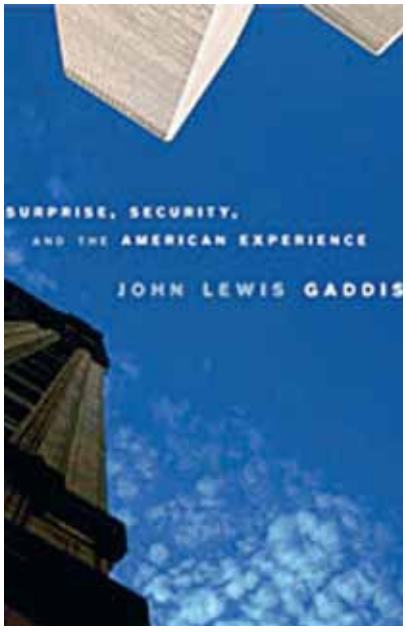
Books



Surprise, Security, and the American Experience

By John Lewis Gaddis

Publisher: Harvard University Press, USA
ISBN: 0674011740
Price: £12.95 (160 pages, hardcover)

Reviewed by Col Richard Szafranski, USAF, Retired

I wish to make three points about *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*. First, it is well written and thought provoking. The book fits neatly into a jacket pocket, and one can easily devour it on a flight from, say, Washington, DC, to Los Angeles. Second, it introduces a framework for US security policy that, as asserted by the author, emerged in the wake of the first attack on our homeland in 1814 when the British attacked Washington, setting fire to the White House and Capitol. This framework — pre-emption, unilateralism, and hegemony — persists today. Understanding it is instructive because Gaddis intends the framework to be both descriptive and predictive, using events following the third assault on our homeland — the unchallenged air attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon — to prove its validity. Third, historians — particularly those persuaded by the politics of the Democratic Party — likely will assert that the evidence cited by the author does not support his conclusions.

Let's examine the framework before judging the book. Gaddis's thesis is that "deep roots do not easily disappear" and that America's roots are well established (p. 38). When confronted with rude surprises or unexpected threats to national security—the aforementioned attack of 1814 and the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the second attack on the homeland — historically, we have expanded rather than retracted our response. In our deep roots reside the historical responses of preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony.

After 1814 preemption took the form of expansion into the territory of derelict or failed states, non-states (pirates and tribes), and states that might fail. Unilateralism followed the precept that the United States cannot rely on the goodwill of others. Our history, as Gaddis deftly shows, does not reflect a tendency toward *isolationism* but an avoidance of *entanglements* — those complications that partners can bring to a mix. Hegemony first took the form of continental (less Canada and all of Mexico) sovereignty; then slavery; then no slavery; and then the expansion into nonwhite territories to restore the economic advantages of slavery.

Given these roots, Gaddis asserts that the president did nothing new after the events of 11 September 2001. Instead, he returned to a set of behaviors that emerged after the attack on Washington in 1814, perhaps without learning all that he could have gleaned from President Franklin Roosevelt's strategic maneuvers, occasioned by the collapse of homeland security in 1941. The genius of Roosevelt, on the one hand, lay in his reasonableness — that "proclaimed interests should not exceed actual capabilities" — and, on the other, in his ability to gain hegemony by *apparently* rejecting pre-emption and unilateralism (p 58). The grand strategic maneuvers embodied in the Marshall Plan and containment stayed the course that Roosevelt set and prevented dangerous

excursions into nuclear-armed preemption. (Gaddis would be pleased to learn about Project Control — Air University's little known sortie into thinking about preventive nuclear war, initiated in 1953. It eventually led to the resignation of the Air University commander.)

The 1814 and 1941 attacks on our homeland saw us dealing "with an identifiable regime led by identifiable leaders operating by identifiable means from an identifiable piece of territory," but the 2001 attack was different (pp 69-70). According to the author, the Clinton administration might have seen it coming. That administration sought engagement rather than the spread of democracy and missed the effects that a revolution in global transportation had on our security by diminishing one of our most important strategic assets: geographical separation from threats.

Gaddis suspects that the Bush administration's difficulty in preserving consent for its anti-terror campaigns is that it brings a nineteenth-century American vision — preemption and unilateralism — to an early 21st century that still appreciates Roosevelt's multilateralism and self-restraint. Even so, the author seems to stand at a higher place than do most of us and, at least when the book appeared, sees a rosier future than we do. This point may be significant. The date that one *reviews* a published book can have just as much importance as the date that one *publishes* it. Martin L van Creveld, for example, lamented that his book *The Transformation of War* was released just as the first untransformed, conventional war with Iraq began. Pre-publication reviewers had a less advantageous position than did those who assessed the book shortly after its publication. Similarly, the people who reviewed *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* in the euphoric wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom's early successes likely reached different judgments than did the ones who stand hip-deep in the present election year.

Thus, one cannot help being puzzled to read:

"that the United States would then nonetheless — with the help of Great Britain — go ahead and attack Iraq anyway, in the face of the direst warnings about the risks of military resistance, the use of weapons of mass destruction, the eruption of outrage in the Arab world, a new outbreak of terrorism, a huge increase in the price of oil, and astronomical estimates of the human and material costs of the operation — only to have none of these things happen."

. . . Finally, that much of the rest of the world would find itself amazed . . . over one of the most surprising transformations of an underrated national leader since Prince Hal became Henry V" (pp 81–82).

None seems a word that we should caution ourselves about using, even if we cannot avoid using *transformation*. When the early reviews of *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* appeared, many individuals in the United States and elsewhere believed that 'mission accomplished' was authoritative if not true, that Iraqi insurgents had not yet used sarin against our troops, that most Arabs did not revile us, that Spain remained in the coalition, that gas wasn't two dollars a gallon, that the price of oil wasn't increasing as production controlled by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries went down, that Abu Ghraib was just a prison, that Fallujah was just a city, and that Gen Eric Shinseki's prescient estimate of the troops required to subdue a postwar Iraq may have been too high. Things change.

So why the author's optimism? A valued, well-educated, and well-traveled academic as well as a fellow of the Hoover Institution from 2000 to 2002 (a designation that includes Richard Allen, Newt Gingrich, Edwin Meese, George Shultz, and Condoleezza Rice, now on leave), Gaddis remains a respected scholar of Cold War history. Appreciating the risk, he published *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* while the jury of time — the triers of fact — was still empanelled. The framework may perform admirably, and history and time may well prove our ability to escape the strategic situation in which we find ourselves. As the author confesses, "It is . . . presumptuous to speculate about those consequences so soon after the event [9/11], but it's also necessary. For although the accuracy of historical writing diminishes as it approaches the present — because perspectives are shorter and there are fewer sources to work with than in treatments of the more distant past — the relevance of such writing increases" (p 5, emphasis in original).

My judgement of this book? It is, to paraphrase the author, relevant.