On Grand Strategy

By John Lewis Gaddis

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.

- Carl von Clausewitz

Summary

1. Grand strategy can be summarized as the alignment of potentially infinite aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities. Gaddis then goes through historical examples and influential writers who have helped shape and define strategy over the millennia.

Key Takeaways

1. Overview
    a. **Grand Strategy – for the purposes of this book, is the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities**. If you seek ends beyond your means, then sooner or later you'll have to scale back your ends to fit your means. Expanding means may attain more ends, but not all because ends can be infinite and means can never be. Whatever balance you strike, there'll be a link between what's real and what's imagined: between your current location and your intended destination. **You won't have a strategy until you've connected these dots—dissimilar though they are—within the situation in which you're operating.**
    b. **Strategy requires a sense of the whole that reveals the significance of respective parts.**
    c. The well-trained soldier will surely perform better than one with no preparation at all, but **what is "training," as Clausewitz understands it? It's being able to draw upon principles extending across time and space, so that you'll have a sense of what's worked before and what hasn't. You then apply these to the situation at hand: that's the role of scale. The result is a plan, informed by the past, linked to the present, for achieving some future goal.**
    d. For apart from war and preparation for war, it's in competitive athletics that the Clausewitzian combination of a distilled past, a planned present, and an uncertain future most explicitly come together. With fitness more fashionable now than in the age of the great duke, there's more participation in games than ever before. But what does that get you, and what does it have to do with grand strategy? You learn to play the game by having a coach, literally a "trainer," who does what drill instructors used to do when military service was mandatory: teach the basics, build stamina, enforce discipline, encourage collaboration, show you how to fail and to recover from failure. Once the game begins, though, your coach can only shout or sulk from the sidelines. You and your teammates are on your own. Still, you'll all do better for having been coached: it's not for nothing that coaches' salaries, at certain American universities, exceed those of the presidents who've recruited them. **Does any of this mean, though, that while playing the game you've been a hedgehog or a fox? You'd probably regard the question as silly because you'd been both: you had a hedgehog-like plan, you modified it as needed in a fox-like manner, and you won or lost depending on whether it worked or didn't. You'd find it hard to say, looking back, when you'd been which. Instead you held opposing ideas in your mind as you functioned. It's**

much the same in most aspects of life, where we make such choices instinctively, or almost so.

e. **No one can anticipate everything that might happen. Sensing possibilities, though, is better than having no sense at all of what to expect. Sun Tzu seeks sense—even common sense—by tethering principles, which are few, to practices, which are many. He fits the mix to the moment, as if setting sound levels on a synthesizer, or color combinations on a computer screen. He leaves enough options to satisfy any fox, while retaining the purposefulness of a hedgehog. He keeps opposing ideas in his mind by projecting them across time, space, and scale. Leadership in The Art of War, then, is seeing simplicities in complexity. Some realities are as easily grasped as Sun Tzu's five fundamental sounds, colors, and flavors: that's how we know their nature. But when simplicities mix, complexities become endless. No matter how thoroughly we prepare, they'll always surprise us. If tethered to principles, however, they need not paralyze us. And how might you learn to tether? By having great teachers, I think, for tethering is what they have us do.**

f. Thucydides wouldn't have put it in that way, but I suspect this is what he meant when he encouraged his readers to **seek "knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it." For without some sense of the past the future can be only loneliness: amnesia is a solitary affliction. But to know the past only in static terms—as moments frozen in time and space—would be almost as disabling, because we're the progeny of progressions across time and space that shift from small scales to big ones and back again.** We know these through narratives, whether historical or fictional or a combination of both. Thucydides and Tolstoy are, therefore, closer than you might think, and we're fortunate to be able to attend their seminars whenever we like.

2. Hedgehogs and Foxes
    a. Hedgehogs, Berlin explained, "relate everything to a single central vision" through which "all that they say and do has significance." Foxes, in contrast, "pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way." The distinction was simple but not frivolous: it offered "a point of view from which to look and compare, a starting point for genuine investigation." It might even reflect "one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general."
    b. By way of an Oxford party, an Archilochus fragment, and Tolstoy's epic, Berlin had stumbled upon two of the very best ways to become intellectually indelible. The first is to be Delphic, a trick known to oracles throughout time. The second is to be Aesopian: turn your ideas into animals, and they'll achieve immortality.
    c. "Who experts were—professional background, status, and so on—made scarcely an iota of difference," Tetlock concludes. "Nor did what experts thought—whether they were liberals or conservatives, realists or institutionalists, optimists or pessimists." But "[h]ow experts thought—their style of reasoning—did matter." The critical variable turned out to be self-identification as "foxes" or "hedgehogs" when shown Berlin's definitions of those terms. The results were

unequivocal: foxes were far more proficient predictors than hedgehogs, whose record approximated that of a dart-throwing (and presumably computer-simulated) chimpanzee. Startled by this outcome, Tetlock sought what distinguished his foxes from his hedgehogs. The foxes relied, for their predictions, on an intuitive "stitching together [of] diverse sources of information," not on deductions derived from "grand schemes." They doubted "that the cloudlike subject of politics" could ever be "the object of a clocklike science." The best of them "shared a self-deprecating style of thinking" that "elevate[d] no thought above criticism." But they tended to be too discursive—too inclined to qualify their claims—to hold an audience. Talk show hosts rarely invited them back. Policy makers found themselves too busy to listen. Tetlock's hedgehogs, in contrast, shunned self-deprecation and brushed aside criticism. Aggressively deploying big explanations, they displayed a "bristly impatience with those who 'do not get it.'" When the intellectual holes they dug got too deep, they'd simply dig deeper. They became "prisoners of their preconceptions," trapped in cycles of self-congratulation. These played well as sound bites, but bore little relationship to what subsequently occurred.

   d. We'd need to combine, within a single mind (our own), the hedgehog's sense of direction and the fox's sensitivity to surroundings. While retaining the ability to function.
   e. You control some things, but align yourself with others. You balance, while never forgetting that the reason you're balancing is to get from where you are to where you want to go. You're a fox and a hedgehog at the same time—even on water. That was the younger Pericles steering Athens: a polymath with a purpose. Over time, though, Pericles began trying to control flows: the winds, the currents, the rowers, the rocks, the people, their enemies, and even fortune, he came to believe, would follow his orders. He could rely, therefore, on intricate causal chains: if A, then not only B, but inexorably C, D, and E. Plans, however complex, would go as planned. The older Pericles still steered Athens; now, however, he was a hedgehog trying to herd foxes, a different and more difficult enterprise. **That's the difference, fundamental in strategy, between respecting constraints and denying their existence.**

3. Clausewitz & Tolstoy
   a. **Too many theories, Clausewitz complains, try too hard to be laws.**
   b. "Genius," Clausewitz writes, "does not consist in a single appropriate gift—courage, for example—while other qualities of mind or temperament . . . are not suited to war." Instead it requires "a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest." It demands, in short, an ecological sensibility. "The man responsible for evaluating the whole must bring to the task the quality of intuition that perceives the truth at every point. Otherwise a chaos of opinions would arise, and fatally entangle judgment."
   c. So when your troops get sick, or their horses begin to starve, or tsars don't follow the scripts you've written for them, you sketch what you know and imagine—informed by the sketch—what you don't: this allows recovering from surprises and moving on. Strategists and artists are, therefore, on the same page in

Clausewitz, or, more accurately, pages, given the hundreds he left behind. But how can planning anticipate surprises? Only by living with contradictions, Clausewitz maintains: **"Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult."**

d. Something or someone will sooner or later break, but you can't know how, where, or when. What you can know is that, owing to friction, "one always falls far short of the intended goal."
e. Clausewitz, in one sense, says nothing new here. **Asymmetries in aspirations and capabilities have always constrained strategies, which is one of the reasons they're needed in the first place.** He's highly original, though, in specifying friction as the cause, while showing that it can occur at any level: the passage of time and extension across space make it more probable.
f. "The good general," Clausewitz concludes, "must know friction in order to overcome it whenever possible, and in order not to expect a standard of achievement in his operations which this very friction makes impossible." Leaders, he seemed to be saying, must keep their feet on the ground.
g. Clausewitz would have seen coups d'oeil—"inward eyes" grasping truths ordinarily requiring long reflection.
h. **How, though, do you "prune" theory? By not asking too much of it.** "It would indeed be rash" to deduce, from any particular reality, "universal laws governing every single case, regardless of all haphazard influences." But those who never rise "above anecdote"—those indefatigable repeaters of pointless stories—are equally useless, for they "would construct all history of individual cases, digging only as deep as suits them, never getting down to the general factors that govern the matter." **Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield; just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man's intellectual development, but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life.** Clausewitz sees theory, then, as training. It's what "hardens the body for great exertions, strengthens the heart in great peril, and fortifies judgment against first impressions." It's the "lubricant" that reduces friction. It "breeds that priceless quality, calm, which, passing from hussar and rifleman up to the general himself, will lighten the commander's task." Troubles come not from embracing theory as a beginner, but from clutching it too closely while rising, a practice that "defies common sense." Theory then becomes an excuse through which "limited and ignorant minds justify their congenital incompetence." **Clausewitz especially despises the "jargon, technicalities, and metaphors" that "swarm" at high altitudes, a "lawless rabble of camp followers" torn from context and enlisted as principles**.
i. "No other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance," Clausewitz writes of war in *On War*. It's a "paradoxical trinity," composed of the passions that cause combatants to risk their lives, the skill of their commanders, and the coherence of the political objectives for which the war is being fought. Only the last is fully governed by reason: the others inhabit the

murky realms of emotion, "where all the usual landmarks seem to have disappeared." **What's needed, then, is "a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets." But anyone who's experimented with magnets will know—Clausewitz surely did—that the difference between two and three, when a pendulum swings freely above them, looks like that between order and chaos: the third magnet shifts the oscillation from regularity to apparent randomness, or, in mathematical terms, from linearity to nonlinearity.** Clausewitz's magnets force us to ask, therefore, how a theory can balance behaviors that seem themselves to be, in their relation to one another, unbalanced. Not by promising certainty, Clausewitz replies. He places theory within the category of rules to which there can be exceptions, not laws that allow none. He values theory as an antidote to anecdotes: as a compression of the past transmitting experience, while making minimal claims about the future. **He relies on theory for training, not as a navigational chart for the unforeseen.** He trusts coup d'oeil more than quantification: any reduction of war to numbers "would not [stand] up for a moment against the realities of life." And he distrusts novices who, without theory, will lack judgment, which must work "like a ship's compass," recording "the slightest variations" from courses set, "however rough the sea."

j. **What Tolstoy means here—I think—is: (a) that because everything connects with everything else, there's an inescapable interdependency across time, space, and scale—forget about distinguishing independent from dependent variables; (b) that, as a consequence, there'll always be things that can't be known—breaking them into components won't help because there'll always be smaller components; (c) that owing to what we can't know, we'll always retain an illusion of agency, however infinitesimal; (d) that while laws may govern these infinitesimals, they make no difference to us because we can't feel their effects; therefore (e) our perception of freedom is, in practice, freedom itself.**

k. **Begin with theory and practice, both of which Clausewitz and Tolstoy respect without enslaving themselves to either.** It's as if, in their thinking, abstraction and specificity reinforce each other, but never in predetermined proportions. Each situation requires a balancing derived from judgment and arising from experience, skills acquired by learning from the past and training for the future. **Theory reduces history's complexity to teachable moments. It's not the reductionism of Tolstoy's plasterers, who smooth over irregularities in search of predictability. Instead theory functions, with respect to the past, as Clausewitz's coups d'oeil do in the present: it extracts lessons from infinite variety. It sketches, informed by what you need to know, without trying to tell you too much.** For in classrooms as on battlefields, you don't have unlimited time to listen. Theory, then, serves practice. And when practice corrects theory—when it removes theorists' horse blinders—it returns the favor, preventing stumbles off cliffs, into swamps, and toward Moscow.

l. Like Clausewitz's magnets, the configuration is triangular, although in two ways. For as you balance knowns, probabilities, and unknowns, you're also doing so

across time, space, and scale. In war, as in life generally, all parts of a whole are interconnected and thus the effects produced, however small their cause, must influence all operations and modify their final outcome to some degree, however slight.

m. **"Any complex activity," Clausewitz writes, "if it is to be carried on with any degree of virtuosity, calls for appropriate gifts of intellect and temperament. If they are outstanding and reveal themselves in exceptional achievements, their possessor is called a 'genius.'" I take this to mean continuing adjustments of "intellect"—which sets courses—to "temperament"—which determines how they're pursued. For just as no politics can be pure, so no "grand strategy" will remain unaffected by the unforeseen.** Why don't you ever see tightrope walkers without long poles? It's because they're stabilizers, as critical to the reaching of destinations as the steps taken toward them. And yet, the poles work by feel, not thought: focusing on them risks falling. Temperament functions similarly, I think, in strategy. It's not a compass—that's intellect. But it is a gyroscope: an inner ear complementing Clausewitz's "inward eye." Like poles on tightropes, temperament makes the difference between slips and safe arrivals.

n. **Overstretch—the enfeeblement that comes with confusing ends and means—allows enemies to apply leverage: small maneuvers that have big consequences.** Themistocles wouldn't have won at Salamis without spinning a Delphic oracle. Elizabeth trusted her admirals to trust the winds. And Kutuzov could safely slumber after Borodino, certain that geography, topography, and climate—the "knowns" Napoleon had ignored—would drive the French out even if the Russians did nothing. The border would be the "golden bridge" the enemy would want to cross to get home. Kutuzov's bridge could serve as grand strategy's gold standard. For if ends are to fit within available means, then solvency and morality—practicality and principle—demand that they do so with the least possible expenditure of resources and lives.

o. Theory versus practice. Training versus improvisation. Planning versus friction. Force versus policy. Situations versus sketches. Specialization versus generalization. Action versus inaction. Victory versus defeat. Love versus hate. Life versus death. Leading from within clouds versus keeping the ground in view. But no "versus" whatever between art and science. It's not too much to suggest, therefore, that Clausewitz and Tolstoy together are, in the amplitude, imagination, and honesty with which they approached these great issues, the grandest of strategists.

4. Xerxes
    a. The prudent leader "dreads and reflects on everything that can happen to him but is bold when he is in the thick of action." Xerxes listens patiently, but objects that "if you were to take account of everything…you would never do anything. It is better to have a brave heart and endure one half of the terrors we dread than to [calculate] all of the terrors and suffer nothing at all. . . . Big things are won by big dangers."
    b. But Xerxes failed, as is the habit of hedgehogs, to establish a proper relationship between his ends and his means. Because ends exist only in the imagination, they

can be infinite: a throne on the moon, perhaps, with a great view. Means, though, are stubbornly finite: they're boots on the ground, ships in the sea, and the bodies required to fill them. Ends and means have to connect if anything is to happen. They're never, however, interchangeable.

5. Octavian
    a. Perusia revealed the pattern. Octavian first reconstituted respect in Rome by navigating the treacherous currents of land redistribution. He then won a battle by entrusting its conduct to others with superior military skills. Finally, he fortified his authority against further insurrections by publicly executing prominent rebels, an act of violence sufficiently precise in its victims and clear in its intentions that it prevented more violence. **Octavian was thinking ahead: how one decision can be made to affect what happens next. Antony wasn't. Unlike Pericles, Octavian never tried to forge, from contingent events, causal chains. Instead he seized opportunities while retaining objectives. He saw next steps where Antony stumbled. Octavian stuck to his compass heading while avoiding swamps: it's almost as if Antony sought out swamps, sank into them, and then got bored with them.**
    b. For Octavian never modeled himself on Alexander. The Macedonian learned limits only through failures. His troops had to tell him, just short of the Himalayas, that they could go no further. **Octavian saw constraints while seeking successes, and on those few occasions when he did lose sight of them, quickly self-corrected. Strategy, therefore, came naturally: he rarely confused aspirations with capabilities.** Alexander spent his life doing so, and didn't long survive the realization that they weren't the same. He died in Babylon—from exhaustion, illness, and disappointment—at thirty-three. Octavian was that age but only a third of the way through his career on the day in Alexandria, almost three centuries later, when he saw and subtracted from what was left of Alexander. Octavian was fortunate, of course, to have survived his own illnesses and the many risks he ran, but he was also more careful than Alexander in deploying strengths and in compensating for weaknesses. "He who knows the art of the direct and the indirect approach will be victorious," Sun Tzu writes, appearing as usual to cover all possibilities. But then he tethers: "Such is the art of maneuvering." **Direct approaches work, Master Sun suggests, only when capabilities approximate aspirations. Abundance allows all you want: there's little need for maneuver. Most of the time, though, capabilities fall short—that was Octavian's problem. Insufficiency demands indirection, and that, Sun Tzu insists, requires maneuver: victories must connect: otherwise they won't lead anywhere. They can't be foreseen, though, because they arise from unforeseen opportunities. Maneuvering, thus, requires planning, but also improvisation. Small triumphs in a single arena set up larger ones elsewhere, allowing weaker contenders to become stronger.** And that brings us back to the young Octavian running circles around the befuddled Antony, leveraging limited assets until he could switch, at Actium, to a more direct approach.
    c. What he was really doing was giving up the republic, but so gradually and with such tact—while displaying at every stage such self-evident benefits—that the

Romans would adapt to and even embrace their new environment, hardly noticing how much it had changed. They themselves would become crops, vines, cattle, and bees. For unlike Xerxes, Pericles, Alexander, and Julius Caesar—not the least of whose gifts to Octavian had been to start him early—**Caesar Augustus saw time as an ally. As the historian Mary Beard has pointed out, he didn't need to abolish anything. He used time to grow things.**

d. Augustus was Rome's most skillful cultivator. Having navigated himself into unchallenged authority, he used it to turn a failing republic—as if it were a Virgilian vine—into an empire that flourishes, in more ways than most of us realize, even now. **Plants aren't aware that they're being made to mature in a certain way, but if firmly rooted and carefully tended they'll cooperate**. The princeps was fortunate to have been given the time such horticulture requires. He employed it productively while cultivating, within himself, a purpose for planting as well as, in harvesting, self-restraint. He feared, at the end, that he'd failed, and in one sense he had: he never got to train a successor in the way Julius Caesar had trained him. Had the dying Augustus foreseen his heirs' abuses, he'd have been horrified: Nero was only forty years into the future. **But Rome was robust enough, as China has also been, to survive terrifyingly bad rulers. Both have done so through diversification: dependent on no single variety of power, they grew into ecosystems, as robust gardens and forests tend to do.**

6. Machiavelli
    a. Cruelties, however, should be swiftly administered—hence the logic of shock and awe—while benefits should be distributed slowly "so that they may be tasted better." That's why a prince must learn when not to be good: timing is everything.
    b. What, then, to do? It helped that Machiavelli and Berlin had lightness of being, for their answer is the same: don't sweat it. Learn to live with the contradictions.
7. King Philip
    a. How could Philip have no superior but be paralyzed by constraints? One reason is that his family, the ubiquitous Hapsburgs, had long privileged dynastic ties over geographic, economic, or cultural affinities: they conquered, it was said, by marrying. As a result, Philip ruled—and depended on revenues from—a patchwork of peoples owing him little loyalty.31 Noncontiguous boundaries compounded the problem, as did the king's dislike of delegating authority. His mind could be in multiple places at once, hence his multiple dilemmas.
    b. Geoffrey Parker, his best biographer, finds an answer in late twentieth-century "prospect" theory: **leaders, it suggests, risk more to avoid losses than to achieve gains**. Given the empire Philip inherited and then expanded, he had a lot to lose. What's strange, though, are the risks he ran to regain territories he hadn't lost. It wasn't Philip's fault that Henry VIII broke with Rome, or that Mary Tudor failed to reverse his heresy. These misfortunes, together with the Protestant Reformation, could even have been God's punishment for centuries of papal excesses. Philip didn't see it that way, though. He was sure that God had entrusted him not just with the task of losing nothing more, but also with that of recovering for the church its ancient and medieval universality.
8. Queen Elizabeth

a. Feria was among the first, but by no means the last, of Elizabeth's perplexed interlocutors. She could be childlike or canny, forthright or devious, brave or risk-averse, forgiving or vindictive, serene or volcanic, even feminine or masculine: "I have the body but of a weak, feeble woman," she told her troops as the Spanish Armada sailed for home in 1588, "but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too." **Relishing opposites, the queen was constant only in her patriotism, her insistence on keeping ends within means, and her determination—a requirement for pivoting—never to be pinned down**
b. This was, in one sense, toleration, for the new queen cared little what her subjects believed. She would watch like a hawk, though, what they did.
c. Pivoting requires gyroscopes, and Elizabeth's were the best of her era. She balanced purposefulness with imagination, guile, humor, timing, and an economy in movement that, however extravagant her display, kept her steady on the tightrope she walked. Philip's gyroscopes, if he had any, malfunctioned constantly. She, without visible effort, retained the initiative in all she did. He exhausted himself regaining it in one place while losing it somewhere else. She deftly turned adversaries against each other. He ponderously united them against himself. She, running a poor state, kept it solvent. He, running a rich one, begged and borrowed. She never felt not up to her role. He worried repeatedly that he was not up to his. Machiavelli, thinking gyroscopically, advised his prince to be a lion and a fox, the former to frighten wolves, the latter to detect snares. Elizabeth went him one better by being lion, fox, and female, a combination the crafty Italian might have learned to appreciate. Philip was a grand lion, but he was only a lion.
d. Certainty, however, never required haste. From the moment Elizabeth became queen, the historian A. N. Wilson has pointed out, "her advisers and courtiers had been urging her to make decisions: to be Catholic or to be Protestant; to marry; to fight a decisive and expensive war in Ireland or the Low Countries. In almost all cases, Elizabeth had dithered, Hamlet-like; and dithering had been, if not the right policy, then at least not the wrong policy." **For "Elizabeth, like Hamlet, could see the calamitous effects of too great a precision and too great a decisiveness in political life."** They hardly at first seem similar. Shakespeare's prince, dressed like Philip always in black, lacks Elizabeth's lightness—except in his mad scenes, where he feigns irresponsibility, even lunacy, to smoke out his enemies. Elizabeth used dithering, which looks irresponsible, in something like the same way: to remind her advisers for whom they worked; to hold off her suitors, thus balancing their states; and, when the balance at last turned against her, to lure the Spanish Armada into the English Channel where, by trusting her admirals, she sprang a massive mousetrap. **Precision and decisiveness, in each of these situations, could have entrapped her**. "This god-daughter of Cranmer, the liturgical master of hendiadys," Wilson concludes, "had seen the wisdom of double-think." My dictionary defines "hendiadys" as "a complex idea expressed by two words connected by a copulative conjunction." Or, less lustily, how two things can be, or become, one. How, for example, could a new religion, conceived in the lust of an English king, replace a faith souls had followed for a thousand years? Perhaps by speaking to them, without condescension, in their own tongue.

e. **Assuming stability is one of the ways ruins get made. Resilience accommodates the unexpected. There can be reasons, therefore, for resisting uniformity, for respecting topography, even for dithering**. Elizabeth ruled in this way, pioneering such innovations as reigning without marrying, tolerating (within limits) religious differences, and letting a language gloriously grow. **Each arose in response to circumstances: none reflected grand designs.**

9. The American Revolution
    a. **Spain, like Rome, imposed uniformities on particularities. This could produce impressive results: it's unlikely, otherwise, that either empire would have expanded so far so fast. The price, though, was shallow roots, which allowed adversity to shake authority. The English spread their influence more slowly, but adapted more easily, especially in North America. Where when trouble came, it brought a republican revolutionary transfer of authority, not a collapse, the example of which, over the next two centuries, would undermine empires everywhere.**
    b. In contrast to Spain's "new world" colonies—and to the territories that France, more recently, had claimed (but barely settled) along the banks of the St. Lawrence, the Great Lakes, and the Ohio and Mississippi rivers—**British America "was a society whose political and administrative institutions were more likely to evolve from below than to be imposed from above." That made it a hodgepodge, but also a complex adaptive system. Such systems thrive, theorists tell us, from the need to respond frequently—but not too frequently—to the unforeseen. Controlled environments encourage complacency, making it hard to cope when controls break down, as they sooner or later must. Constant disruptions, however, prevent recuperation: nothing's ever healthy. There's a balance, then, between integrative and disintegrative processes in the natural world—an edge of chaos, so to speak—where adaptation, especially self-organization, tends to occur. New political worlds work similarly. Elizabeth understood political horticulture: that things grow best when variety is allowed and roots aren't too closely examined.**
    c. What won the war, for the Americans, was a Machiavellian insight: that a constitutional monarchy's humiliation of an absolute monarchy could cause the latter, years later, to rescue a republican revolutionary upstart. Still bitter over France's loss of North America to the British in 1763, Louis XVI welcomed rebel emissaries to Paris in 1776. The Americans offered trade vaguely but revenge satisfyingly: the French responded with recognition, financing, and a "perpetual" military alliance. Their fleet's timely arrival off Yorktown forced the final British capitulation—whereupon the Americans blithely abandoned their ally to negotiate a settlement with agents of their enemy, extending their boundaries west to the Mississippi River. The outcome defied categories. Was it a victory for principle or expediency? For the rights of man or the rules of statecraft? For lightness of being or heaviness of hand? For a republic or, as Washington himself put it, an "empire"? To say "all of the above" dodges the question, but usefully. For if Burke was right that governments should balance dissatisfactions, if Elizabeth was right to set precedents rather than be bound by them, if Machiavelli was right

to prefer proportionality to consistency, then the Americans weren't just making it up as they went along. Even Augustus might have been impressed by what their leaders did next: they staged a second revolution to correct failures in the first, but with so skillful a mix of stealth and persuasion that the country didn't grasp, until after it had happened, what had just happened.

d. The Constitution and The Federalist share the qualities of having been pressed by time in composition, but liberated from time in lasting significance. The paradox gets at the heart of what it means to hold opposing ideas in the mind simultaneously while retaining the ability—here brilliantly—to function. The proposed Constitution "forms a happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests being referred to the national, the local and particular to the State legislatures." **Madison thus deployed scale across space to reverse time: history would henceforth strengthen his republic by allowing factions to compete at all levels, so that as the country grew, its path would not be that of Rome. The Federalist's arc bent toward a Lincoln, not a Nero.**

10. Napoleon
    a. **Heroics drain you**. Offensives slow as supply lines lengthen. Retreats invite counterattack. Russia is big and its winters are cold. Dogs that catch cars never know what to do with them. Why, then, did Napoleon forget what most fools remember? Perhaps because **common sense is indeed like oxygen: the higher you go, the thinner it gets. As each triumph topped its antecedent, Napoleon's grammar became his logic. Like Caesar, he rose so far above fundamentals as to lose sight of them altogether. Such ascents can be awe-inspiring: so too, in their day, were hot air balloons. But gravity is always present.**
11. Lincoln
    a. In both of which he educated himself. He read voraciously, remembered pragmatically, and applied lessons ingeniously. Oratorical skills smoothed his path from law to politics: not being ponderous helped.
    b. What Lincoln had shown was the practicality, in politics, of a moral standard. I mean by this an external frame of reference that shapes interests and actions, not—like Douglas's—an internal one that only reflects them. Lincoln's didn't arise from faith, or formal ethics, or even the law, a profession necessarily pragmatic in its pursuit of justice. It emerged instead from what experience had taught, from the self-education that widened it, and from the logic in which Lincoln grounded his oratorical lightning. Judge Douglas's amorality, therefore, was not just wrong: it violated the most basic requirements of common sense.
    c. As president-elect he recruited a cabinet of frustrated first lovers or, as the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has called it, a "team of rivals." They included his major competitors at Chicago—the indignantly disappointed Seward as secretary of state, the transparently ambitious Salmon P. Chase of Ohio as treasury secretary, the corrupt but politically necessary Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania as secretary of war, the reliably steady Edward Bates of Missouri as attorney general—and a stalwart noncompetitor, Gideon Welles of Connecticut, as secretary of the navy. Perhaps they'd devour one another, **Lincoln told his**

young aide John Nicolay, but he needed the best men he could get. So he'd "risk the dangers of faction to overcome the dangers of rebellion."

d. As did military command for Lincoln, who knew without having to read Clausewitz that w**ars, however ferocious, must serve, not consume, the states waging them. War could never be an end in itself, but it could be the means by which an endangered state saved itself**. And Lincoln saw that a civil war—which he'd allowed to be forced upon him—might also permit the American state, tainted by slavery, to save its soul.

e. In his history of the Emancipation Proclamation, Allen C. Guelzo suggests that "the gift of coup d'oeil" allowed Lincoln to "take in the whole of a situation at once and know almost automatically how to proceed."

f. Lincoln proclaimed emancipation chiefly for military reasons, but as its moral implications became evident, they simplified his diplomacy. They gave the Union the high ground of conscience: just as no Northerner would re-enslave former slaves who'd served in its army, so no foreign state could afford, by the middle of 1864, to recognize the Confederate slavocracy, much less to intervene on its behalf. Behind this shield the world's largest population of cotton cultivators staged what the historian Sven Beckert has called an "agrarian insurrection," unequaled in its speed and scope. That hastened the Union's victory while securing the single integrated economy it would need to give hope to the world—and, in his expectation of an eventual proletarian revolution—even to Marx.

g. "Somehow he managed," Lincoln's most thorough modern biographer has concluded, "to be strong-willed without being willful, righteous without being self-righteous, and moral without being moralistic," thus yielding a "psychological maturity unmatched in the history of American public life." **Which is simply to say that he managed polarities: they didn't manage him. But how, with so "defective" an education? The answer lies, I think, in the common sense Lincoln extracted from an uncommon mastery of scale, space, and time. Scale sets the ranges within which experience accrues. If, in evolution, edges of chaos reward adaptation; if, in history, adaptation fortifies resilience; and if, in individuals, resilience accommodates unknowns more readily than rigidity, then it stands to reason that a gradual expansion of edges better equips leaders for the unexpected than those that shock, leaving little time to adapt, or those inherited, which breed entitlement and arrogance, its companion.** To see the difference, compare Lincoln's life with that of John Quincy Adams. Great expectations inspired, pursued, and haunted Adams, depriving him, at critical moments, of common sense. Overestimations by others—which he then magnified—placed objectives beyond his reach: only self-demotion brought late-life satisfaction. No expectations lured Lincoln apart from those he set for himself: he started small, rose slowly, and only when ready reached for the top. **His ambitions grew as his opportunities expanded, but he kept both within his circumstances. He sought to be underestimated. Space is where expectations and circumstances intersect. Lincoln and Adams both saw, in westward expansion, the power to secure liberty, but they also feared its dangers.** He, therefore, used space, in war, to restore the Union. He ignored orthodoxies, pored over maps, and calculated capacities. These showed Northern

strengths to be the exterior lines along which new technologies—telegraphs, railroads, industrially produced weaponry—could combine with new thinking to allow mobility and concentrated force. All Lincoln needed were generals who'd fight, and the time it would take them to exhaust the Confederacy. After which the country would control the continent, as the Founders intended. **Finally, then, time. Lincoln kept it on his side: he knew how to wait, when to act, and where to seek reassurance.** He'd come close to agnosticism before assuming responsibilities: as these grew, however, his faith did also, but not conventionally. Instead it resembled a dialogue between a man and—Lincoln's term—his "Maker." Why, the president once asked a group of self-certain ministers, if God had revealed His will to them, had He not "directly to me"? Lincoln came to believe that God was doing this through the course of events, not divine revelation.

12. Roosevelt
    a. Baited now on two fronts, Salisbury yielded on one. **"There is no such thing as a fixed policy," he observed, "because policy like all organic entities is always in the making."**
    b. Crowe began where Mackinder left off. Great Britain was an island off the coast of a continent, but with "vast overseas colonies and dependencies." Its survival required the "preponderant sea power" it had long maintained. This had made it "the neighbour of every [other] country accessible by sea," a status that could have provoked "jealousy and fear"—Crowe knew his Thucydides—had Britain not "harmonize[d]" its interests with "desires and ideals common to all mankind." Now, the first interest of all countries is the preservation of national independence. It follows that England, more than any other non-insular Power, has a direct and positive interest in the maintenance of the independence of nations, and therefore must be the natural enemy of any country threatening the independence of others, and the natural protector of the weaker communities. Maritime supremacy, then, demanded not just the balancing of power on continents that Mackinder had emphasized, but also the reassurance of states bordering seas that the single dominant power at sea respected their interests, as well as its own.
    c. **Roosevelt didn't so much distrust experts as lament their limited horizons.** It irked him that his own agents—the diplomats and military attachés in the Moscow embassy, the Washington officials who read their reports, even his beloved navy—were close to considering Stalin worse than Hitler: they failed to see the larger possibilities that came with a wider view. If the Soviet autocracy was to help the American democracy reduce dangers to them both, then Roosevelt would need deal makers like Davies with more breadth than depth, not specialists who knew too much to make deals.
    d. "So we had won after all!" Churchill remembered exulting on getting the news from Hawaii. "The United States was in the war, up to the neck and in to the death." "Silly people" had thought Americans too soft, too talkative, too paralyzed by their politics to be anything more than "a vague blur on the horizon to friend or foe." But I had studied the American Civil War, fought out to the last desperate inch. American blood flowed in my veins. I thought of a remark which

Edward Grey had made to me more than thirty years before—that **the United States is like "a gigantic boiler. Once the fire is lighted under it there is no limit to the power it can generate."**

e. His country emerged from them with half the world's manufacturing capability, two-thirds of its gold reserves, three-fourths of its invested capital, its largest navy and air force, and its first atomic bombs. There were, to be sure, pacts with devils in all of these: strategies, like politics, are never pure. But as historians Hal Brands and Patrick Porter have pointed out, "If this wasn't a successful grand strategy," then "nothing would be."
f. **Roosevelt had "countervailing qualities of a rare and inspiring order."** He was large-hearted and possessed wide political horizons, imaginative sweep, understanding of the time in which he lived and of the direction of the great new forces at work in the twentieth century—technological, racial, imperialist, anti-imperialist; he was in favour of life and movement, the promotion of the most generous possible fulfillment of the largest possible number of human wishes, and not in favour of caution and retrenchment and sitting still. **Above all, he was absolutely fearless. As a result—and unusually for leaders of his or any other country—he seemed to have "no fear at all of the future."**
g. Roosevelt, in striking contrast, was one of those politicians equipped with "antennae of the greatest possible delicacy, which convey to them . . . the perpetually changing contours of events and feelings and human activities." Gifted with the capacity "to take in minute impressions," they absorb and extract purpose from—as do artists—vast multitudes of "small evanescent unseizable detail." Statesmen of this type know what to do and when to do it, if they are to achieve their ends, which themselves are usually not born within some private world of inner thought, or introverted feeling, but are the crystallisation, the raising to great intensity and clarity, of what a large number of their fellow citizens are thinking and feeling in some dim, inarticulate but nevertheless persistent fashion. Which allows such leaders then to convey, to those citizens, "a sense of understanding their inner needs, of responding to their own deepest impulses, above all of being alone capable of organising the world along lines [for] which [they] are instinctively groping." In this way, Berlin concluded, Roosevelt made Americans "prouder to be Americans than they had been before. He raised their status in their own eyes—[and] immensely in those of the rest of the world." For he showed "that power and order are not . . . a straitjacket of doctrine, . . . that it is possible to reconcile individual liberty—a loose texture of society—with the indispensable minimum of organising and authority." In which coexistence of opposites resides "what Roosevelt's greatest predecessor once described as 'the last best hope of earth.'"
h. Presidential advisers found this frustrating, even frivolous, and some historians since have agreed. But follow the metaphor more closely: how do you keep one hand from knowing what the other is doing without having a head instruct both? **"I may be entirely inconsistent," FDR went on to explain, "if it will help win the war." Consistency in grand strategy, then, was less a matter of logic than of scale: what made no sense to subordinates could make perfect sense to him. For he saw better than anyone relationships of everything to everything**

else—while sharing what he saw with no one. Instead he radiated an apparently effortless aplomb, despite spending the longest presidency in American history, and the last third of his life, unable, unassisted, to instruct even his own legs and feet.

13. Other
    a. The test of a good theory lies in its ability to explain the past, for only if it does can we trust what it may tell us about the future.
    b. Because their causes were knowable, their consequences were predictable. But only individually, for not even the canniest seer can specify cumulative effects. Little things add up in unpredictably big ways—and yet, leaders can't let uncertainties paralyze them. They must appear to know what they're doing, even when they don't.
    c. This, then, is how leaders dismantle walls they've built separating vital from peripheral interests. **For the abstractions of strategy and the emotions of strategists can never be separated: they can only be balanced. The weight attached to each, however, will vary with circumstances. And the heat of emotions requires only an instant to melt abstractions drawn from years of cool reflection. Decades devoid of reflection may follow.**
    d. **Checklists adapt better to change than commandments.** Sailors rely on them before going to sea. Soldiers employ them in planning missions. Surgeons demand them, to make sure they'll have the instruments they need and that they'll leave none behind. Pilots run through them, to ensure taking off safely and landing smoothly—preferably at the intended airport. Parents deploy them against all that can go wrong in transporting small children. Checklists pose common questions in situations that may surprise: the idea is to approach these having, as much as possible, reduced the likelihood that they will.
    e. Nor did Jefferson, any more than Paine, say anything about what kind of government might replace that of the British tyrant. Details weren't either patriot's strength. Had they been, independence might never have been attempted, for **details dim the flames fireships require**. They disconnect ends of arguments from their beginnings. That's why Paine and Jefferson thought it necessary first to tilt history, and only at that point to begin to make it. **Rhetoric, their lever, had to be clearer than truth, even if necessary an inversion of it.**
    f. Simón Bolívar, their liberator, suggested an answer as early as 1815: **there would never be, he acknowledged, a United States of Latin America. One reason was geography. It might be easier to rule an empire from its seaports than from its interior, but this didn't prepare a nation to rule itself: the internal barriers of climate, topography, habitats, cultures, and communications were too great**.
    g. The argument is absurd, but only because it rejects any coexistence of contradictions in time or space: it thereby confirms Berlin's claim that not **all praiseworthy things are simultaneously possible. And that learning to live within that condition—let's call it history—requires adaptation to incompatibles.** That's where grand strategy helps. For "in all fair dealings," Burke reminded his parliamentary colleagues in 1775, "the thing bought must bear some proportion to the purchase paid." **Proportionality comes from what**

> **grand strategy is: the alignment of potentially infinite aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities. And fairness? I'd say from bending the alignment toward freedom.** Or, as Berlin would have put it, toward "negative" liberty. This is what Clausewitz meant by subordinating "war" to "policy," for what freedom could come from total violence? It's what Augustine sought by seeking to make wars "just." And it's what Sun Tzu, with uncharacteristic gentleness, acknowledged: that "while an angered man may again be happy, and a resentful man again be pleased, a state that has perished cannot be restored, nor can the dead be brought back to life." The contradiction between the living and the dead is the greatest we'll ever hold, in mind or in spirit, whatever the "present" within which we function. All at either end of that tightrope—well, almost all—deserve respect.

What I got out of it

1. Really enjoyable book that reads like a novel. The historical examples beautifully help reinforce Gaddis' message – the ability to handle two opposing ideas and still function is a sign of genius, inconsistency is not to be feared if you are adapting to changing circumstances, coup d'oeil,

Let's all aim for Coup d'oeil

The ability to discern at one glance the tactical advantages of the terrain

Clausewitz – the ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself, that is the essence of good generalship. Only if the mind works in this comprehensive fashion can it achieve the freedom it needs to dominate events and not be dominated by them

BH Liddell Hart – a vital faculty of generalship is the power of grasping *instantly* the picture of the ground and the situation, of relating one to the other, and the local to the general