an unmatched ability to deploy and sustain that force logistically. Diplomatically, it is the most powerful single state, though its dominance in this realm is far less secure (a fact demonstrated, for example, by its inability to secure broad global support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq). Moreover, the United States has either the world’s largest or second-largest economy, depending on whether all of the European Union states are counted as a single unit, and its wealth can be leveraged for diplomatic and other influence.

The first two chapters herein concern the rise and changing global role of the United States. Chapter 1 draws out the major threads of the strategic “story” of the period from independence to the end of World War II, while Chapter 2 deals with the Cold War and the decade thereafter. Part of the reason for this particular division is that it is in the latter period that the American presidency transforms into the key Western leadership position in an ideologically charged superpower competition with no clear endpoint. (US presidents, as well as lesser policy makers, obviously hoped that the Cold War would end peacefully and that Moscow would abandon its errant ways, but precisely *how* that would occur was not at all obvious throughout most of the period.) The challenges of Cold War leadership placed a premium value on the strategic acumen of presidents, especially once the USSR came to possess a number of nuclear weapons sufficient to

grant itself the option of destroying the NATO countries in a matter of hours. Nevertheless, the occupants of the Oval Office during the Cold War era do not stand out as a collective of Machiavellis and Tallyrands who all displayed dazzling strategic ability and outwitted their foreign counterparts, a point significant to this book's larger argument.

Missed opportunities and uncertain prospects

By the 1990s Washington enjoyed an unprecedented status: it was a global quasi-hegemon. It commonly is said that the United States was, or even still is, a world hegemon, or even empire, but this overstates the case, given the very real limits on Washington's power and its willingness to apply force in many situations. Still, though, the United States held (and, albeit to a lesser degree, still holds) a truly unique position.

The fundamental weakness with the strategic thinking of the post-Cold War period is that it was based on the fundamental assumption that US quasi-hegemony would continue long into the future. This was a fatally flawed premise. Rather, *the years immediately following the end of the Cold War were anomalous, and represented a fleeting strategic moment that could not have been made permanent even by the most talented policy makers.* Unique circumstances had made the Cold War itself possible—most critically, the world wars brought about the demise of the old multipolar great power system; the disintegration of the Western European overseas empires soon followed. With German power utterly destroyed and London and Paris militarily and financially exhausted, both Moscow and Washington enjoyed an unprecedented chance to expand their influence. (Though, at the time, the United States was far less focused on the opening that presented itself than it was on the threat of Soviet domination of Eurasia—its strategy clearly, and appropriately, was driven more by fear than perceived opportunity.)

The progressive collapse of the Cold War order over the three years from 1989 to 1991, with the Soviet imperium in East-Central Europe crumbling, to be followed by the splintering of the USSR itself, created a temporary unipolar condition. Even if American policy makers had possessed unsurpassed cunning and ruthlessness, they could not long have maintained US dominance worldwide: by the time of the USSR's dissolution, China already had been implementing serious (and highly successful) economic reforms for more than a decade; India was a significant regional power that long had been ambitious to be something considerably greater; the Japanese economy provided Tokyo with the option of playing a substantial global role, though it remained reticent in this regard; the process of European integration had been ongoing for decades and was accelerating; and so forth. Indeed, there is every reason to suppose that Soviet collapse merely permitted a brief period of unipolarity *that would not even have occurred if Moscow had been better able to manage its decline.*⁴ Absent a globally

devastating nuclear conflict, multipolarity—the usual condition of great power politics in recent centuries—would sooner or later reassert itself.⁵

Despite its ephemeral character, however, unipolarity offered American leaders a unique opportunity to shape the future of the global system. As Chapter 2 discusses, the period following the end of the Cold War offered a matchless opportunity to policy makers to use American influence to shape the security environment by building new institutions and/or altering existing ones. Given the inevitability of multipolarity, new global political arrangements ideally would have been able to accommodate the reasonable ambitions of rising powers while simultaneously creating an environment in which competition among major states could be channeled in ways that would diminish the possibility of the outbreak of great power war. However, the actual attempt to craft the international security environment was unfocused and desultory, with Washington remaining bogged down in day-to-day problems and displaying no realistic long-term vision—largely because policy makers did not understand that unipolarity was a rapidly wasting asset. The US failure to thoughtfully refashion the security environment when it was at the apex of its power and possessed the maximum ability to influence the process was a missed historical opportunity; as a result, it is entirely possible, if not probable, that the renewed multipolar system will be highly unstable and conflict-prone.

Of course, channeling great power competition is not easy under the best of circumstances, and there is no guarantee that American policy makers could have shaped the security environment in ways that would have been of long-term benefit. This does not, however, alter the disturbing fact that few US leaders appeared to have understood that relatively humble concerns related to the activities of rogue states, terrorists, and similar petty villains were a distraction from more enduring challenges facing their country. There was an absence of long-term strategic vision within the US policy making class, and no clear US strategic concept beyond the desire for “more”: the further spread of democracy, greater global stability, and an ever-growing military advantage over potential foes. These objectives were vague, and the unfocused effort to achieve them distracted American policy makers from efforts that might be more significant over the long term.

Chapter 3 addresses the continuing failure of the United States to construct a grand strategy that would allow it to effectively shape the global security environment. A particular focus is the aforementioned progressive crumbling of unipolarity and the trend toward the rise of great power competitors capable of effectively challenging American power. The conflict known in the G.W. Bush years as the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and the Long War—and which in essence continues, though those terms have fallen out of fashion—also is addressed, particularly the problems that flow from making counterterrorism the central strategic focus of the US government.

The quiet crisis: presidents and strategy in recent decades

Chapter 4 of this work ties together many of the threads in the previous chapters to explore the unique role that the presidency has played historically in American grand strategy. As noted above, the Constitutional system gives the president a uniquely powerful role in the formation of foreign and defense policy, and over the course of US history the president has proven, time and again, to be *the* key figure in strategic decision making. While many governments—including, somewhat ironically, authoritarian or totalitarian ones such as the Argentinean junta that launched the Falklands War⁶ and the post-Stalin Soviet Union⁷—had or have strategic decision processes in which power is dispersed among numerous players and coalition-building is central to policy making, the president is a singular figure in US strategic decision making. Bureaucratic wrangling is not unknown in Washington, of course, but the president has the legal and practical ability to drive policy in a chosen direction regardless of the views of his advisors and can do so without fear of overthrow, a privilege enjoyed by neither the British prime minister nor the chairman of Burma's (Orwellian-titled) State Leadership Development Council. Therefore, to a very considerable degree, American strategy is presidential strategy—a reality that has both enormous advantages and risks.

Voters, presidents, and the future of US strategy

Most likely, it is not merely the case that the American public chooses to place a premium on perceived domestic affairs competence while putting little value on perceived strategic acumen. In some elections (particularly the three immediately after the Cold War's end: 1992, 1996, and 2000) foreign and defense questions appear to have played a relatively modest role, but in others—such as the 1968, 1972, 1980, and, more recently, 2004 contests—views regarding the strategic talent of the presidential candidates likely were a significant factor in the election's outcome. (For instance, the outcome of the 1980 election—a landslide electoral college victory for Reagan—might have been different if Carter's handling of the Iran hostage crisis had not deeply undermined public perceptions regarding his strategic judgment.) Moreover, a voter possessed of even very modest foresight has an incentive to take strategic competence into account. If Americans believe that their state will, much less *should*, continue to act as a superpower over the long term (clearly, the prevailing opinion), then even in a period of relative international calm it is easy enough to see that good “strategic management” is valuable in preventing future problems and maintaining an amenable global environment. Thus, American voters have every reason to place a high value on strategic competence.

It is argued herein, however, that in the years following the death of Franklin Roosevelt a substantial number—indeed, a majority—of presidents have been strategic underperformers and this represents a discernable long-term problem, not a simple matter of bad luck. This outcome reflects the fact that, in regard to selecting for strategic competence, the modern US presidential electoral system is dysfunctional—and *it can be expected to remain so*. To put the matter in Darwinian terms, the electorate does a poor job of selecting for strategic excellence: lack of obvious promise as a grand strategist rarely is a fatal selection disadvantage for a candidate. *Demonstrable* incompetence might constitute such a disadvantage, but, except in the case of a president running for reelection, most presidential candidates (the occasional Eisenhower aside) have never had high-level directly personal responsibility in foreign affairs, and voters seem inclined to grant them the benefit of the doubt in regard to their (unproven) strategic competence.

As noted above, this does not necessarily mean that, in the abstract, US voters do not care about strategic competence.¹¹ However, it certainly seems that most Americans do not possess—or, if they do have, choose not to use—a very effective filter for separating the heroic from the hapless.¹² In part, this reflects the fact that relatively few Americans possess an especially nuanced understanding of foreign and defense policy, but it is possible to assess likely aptitude without oneself being especially knowledgeable—one can be ignorant of theoretical physics and yet appreciate that Edward Teller and Enrico Fermi were not.¹³ However, for the purpose at hand, whether voters are indifferent to strategic acumen or value it but have difficulty ascertaining when a candidate actually possesses it is tangential. The important point is that in recent decades the US electoral system has not served as an effective mechanism for assuring a consistently high level of presidential strategic competence and it should not be expected to do so in the future.

There are two major potential criticisms that should be noted in regard to this claim. First, one could object that, in fact, the level of strategic competence displayed by US presidents in recent decades actually has been high; after all, the United States did emerge victorious in the Cold War and is the world's greatest power. This is not an inconsequential point, but it also is not a devastating one, if historical context is properly taken in account. Given the position that the United States occupied in 1945, there was, realistically speaking, only one foe capable of inflicting catastrophic damage to its national interests; this remained the case for more than four decades. The Cold War presidents—some vastly more than others—do deserve credit for avoiding any radical strategic failure, but it should be appreciated that the Soviet Union was not a consistently brilliant super-foe: it was a very real polity with not-inconsiderable strategic blind spots¹⁴ and a decisively flawed ideology. The USSR *was* hostile and had the military assets to be remarkably dangerous, but the bipolar structure of the Cold War was unusually simple. By contrast, for instance, in the

Napoleonic Wars, London had to cope with a diplomatic kaleidoscope—an ever-changing line-up of allies, foes, hesitant neutrals, and so forth,¹⁵ while the *ancien régime* environment that Fredrick the Great operated in a few decades earlier was unreservedly carnivorous.¹⁶ Simply put, some threat environments simply are more difficult to navigate than others—and thus require great strategic sophistication and consistently excellent performance; the menace that Washington faced in the Cold War was grave, but relatively straightforward in character.

In retrospect, given the record of both Soviet and American mistakes, it seems implausible that unfailing strategic genius, or anything reasonably close to it, was necessary to fend off Moscow's challenge. It required, rather, a US grand strategy that was sufficiently simple and robust to be more-or-less consistently implemented by a superpower polity given to frequent error and intermittent self-doubt. Containment proved to be suitable to this purpose.¹⁷ In short, the string of Cold War presidents performed adequately in the context of the circumstances,¹⁸ but the completeness of the American victory was as much a result of Soviet actions (including, critically, the decision not to undertake significant domestic economic and political reform until it was so late that the medicine would kill the patient) as a demonstration of presidential wisdom.

While the United States performed adequately overall in meeting the Soviet test, its post-Cold War record has been far less impressive: as argued above, the record for the 1990s was a deeply unimpressive one overall, with Washington unable even to form a coherent, plausible set of strategic goals (or, perhaps worse, unaware that it needed to do so). Since 9/11, American strategic performance has been even more problematic, a point discussed in greater detail below. While the United States remains the world's greatest power, its position has deteriorated tremendously since the Soviet collapse.

A second potential criticism of this book's overarching thesis is that the number of relevant presidents is so small that there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the electoral system is not an effective quality filter. As of this writing, only twelve presidents have served since Franklin Roosevelt's death and only four from 1991 to the present. The sample certainly is small, but the author would contend that there are clearly discernable ongoing historical trends that can be explored usefully in a work such as this one and, in turn, the analysis of those trends offers insight regarding likely future developments. Forecasts of "the history of the future" rarely are both very specific *and* highly reliable. Herein, the latter attribute is privileged over the former one: the author hopes to provide a generally accurate map, and thus it is not an intricately detailed one. The global security environment is the product of an immensely detailed system of inputs; it literally reflects the sum total of human existence, with everything from commodity prices to theology playing a role. Such complex systems do not lend themselves to precise divination.