

What's in On Grand Strategy for me?

John Lewis Gaddis, professor of History at Yale, is the author of “Strategies of Containment,” “The United States and the Origins of the Cold War,” “Surprise, Security, and the American Experience” “The Long Peace,” “The Landscape of History,” and “The Cold War: A New History.” His “George F. Kennan: An American Life” won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in biography.

The famous leaders balance their grand ambitious vision with caution and an attention to details.

Gaddis sets up his discussion with Isaiah Berlin's two categories of thinkers. The “foxes”, who know many things, and the “hedgehogs” who know one big thing. Which is better?

The legendary Oxford professor and president of Wolfson College, Isaiah Berlin, once categorized writers by saying that “the fox knows lots of things, but the hedgehog focus on one big thing.”

Berlin was comparing two kinds of writer: hedgehogs, who were people with a worldview consisting of one main idea around which everything else is related, and foxes, who paid attention to the details and saw the world as a complex place with a variety of different, even contradictory, aspects.

On the one hand, the world pays more attention to hedgehogs, with their crude, brassy theories. But it's the foxes we should be trusting to make better decisions because of their capacity for uncertainty, reflection and adaptation. Hedgehogs do well when the world is stable but when it starts to change, you want a fox in charge.

Berlin's analogy was easily expanded upon by other people to include well known leaders of our time. This time, the hedgehog represented a highly-driven and single-minded leader, while the fox represented someone who's cautious and sees all the obstacles in their way.

With this analogy, it became apparent that the well known leaders had a healthy mixture of both hedgehog and fox traits. Those leaders at the extreme ends of the spectrum were either too cautious or they failed to see the whole picture.

Consider the story of two leaders with two different dispositions: King Xerxes of Persia, who was a hedgehog, and his mentor Artabanus, a fox.

In 480 BC, these two were considering a possible invasion of Greece. Being a fox, Artabanus was cautious and saw many potential pitfalls ahead. So he advised against the

invasion and tried to warn Xerxes that the journey was too long and that they'd surely run out of food and be too tired to fight the mighty Greek soldiers.

Being a hedgehog, Xerxes was one thing focused and bold in his decision-making. In his opinion, nothing risked meant nothing gained, so he neglected Artabanus's worries and invaded. Artabanus proved to be right, as the Persians were too tired by the time they reached the Greek army.

Artabanus may have been correct on this occasion, but a leader should be wary of his approach. There are times when a leader needs to make brave decisions, and when leaders are always like Artabanus they may never take a step.

So, the better leader is part hedgehog *and* part fox – they can assess all the different angles while still being able to take determined steps.

Abraham Lincoln was one such leader. He was determined to get the 13th Amendment passed in order to abolish slavery and, like a fox, he accomplished a variety of angles to achieve this goal – including bribery, flattery and lies.

The fox-hedgehog analogy also reveals the ideal characteristics for making true projections.

When Isaiah Berlin applied the fox-hedgehog analogy to various writers, it was nothing more than a fun parlor game. He was delighted when he found out it was being used to characterize historical leaders and other famous figures.

One of the bigger applications of Berlin's theory involved the political psychologist, Philip E. Tetlock, who conducted a massive study on expert opinions between 1988–2003. Tetlock looked at 27,451 predictions about world politics from 284 experts to determine which ones were accurate and if there were any significant common characteristics among them. The experts ranged from professors, politicians, think tank members and various other professionals, and all had various political leanings, as well as other characteristics such as pessimism or optimism.

Tetlock derived from his studies a theory of good judgment. Gaddis considers this essential to grand strategy. "Self-critical thinkers," he writes, "are better at understand the contradictory dynamics of evolving situations, more circumspect about their predicting prowess, more accurate in recalling mistakes, less prone to rationalise those mistakes, more likely to update their beliefs in a timely fashion, and — as a cumulative result of these advantages — better positioned to affix realistic probabilities in the next round of events."

Indeed, the study showed foxes to be far better at estimations. This was due to how foxes use various sources of information to make their estimations, along with the understanding that politics isn't a science.

Hedgehogs, on the other hand, are over-reliant on simplification and as a result, their estimations were seen to be as true.

According to Tetlock, another reason for the accuracy of foxes was their humble nature, which led them to be cautious and consider all possible factors before coming to a conclusion.

Hedgehogs were very much the contrary: They were stubborn and unlikely to doubt themselves, meaning they were less adaptable and less likely to be right. However, Tetlock noticed that these hedgehog-experts were often famous people in the media and television talk shows. Since they had one big idea, their saying was more easily digestible – and therefore more appealing – than the complex thoughts presented by foxes.

So what began as a fun conversation-starter turned out to be more academically useful than Berlin could've ever imagined!

With a bold plan, big leaders can succeed despite obstacles. But they shouldn't let power corrupt their sense.

Throughout history, there have been power-hungry leaders who've gotten carried away with their grand aspirations. But we've also seen powerless yet clever leaders who've managed to realize their ambitions despite their weakness.

By making a realistic assessment of the skills they *do* have, a great leader can devise a plan that utilizes those skills to achieve their desired targets.

Take Octavian, grandnephew to Julius Caesar and inheritor his legacy and titles. Despite his youth, Octavian was wise enough to know that his limited military experience meant he wasn't going to get power as a heroic army general like his great-uncle Caesar. Instead, he won over Rome's army by giving bonuses to his loyal troops.

Octavian also had to contend with other popular challengers to the throne – namely Marc Antony and Lepidus – who had far more military and political experience than he did. Octavian allowed them to divide up the empire and take the more desirable fields while agreeing to share the leadership role – he knew that being one of three rulers was better than anything else.

Indeed, this position as a co-leader was the perfect place for Octavian to plot and get his power gradually by continuing to use his ideas. By staying focused and paying attention to the limitations, he went on to become Rome's first emperor, under the name Augustus.

But with great power comes the threat of it all going to your head – something that has led to many a collapse. This is why great leaders avoid waging war as a way to get power and victory.

As military theorist Carl von Clausewitz said, war is “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.” That should be its only justification; it shouldn't be used as a power grab, which is what led to Napoleon's demise.

In 1812, Napoleon wanted to teach the Russian czar who's boss. So, he planned to rapidly invade Russia, overcome its army and return home to France in triumph before winter set in. Alas, Napoleon's dreams of glory on the battlefield didn't work out as planned. He chased the Russian army all the way to Moscow, only to find the city deserted and stripped of supplies.

With frost already creeping upon them, there was no point occupying a barren city with tired and hungry troops. Napoleon had to cut his deprivations and retreat, but the long, deathly cold journey home cost thousands of people.

But wasn't Napoleon known for being a superior strategist? As the author says, “Common sense is like oxygen: the higher you get the thinner it becomes.” Clearly, Napoleon's prior victories had gone to his head, and before long it would cost him his empire.

Adaptability brings steadiness.

You may think that a sign of strong leadership is having obedient followers. But when those following your orders are a homogenous group with unwavering submission, it can also be a sign of fragility. For it is this very scenario that has built a house of cards in certain societies – where a small gust of opposition has sent it toppling to the ground.

This is precisely what happened during the European colonization of the Americas, where the leadership of the British colonies proved to be more adaptable, and therefore more steady than their Spanish counterparts.

When Elizabeth I was in control of the American colonies in the late sixteenth century, she had a fairly relaxed approach and would willingly delegate when necessary. As a result, her underlings were actively involved with the locals of the colonial settlements and were closely in tune with the concerns of each individual town and city. This, in turn, resulted in a diverse

and adaptable system of government, ready to make changes that suited the town's unique problems.

Then there was Philip II of Spain, who ran his colonies in a strictly uniform manner – whether it was the kind of worship being practiced or the style of governing. At the time, it was said that a man from Lima could go to Mexico City and feel ok at home.

With the Spanish empire being so homogenous and unadaptive, it meant that any spark of rebellion or adversity could quickly spread like wildfire across the colonies.

Meanwhile, if a problem arose in the British colonies, the closely attuned leadership was ready to take care of it before it could go beyond.

This adaptable leadership also meant that the US was in good shape to prosper after gaining independence. Due to the complexity of their system of leadership, many functioning local governments had already been established by the time of independence, and this is a big reason as to why the US became the only nation in the Americas accomplished successfully challenging the Old World powers.

Conversely, the collapse of the Spanish empire left a dangerous power vacuum in South America. With Spain's iron fist having been clenched so tight, no one living in the colonies had any experience of governing.

Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan revolutionary leader, called this a “political immaturity” caused by the Spanish rule. It concluded in the continent remaining fragmented after getting independence, rather than becoming a “United States of Latin America,” like their neighbors to the north.

Focusing too much on short-term gains can ruin long-term gains.

Now that we've looked at a few case studies from history, let's revisit Isaiah Berlin's concept of the hedgehog and the fox. Is leadership really as simple as these two types suggest? The answer is no. In reality, most people exist somewhere between these two types. History shows us that even skilled, fox-like strategists can lose sight of the options and make hedgehog-like mistakes.

This is particularly the case when leaders focus on short term gains at the expense of long-term ones – the kind of mistake that can inadvertently make a strong future enemy. During World War I, for example, the US and her allies convinced Russia to remain involved in the conflict. As a result, the Bolshevik resistance formed, staging a successful revolution in 1917. A big part of their success was that Russia's leaders had been significantly weakened by the war.

After the revolution, the US, led by Herbert Hoover, supported the new Russian government with an aid program that helped the nation survive the famine of 1921–22. The US also supported Stalin's Five-Year Plan, which involved rapidly turning his nation into a world power by exporting entire establishments to Russia. This included ones that operated on Henry Ford's state-of-the-art mass production techniques.

Ironically, this all led to the Cold War and the Soviet Union becoming the West's primary adversary, which is why the clever leader should always keep long-term results in mind and act accordingly.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's (FDR) strategy in dealing with the Soviet Union was mainly focused on working together to lower the powers of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Due to its geographical place, it was vital that Russia act as a wedge between these two nations, not a bridge. With this in mind, in 1933 FDR saw the value in recognizing the USSR as a new country, since he may very well need them as an ally in the future.

With his strategies focused on the long-term, FDR wasn't taken by surprise when Hitler and Stalin signed a nonaggression pact in 1939. After all, they were both hedgehogs. Looking beyond this initial agreement, he also knew that the lack of respect between the two single-minded men would lead to the eventual collapse of the deal. Sure enough, it did collapse. And who was there with open arms to accept the USSR when it did? FDR. Franklin D. Roosevelt is another good example of a leader who balanced his hedgehog and fox characteristics. He had his unwavering, one-track plan to neutralize Germany and Japan, but used different small, foxy maneuvers to move himself closer towards that goal.

"On Grand Strategy" is many things — a good validation of the liberal arts, an argument for literature over social science, an engaging reflection on university education and some timely guidance to Americans that lasting triumph comes from winning what you can rather than all that you want.

There's no exact formula to being a successful leader, but history is full of examples that brings us the best ones keep their work focused on a big end goal while looking for a number of options to help accomplish it. They stay adaptable in order to navigate around totally unpredictable events, without letting these potential problems fail their progress.

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