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Surprise, Security, and the American Experience

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Van Tol and Gaddis: Surprise, Security, and the American Experience

BOOK REVIEWS

HOW COMFORTABLE WILL OUR DESCENDENTS BE WITH THE CHOICES WE’VE MADE TODAY?


John Lewis Gaddis is the Robert A. Lovell Professor of History at Yale University and one of the preeminent historians of American, particularly Cold War, security policy. Surprise, Security, and the American Experience is based on a series of lectures given by the author in 2002 addressing the implications for American security after the 11 September attacks. It is a succinct and masterful statement of the central national security dilemma that presently faces us.

For many, especially critics of the current administration, President Bush’s post-9/11 policies in response to the threat presented by militant Islamism represent a radical and scary departure from historical U.S. policy. Many putatively are aghast at the introduction of preemptive/preventive war into the National Security Strategy adopted in September 2002 and the apparent shift to a harsh hegemonic unilateralism.

Gaddis argues that far from being a radical departure, the Bush administration’s response to the attacks represents considerable continuity with American historical tradition. Twice before in U.S. history, American assumptions about national security were shattered by surprise attack, and each time U.S. grand strategy profoundly changed as a result.

After the British attack on Washington, D.C., in 1814, John Quincy Adams as secretary of state articulated three principles to secure the American homeland against external attack: preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony. The Monroe Doctrine, proclaiming American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, was declared unilaterally and preemptively in reaction to the Spanish empire’s collapse in Latin America (though in practice it was enforced by British naval supremacy, not American power).

For over a century, the United States expanded its territory and influence through force majeure exercised against “failing states,” another phenomenon by no means new in our times. Florida was ceded by Spain under pressure in 1810, Texas and the Southwest were taken from a chaotic Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century, overseas Spanish possessions...
were seized in 1898 after an ostensible “terrorist” attack on USS Maine, and myriad lesser interventions took place in Latin America and the Caribbean. Fear of multilateral entanglement peaked with insistence on being an “associated power” during World War I, rejection of the League of Nations, and pre–World War II isolationism. America remained content with hegemony in the Western Hemisphere and unilateralism in dealings with other nations and international organizations; preemption of the dictators in the 1930s, always infeasible domestically, would have been impossible given European democracies’ appeasement policies.

Transportation revolutions from the late nineteenth century onward diminished the value of geographical separation that underpinned this strategy, as spectacularly proven by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Obliged by necessity—the United States had insufficient power to defeat both Germany and Japan in a reasonable amount of time and at an acceptable cost—to depart radically from unilateralism, President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved quickly to establish a “Grand Alliance” with Britain and the Soviet Union.

By the end of World War II, America was able to move in a remarkably short period of time from a strategy that had limited itself to controlling the western hemisphere to one aimed at winning a global war and managing the peace that would follow. Equally significant is the fact that FDR pulled off this expanded hegemony by scrapping rather than embracing the two other key components of Adams’ strategy, unilateralism and preemption.”

To keep allies with widely disparate war aims together, FDR sought to “embed conflicting unilateral priorities within a cooperative multilateral framework. . . . If the present war could provide the incentive to build structures and procedures that would prevent new [wars], then all would benefit.” Absent this, “there was sure to be something worse, whether in the form of a less than decisive victory against Germany and Japan, or a postwar economic collapse, or even a replay of the post–World War I retreat by the United States back into the unilateralism of the nineteenth century that had . . . contributed to the coming of World War II. The result was de facto American hegemony, but in contrast to anything John Quincy Adams could ever have imagined, it was to arise by consent.”

Gaddis argues that this was the radical departure in U.S. security policy, not what has happened since 11 September. Since World War II, the underlying principle vis-à-vis other nations was that “there should always be something worse than the prospect of American domination,” a condition easy to maintain during the Cold War standoff with the Soviet Union. This ensured an “asymmetry of legitimacy” between the United States and the Soviet Union that “did much to determine how the Cold War was fought and who would ultimately win it.” Preemption as policy routinely was rejected on the basis that, given the lessons of the bloody world wars, an impossibly high moral ante was needed to justify starting a war and incurring the inevitable costs for an unknown benefit, even in the face of a clear and present danger.

But what if there is no longer “something worse”? One curious question
post–Cold War is why there have been no serious efforts among other nations to build countervailing groupings to "balance" near-hegemonic U.S. global power, French urgings notwithstanding. “The reason, very likely, was the habit of self-restraint Americans had developed—because they had had to—during the Cold War, a habit they did not entirely relinquish after it ended.”

The shocking and lethal nature of the 9/11 attacks, coupled with the fact that they had been executed by a mere group of zealots, resulted in a rapid, radical change in U.S. national security strategy. Key Cold War assumptions no longer applied. The post–Cold War international environment was not benign; terrorists were neither deterrable nor containable like states but potentially had equivalent lethality; the international state system had declining authority; and there was no longer a security environment in which all the players knew and respected the rules.

The 2002 National Security Strategy avers that the United States will “identify and eliminate terrorists wherever they are, together with the regimes that sustain them.” Though multilateral action is preferred (“The United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community”), unilateral preemption may be necessary (“We cannot let our enemies strike first.”). The United States will maintain de facto hegemonic power sufficient “to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.” The strategy seeks to make such implicit hegemonic power palatable by linking it to such universal principles as “No people on earth yearn to be oppressed, aspire to servitude, or eagerly await the midnight knock of the secret police.” Lastly, the strategy and subsequent policy statements argue that terrorism (that we care about) is spawned largely by the lack of representative institutions in tyrannical regimes; thus “terrorism—and by implication the authoritarianism that breeds it—must become as obsolete as slavery, piracy, or genocide” through the spread of democracy. Gaddis finds much to respect in this strategy, particularly its intellectual coherence. However, he notes glaring flaws in its execution. The “most obvious failure has to do with the relationship between preemption, hegemony, and consent.” The run-up to and aftermath of the Iraqi war have raised doubts about the willingness of much of the world to consent to American hegemony if used to preempt in the absence of compellingly clear and present danger, doubts aggravated by the fact that the Bush administration “has never deployed language with anything like the care it has taken in deploying its military capabilities.” It is this lack of multilateral “consent”—and the supposed departure from widely accepted historical norms—that has animated much of the opposition to current policies both at home and abroad.

This poses a problem that will not soon disappear. As Gaddis notes, “the means we choose in this post-September 11th environment could wind up undermining the ends we seek. It is also possible, though, that the ends we seek, given the new threats we face, can be achieved only by means different from those that won World War II and the Cold War. This much at least is clear: the dilemma is a difficult one, and its resolution will largely determine the relationship.
between surprise, security, and the American experience in the 21st century."

Gaddis closes with a poignant anecdote. One of his Yale undergraduates “asked in the dark and fearful days that followed September 11th, ’Would it be OK now for us to be patriotic?’” to which he responds, “Yes, I think it would.” This is a commentary both on the smug self-indulgence of many elites during America’s post–Cold War “vacation from history” and on the uncomfortable “disconnection in our thinking between the security to which we’ve become accustomed and the means by which we obtained it.” It is intellectually fashionable in many venues today to condemn the sometimes morally ambiguous policies that have nonetheless brought us the national security we historically have taken for granted. But as Gaddis notes: “The better approach, I think, is to acknowledge the moral ambiguity of our history. Like most other nations, we got to where we are by means that we cannot today, in their entirety, comfortably endorse. Comfort alone, however, cannot be the criterion by which a nation shapes its strategy and secures its safety. The means of confronting danger do not disqualify themselves from consideration solely on the basis of the uneasiness they produce. Before we too quickly condemn how our ancestors dealt with such problems, therefore, we might well ask ourselves two questions: What would we have done if we had been in their place then? And, even scarier, how comfortable will our descendants be with the choices we make today?”

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As the United States enters its fifth year in the war on terrorism, too little is known about al-Qa’ida. Though several top al-Qa’ida operatives, like Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, are now in custody, and detainee reporting from Guantanamo Bay, Bagram Airbase, and other locations provides a historical snapshot of the pre-9/11 organization led by Usama Bin Laden, the United States still lacks the vocabulary to understand how and why terrorism threatens. This is partly due to the impact of global counterterrorist operations (the Congressional Research Services notes that three thousand suspected al-Qa’ida members have been detained by about ninety countries), conflicting strategies within Bin Laden’s organization (global legion of militants or global inspiration), and the diversity of groups that compose contemporary depictions of al-Qa’ida (the Egyptian al-Jihad, the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah, or the Kashmiri Haarakat ul-Mujahidin, to name three of the many disparate nationalist groups lumped together with al-Qa’ida).

Jason Burke, a chief reporter for the London Observer who spent about four years in Pakistan and Afghanistan, argues that al-Qa’ida (Arabic for “the base of operation” or “foundation”) is less an organization than an ideology. “Osama