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‘The Twilight Struggle’ Review: Welcome to the New Cold War

The 20th-century’s global competition may have lessons for future conflicts with China.

Xi Jinping appears in a video during a 2021 ceremony celebrating the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party.

PHOTO: KYODO NEWS/GETTY IMAGES

By A. Wess Mitchell
April 29, 2022 11:13 am ET

The Cold War strategist George Kennan, in his “Memoirs” (1967), tells how he once escorted a group of drunken congressmen to meet the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. The year was 1945, and Kennan was charge d’affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. The congressmen had traveled to Moscow in hopes of seeing the reclusive dictator, who agreed to meet the delegation but not before having the NKVD ply them with large quantities of tea spiked with vodka. Moments before arriving at the Kremlin, one congressman, feeling the vodka, shouted that he planned to “biff the old codger one in the nose.” Faced with every embassy handler’s worst nightmare, the normally shy Kennan erupted and told the congressman, in effect, to shut up.

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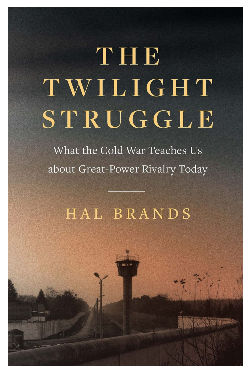
The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today

By Hal Brands
Yale University Press
328 pages



This episode, which occurred not long before Kennan composed his famous "Long Telegram" warning against Soviet expansionism, reveals a lot about the great strategist's relationship with power. Brilliant, moody and introverted, Kennan was not the type to tell the establishment what it wanted to hear. For years he waged a kind of one-man campaign, first against utopians in the Roosevelt administration who thought they could sweet-talk "Uncle Joe," then against hawks in the early Truman administration who wanted to biff Stalin one in the nose.

What Kennan could see that others couldn't was that a new era was beginning, one that was different from anything Americans had ever experienced. It would require traits that didn't jibe with prevailing policy notions on either the left or the right. Drawing on Russian history, geography and culture, Kennan outlined a strategy of patient counter-pressure. It would remain the framework for U.S. foreign policy until the Soviet system collapsed nearly half a century later. The reason we remember Kennan is not only because of his insight but also because of his plucky persistence in saying what he thought was right, even when it did not please.

Today America once again finds itself at the onset of a new era of geopolitical rivalry, this time with a rising China and a vengeful Russia. The U.S. needs strategic thinkers like Kennan, with the originality to see what needs to be done and the grit to say so, even when it defies establishment orthodoxies.

The latest entry in the Kennan sweepstakes is Hal Brands's "Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today." Mr. Brands, a professor at Johns Hopkins, is known for his prolific and thoughtful foreign-policy commentary. The arguments in his book reflect what appears to be an emerging consensus that we are entering a second Cold War. Like the first one, the thinking goes, it will be a series of long and grinding contests between rival systems

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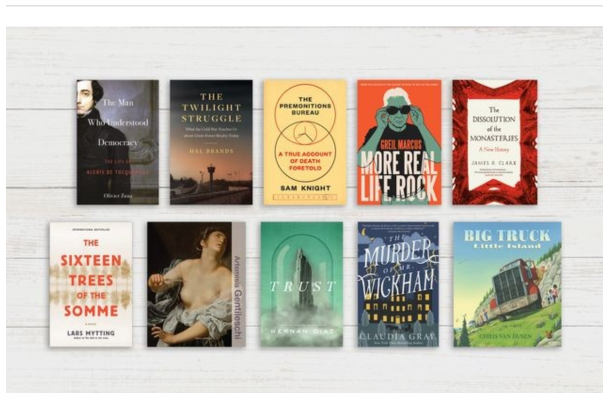

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—between democracy and autocracy. Using a term from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, Mr. Brands calls these contests "twilight struggles," since they happen "between the sunshine of peace and the darkness of war." He worries that the ability of Americans to navigate them has atrophied, and his remedy is to look to history for lessons. "To prevent policymakers from using that history badly," he writes, "scholars must help them use it well."

Much of "Twilight Struggle" consists of a synthesis of Cold War history as told by historians like John Lewis Gaddis, Odd Arne Westad and Tony Judt. The book is organized around various aspects of strategy: "contesting the periphery," "creating situations of strength," "knowing the enemy, "setting limits," etc. Dividing the analysis in such a way allows Mr. Brands to match his chapter-themes to the lessons he offers in the book's conclusion, but it also forces him to retell Cold War chronology in many of the chapters. The repetition is softened by Mr. Brands's breezy style, which chaperones the reader through a half-century of well-trod history. The effect is appealing, but the book's structure presents a disjointed picture of how the policies of the era's nine presidencies fit together into a strategic whole.

Mr. Brands proceeds from the premise that great-power competition is back and that it represents the biggest challenge facing the U.S. This idea has gained a grudging acceptance in the Washington establishment since the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy. But the establishment remains in denial about the choices that the new era will require—and how U.S. policy should adapt to deal with it. The essence of strategy is setting priorities and managing trade-offs. As Frederick the Great said: He who defends everywhere defends nowhere. Thus the measure by which "Twilight Struggle" must be judged is how well its exposition helps policy makers think about hard choices.

Mr. Brands's core argument is that the U.S. can succeed in the new competition largely as it did in the last one—by applying an updated version of Kennan's strategy of containment. "Holding the line while exerting selective counterpressures," he writes, "can eventually moderate the ambitions and reveal the weaknesses of even formidable foes." Using the containment framework, the U.S. can rally its democratic allies to wage sustained political and economic warfare against authoritarian governments in Beijing and Moscow until they change their ways—or collapse.

Mr. Brands's message may find a receptive audience among Washington officials for whom the Cold War playbook is seductively familiar. The problem is that it is far from clear that Kennan's strategy will work today. The U.S. now faces *two* nuclear-armed great-power rivals, in addition to a host of smaller threats, while possessing a fraction of the relative economic strength that we did after World War II. America's primary competitor, China, has an economy that will soon be larger than America's and Europe's combined (in contrast to the Soviet Union's economy, which, as Niall Ferguson has noted, was never larger than 44% of America's). Unlike the Soviets, the Chinese have a thriving private sector that is intimately bound up with our own. And while China is ruled by a Communist government, its actions are not driven by the desire to convert other countries into ideological replicants, as Soviet actions were.

These differences, especially the scale of Chinese power, create a problem for Mr. Brands's argument. Even a reader who is inclined to accept the Cold War analogy can't help wondering if containment will work against a threat like China. Can a country with 1.4 billion people and the world's largest economy be gradually strangulated in the way the economically backward Soviets were? Will cutting off U.S. capital, trade and technology ties with China hurt them more than us? Will U.S. allies be willing to distance themselves from China's economy on ideological grounds? Recent experience suggests that the answer to all of these questions is a resounding "no."

Mr. Brands gives the differences a passing nod but never grapples with their implications. Instead he emphasizes the flexibility of the containment framework —saying that, in its first iteration, it steered between "capitulation and annihilation," blended "audacity with caution," rejected both "an unachievable

universalism" and "the fatalism of believing that authoritarian revisionists are destined to dominate," and combined "clarity of conception with flexibility of application." All of this may be true, but it doesn't shed much light on what the U.S. should do today. Using such broad parameters, a modern-day president could justify an array of incompatible strategies, from a renewed bid for primacy to selective retrenchment.

Even when Mr. Brands gets down to brass tacks, it's often unclear how policy makers could use his recommendations. He is surely right that we must chart a middle course between "disastrous escalation" and "disastrous retreat." But what administration wouldn't seek to avoid those extremes? He admonishes policy makers to hold the moral high ground yet also to be willing to "make compromises that blur the moral lines"; but he never explains when to do which. He warns that issues like climate change "demand collaboration among competitors" but never says what policy makers should put first when such goals collide with traditional interests, as they often do. China's growing technological edge gets parenthetical treatment—we need to aim at "retarding China's growth and innovation through technological denial," though it's unclear how.

Overall, the reader gets the impression that Mr. Brands sees the heavy lifting of conceptualizing a strategic shift for the new era of great-power competition as having already been done by Kennan and the scholars from whose work many of his arguments are derived. Yet as Kennan knew, strategic shifts are hard. The experts who began to argue for a shift in the mid-2010s met stiff resistance from a left still enamored with the idea of making China a "responsible stakeholder" and a right still obsessed with the Middle East. Only fairly recently has great-power competition re-entered the mainstream of U.S. policy.

Despite this shift now seeming inevitable, it was not—it required years of effort from strategists and officials whose arguments were treated as heresy at the time. What those efforts bought us is a frank appraisal of the emerging landscape and the beginnings of a reorientation of U.S. strategy. But the question of what U.S. strategy should ultimately look like is still unanswered. Unfortunately, "Twilight Struggle" doesn't address the question sufficiently.

There is an undeniable ease and fluidity to Mr. Brands's narrative, and his use of Cold War archives is impressive. But on balance he seems to be telling Washington

what it wants to hear—that we’ve been here before and can win again, if only we trust our muscle reflexes. What Mr. Brands overlooks is that those reflexes may be wrong. Kennan believed that the “twilight struggle” of his own era was *sui generis*—a historical event that stood alone in time. Maybe he was right, maybe not. Either way, we will need another Kennan before long.

—Mr. Mitchell is a former U.S. assistant secretary of state for Europe and the author of “The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire.”

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