

[H-Diplo Roundtable XVII, 13 on Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic \[8 February 2016\]](#)

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Introduction by Thomas R. Maddux, Emeritus, California State University Northridge

John Quincy Adams played an increasingly significant role in the history of American diplomacy from the American Revolution through the continental expansion that culminated in the United States extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. Every scholar who has written on aspects of this period, especially during Adams's service as Secretary of State under President James Madison and as President in 1820-24, has discussed Adams's contributions, starting with his role as a personal secretary to his father John Adams, the first U.S. Minister to Great Britain, and continuing service by Adams as Minister to Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and the Netherlands. As President Madison's

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Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams significantly influenced the post-War of 1812 direction of U.S. policies in dealing with the European powers as well as taking advantage of emerging opportunities for U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere, most notably the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 to oppose European colonization, and to lay the groundwork for U.S. expansion to the Pacific through negotiations with London and a pressure-oriented policy with respect to the declining Spanish empire from Florida to the Southwest. The most influential foundational studies include Samuel Flagg Bemis's books, and one of the reviewers in the roundtable, William Earl Weeks, has contributed three recent studies that discuss Adams' views and role in U.S. expansion.¹¹

Edel brings a different approach to a study of Adams's diplomacy, that of grand strategy from the field of international relations, and integrates it with history. As the author explains his approach, he "explores how Adams conceived of his own and the nation's rise to power, discusses what he did to promote his and the nation's advancement, assesses where he succeeded and where he failed, and examines the contemporary applicability of Adams's thinking" (5). Historians may get a little nervous with the terms "contemporary applicability" and "grand strategy," but Edel is careful to evaluate Adams within his historical context, relying extensively on Adams's extensive official writings and his diary of nearly seventeen thousand pages as well as the secondary literature on Adams and U.S. diplomacy. Furthermore, Edel applies a concept of grand strategy that is understandable -- "a comprehensive and integrated plan of action, based on the calculated relationship of means to large ends"(5), -- and he notes the importance of setting priorities among competing objectives and Adams's necessary ability to adjust tactics as circumstances changed (10).

The reviewers agree that Edel has enhanced scholars' understanding of Adams's diplomacy through the grand strategy concept and principles that he develops. As Seth Center emphasizes, "Edel examines a grand strategist working at his craft ... through Adams's stressful, lifelong process of trying to grasp the nature of domestic and international affairs, understand the strengths and weaknesses of allies and enemies, recognize change, decide when to parry, thrust, and fold; and judge when to stand on principle and when to stuff principle in the corner." Christopher McKnight Nichols also appreciates how Edel highlights Adams's "over-arching strategic vision centered on two-overriding goals: reducing security risks to the U.S. and 'vindicating republicanism' as the best form of government to ensure progress as well as liberty." Yet Nichols notes the "perplexing paradox" of Adams developing a grand strategy but having difficulty, as Edel notes, "translating his vision into policy" (304). By emphasizing the importance of the "deliberate pursuit" of power and expansion by Adams and other U.S. leaders, Edel may weaken the importance of grand strategy, Nichols concludes: "perhaps this history of flexible thinking, nimble policymaking, failures, successes, and unintended consequences, also reveals the limitations of thinking in terms of grand strategy as an organizing concept, in politics as well as history." Rhonda Barlow suggests that Edel perhaps gives Adams too much credit as the "first grand strategist," noting the earlier visions of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. Although William Weeks would have preferred a more "topical breakdown of Adams's political philosophy," he does appreciate the extent to which Edel presents Adams's comments from his diary and his views.

The reviewers would have welcomed more analysis of some of Adams's views and policies. Barlow, for example, questions when Adams shifted from the "New England emphasis on the Atlantic trade for the Jeffersonian vision of western expansion." Weeks agrees with Barlow on the absence of freedom of the seas and naval power as a significant principle for Adams in Edel's analysis.

Continental expansion as a defensive measure to bolster security with respect to the European powers downplays, from Weeks' perspective, the degree to which expansion also promised a "large internal market." Nichols suggests a couple of "minor quibbles" with respect to Adams's views as a negotiator of the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812 and on Adams's considerations on European power politics as he negotiated with Spain on Florida and the western boundary of the U.S.

If Adams had significant success as a negotiator and strategist, why did he end up as a self-admitted failure as president? The reviewers are intrigued by this question. Edel notes Adams's personality and his tendency to slip into periods of depression. They returned when he encountered problems with domestic politics in the White House and his vision of leadership and the right course for the federal government gave way to the turmoil of democratic politics and a one-party system with too many aspiring presidential candidates. As Center notes, Adams's skill in foreign-policy strategies and negotiations owed much to the fact that they are "simply less complicated to execute than anything requiring domestic political mobilization, legislative action, and treading on state and local interests." Nichols agrees that "Adams as president comes across as stubborn and a poor communicator, unable to perceive regional and local interests, often misjudging allies and opponents alike."

Adams did not attend the inauguration of his successor Andrew Jackson, and headed home for Massachusetts. Yet this was not the end of Edel's story for Adams or for his grand strategy. In November 1831 Adams was elected to Congress and his personal distaste for slavery and concern about its threat to the ideals of independence and republicanism prompted him to turn publicly against slavery, against efforts to prevent debate on slavery in Congress—the Gag Rule battle over preventing petitions against slavery from being received or discussed in the House of Representatives—and finally the conflict over the expansion of slavery into new territories acquired in the West. Weeks considers Edel's chapter, "A Stain upon the Character of the Nation: The Fight against Slavery" the strongest in the book, concluding that "For Adams, ending slavery in the U.S. was a type of internal 'Manifest Destiny,' a domestic 'extension of the area of freedom' that had to occur if the nation was to fulfill its presumed providential destiny as the world's leading advocate of human freedom." This confirms Edel's emphasis on "vindicating Republicanism" as one of Adams's overriding goals, yet at a cost that Adams did not have to face.

Participants:

Charles Edel, an Assistant Professor of Strategy and Policy at the U.S. Naval War College, is currently serving as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow working at the Department of State as a Member of the Policy Planning Staff. He holds a Ph.D. in History from Yale University, and received a B.A. in Classics from Yale College. He worked at Peking University's Center for International and Strategic Studies as a Henry A. Luce Scholar. The author of *Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic* (Harvard University Press, 2014), he is working on a project about the role of foreign revolutions in American history.

Rhonda M. Barlow is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Virginia. She is currently completing her dissertation on John Adams and early American foreign policy.

Seth Center is a historian at the U.S. Department of State where he researches, writes, and teaches

about the history of American diplomacy, strategy, civil-military relations, public diplomacy, and the Department's culture and organization. In addition, he works on lessons learned studies for the U.S. Government. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Virginia and B.A. at Cornell University.

Christopher McKnight Nichols is Assistant Professor of History in the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion at Oregon State University, and directs the OSU Citizenship and Crisis Initiative. A specialist on the history of U.S. foreign relations, political and intellectual history, Dr. Nichols has written extensively on internationalism, isolationism, globalization, American public opinion, and U.S. interventions abroad. He is the author of *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Harvard, 2011); co-editor and co-author of *Prophesies of Godlessness: Predictions of America's Imminent Secularization from the Puritans to the Present* (Oxford, 2008); Senior Editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Military and Diplomatic History* (Oxford, 2013). Nichols is currently writing a book on conservative visions of foreign policy in the early Cold War and is co-organizing and co-editing a major conference and book project on "Rethinking American Grand Strategy."

William Earl Weeks received his Ph.D. at the University of California, San Diego in 1986 and specializes in nineteenth-century U.S. History at San Diego State University. He is the author of *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to Civil War* (1996) and is the author of *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, vol. I: Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754-1865*.

Review by R. M. Barlow, University of Virginia

John Quincy Adams has been the subject of a number of biographies and studies in American foreign policy. Charles Edel, author of *Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic*, justifies this latest entry:

This book explores how Adams conceived of his own and the nation's rise to power, discusses what he did to promote his and the nation's advancement, assesses where he succeeded and where he failed, and examines the contemporary applicability of Adams's thinking. While there have been biographical and policy studies written about Adams, and there have been several books that look at the strategy of the United States in the nineteenth century, this is the first to tie the concept of grand strategy of the early republic to the life and career of John Quincy Adams (5).

Edel uses a very broad definition of grand strategy, one that not only "matches means to large ends" but also "operates simultaneously at the personal level... the national level... and the moral level" (6). This comprehensive definition seeks to accommodate both the man and the vision, and explains how Adams could "promote his and the nation's advancement" (6). Adams's grand strategy is summarized as "reducing security risks...and vindicating republicanism" (8). To enhance security, he promoted a three-pronged strategy of "neutrality... enhanced defense capabilities... and continental expansion" (8-9). To enhance republicanism, he promoted "economic growth" and "offered a strategy capable of attacking slavery" (9). Adams was not only a grand strategist, but America's first grand strategist: "not the first... to promote strategies for America's rise, but... the only one who linked, prioritized, and sequenced them into a comprehensive grand strategy" (9).

Edel examines Adams's grand strategy in "five significant phases" that address familiar incidents in Adams' life and career (9). The first chapter, *The Fires of Honorable Ambition*, describes Adams's education and upbringing. The second chapter, *Clans and Tribes at Eternal War*, shows that Adams's education continued in Europe, where he saw firsthand the problems with monarchy and the extremes of revolution. The third chapter, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy*, deals with Adams's career as Secretary of State; the fourth chapter, *The Spirit of Improvement*, with Adams as President, and the fifth chapter, *A Stain upon the Character of the Nation*, with Adams's fight against slavery during his tenure in Congress. The sixth and final chapter, *The Influence of Our Example*, addresses Adams's legacy.

Edel follows a chronological structure that allows him to trace the development of Adams's grand strategy. He begins with an overview of Adams's upbringing and education. Adams's famous parents, John and Abigail Adams, instilled in him a sense of duty, including "a belief that his own fate was tied to the nation's" (53). The young man not only studied history and the classics, but he did so in Europe, where by the age of fourteen he was serving as secretary to Richard Dana in St. Petersburg (30). By the time he graduated from Harvard, Adams already was thinking of "certain necessities for America's future growth: security, expansion, a progressive spirit of improvement, and a moral impulse" (54). He had studied Thucydides, recommended by his father as "full of Instruction to the Orator, the Statesman, the General, as well as to the Historian and Philosopher," and still one of the essential authors for a modern college course in Grand Strategy (20-22). But he had not yet formulated his own grand strategy (54).

In 1794, Adams returned to Europe, where he served as minister first to the Netherlands and later to Prussia. His diplomatic service helped him develop his grand strategy by "tempering his intellectual beliefs against real experiences" (64). He observed both the economic benefits of the Jay Treaty and the upheaval of the French Revolution, and "In order to reduce the nation's security risks... advocated the strategies of unity at home and neutrality in foreign affairs" (62). When he returned home to the United States, Adams supported the Louisiana Purchase because it "'add[ed] an immense force' to the nation" (91). Adams had learned the importance of power in foreign affairs, and that "the country's future lay in national expansion" (105).

In 1817, Adams became President James Monroe's Secretary of State and found the department in disorder, with no system for organizing letters and files (114-15). Attempting to bring order to the State Department appears to have helped him bring order to his strategic thinking: "Adams had begun to articulate his sense of grand strategy where the particular and the general, the 'whole and the detail,' operated simultaneously on each other" (116). Drawing on ideas already expressed by Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Paine, in 1819 Adams told the cabinet that "the world shall [have] to be familiarized with the idea of considering our proper dominion to be the continent of North America" (121-23). Adams's support for expansion had escalated to insistence on hegemony in an effort to prevent Britain or Russia from supplanting Spain (133, 139). Focus on continental hegemony meant "limiting [American] commitments abroad" (183). By 1823, Adams had developed "a coherent grand strategy of expansion that most famously found expression in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823" (168).

Adams's grand strategy included not only continental hegemony but also a moral component, which found expression in his push for internal improvements during his presidency and his opposition to

slavery during his terms in Congress. Although Adams had expressed his distaste for slavery as early as 1804, he “placed a greater emphasis on preserving and strengthening the Union” (252). But as he watched western expansion shift from “Justice” to “Conquest,” he understood that the search for security had changed to an aggressive hunt for territory to extend the institution of slavery (277). He insisted that the re-introduction of slavery into Texas was a threat to all free states in the Union (275). Adams drew a parallel with ancient Rome, where initial defensive measures degenerated into conquest and empire (276-77). Edel notes that “the final component of [Adams’] grand strategy required that the United States be not only powerful, but also moral” (253). Although Adams was unable to “convert [his] vision into political reality,” his view that the Constitution had to be interpreted in light of the Declaration of Independence was embraced by Abraham Lincoln (297).

Adams’s legacy includes “powerful lessons for contemporary situations” (300). In Adams’ view, the United States should recognize that its power has limits, should encourage “change but not upheaval” abroad, and promote “domestic peace and productivity” in order to lead the world by example rather than intervention (301-02).

Edel’s book will be of interest to a variety of readers. Scholars of both early America and American foreign policy, and of course, grand strategy, will find this study well worth their time. Skeptics of either the value of the concept of grand strategy, or that Adams was a ‘grand strategist,’ can focus on Edel’s engaging and informative narrative. Edel humanizes Adams: the early riser who fell asleep in public; the swimmer who came out of the Potomac wearing only his green goggles; the Secretary of State overwhelmed by stacks of paper (113-115). Adams’s struggle with depression included his envy of British Foreign Minister Lord Castlereagh, who committed suicide in August 1822 (195). Edel’s account of Adams’s upbringing reveals a sensitive child warped by his stern and relentless mother (53). Readers familiar with Abigail Adams only as the supportive wife of the elder Adams will find her treatment of her eldest son disturbing.

As Hal Brands notes, “Grand strategy, it turns out, is one of the most slippery and widely abused terms in the foreign policy lexicon.”¹¹ Edel’s definition will not please everyone, nor will his view that John Quincy Adams was the first grand strategist. One could argue that Benjamin Franklin, architect of the Albany Conference, was thinking in terms of ‘grand strategy’ already in the colonial period, and that the differing visions for the future of America, expressed by Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, were competing ‘grand strategies’ for either a ‘Republican Empire’ or an ‘Empire of Liberty.’ George Washington’s Farewell Address rests on earlier platforms for neutrality and expansion, namely, the Model Treaty penned by John Adams in 1776. Studies of the foreign policies of Franklin, Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson that include substantial treatment of their overarching visions for the successful navigation of the United States in multi-polar world are available, and, while they may not overtly refer to the concept of grand strategy, as with the case of John Quincy Adams himself, the concept is apparent in the writing.

As a scholar of John Adams, I found this analysis of John Quincy Adams informative, but was left with some tantalizing questions. My own research suggests that the elder Adams never abandoned the New England emphasis on the Atlantic trade for the Jeffersonian vision of western expansion. How exactly did John Quincy step out of his father’s shadow, abandoning the ‘marine strategy’ for a ‘continental’ one? While it is true that older editors like Worthington C. Ford, editor of the *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, and Charles Francis Adams, editor of *The Works of John Adams*, are generally

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reliable in providing the documents necessary for an analysis in grand strategy, they are not infallible.^[3] Important documents remain buried in the microfilm. So while it may indeed be true that John Quincy Adams never overtly exposed his strategic thought, it is also possible that something as yet unpublished may be revealing. In 1816, Adams wrote to his father and declared, “My system of politics more and more inclines to strengthen the union, and its government.”^[4] The elder Adams, after his own loss of the presidency, insisted that he had a “system” for conducting foreign policy, and had held to it from as early as 1774. Did his son do likewise? As scholars of early American foreign policy, perhaps we should be recommending President Barack Obama develop not a grand strategy, but a system.

Review by Seth Center, U.S. Department of State^[5]

“I don’t know exactly what John Quincy Adams had in mind when he spoke those words,” George Kennan admitted of Adams’s famous exhortation against going out in search of monsters to destroy on the Fourth of July, 1821. Nevertheless, the retired diplomat and elder statesman, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1966, “I think that, without knowing it, he spoke very directly and very pertinently to us here today” (299). Do not go out in search of monsters to destroy in revolutionary Greece in 1821 or post-colonial Vietnam in the 1960s or in subsequent foreign adventures. Adams symbolizes the wise ‘realist’ cognizant of the limits of American power, but also an ‘idealist’ optimistic about the ultimate power of America’s universal appeal as the “beacon on the summit of the mountain” (161-163).

Historical lessons offered without understanding are the well-spring of ‘learning’ from the past in too many foreign policy discussions. Like Kennan, Charles Edel seeks lessons from Adams’s early American statecraft. Unlike Kennan, Edel does not wield Adams with a specific policy agenda. *Nation Builder* takes Adams on his own terms, illuminating the underpinning strategic logic that propelled him through a career in public service that defies easy characterization. *Nation Builder* bursts with insights for strategists and statesmen.

Edel employs the framework of Grand Strategy as a scholarly tool with a contemporary purpose. Grand Strategy is perhaps not as theoretically rigorous as political scientists demand, and it imposes a coherent framework on historical events that makes some historians squirm. For policy practitioners, the lessons that emerge tend to be ten commandment-like in their simplicity. Yet Grand Strategy is a welcome framework for bringing history and international relations disciplines into dialogue, and bridging the academic-policy divide. Along with other Grand Strategy adherents, Edel is leading scholars into a golden age for the re-introduction of history to policy with rigor and relevance.

Edel demonstrates, foremost, that detailed history is essential to reveal the art of strategy-making. His nuanced portrait of Adams shows why strategic maxims alone do not suffice as guides to statecraft. *Nation Builder* does indeed identify the basics of strategy: “foreign policy was extraordinarily complex and would require tradeoffs;” an “America that is equally committed to projecting its power everywhere limits its ability to do so effectively and decisively;” and dealing with domestic problems would “further American power more than foreign interventions ever could” (300-302). However, the real story of grand strategy is told through Adams’s stressful, lifelong process of trying to grasp the nature of domestic and international affairs, understand the strengths

and weaknesses of allies and enemies, recognize change, decide when to parry, thrust, and fold; and judge when to stand on principle and when to stuff principle in the corner. Edel examines a grand strategist working at his craft.

Nation Builder argues that Adams possessed a “clear vision” and the first-ever “detailed policy road map” for American grand strategy (295). The foundation was a secure United States that vindicated the republican form of government and advanced the cause of human progress and liberty. Adams’s core values were formed at the elbow of the founders and sprung from the Declaration of Independence. As a diplomat he strove to isolate America from Europe’s wars while expanding commercial opportunities; as a Senator he pursued the national interest and paid the political price for disregarding sectional interests; as a loyal Secretary of State to James Monroe he promoted territorial expansion and hemispheric dominion while restraining revolutionary impulses; as a stymied and morose President, he envisioned, advocated, and failed in a program of internal improvements designed to strengthen the republic and foster social cohesion; and finally, as a curmudgeonly Congressman he challenged slavery as a threat to the nation’s founding ideals, viewing it as the final obstacle to realizing his grand strategy for perfecting the experiment in liberty.

Edel characterizes Adams’s shifting priorities as purposeful strategic sequencing. At each stage of his career Adams made tradeoffs, ignoring some principles when they interfered with others, shifting to agenda items that could be practically achieved and letting others rest, and more often than not assessing risk and opportunity—personal, political, and strategic—effectively, or at least not disastrously. Adams had no time for stray voltage. He retained bedrock principles, but he only acted based on what levers he could exercise, even to the point of appearing morally callous. For instance, while foundational to his overall strategy, Adams did not address slavery while serving as a diplomat nor immerse himself in the messy politics of internal improvements as Secretary of State. Adams’s behavior reflected a proto- bureaucratic politics approach. He pursued objectives within his realms of responsibility and power as he progressed through the ‘national security bureaucracy’ and the legislative branch.

In highlighting sequence, Edel shows that grand strategists, no matter the coherence of their vision, are limited by their position when they enter the realm of executing a strategy. Only a dictator could even attempt to implement a true grand strategy, the rest of us, particularly in a messy democracy with limited capabilities riven by domestic factions in a dangerous and unstable world, can merely act consistent with our core values where we are capable of having any effect.

Edel features the role of personality in statecraft. Adams was a complicated and a difficult man who was constitutionally incapable of thinking anyway but strategically. His success as a politician and diplomat is somewhat mysterious since he appeared to lack any ‘emotional IQ,’ and delighted in his contrarianism. A British minister called him the “most doggedly and systematically repulsive” man he knew (104). The characterizations of Adams’s wife were marginally kinder. His personality lacked Nixonian paranoia, but not Nixonian awkwardness. Edel suggests that Adams’s personality was driven by an all-consuming focus on America’s place in the world and his place in America. He was raised to lead the nation. He chastised his brothers to use their leisure time to gain knowledge in order to “make us useful to our fellow men when we grow up” (28). He was ten and he never lightened up. That ascetic approach to life was inseparable from pursuing strategy. He constantly weighed short- and long-term consequences, assessed risks, anchored his assessments in core values

of republicanism, and followed the conclusions to their intellectual destination. It was an exhausting way to live life, but an excellent way to become an influential strategist.

Adams's policy shifts were as stark as his personality quirks. As a Federalist Senator he bucked his party and constituents by supporting the Louisiana Purchase (90), censuring British depredations against American shipping and supporting President Thomas Jefferson's embargo act. He caucused with the Republicans and then resigned before he lost re-election. The sectional interests of New England could not trump the need for national unity in the face of an external threat and in defense of neutral rights (92-96). He could not support "stupid servility" to Britain as a Senator (96), but he foresaw and advanced strategic convergence with Britain as Secretary of State (171). Such shifts invited partisan broadsides, which Adams endured. His prescriptions shifted radically. The objective did not: protect and strengthen the union from threats foreign and domestic.

Adams's approach demonstrates the benefits of being a 'walk and chew gum' strategist. Even as he advanced Anglo-American rapprochement, he was unafraid of taking actions that antagonized the British. He rejected their offer of a Western Hemispheric condominium—against the advice of the rest of President James Monroe's cabinet. He deployed a gunboat to contest British claims at the mouth of the Columbia River. He argued in an open letter that "all the Indian wars with which we have been afflicted have been distinctly traceable to the instigation of English traders or agents." An exasperated Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, noted after the execution of two English agents in Florida that English opinion was sufficiently mobilized that if he but "held up a finger," war would have broken out (153). Adams innately grasped how much risk he could run to expand the American dominion at the British expense without sacrificing the strategic relationship.

There is an inexplicable aspect to Adams approach to strategy once becoming president. Having spent his entire life developing a strategic vision and navigating to advance that strategy, he somehow abandoned the traits that served him so well in the past. When Adams the strategist became Adams the executive he wilted. He handed a core element of his agenda—internal improvements—to Congress without a legislative strategy. He became more risk adverse, refusing to challenge the Georgia Governor's seizure of Creek Indians' land out of fear of precipitating a states' rights insurrection—an episode in which even Andrew Jackson believed the Georgians had taken states' rights too far (225-227). He stood aloof as people within his own administration attacked his agenda. He retreated into self-pity instead of battling as he had in other stages of life.

Edel rightly points out how structural factors in the nature of one-party politics hampered Adams's Presidency, and he explains how Adams's antiquated view of the disinterested statesman militated against a more active defense of his agenda. There is also another basic dynamic to consider. Enunciating foreign policy principles in speeches, convincing the President to act (and not act) in the external realm, even negotiating a treaty with another sovereign state, all of which Adams excelled at, are simply less complicated to execute than anything requiring domestic political mobilization, legislative action, and treading on state and local interests. Adams's experience suggests that grand foreign policies may be easier to pursue than Grand Strategies.

Edel celebrates Adams's desire to drive events rather than "merely" respond to them (296). But he also demonstrates that Adams's brilliance resided in how he responded to events. He was opportunistic, happy to take advantage of others' misfortune and distraction. In Edel's words, Adams

knew when to “give gravity a push” (135). He saw opportunities where others saw risk. He vociferously made the case for General Andrew Jackson’s spontaneous land grab as an essential defensive maneuver necessary to fill the emerging security vacuum in Florida, even as others urged the President to disavow the constitutionally dubious act. Adams also saw risk where others saw opportunities. He urged restraint when public fervor threatened to push the United States into supporting revolutionary brethren abroad, arguing that such support distracted Americans from the task of perfecting their own republican experiment and, in any case, exceeded American capabilities. The mark of a grand strategist is not simply to have everything going according to one’s plan but to have the vision and dexterity to focus on enduring principles even as circumstances shift exposing new policy options.

Edel highlights Adams’s fear that America’s intentions would outstrip capabilities. This concern militated against supporting revolutionaries with anything other than words. Adams, however, was not reflexively anti-interventionist. He searched out monsters, but they were usually of the distracted (British) or wounded (Spanish) variety. This cautious and disciplined approach to foreign policy enabled the embryonic nation to become a unified, economic powerhouse, secure from European powers in its continental dominion. That success, in turn, enabled future U.S. statesmen to go out in search of monsters to destroy without existential concern that the consequence of intervention abroad might be irreparable harm to the cause of liberty at home or an invitation to foreign attacks against U.S. interests.

Nation Builder unearths a profound question about how capabilities change the prism through which policymakers view the intersection of values, interests, threats and opportunities. Did Adams’s principled statement against intervention in others’ revolutions represent far-sighted prudence or merely an accurate calculation about U.S. capabilities in relation to risks in the Early Republic? Given that Adams too saw monsters lurking everywhere, one wonders exactly how he would have approached them if he possessed a military with unlimited reach, unmatched economic power, and executive authority never envisioned when he argued that “there is no doubt that defensive acts of hostility may be authorized by the Executive” (148). Armed with a counter-insurgency doctrine, U.S. Agency for International Development and Green Berets, to say nothing of drones and even more capable special operations forces, Adams also might have found himself the target of Kennan’s ire for violating his own principles.

In 1966 or later Kennan would not find too many American statesmen who would disagree with Adams’s Fourth of July wisdom. What he would find is a long list of American leaders who, presented with ‘menus of options’ unimaginable to Adams, intervened anyway. Espousing grand strategic principles is easy. Executing Grand Strategy is hard. Adams’s skill as a statesman, Edel reminds us, resided in his convictions and his discernment of strength, weakness and opportunity, not in the dogmatic application of doctrines, the simplistic reliance on historical lessons, or the pursuit of policy consistency for its own sake.

Review by Christopher McKnight Nichols, Oregon State University

There may be no better single figure to focus on for a history of American politics and diplomacy from the Revolution through the years immediately preceding the Civil War than John Quincy Adams. He was involved in virtually all of the major events of this era as an observer or direct actor. Adams

served in diplomatic and political capacities—informal, appointed, and elected—almost continuously from his first formal posting in 1781 (at age 14) through his death in 1848. He was Minister to Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and the Netherlands, helped forge the peace at Ghent in 1815, was Secretary of State, a congressman, and President. Adams also was an extraordinarily active correspondent and diarist, even for his day and class; he left copious and insightful notes, diaries, and letters for posterity. (His diary alone clocks in at nearly seventeen thousand pages.) Given his prominence and vast archive, historians have, therefore, spent a great deal of time analyzing Adams, though his immense influence on American politics and diplomacy was more widely acknowledged in his day, and immediately thereafter, than it is today.

There has been a rising interest in Adams, perhaps in light of the particular challenges facing contemporary U.S. foreign relations and political culture. Notable recent books on Adams include works by Harlow Giles Unger, Joseph Wheelan, Phyllis Lee Levin, and Fred Kaplan (and of course interest in Adams's father John Adams, fostered in large part by David McCullough).^[6] Charles Edel's *Nation Builder* is the best of these recent works.

Edel's book presents Adams with rich detail and complexity. The book focuses on Adams not simply for insights into his life and thought, or as a lens to observe historical transformations of the era, but as a case study for "grand strategy at the personal and national level" (6). As such, Edel's work represents an important contribution to the burgeoning field of grand strategy historical scholarship. It is also a welcome addition to literature on the intersection of the foreign and domestic policy from the Early Republic through the antebellum era.

The vast majority of recent grand strategy scholarship focuses on the twentieth century, particularly the U.S. during and after WWII, or on European 'great' rather than small or modest powers. Work in the field points toward an emphasis on major thinkers and politicians (almost always men), as well as 'great' texts and ideas, such as Thucydides and *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the realpolitik advocated by Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck and Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in *On War*, but grand strategy scholars largely concentrate on recent teams of U.S. presidents and secretaries of state such as Harry Truman and Dean Acheson, Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, or leaders such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Signal works in the field include Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, John Gaddis's *Strategies of Containment*, and most recently Hal Brands's *What Good is Grand Strategy?*^[7] Edel, trained and well-versed in this historiography, embraces the main techniques and overall approach but adds to these important studies by pushing against the grain of the periodization and implicitly presentist 'great power' orientation of much of this literature. *Nation Builder* therefore explores Adams's strategic thinking alongside longer-term patterns and developments. The U.S. in Adams's era, Edel shows, operated in the world not as a 'great' power, and certainly not as a hegemon, but as a weak nation led by policy-makers who were keenly aware of the United States' fundamentally tenuous, vulnerable place in the world.

As grand strategy scholarship, courses, and programs of study proliferate, along with renewed calls for a 'return' to a grand strategy in contemporary U.S. foreign policy, it is all the more incumbent on us to make clear definitions. The phrase 'grand strategy,' as Edel indicates, seems self-evident but is actually quite slippery. What is grand strategy and how does analysis of Adams's career illuminate the shaping of the U.S.'s foreign relations in the first seventy years of the nation's existence? Here

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Edel offers a useful definition and partial corrective to more reductive thinking about grand strategy: In the “broadest sense, grand strategy is a comprehensive and integrated plan of action, based on the calculated relationship of means to large ends” (5). Edel argues that at the national level this entails “not only defining long-term objectives, but also integrating the military, diplomatic, economic, political, and moral resources of a nation to accomplish its goals.” And for an individual, Edel asserts that as a “discipline” grand strategy “requires the ability both to master discrete subjects and to understand how these separate parts integrate into a larger system” (5-6). Thus Edel suggests that it is best to examine grand strategy historically, and to trace the nuances of thought and action, at the national, personal, and moral levels, particularly for a figure such as Adams.

Perhaps the most significant argument advanced in the book, therefore, is that John Quincy Adams was a—perhaps *the*—preeminent American grand strategist from the late eighteenth century through almost the middle of the nineteenth century. This and related insights about the specifics of Adams’s unfolding—sometimes fraught, often effective, occasionally thwarted—strategies provides the narrative arc of the book.

Particularly in his time as Minister in England (1815-1817), Secretary of State (1817-1825), President (1825-1829), and in Congress (1831-1848), Adams crafted an over-arching strategic vision centered on two-overriding goals: reducing security risks to the U.S. and “vindicating republicanism” as the best form of government to ensure progress as well as liberty. (8) An overriding faith in civic republicanism, and the protection of the U.S. as the exemplar republic formed the basis of Adams’s ideological-strategic commitment. As Edel shows, Adams “linked, prioritized, and sequenced [strategies for America’s rise] into a comprehensive grand strategy that was intended to harness the country’s geographic, military, economic, and more resources” (9). And it is in this regard that Adams should hold a special place in the history of foreign relations, because as a “nation builder” his “particular combination of ideas and policies make him an important bridge between the founding generation of American statesmen and the Civil War era Lincoln and Seward” (9).

To make this case *Nation Builder* depends on biography, of course, but it is not intended as a comprehensive account of Adams’s life. Instead, demonstrating a deep knowledge of Adams and with a knack for providing telling anecdotes that help bring the history to life, Edel selects key moments and eras that illustrate broader patterns and developments. Edel begins his book with Adams’s formative years in Europe with his father (he evaded British capture while crossing the Atlantic during the Revolutionary War), meals with leading thinkers, and his impressive reading, writing, and language acquisition (French, German, Dutch, to name a few). Starting from Adams’s earliest life experiences, Edel focuses on five phases that showing the relative weight of personal, national, and moral strategic thinking and factors for Adams: first, “keeping Europe at bay;” second, “expanding the United States territorially across North America;” third, “anchoring the country’s long-term development in infrastructure, education, and commerce;” fourth, “attempting to abolish slavery;” and fifth, “evaluating his legacy” (9).

The book’s succinct chapters proceed chronologically to examine the highlights of an extraordinary, wide-ranging life: Adams’s battles with depression, personal impulses, and professional aspirations as he sought purpose through the late 1790s; his involvement in diplomacy and political ascent in the 1800s; his thought and participation in debates regarding resolving the War of 1812, territorial expansion, the acquisition of Florida, slavery, support for republican movements abroad, and

articulation of the Monroe Doctrine; his ambitious aims at internal improvement and failures as president; and finally, his efforts to battle the slave system as an institution and in politics. Throughout all of this, though, Edel depicts Adams as retaining a core set of national security concerns and civic republican commitments.

A major contribution of the book is its account of how Adams's perception of an Old World-New World ideological, diplomatic, and cultural divide shaped his worldview. Such a vision was also evident in formative policy statements and doctrines established by George Washington's 1796 Farewell Address and Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural in 1801 (in my view) but, as Edel argues, Adams best articulated this perspective and grappled with the complexities of hemispheric and Atlantic relations in the 1810s and 1820s. "In the early republic," Edel explains, "American political theory and domestic politics stressed the division of power through checks and balances. But when it came to foreign policy, there was an inconsistency. At least in the Western Hemisphere, America believed in no checks, no balances, and often no restraint. Instead, America pursued, in a vision laid out by the Constitution's framers and executed by John Quincy Adams, a preponderance of power. The reasons for this were clear enough. If America did not, so the framers argued, North America would end up looking like Europe, which would mean no liberty" (302). Edel's formulation of the Old World-New World divide bears upon another question raised by the book: how to make sense of a system premised on limits at home but not abroad? This is a fascinating and enduring one for the United States; this theme runs provocatively throughout the book.

In terms of the articulation and extension of U.S. power abroad, I was most interested in the sections of the book on the development of the Monroe Doctrine. Here Edel does not substantively deviate from the classic interpretations of Ernest May or Dexter Perkins, or recent analysis by Jay Sexton.^[6] But what Edel adds is to overtly connect the Adams-Onís treaty negotiations to Monroe Doctrine logic to expose contradictions and tensions at work in the United States' policies and in Adams's own thought. Adam's "unwavering advocacy of [Andrew] Jackson's moves in Florida suggests an overwillingness to employ and condone force to accomplish political objectives." (182) Yet, vital to the Monroe Doctrine was a "gospel of limitations"—such as not supporting Greek or South American independence. This policy sought to limit U.S. exposure to foreign entanglement, while at the same time aspired to expand territorial and commercial interests (183).

In this regard, according to Edel, Adams missed the mark as a grand strategist. He failed to "think through the implications of his policies"—territorial expansion inherently empowered Southern slave interests, increased sectionalism, and was likely to bring the nation into conflict with foreign powers (and itself) (183). A penetrating insight into Adams's approach appears in *Nation Builder* in sections detailing how he debated with Monroe and a cabinet almost entirely pre-disposed to enter into an Anglo-American pact to preserve the integrity of the Western hemisphere. Adams centered his analysis regarding what became the Monroe Doctrine less on the overt, unilateral projection of power, and more on rhetoric: stating U.S. republican principles and their unique application to the western hemisphere to the world. According to Edel this did not embody a weak unilateralism (an empty U.S. assertion defended by the British navy) as some historians depict, but, rather, Adams's "expectation of future growth, and perhaps most importantly, a simultaneous limitation of activity abroad and an expansion of interests." (181-182).

What Adams wanted most, Edel explains, was based on his experiences as diplomat. He sought to

push for strong words and harder diplomacy in private (particularly with the Holy Alliance), leaving options open in public, while James Monroe, in contrast, had the national and the international publics in mind as he sought a “broad public assertion of American principles” (184). These and related actions—elemental to Monroe cabinet debates—reveal the character traits and intellectual propensities that made Adams such an adept diplomat and able advisor and yet an ineffective chief executive.

“Before becoming president,” Edel notes, Adams had “mused that ‘the more of pure moral principle is carried into the policy and conduct of a Government, the wiser and more profound will that policy be,’” but when positioned at the zenith of that government and under the conditions of a contested election, he foundered (191). Adams tried to do too much, too fast, and did not recognize the structural forces realigning American party politics in the 1820s. For example, his opposition to Indian removal in Georgia was read by opponents as a sign of federal overreach, his push back against acquisition of Texas and the international slave trade was seen as part of an effort to “atrophy the institution of slavery,” and ultimately his ambitious plans for internal improvements appeared to his detractors, according to Edel, as “the first step toward empowering the federal government to legislate slavery’s abolition” (247). Interestingly, there is no evidence from his public speeches or private correspondence that the gradualist Adams intended to legislate restrictions—or even an abolition—to slavery during his time in the White House. After all, democratic revolutionaries from Greece and Latin America came to the U.S. pleading for assistance, which prompted a risk-averse Adams as Secretary of State, to stick to neutrality and “gradual rather than radical or sudden change” (284). Why should this stance have differed in his presidency?

It did not, though, as Edel highlights, Adams was morally torn even as he pursued a deliberately nonpartisan, cautious policy on slavery as he aimed for rapprochement in politics and large-scale developments through land sales, tariffs, and internal improvements. In *Nation Builder* Adams as president comes across as stubborn and a poor communicator, unable to perceive regional and local interests, often misjudging allies and opponents alike. Out of office for more than a decade, with the benefit of hindsight, Adams assessed his own presidency succinctly: “The great object of my life therefore as applied to the administration of the Government of the United States has failed” (242).

In his post-presidential life, however, serving in Congress from Massachusetts, Adams hoped, in part, to redeem himself. Advocacy of a domestic transformation preoccupied Adams. Times had changed, he opined, as he fully took up the anti-slavery cause, which his “conscience” had pressed upon him (288). Slavery, Adams consistently argued from the 1830s through his death in 1848, was a poison to the nation; its abolition was both elemental to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and republicanism and as an embodiment of Christian duty (280). It was in this effort that he made himself into an effective politician, in arguing with contemporaries, and in explaining difficult policy choices to wider publics, to “open the way for others,” even if, ultimately, he lamented he was not successful in ending slavery, beating back the “gag rule,” and a number of other manifestations of Southern slave political power (289). Fittingly, he died in 1848 in the House of Representatives arguing against a resolution to honor general officers that fought in the 1846-8 Mexican-American War—and implicitly the extension of slavery to the newly acquired areas.

I do have some minor quibbles with Edel’s study, particularly as I consider how I plan to teach this book in my U.S. and the World courses. I would have liked to see more explanation of the intricacies

of the strategic thought of Adams as chief negotiator on the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812 and, similarly, I longed for an extended look at the acquisition of Florida and Adams's assessments of shifting European power politics in negotiating with Spanish Foreign Minister Luis de Onís y González-Vara the Adams-Onís treaty with Spain. I also would have liked to have seen in the book's conclusion on the legacy of Adams more overt analysis of how, if at all, Adams's policies and visions influenced later thinkers and developments, beyond Lincoln. For instance, to what extent did congressman and Secretary of State James Blaine adopt or adapt Adams's conception of U.S. hemispheric leadership, territorial expansion, and interventionism?

Although they are outside of the scope of the project as Edel defines it, the following questions emerge from the book: how did the constellation of ideas in Adams's grand-strategy firmament shift for Presidents Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt, or even Woodrow Wilson? And how did such ideas apply, if at all, for other non-diplomat, non-politicians thinking along similar lines: abolitionist and journalist William Lloyd Garrison, abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass, international evangelist D.L. Moody, or later international peace activist Jane Addams? Beyond presidents and secretaries of state, exactly who counts as a grand strategist is a question worth asking.

Nation Builder reveals vividly that as a strategic thinker, Adams was exceptional; as a strategic operator, however, Adams was at best average, depending on his role and the given moment. "While he served as secretary of state and president," observes Edel, "Adams's different strategies had been stymied by personal and political shortcomings. His disposition was poorly suited for the compromises that democratic politics demanded, and he had little ability to steer public opinion" (287). Indeed, in "many instances [Adams] lacked the ability to convert that vision into political reality" (295). If this is the case, as was most evident in his fraught presidency, the problematic translation of vision into policy might indicate that we would be better off depicting Adams as a capacious strategic thinker, with grand aims, a skilled diplomat, a poor president, and a good congressman of great principle.

But looking at the consistencies and variations of Adams's thought and life in politics, the question of assessing core ideas while gauging 'success' and effectiveness broached by Edel in both the introduction and conclusion presents a perplexing paradox. If the capacious, long-term thought, set of worldviews, and intellectual framework of the sort Adams developed and applied is best understood as a grand strategy, what do we make of the fact that, as Edel rightly notes, "he had more trouble translating his vision into policy"? (304)

One partial answer lies with what Edel sees as a major contribution: Adams's grand strategy helps explain why "America's rise from a confederation of revolutionary colonies to a continental power was not an inevitable result of resources and demographics, but rather the product of deliberate pursuit." (10) More precisely, *Nation Builder* shows that we should locate John Quincy Adams at the center of any narrative that aims to explore the foreign and domestic political dynamics by which the U.S. came of age from the 1790s through the 1840s. On the other hand, perhaps this history of flexible thinking, nimble policymaking, failures, successes, and unintended consequences, also reveals the limitations of thinking in terms of grand strategy as an organizing concept, in politics as well as history.

Review by William Weeks, San Diego State University

My thanks to Tom Maddux for yet another opportunity to participate in the stimulating roundtable discussions on H-Diplo. The book under consideration was especially appealing to me in that represented a chance to re-engage with the life and legacy of John Quincy Adams, whom I had the privilege of knowing for a decade at the outset of my academic career-- that is, if many, many hours spent submerged in his papers, both personal and private, count as knowing him. It also presented an opportunity to reflect upon the generosity of the present-day Adams family, whose willingness to make public a largely unexpurgated version of four generations of the family's papers constitutes a source unequalled in its size and scope in American historical studies. That massive correspondence is a mixture of triumphs and failures, with the latter often being linked to alcohol abuse. Yet the fragment that I am familiar with reveals a clan committed to service and integrity, with only a little material which is shameful.

Even in an age of history from the bottom up, the Adams family saga continues to be of interest, in both in academia and in American popular culture. To many, the individual members of the family have come to personify the national experience, both in their public and private lives. It makes for fascinating storytelling. Abigail Adams remains a founding icon of American feminism. Woody Holton's biography of her won the Bancroft Prize in 2010. Diane Jacobs has recently published *The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Three Remarkable Sisters*.^[9] Her spouse has not been forgotten, either. On TV, the 2008 HBO miniseries *John Adams* won (according to Wikipedia) thirteen Emmy awards, more than any other miniseries in television history. Will anyone ever capture Adams's distinct combination of great devotion to public service and neurotic insecurities as well as the actor Paul Giamatti?

John Quincy Adams, in particular, has seen his reputation increase as one of the most significant Americans of the antebellum period. The increasingly favorable view of him is due in no small measure to Adams's outspoken opposition to slavery while he served in Congress at the end of his life. In addition to that, Adams retains his reputation as one of the chief ideological architects of the American foreign policy tradition.

Charles Edel seeks to burnish that reputation by emphasizing Adams's life-long efforts to articulate and implement what he terms a 'grand strategy' of U.S. domestic and foreign policies, whose principles to some extent persist to the present. Edel seeks to bring out the "personal, national, and moral dimensions" (9) of this grand strategy, although I must say, *Nation Builder* did not meet my expectations in this regard. I was expecting something along the lines of an updated version of George Lipsky's classic text, *John Quincy Adams: His Theory and Ideas*, a sort of topical breakdown of the various aspects of Adams's political philosophy.^[10] Instead, Edel presents a chronological, interpretative biography of Adams that revisits the well-worked ground of the major turning points of his career, climaxing with his fatal stroke in 1848 on the floor of the House. This occurred while he was rising to oppose a resolution paying tribute to officers who had served in the 1846-48 Mexican-American War. Adams reasoned that it was wrong to honor soldiers who fought for a dishonorable cause, in this case, to expand the domain of slavery as he saw it. He literally keeled over while standing for the principle that it is wrong for the nation to honor its veterans of unjust wars, that service in the military does not mean one can check one's conscience at the door, and that as individuals we are always responsible for our actions.

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This sort of principled and fearless stand is what makes Adams so worthwhile to study and, insofar as he brings this out, what makes Edel's book valuable. The concept of grand strategy emerges only from time to time in the narrative. This does not necessarily negate the value of what Edel does write. The author displays a detailed knowledge of what Adams's writings (especially his diary) reveal and relies heavily on quotations from these sources to help make his argument. While some may find this objectionable on the grounds that it is counter to what some might consider 'good history,' I enjoyed the heavy dose of Adams's comments. His distinctive voice, his obsessions, his at times Nixonian sense of persecution, combine to create a book within a book. The sheer quantity of what Adams wrote—Edel notes that Adams' diary alone contains 17,000 pages—means that even when Adams was posing for posterity, he was giving away elements of himself that yield great insight into his being. He just wrote too much for a certain type of truth not to emerge. The pace and vocabulary of his prose brought back memories of my time with Adams, reminding me of the admiration I came to feel for his life and work, notwithstanding his fundamentally disagreeable and, at times, cruel personality.

Edel begins *Nation Builder* with a well-grounded chapter on Adams's youth. Yet his discussion in chapters 2 and 3 of Adams's time as an American diplomat both at home and abroad seem rather flat to me, especially his chapter on Adams's time as secretary of state. Frankly, I question whether the author has fully captured the nuance attendant to the complex skein of events and trends prevalent during the so-called 'era of good feelings.' In particular, his discussion of affairs on the southern frontier during the late 1810s seems superficial. The origins of the First Seminole War are much more complicated than as mere retaliation for "increasingly violent Indian cross-border raids" (140).

Edel is on surer ground in chapter 4 when he details Adams's comprehensive plan for national development while he was president. In both that chapter and the following one on Adams's career in congress, the author recounts things I already knew but in a fresh and illuminating way. Adams's ambitious plans as president for internal improvements—physical, educational, scientific, and moral—were astoundingly bold for their time. His prescription that (in Edel's words) "liberty, properly harnessed and driven by the federal government" would "release the creative powers of the nation" (215) can and should be seen as the precursor to both Progressivism and the New Deal. Indeed, Adams's convictions regarding an activist role for the federal government in American life are no less controversial today than they were when he first articulated them in the 1820s.

While Edel brings Adams's plan for national growth and development into sharp focus, he fails to give Adams's views on the meaning of the American union and its relation to continental expansionism the attention they deserve. Drawing on the work of David Hendrickson and others,^[1] Edel argues that expansion across North America was fundamentally defensive in nature, an attempt to gain U.S. control of the continent in the name of heading off future rivalries of the sort that roiled Europe. Yet this outlook, correct so far as it goes, omits the undeniable fact that the very idea of Union was, from the time it was first imagined by Benjamin Franklin and George Washington in the 1750s, itself linked to the distinct advantages that union (along with independence) offered-- westward expansion, collective security, and the prosperity offered by a large internal market. Adams had absorbed these principles in his youth as the foundation of American unionism, making it inevitable that as a young man he would defect to the Republicans when New England Federalism drifted away from them. Continental Expansionism—arguably the most important aspect of the American 'grand strategy' in the early Republic (certainly after 1815)—receives little attention in this volume. One wonders why this is so.

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Edel's picture of Adams also omits any substantial discussion of another basic Adamsonian principle—the notion of 'freedom of the seas.' This outlook employed American nationalist ideology in constructing the world's oceans as global highways bound by American notions of law and enforced by (in however limited a way) American naval power. In effect, it extended American sovereignty to the territorial waters of other nations. Adams did not originate this principle, but his vigorous defense of this idea, both as a diplomat and as president, remains one of his most important contemporary legacies-- witness its application today, as the U.S. 'pivot' toward Asia seeks to contain China's expansion of its influence into the South China Sea. I would argue that any book wishing to detail the 'grand strategy' of John Quincy Adams should give 'freedom of the seas' a major section if not its own chapter.

Those objections aside, *Nation Builder's* strongest chapter deals with Adams's efforts to halt the growth and existence of slavery, which he termed "a stain upon the character of the nation." (250) Although a number of historians—notably Leonard Richards and William Lee Miller—have documented Adams's career as an anti-slavery activist, Edel brings this phase of Adams' life into especially high relief.¹²¹ The final pages of the chapter in which Edel gathers a selection of Adams's abolitionist comments into a few pages had me literally on the edge of my seat. One example suffices to give some sense of the incendiary nature of these comments. In his diary, Adams recounted this comment to a fellow congressmen in 1832: "The real question now convulsing this Union was, whether a population spread over an immense territory, consisting of one great division all freemen, and another of masters and slaves, could exist permanently together as members of one community or not; that, to go a step further back, the question at issue was slavery" (259). It was the 'house divided' speech decades before Abraham Lincoln uttered his more famous version.

And yes, Adams was an abolitionist, even if he refrained from using the term to describe himself because of the negative connotations attached to it. I was left marveling at the intensity of Adams's anti-slavery/abolitionist convictions and the lengths he was willing to go to make them a reality. This is further evidence, in my view, of the extent to which scholars have underestimated how ideologically objectionable and morally insulting Adams found slavery to be, and how eager he was to confront it, even at the risk of civil war. While so many other northern politicians sought to tamp down the fires of controversy, Adams (and a few others) pressed the issue at every opportunity. This, it seems to me, suggests that white southerners were largely correct in their fears that northern anti-slavery zealots (and later, the newly formed Republican Party) aimed not just to co-exist with a contained slavery but also to remove it, root and branch, and the way of life that went with it. You do not have to be a neo-confederate to believe that Northern antislavery and abolitionist agitation was as much responsible for the breakup of the Union as was the Southern slaveholder—the facts are plain if we are willing to see them and give up some of our most deeply held historical preconceptions. Edel's fine chapter will aid in this evolution of our thinking about the origins of the war. For Adams, ending slavery in the U.S. was a type of internal 'Manifest Destiny', a domestic 'extension of the area of freedom' that had to occur if the nation was to fulfill its presumed providential destiny as the world's leading advocate of human freedom. Once freed of national ambitions and in a secure House seat, Adams decided to force the issue. He pursued this domestic version of manifest destiny with the same, if not greater, zeal, than he did its foreign counterpart. He knew that that the struggle would continue after his death. He understood that his work as a congressman had been to "open the way for others...the cause is good and great" (289).

Like Lincoln, Adams' nationalism rested on the promises of the Declaration of Independence. Also like Lincoln, Adams believed the country had drifted from its original intention to put slavery on a road to extinction. Edel shows how Adams, during his career as a national leader, had to disguise his true feelings on the topic of slavery in the name of preserving the shaky union of states. It was Adams's ambivalent commitment to the Union 'as it is' that makes problematic any effort to articulate his 'grand strategy of the republic.' For in fact, Adams never acquiesced in the fundamental bargain on which the Constitution was based—the acceptance of slavery. All of his efforts to present himself as a 'man of the whole nation,' a man above party and section, were disingenuous from the start, in that he (unlike Daniel Webster) could never fully reconcile himself to a union with slaveholders. This was obvious by the 1820s, in spite of Adams' pretensions to the contrary. Only when his national ambitions were behind him did Adams feel free to speak his mind on the issue, which he did in increasingly apocalyptic terms. Slaveholders were right to see in Adams someone determined to challenge the economic and cultural foundations of their existence. Any book promising to deal with Adams's 'grand strategy for the Republic' must foreground the fact that ending slavery in the U.S. was a fundamental part of that grand strategy. In other words, Adams's strategy for the Republic began with the reconstruction of that Republic without slavery. It was a prescription for confrontation, and deserves to be remembered as such.

Traditionally, John Quincy Adams has been famous for his many diplomatic achievements and as bearer of the informal title of 'greatest secretary of state.' Yet I finished Charles Edel's engagingly written book with the notion that Adams is perhaps best remembered as the one person who, more than any other, forced the body politic of the United States to confront the issue of slavery. It is, I believe, the achievement of which he (and his descendants) would be proudest.

Author's Response by Charles Edel, U.S. Naval War College

Thanks very much to Thomas Maddux for proposing this roundtable, corralling a terrific group of scholars, and writing the introduction. I would also like to thank Rhonda Barlow, Seth Center, Christopher Nichols, and William Weeks for taking the time to provide such thoughtful readings and insightful comments on my book. I agree with much of what they say in their reviews, but would like to elaborate on certain subjects where there might be some disagreement, or where further explanation might be useful.

As several of the reviewers observe, the book does indeed attempt to link Adams's and the nation's rise to power. That makes it something less, and hopefully something more, than a typical biography. Each chapter is intended to highlight a critical period in Adams's life, while also exploring different facets of his grand strategy. The study of grand strategy constitutes a growing and exciting field of scholarship that is necessarily interdisciplinary. As Barlow suggests, the study of grand strategy in the early Republic is not a new field, even if the terminology is. Indeed, such thinking preoccupies much of the writing of the first generation of American statesmen and can be seen in the geopolitical analysis that runs throughout the *Federalist Papers*.

Present at the creation, John Quincy Adams absorbed President George Washington's injunction to avoid European conflicts, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton's belief in the economic foundations of state power, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson's desire for continental expansion, and his father President John Adams's belief in the necessity of a strong and energetic national

government. Adams was a product of these traditions, but also an innovator who attempted to synthesize them in a new way. As Nichols notes, the current revival of interest in grand strategy is almost wholly contemporary in nature, and where the concept has credence, it is almost wholly in the realm of foreign policy. I employed a more catholic approach, and attempted to bridge several different historical fields—foreign policy, domestic politics, political economy—and disciplines—history, international relations, and security studies.

As I note in the introduction, grand strategy is meant to provide the intellectual architecture for deciding what goals a country should seek, and a plan for how it should go about doing so. Lacking vision, grand strategy becomes a series of *ad hoc* responses to disparate event. Without execution, grand strategy becomes an exercise in simply naming objectives. At its best, grand strategy involves both defining and prioritizing the ends and ensuring optimal use of the available means.

But, as Center notes in an especially perceptive observation, the “mark of a grand strategist is not simply to have everything going according to one’s plan but to have the vision and dexterity to focus on enduring principles even as circumstances shift exposing new policy options.” A sufficiently flexible grand strategy allows for adaptation. Changing circumstances require changing priorities, because dogmatically following a script without paying attention to shifts in one’s surroundings will not yield successful results. Mike Tyson said it best: “Everybody has a plan ‘til they get punched in the mouth.”^[13] — Good grand strategy means good reassessments, because while strategy is about how to achieve desired ends, it is also about adjusting the ends so that realistic ways can be found to achieve them. Adams captured this best, though perhaps not quite as eloquently as Tyson when he remarked that, “I did not recollect any change of policy; but observed there had been a great change of circumstances.”^[14] —

Center calls attention to Adams’s command of context in a number of ways. He notes that regardless of the logical consistency of a particular vision, individuals are limited by their positions when they attempt to execute a strategy. Hence what Adams was able to accomplish as a diplomat abroad advising the Secretary of State and President, is quite different from what he was able to do as Secretary of State himself. Similarly, when serving as President and attempting to conciliate various national constituencies, his range was both broader and his role more circumscribed than it would be when he was a regional congressman purposefully inflaming public opinion.

Given Adams’s ability to read his environment, why, Center wonders, did such discernment seemingly abandon Adams as President? Faced with opposition, why did Adams retreat into depression and distraction rather than size up his opponents and formulate a plan of attack? This is a problem that has long intrigued scholars, with historians finding his presidential years so anomalous that Adams’s life is generally divided into a before-and-after. I think there are several explanations for this puzzling, and utterly depressing, period of Adams’s life. First, such despondency was not out of character. As a young man, struggling with the burden of familial expectations, Adams fell into the first of several deep depressions.^[15] — The black dog that haunted him in the presidency was not anomalous in this regard, but rather a return of an old and quite unwelcome acquaintance.

Additionally, it is worth noting that during his presidency, Adams attacked before he retreated. Despite sounding a cautious, and conservative note, in his Inaugural Address, the breadth and sweep of Adams’s first Annual Message to Congress made it quite possibly the most ambitious vision of the

Executive branch, and really of the Federal Government, until perhaps that of Franklin D. Roosevelt more than a century later. Despite his cabinet's strong objections that the speech was overly bold and politically unpalatable, President Adams ignored appeals towards moderation. He informed his cabinet that he was thinking about "a longer range than a simple session of Congress. The plant may come late, though the seed be sown early."¹⁶¹ While it is tempting to attribute such thinking toward a long-range view, such an explanation does not fully explain why the normally cautious Adams seemingly threw caution to the wind in this instance.

A better explanation for Adams's boldness, and his subsequent depression, comes from the suspect manner in which he won the 1824 presidential election. As his opponents coalesced into a unified opposition party, Adams was caught on the horns of a dilemma. If he did nothing, he would almost certainly guarantee victory for his opponent. But if he engaged in the type of political maneuvering he had undertaken to win the presidency in the first place, he would both betray his own ideals and furnish his adversaries with evidence to support their accusations of his corruption. Faced with such a choice, Adams chose the former, realizing that it almost certainly meant political defeat.

Center poses one final, and especially provocative question, asking whether Adams's anti-interventionist stance of the 1820s represents a durable lesson for policymakers, or whether it was merely a rational assessment of American capabilities at the time. In fact, Adams himself would be the first to argue that changing circumstances and contexts necessarily mean changing policies. In multiple instances, Adams declared that precedent should not become a policy straight-jacket; the nation needed to keep in mind the changing nature of American power and the shifting international environment. What made sense when the nation was a small power on the edge of the world, might not make as much sense to a nation that was substantially larger and more secure. Adams was never shy about promoting American values, nor using military power when doing so would advance American interests. He was, however, keenly aware of the relationship between America's capabilities and its ambitious aims.

Weeks, who has written extensively on Adams and on American foreign policy during this period, raises three critical questions about Adams's strategy. He questions whether Adams's views on continental expansion and freedom of the seas receive enough attention, and argues that Adams's desire to eradicate slavery must stand in the foreground of any articulation of his strategic concept. Weeks and I are both admirers of George Lipsky's *John Quincy Adams: His Theory and Ideas*, which explores the various topics and themes inherent in Adams's political philosophy.¹⁷¹ A central premise of my book, however, and one that is indeed inherent in my definition of grand strategy, is that to be credible and useful, a grand strategy needs to be holistic, unfold over time, and be as concerned with execution as with ideas.

As Barlow writes, and as I greatly look forward to reading in her dissertation, the sea was prominent in the mind of John Adams, and there is little doubt that from a very early age, perhaps even starting with his multiple wartime Atlantic crossings at his father's side, the importance of a navy for the young nation's security was imprinted on John Quincy Adams. The significance of a navy was further reinforced through his diplomatic career. He was dealing with a world and an international system dominated by an Anglo-French colonial and maritime rivalry. It was certainly clear to Adams that if America wanted to maintain its neutral commerce in the seas and ignore both Britain and France's objections, it would need a powerful navy.

Moreover, Adams hailed from New England, where fisheries, commerce, and maritime trade mattered immensely. While he did not always line up with New England commercial interests – especially on deferring to the British – he thought the United States not only needed to become a commercial state, but also required the ability to defend its commercial interests. In his presidential address to Congress in 1825 he purposed the idea of a naval academy. While Annapolis was not founded until 1845, Adams called for the establishment of a Naval Academy on par with West Point, the “formation of scientific and accomplished officers,” and a massive shipbuilding program two decades earlier.^[18] That explains why Adams’s views on the nation’s maritime strategy, commercial and naval, receive treatment in multiple chapters, and especially in chapter two. Yet it is also worth noting that while freedom of the seas was a means for Adams, economic development and physical security of the North American continent were the ultimate ends.

I have to admit to being somewhat surprised by Weeks’s contention that the topic of westward expansion was given short shrift. As I argue in the introduction and each of the subsequent chapters, Adams crafted a grand strategy aimed at both reducing security risks to the republic and vindicating republicanism as the form of government best suited to promote human progress and liberty.

Intertwined, these goals, one defensive and the other offensive, necessitated hegemony in North America and influenced Adams’s thinking from his earliest years. For Adams, in order to expand the sphere of liberty, the nation’s future needed to diverge from Europe’s past, which meant precluding, as far as it was possible, the emergence of armed and geographically proximate neighbors that would force a militarization of the nation and a suppression of its citizens’ liberties. But it also meant promoting national development with a view to establishing the country’s long-term capacity for growth. Adams wanted to enable the United States to become the most progressive nation on earth by devoting its resources to its own development. This meant investing in infrastructure, in new industries, and in human capital by educating the republic’s citizens. The key to this was a powerful federal government, along Hamiltonian lines, projected over a vast territory, using Madisonian methods. Adams’s thoughts and actions on behalf of continental expansion, intended as both a defensive action and as the necessary prerequisite to growing the sphere of liberty, occupied the primary component of Adams’s strategy.

Until they didn’t. As Weeks mentions in his generous comments on my fifth chapter, Adams’s increasingly virulent anti-slavery role as a congressman led him to fight against an expansion he saw as enlarging slavery’s dominion. The nation’s violent territorial aggrandizement had made the creed of American foreign policy “preserving, protecting, spreading, and perpetuating the institution of domestic slavery.”^[19] To Adams, this transformation was a moral regression.

As righteous as his anti-slavery stance was, it should not obscure the fact that a reconstruction of the republic without slavery was not Adams’s only objective—nor depending on circumstances even his primary one. Adams believed in prioritizing objectives, and his first priority was continental expansion in order to preclude the emergence of any geographic rivals to the United States. For Adams, as for most of the republic’s early statesman, this was the nation’s most pressing challenge. While there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Adams held anti-slavery feelings from early in his life, he also believed that taking on the nation’s original sin of slavery too early would bring a premature end to the Republic. It was for this reason I wrote that Adams believed slavery to be both morally indefensible *and* a necessary political evil for most of his career. His grand strategy was not simply about ending slavery, but about producing a powerful continental state that acted as a moral

power. This was the issue he tended to for the final years of his life as he worked to prepare the nation for its day of reckoning.

Of course, the abolishment of slavery did not come to pass during Adams's life. As Nichols asks, what should we make of the fact that Adams often had so much trouble translating his vision into policy? How, in other words, should we judge Adams as a strategist? Adams certainly had a mixed record of success in his endeavors. He also charted a course that others would follow. Looking at the contradictions, difficulties, and dilemmas Adams faced, I think Nichols captures some of the complexities and limitations of grand strategy quite nicely. In so doing, he raises the question of how to account for seeming contradictions in a grand strategy, and how, and on what time horizon, we should judge strategists.

Grand strategy is not figuring everything out perfectly in advance, but rather responding and recalibrating along the way. In his classic work *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz writes that, "theory should be study, not doctrine."^[20] That is, theory, and in this case strategy, is best understood as a verb and not a noun. It is something that needs to be done on an iterative basis so that as the strategic environment shifts, so too does the approach. As circumstances changed, so too did Adams's conception of what the nation could realistically accomplish.

I would simply add that while context might explain the success or failure of a grand strategy, it is not the only measure of success. That Adams's domestic vision was defeated during his presidency can be explained by context; that this same vision was resurrected under the Whigs and formed the basis of much of the Republican Party's program speaks to its long-term durability. As I noted above, the practice of grand strategy must necessarily include both conception and execution, which involves both context and circumstance. Success may also be judged by a longer time horizon, and if this is the standard, establishing adaptable and transferable strategies is as important for judging the success of a grand strategy as is successful implementation.

Notes

[1] Samuel Flagg Bemis's *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Knopf, 1949) and *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (New York: Knopf, 1956); William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to Civil War* (1996) and *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations: Vol. 1 Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) For a detailed bibliography on Adams, see Charles N. Edel, *Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), n. 14, 309-310.

[2] Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), vii.

[3] Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1913–1917); Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations, by His Grandson Charles Francis Adams*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1853).

[4] John Quincy Adams to John Adams, 1 Aug. 1816, *Writings*, 6:60.

[5] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of State or the U.S. Government.

[6] Harlow Giles Unger, *John Quincy Adams* (New York; De Capo Press, 2013); Joseph Wheelan, *Mr. Adams's Last Crusade: John Quincy Adams's Extraordinary Post-Presidential Life in Congress* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); Phyllis Lee Levin, *The Remarkable Education of John Quincy Adams* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); Fred Kaplan, *John Quincy Adams, American Visionary* (New York: Harper, 2014); David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

[7] Paul Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); See also, Paul Kennedy, editor, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, revised and updated); Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[8] Ernest May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975); Dexter Perkins, *A History of the Monroe Doctrine* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1963, revised edition); Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).

[9] Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams* (New York, 2009); Diane Jacobs, *Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Three Remarkable Sisters* (New York, 2014).

[10] George A. Lipsky, *John Quincy Adams: His Theory and Ideas* (New York, 1950).

[11] David Hendrickson, [Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789-1941](#) (2009) and [Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding](#) (2003), both published by the University Press of Kansas.

[12] Leonard L. Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams* (New York, 1986); William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: John Quincy Adams and the Great Battle in the United*

States Congress (New York, 1995).

[13] Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ix.

[14] JQA, Diary 37, December 8, 1825, p. 26 [electronic edition].

[15] As for John Quincy's lifelong struggle with depression, a most useful explanation of both cause and effects can be found in Joshua Wolf Shenk's excellent *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled his Greatness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2005).

[16] JQA, Diary 37, November 26, 1825, p. 16 [electronic edition].

[17] George A. Lipsky, *John Quincy Adams: His Theory & Ideas* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1950).

[18] John Quincy Adams, December 6, 1825, "First Annual Message." <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3514>

[19] John Quincy Adams, October 7, 1844, "Address to the Boston Whig Young Men's Club." The speech was printed in the *Boston Daily Atlas*, October 9, 1844.

[20] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press (1976 [1993]), Book 2, Chapter 2.