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The End of Grand Strategy: US Maritime Operations in the Twenty-First Century

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The End of Grand Strategy: US Maritime Operations in the Twenty-First Century, by Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2017. 252 pages. \$30.

As Hal Brands wrote in his 2014 work *What Good Is Strategy?* (Cornell Univ. Press), grand strategy is “very much in vogue these days” (p. vii). In the broadest sense, it is a quest to find some semblance of order in the intricately complex security environment. The more disorderly the global security system, the more expansive the change under way in this system; and the more fragile the domestic consensus on national priorities, the greater the need for some sort of unifying and guiding strategy. That is why Americans desperately are seeking one now.

Even though the body of scholarly literature on grand strategy is large and growing, in *The End of Grand Strategy* Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski have made an original, provocative, and contrarian contribution, arguing that Americans are inclined toward a “one-size-fits-all” grand strategy based on global primacy that has “little utility in the twenty-first century” (p. 2). Primacy, Reich and Dombrowski believe, “has become the default option of American academics and policy makers who deliberate over grand strategy” (p. 41). This option leads to two major problems: primacy is no longer feasible for the United States, and the actual application of American power, particularly military power, does not reflect the grand strategy on which Reich and Dombrowski feel that it is based.

The authors advocate abandoning the “one-size-fits-all primacist” grand

strategy and using a flexible array of six strategies: primacist-hegemony, leadership / cooperative security / unilateral hegemony, formal sponsorship, informal sponsorship, isolationist retrenchment, and restrained retrenchment. Reich and Dombrowski then provide six maritime case studies to illustrate that the United States already is using this array of strategies even while claiming to use a unitary one-size-fits-all one.

This argument makes sense if—and only if—the authors’ conceptualization of grand strategy is accurate. But has anyone outside the academy ever claimed that there is a discernible, unitary American grand strategy that dictates the application of national power? The authors write: “By definition, the architectural design of any single, abstract strategy is relatively rigid if not indeed static—intellectually, conceptually, analytically, and organizationally” (pp. 167–68). But outside the academy, there is no “single, abstract” U.S. grand strategy. There never has been and never will be.

A case can be made that what Reich and Dombrowski are describing is the natural and enduring distinction between theoretical grand strategies, which often strive for logical consistency and internal coherence, and applied strategy. Just as no military operation ever perfectly reflects the operational plan behind it, there never is perfect congruity between a theoretical grand strategy and the practice of strategy. That is the reason that the grand strategic guidelines that the U.S. government uses to guide its action—particularly the congressionally mandated *National Security Strategy* documents—do not constitute coherent, logically consistent grand strategies for a theorist or scholar.

In practice, American political leaders use the national grand strategy, be it primacy or something else, as a shorthand way of explaining the complex security environment to the public and its elected representatives, and as a very broad and pliable set of historically derived best practices and aspirations. No policy maker ever made a decision and no military leader ever crafted a theater strategy or operational plan because it was what the grand strategy demanded. As John Gaddis phrased it in *On Grand Strategy* (Penguin Random House, 2018), grand strategy is simply “the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities” (p. 21). It is a constantly shifting web of patterns and habits blending both aspirations and predilections, a creed, even a myth, and not something prescriptive, such as a legal code. Outright dissonance between its theory and its practice would be worrisome, but some level of incongruity is normal, even inevitable.

While theorists of grand strategy talk of primacy, in reality the United States is focused more on maintaining the system it created rather than trying to dominate it. Thus the configuration of the U.S. military, which is derived from a practice of reasonably being prepared for low-probability/high-risk threats such as major war, while devoting most of its effort to system-maintenance missions, makes sense. Ultimately, Reich and Dombrowski’s contention that the United States is at the end of grand strategy does not stand up if grand strategy is conceptualized as a set of if/then statements or rules of thumb, as a shorthand way of communicating and building consensus rather than official writ.

That said, *The End of Grand Strategy* is a challenging, erudite, and worthwhile read. It is unusual in its use of sea

power to illustrate its points. It is right about the enduring centrality of American naval power. It is right that a “new” grand strategy is not the solution to America’s security problems. However, to borrow from Mark Twain, the authors’ report of the death of grand strategy may be an exaggeration.

STEVEN METZ



Hell on Earth, by Avigdor Hameiri, trans. Peter C. Appelbaum. Detroit, MI: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2017. 478 pages. \$39.99.

War memoirs and war literature frequently intersect. Because of the traumas and tragedies of war and the impact they have on individuals, it is not uncommon for authors to write of their experiences of war using fiction to give voice to both literary creativity and personal experience. Karl Marlantes’s powerful novel *Matterhorn* (Grove, 2010) is one example, written about his experience of the Vietnam War as a Marine officer. So also are the writings of Israeli author Avigdor Hameiri (1890–1970) a reflection of the author’s experience of an earlier war.

Born in the village of Odavidhaza, in Carpathian Ruthenia in Austria-Hungary (near present-day Mukacheve, western Ukraine), Hameiri fought in World War I as a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army and recounted his experiences in two fictionalized memoirs, *The Great Madness* (1929; translation published by Vantage, 1952) and *Hell on Earth* (original-language publication, 1932). The former recounts experiences of a Jewish soldier on the eastern front, while the latter, the translation of which is the subject of this