

 **Article REVIEW**

Robert Jervis. “Containment Strategies in Perspective” (review essay). *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 8:4 (Fall 2006): 92-97.

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I first read “Strategies of Containment” as a graduate student in the early 1990s. Reading it again, over a decade later, I am in complete agreement with Robert Jervis that it has indeed stood the test of time since its first publication in 1982. Jervis provides an excellent summary of John Lewis Gaddis’s main points as well as a thorough analysis of the book’s many strengths and some of its weaknesses. I also appreciate Jervis’s balanced commentary as he assessed the book from both a political scientist’s and an historian’s point of view, though perhaps the former perspective is more prevalent than the latter. And I concur that Gaddis’s detailed discussion of asymmetrical and symmetrical strategies of containment and his careful assessment of how ends are related to means, intentions to capabilities, and objectives to resources remains a critically important account of U.S. Cold War policy.

I differ from Jervis, however, as I finished the book, if not grumpy, at the very least, bemused. Not because the book’s insights aren’t still relevant; they are perhaps more relevant than ever as the United States confronts the problem of how to contain its current enemies (it certainly cannot go to war against all of them). My disgruntlement lies in the fact that Gaddis fails to engage much of the literature published after 1982 in his latest edition. As Jervis rightly notes, while *Strategies of Containment* might be “expanded” (as the cover tells us) to include additional information on Jimmy Carter, and especially Ronald Reagan, its claim to be “revised” is more of a stretch. In comparing my 1982 and 2005 editions, very little in the text has been modified. There are a sprinkling of post 1982 works (mostly Gaddis’s own scholarship) cited in the endnotes but little engagement with this literature in the actual text. Given Gaddis’s exceptional ability to analyze and synthesize, I am puzzled as to why he did not include at least a few paragraphs at the end of each chapter comparing what he knows now to what he knew in 1982. Jervis mentions a number of areas that are slighted in the 2005 edition; I will add a few more.¹

One omission in Jervis’s review is his failure to comment on the fact that *Strategies of Containment* is still first and foremost an American-centric account. Indeed, despite the explosion of scholarship on the globalization of the Cold War since the 1982 edition, which recognizes the agency of actors other than the United States and Soviet Union, Gaddis chooses to ignore what does not fit into his over-arching framework. The subtitle, “A Critical Appraisal of

¹ Jervis points to Gaddis’s disinclination to engage revisionist literature because he has already done so elsewhere. Jervis is more critical of Gaddis’s slighting of whether a rapprochement with non-democratic adversaries was possible if those adversaries did not first become more democratic. Jervis also questions Gaddis’s selectivity—using Vietnam instead of Berlin to look at John F. Kennedy’s implementation of flexible response and his focus on linkage as part of Nixon and Kissinger’s asymmetric strategy.

American National Security Policy during the Cold War,” explains Gaddis’s primary focus. Still, any American account of national security policy during the Cold War needs to take into account the globalized Cold War. Granted, Gaddis does discuss Korea and Vietnam but he snubs the rest of the so-called Third World.

The abundance of literature on the U.S. dilemma of trying to contain both communism and Third World nationalism during the 1950s and 1960s also warrants some mention. In fact, a number of recent works seem to suggest that Dwight D. Eisenhower’s containment strategy was not so asymmetrical after all when applied to the Third World, while John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson may have been much more so when one examines their strategies in the entire global arena. And while Washington and Moscow were certainly *the* players in the Cold War, other loci and figures played critical roles as well. Recipients of American and Soviet largess were often able to control their benefactors to an extent all out of proportion to their actual relevance in the Cold War.² The same criticism can be applied when looking at Gaddis’s chapters on Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and détente. Gaddis is persuasive in his discussion of Nixon and Kissinger’s return to George Kennan’s conception of containment in their dealings with the Soviets and Chinese.³ But what about their strategies for containing the rest of their enemies? Or that the Nixon Doctrine, in part, used Third World non-democratic allies like Iran to uphold containment strategy on the periphery?

For me, the most dated chapter in the 2005 edition and the least convincing is the one on implementing flexible response in Vietnam. Vietnam is far more than a failure of symmetrical containment. Given the many, many explanatory frameworks that have been put forth since 1982, some that have placed containment front and center, and many that have not, I would have expected substantial revision of this chapter. I am not suggesting that Gaddis change his argument, but some discussion of how more recent scholarship has influenced his assessment of the Kennedy and Johnson administration’s strategies toward Vietnam (or at least some discussion as to why recent literature has not influenced his analysis) would have been useful. As Jervis remarks, Gaddis does deal with the psychological aspect or, to use more common phrasing, “the credibility problem” in decision-making vis-à-vis Vietnam, but he once again fails to draw on a substantial body of literature in developing this theme.⁴

² Examples of the agency of actors other than the United States and works that suggest Eisenhower’s strategy of containment was perhaps not as asymmetrical when applied globally include Tony Smith, “New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* (Fall 2000): 567-591; Zachary Karabell, *Architects of Intervention: The United States, the Third World, and the Cold War, 1946-1962* (Baton Rouge: 1999); Stephen Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism* (Chapel Hill: 1988); Audrey R. Kahin and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (New York: 1995); and Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: 2004). For the most recent example of this type of literature, see *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War*, eds. Kathryn Statler and Andrew Johns (Lanham, MD: 2006). For literature on Kennedy and Johnson’s strategies see, Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston, 2003) and *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963-1968*, eds. Warren Cohen and Nancy Tucker (New York: 1994).

³ As Jervis observes, Kennan figures prominently in Gaddis’s account, as he should. But perhaps this is another case of the dangers of the biographer/subject relationship, which might explain why Kennan takes on almost heroic proportions in his periodic reappearances throughout the book.

With respect to the expanded portion of the book, which Jervis mentions briefly, Gaddis certainly has amplified his treatment of Reagan, but the chapter is not necessarily new as Gaddis follows much of his earlier argument that can be found in chapter 7 of his 1992 *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations*. While Mikhail Gorbachev emerges as a more fully developed actor here than in some of Gaddis's other works, many scholars will still object to Gaddis's emphasis on Reagan's agency in ending the Cold War. We will not know, as Gaddis himself recognizes, for many more decades the extent of Reagan's influence on Gorbachev. Gaddis is careful here to cover his bases, with such statements as "there is less triumphalism in this account than in those put forward by many of Reagan's advisers and acolytes," and "it seems reasonable, then, to follow Reagan's lead, and seek no single explanation for what happened in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev: internal developments were surely more important than external pressures and inducements..." (374-375). And yet, by the end of the chapter one still comes away with the sense that Reagan was the puppet master and Gorbachev his willing puppet. Kennan in 1996 commented that the two individuals who contributed greatly to the end of the Cold War were first Gorbachev... "but also Ronald Reagan, who in his inimitable way, probably not even being quite aware of what he was really doing, did what few other people would have been able to do in breaking this log jam." Gaddis goes further to propose that "of course, it is also possible that Reagan really *did* know, all along, what he was doing." (377) Perhaps, but the evidence presented in this chapter is not overwhelming in sustaining that conclusion.

My favorite part of the book was the epilogue. Here, at last, the reader has some sense of Gaddis's own evolution of thought over the past two decades. As he has done in *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*, Gaddis looks at continuities in U.S. foreign policy. His discussion of the possibility that some aspects of containment might be transferable, even in a post Cold War, post 9/11 world, is intriguing. In fact, I would have enjoyed more detail on the current applicability of strategies of containment, especially his final lesson that containment "must not destroy what it was attempting to defend." I would also have enjoyed more commentary from Jervis on this subject.

⁴ It is easier to cite the books that appear in Gaddis's endnotes than those that do not. Gaddis does cite Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: 1999), Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: 1995), David L. DiLeo, *George Ball, Vietnam, and the Rethinking of Containment* (Chapel Hill, 1991), Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: 2000), George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, second edition (New York: 1986), and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: 1992). Jervis cites a somewhat obscure work by Blema Steinberg, *Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam* (Pittsburg, 1996) in addressing the psychological component of decision-making on Vietnam. Logevall's book is the primary study on this issue, but see also David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: 2000); Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: 2001); and William Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Palo Alto: 1994). For many more recent works on Kennedy and Johnson's Vietnam strategies, I refer readers to Ed Moise's excellent Vietnam bibliography: <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/EdMoise/bibliography.html>, especially the section on U.S. Policy.

Strategies of Containment, then and now, is not as provocative as some of Gaddis's other works but it remains required reading for those attempting to understand the successes and failures of U.S. "grand strategies" during the Cold War.⁵ Still, the 2005 version is, for me, the less satisfactory of the two. In his assessment of Kissinger, Gaddis notes that "Kissinger had articulated a consistent view of international affairs: one could read *A World Restored* (published in 1957) and find in it a generally reliable guide to the policies he would seek to implement a decade and a half later." (346) Likewise, one can read the 1982 version of *Strategies* as a very "reliable guide" to the 2005 edition. So while I can only marvel at Gaddis's incredible consistency over the years, at the same time I find that consistency vaguely unsettling.

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⁵ See John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: 1987) and John Lewis Gaddis *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: 1997).