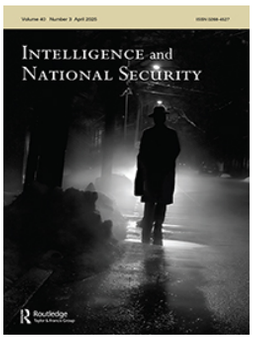

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REVIEW ESSAY

New writings on grand strategy

Huw Bennett

The Pursuit of Dominance: 2000 years of superpower grand strategy, by Christopher J. Fettweis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, 312 pp., £27.99 (hardback), ISBN: 9780197646649.

British grand strategy in the Age of American Hegemony, by William D. James, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, 272 pp., £76.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780198896609.

Purpose and power: US grand strategy from the revolutionary era to the present, by Donald Stoker, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024, 586 pp., £35.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781009257275.

ABSTRACT
The recent revival in the study of grand strategy owes much to the search for meaning about the West's global purpose after the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Long dominated by writing on the United States, the field is now more diverse than ever and unlikely to disappear any time soon, as scholars come under pressure to produce work deemed relevant to those in power. The urge to generate useful lessons for governments can undermine the search for original knowledge as the basic purpose of scholarly research, though this is not always the case. This tendency is, however, evident in the titles under review.

'What divides the Goths and the Romans is not a river, nor a swamp, nor a wall – for these one might break through, sail over, or surmount – but fear, which no one has ever surmounted who believed that he was the weaker'. The fourth-century philosopher Themistius here suggested human willpower outweighed material considerations in determining the fates of nations.[1] Grand strategy advocates find it hard to resist a snappy classical allusion and, like Themistius, place belief at the centre of their worldview. Their belief is that grand strategy is more than simply the coordination of all elements of state power into a coherent system for achieving long-term objectives. Grand strategy is claimed to be inevitable. As Hal Brands holds, "All leaders – consciously or unconsciously, on the basis of reasoned analysis, pure ideology or intuition, or something in between – make judgments about which goals are most important, which threats most deserving of attention, and how resources should be deployed to meet them".[2] Andrew Ehrhardt and Maeve Ryan caution those contemplating ditching the concept that '. . .you bury with it the very essence of statecraft'.[3]

Grand strategy clearly matters to those interested in intelligence, and grand strategists who ignore intelligence are more likely to see their ambitions fail.[4] Most studies still centre on a single nation state because their historical, geographical and cultural peculiarities exercise considerable influence over grand strategic decision-making.[5] Critics of grand strategy emphasise the field's methodological shortcomings, question whether grand strategy remains feasible in the current

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political climate, and ask about the purpose driving the agenda. This review outlines these critiques, illustrates how the field's strengths and weaknesses manifest in three recent titles, and concludes that the most serious shortcoming is the preference for practitioner-friendly wisdom over conceptual or historical originality. Though interesting, original studies might still be found, grand strategy is a field with an unusually high tolerance for books which can only be characterised as banal.[6]

Much methodological debate has centred around definitions. In an influential article Nina Silove argues grand strategy is understood in three senses, though these can at times overlap:

> First, scholars use grand strategy to refer to a deliberate, detailed plan devised by individuals. Second, they employ it to refer to an organizing principle that is consciously held and used by individuals to guide their decisions. Third, scholars use the term to refer to a pattern in state behavior. As shorthands, the three uses may be thought of, respectively, as 'grand plans', 'grand principles', and 'grand behavior'.

Silove despairs at the inability of grand strategy writers to agree on a definition as a settled basis for a sustained research programme.[7] Indeed, diverse perspectives on definitions, methods, and explanatory versus normative purpose mean grand strategy cannot be called a research programme in rational social scientific terms.[8] Methodological imprecision, such as an absence of scope conditions for what is and is not grand strategy, have led to the remarkable situation where a field so at pains to stress its relevance for policy-makers frequently says nothing about what determines effectiveness.[9] Grand strategy's totalising sensibility is inherently antithetical to the drawing of limited, precise, qualified inferences about causal relationships. Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich optimistically suggest how positivist rigour might best be brought into play: through mixed-methods studies, more comparative work, a more systematic analysis of the relationship between ends, ways and means, and by devoting more effort to causal explanation than policy prescription.[10] For historians of course definitional flexibility is to be admired because grand strategy is made at particular moments by specific people who conjure their own meanings. Historians have little patience for the scientific quest to locate a single, timeless definition.[11]

Donald Trump's presidency sparked renewed debate about whether the United States is even capable of producing grand strategy anymore.[12] Wherever one stands on Trump personally, his presidency clearly exposed deeper-rooted problems. Richard Betts argues democracy imposes terminal constraints on grand strategising by compelling leaders to prioritise domestic issues, through frequent leadership turnover which damages longer-term planning, and through decision-making gridlock brought about by the separation of powers. Leaders thus tend to be sucked into day-to-day crisis management with little time left over for true grand strategy.[13] For Daniel Drezner the foreign policy establishment is now a far less receptive audience for writings on grand strategy. Political polarization and legislative indifference mean the scope for influencing the executive is diminishing.[14] Even if true, such an environment has not prevented the authors of the three books under review prioritising knowledge accessible for practitioners over the generation of original findings.

What do these books seek to accomplish? *The Pursuit of Dominance* is modelled on the grand strategy course introduced to the US Naval War College by Admiral Stansfield Turner in the early 1970s and aims to comprehend how great powers maintained their supremacy, rather than how they rose or fell. Christopher J. Fettweis writes for experts and lay readers alike and hopes to provide lessons useful for the United States today. His book comprises six case study chapters, on Rome, the Tang Dynasty, the Mongols, the Ottomans, Imperial Spain, and the British Empire, bookended by introductory and concluding reflections on cross-cutting themes. Strangely, American history is deemed irrelevant – or perhaps too familiar to be worth bothering with. William D. James' book focuses on a single case, Britain since 1940, responding to the call for non-American examples to enrich the field's evidence base. As a modified doctoral thesis James' text is impeccably organised yet entirely free from the jargon-heavy parochialism so common in many adapted doctoral projects. *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony* aims to demonstrate that Britain has thought and acted grand strategically, that American influence over the U.K. has been exaggerated, and that

domestic politics matter. *Purpose and Power* describes the American experience from the revolution to the present day. In it, Donald Stoker aims to instruct American leaders about the purposes for which national power has been used and how to think about using power effectively in the future. He rightly notes: 'It would be incorrect to insist the US has always possessed a grand strategy or developed clear strategic paths. It's equally false to say it never has'.[15]

Each book addresses the definitional debate, if not the methodological critiques. For Fettweis, grand strategy '...is the art of marshalling resources to pursue national goals'. In claiming all countries possess one, whether they know it or not, his approach fits into Silove's "grand behavior" category. Fettweis is interested in how the external security environment shapes this behaviour.[16] Stoker's *Purpose and Power* opens with "A framework for strategic analysis" easily recognisable to military staff college alumni. Interests produce political aims, which dictate the form taken by grand strategy, in turn shaping operations, which then inform tactics. Stoker argues Americans have consistently sought to realise three aims: security, sovereignty, and expansion (initially territorial, then by spreading democracy globally). Though Stoker includes information, economics, diplomacy and military power in his definition the emphasis is mainly on the latter two dimensions.[17] *Purpose and Power* is a "grand principles" study. Of the three, *British Grand Strategy* is the only one to devote a whole chapter to definitions, in which James appears at ease with the concept's Anglo-American origins and untroubled by the prevailing terminological incoherence: '...the fact that concepts evolve over times should not be cause for despair'.[18] Discernibly 'grand plans' in flavour, James' framework is astutely attuned to the process by which those plans come to be adjusted. Grand strategy is done by states (of all sizes), spans both peace and war time, and comprises military, economic and diplomatic means.[19] Yet for all the undoubted merits in the coherent definitions put forward, these books do nothing to push the debate in a new direction.

Vivid lessons for policy-makers flourish abundantly on nearly every page. Stoker's deep dive into American history fruitfully compares presidential leadership styles. Barack Obama wasted his talents on tactical matters, unlike Dwight D. Eisenhower, who set clear aims and 'solid strategic direction'.[20] The Ottoman Empire demonstrated the benefits of opening public service to a wide talent pool, though not one wide enough to include women.[21] James rightly notes the tendency for domestic politics to assume a less prominent role in grand strategy when the state faces an existential threat.[22] The Second Seminole War (1835–42) highlighted recurrent problems in American warfighting: entering hostilities in a poorly prepared state, misunderstanding the enemy and committing too few resources to achieve strategic objectives.[23] Both the British Empire's heyday and the United States' economic expansion in the nineteenth century suggest protectionist trade policies, now increasingly back in vogue, might be necessary for states to ensure their security.[24] Perhaps it is too much to hope that the current affairs commentariat take heed of the lesson that today's challenges are no more insurmountable than those of the past.[25]

All three studies can be considered historically minded to greater or lesser degrees. Stoker's tome chronicles American power since 1775 with a relentless adherence to organising principles: the political aims, the threat environment, grand strategy as a whole, followed by economic, diplomatic and military factors. Detail does not always connote clarity. A certain familiarity with American history is assumed: the 1859 John Brown raid is mentioned in passing, for example, with no explanation.[26] Conceptual rigidity results in a text frequently interrupted with sub-headings, sometimes three on a page, and sections comprising only three sentences (on naval strategy in 1812, for example). The quest for comprehensiveness is occasionally self-defeating. Theodore Roosevelt's administration is recognised as uniquely significant for tilting the US away from territorial expansion after 1903. Roosevelt is acclaimed as a talented grand strategist.[27] Yet his achievements only deserve seven and a half pages of discussion when space is wasted on inconsequential figures like Rutherford B. Hayes.

The emphasis on military factors is also periodically a shortcoming. As Stoker acknowledges, American success against the British after 1776 depended upon 'pivotal and arguably indispensable' support from France.[28] Yet such assistance receives limited attention. Stoker's extensive treatment of

the Indian wars is commendable – between 1865 and 1898 the US Army fought more than 1,000 such engagements.[29] His unwillingness to give voice to indigenous strategists or to the Seminole, Chickasaw, Cherokee and other communities subjected to federal expansion, less so. Does President Andrew Jackson deserve credit for saving 'the Five Civilized Nations . . .from extinction'?[30] One might expect a variety of verdicts to be available. Fettweis, too, makes '. . . no effort to relate history evenhandedly'.[31] Case studies are selected from those powers which exercised dominance absent any peer competitors, each offering distinctive lessons, though there is no common structure to the chapters. Historiographical currency extends sometimes little further than Edward Gibbon or A.J.P. Taylor, leading to such outdated platitudes as the assertion that none of the First World War's belligerents embarked with political goals.[32] Anachronisms abound: 'Had there been Keynesians at the time [the Roman Empire], they would have been pleased'.[33] Grand strategic intentionality is inferred from actions in many instances where decision-makers left no record as to their thinking.[34]

Unlike the other two titles, *British Grand Strategy* claims to make historically original arguments based on empirical evidence. In fact the study follows a social scientific logic rather than one attuned to time-bound contingencies, and by looking at separate key moments it misses long-running, mundane decision-making in the years separating those dramatic events. There is a logic for the case studies: by covering three historical periods (the 1940s, the 1960s, and the 2000s) they '. . .allow for variation in the external threat environment' whilst having in common American hegemony in the international system.[35] However, the comparative method is not applied in an explicit or rigorous fashion. Case studies represent a class of events, selected to test the validity of an explanation.[36] James does not explain why the Second World War, the East of Suez decision, and the 2003 Iraq War qualify as the most valid case studies for analysing the extent to which Britain exercised grand strategic independence. What about other options, such as nuclear strategy, decolonisation, or the Falklands War? Furthermore, the three cases selected all support the hypothesis about British independence. The book's implicit scope conditions therefore mean the argument can only be relevant to British *independent* grand strategy making, and not to British grand strategy making as a whole.[37]

Each case study chapter contains rich description of the historical events, in every case highly informed and articulated with lucid concision. Yet they only feature two common causal devices for explaining grand strategic choices: domestic actors, and the role of allies. These vital causal mechanisms receive limited attention and there is little discussion directly comparing them between the cases to the extent that 'systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases' is lacking.[38] *British Grand Strategy's* flexible approach to social scientific methodological rigour is, unfortunately, not compensated for by historiographical originality. In order to satisfy archival purists, historical studies should demonstrate how new source materials change what is understood about a particular question. Chapter three argues British leaders in the Second World War wished to keep casualties low and aimed to engage the Wehrmacht only once they possessed numerically superior armed forces.[39] ('Wehrmacht', incidentally, does not mean 'army').[40] These arguments won't surprise anyone familiar with British strategy in the war.[41] References to diaries, Cabinet papers, Foreign Office correspondence and other primary sources cannot conceal the chapter's synthetic rather than novel character.

Chapter four's assessment of the Labour government's decisions to abandon a substantial military presence in Aden and Singapore in the mid-1960s, though entirely coherent, presents no meaningful interpretive deviation from the existing archive-based studies by Saki Dockrill and John Young.[42] James argues the security situation in Aden in particular '. . .determined the shifting calculus in Whitehall'.[43] But there is no discussion about the conflict there. The final case study, on the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, argues Tony Blair genuinely believed in the need to remove Saddam Hussein as a desirable goal in itself, and as a means to strengthen Anglo-American relations. Blair's personal conviction found its most memorable expression in his 28 July 2002 note to President George W. Bush: 'I will be with you, whatever'.[44] James makes excellent use of the Iraq Inquiry evidence and presents a compelling narrative, though there is hardly any attention to the question of how Blair

was able to sideline opposition from within the Labour movement to the war. Again, the central argument repeats what is already known. Patrick Porter's 2018 *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq*, for example, meticulously reconstructed the run up to the invasion and the ideational context in which decisions arose.[45]

James is to be commended for at least trying to contribute meaningfully to the scholarly literature. Fettweis does not even pretend to do so. Stoker dismisses fellow scholars: 'We're awash in works urging America's pursuit of specific grand strategies such as "liberal hegemony" and "offshore balancing". I've spent little time on suggestions such as these because there's no evidence for the United States ever attempting them'.[46] There is also no evidence for Stoker presenting an original historical interpretation despite the hundreds of pages of narrative detail. According to Jeffrey Michaels and Matthew Ford, grand strategy research programmes have become intellectually compromised by relying on funds from partisan organisations with a right-wing agenda.[47] Whether these programmes produce research adhering to a mostly conservative outlook is contestable. Left-leaning research is also being written.[48]

If these three books are anything to go by, the real malaise now besetting grand strategy studies is one of banality, a problem caused by indifference to originality as the fundamental purpose of scholarly writing. Are all future studies destined to suffer from this malaise? A glance back at earlier classics in the genre, which combined deep archival originality with sparkling interpretive creativity should give us hope that there is indeed a future for grand strategy – if only scholars would aim higher.[49]

Notes

1. Fettweis, *The Pursuit of Dominance*, 30.
2. Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* 6.
3. Ehrhardt and Ryan, "Grand Strategy is No Silver Bullet, But It Is Indispensable," https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/grand-strategy-is-no-silver-bullet-but-it-is-indispensable/.
4. On the grand strategy-intelligence relationship, see: Fingar, "Intelligence and Grand Strategy," 118–134.
5. Kennedy (ed.), *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, 6.
6. For recent examples of studies which contain original conceptual and historical findings, see: Borgwardt, Nichols and Preston (eds.), *Rethinking American Grand Strategy*; and French, *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement*.
7. Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword," 34.
8. Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich, "Is Grand Strategy a Research Program?" 59–60.
9. Lissner, "What is grand strategy?" 67.
10. Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich, "Is Grand Strategy a Research Program?" 84–5.
11. Morgan-Owen, "History and the Perils of Grand Strategy," 351–85.
12. Drezner, Krebs, and Schweller, "The End of Grand Strategy," 107–17.
13. Betts, "Is Grand Strategy an Illusion?" 590–603.
14. Drezner, "Grand Strategy in a Fractured Marketplace of Ideas," 657–72.
15. Stoker, *Purpose and Power*, 11.
16. Fettweis, *The Pursuit of Dominance*, 3, 5.
17. Stoker, *Purpose and Power*, 2–11.
18. James, *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony*, 16, 20.
19. Ibid., 30–3.
20. Stoker, *Purpose and Power*, 697.
21. Fettweis, *The Pursuit of Dominance*, 115.
22. James, *British Grand Strategy*, 203.
23. Stoker, *Purpose and Power*, 95.
24. Fettweis, *The Pursuit of Dominance*, 196; and Stoker, *Purpose and Power*, 87.
25. Ibid., 214; and James, *British Grand Strategy*, 3.
26. Stoker, *Purpose and Power*, 5.
27. Ibid., 122, 214.
28. Ibid., 36.
29. Ibid., 162.
30. Ibid., 90.
31. Fettweis, *The Pursuit of Dominance*, xii.

32. Ibid., 4.
33. Fettweis, *The Pursuit of Dominance*, 43.
34. Ibid., 87.
35. James, *British Grand Strategy*, 9.
36. George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 17.
37. Mahoney and Thelen, "Comparative-historical analysis in contemporary political science," 13.
38. George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 67.
39. James, *British Grand Strategy*, 42.
40. Ibid., 75.
41. On the British Army, for example, see: French, *Raising Churchill's Army*.
42. James, *British Grand Strategy*, 42; Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*; Young, *The Labour Governments 1964–1970, Volume 2*.
43. Ibid., 142.
44. Ibid., 147, 161.
45. Patrick Porter, *Blunder*.
46. Stoker, *Purpose and Power*, 696.
47. Michaels and Ford, "Grand strategy or grant strategy?" 764–86.
48. Jackson, *Grand Strategies of the Left*.
49. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*.

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