Review – The Twilight Struggle

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The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today
By Hal Brands
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In recent years, it has become clear to many analysts that the United States is facing a "new" or "second" cold war. This reality raises several important questions: Can the West win again? If so, how can we develop a competitive strategy? How can the US effectively lead a democratic coalition in a global struggle against authoritarianism? In his timely, clear, and concise book, historian and strategist Hal Brands argues that the answers to these questions partly lie in studying the past. Drawing from secondary sources in history and political science, US government archives, and the personal papers of American policymakers, Brands thus contends that, as the US prepares yet again to wage a great-power competition against Russia and China, America's top strategists ought to look to the history of the original Cold War for lessons in how to succeed.

At its core, *The Twilight Struggle* is an astute example of *applied history* – an attempt to shed light on America's current foreign policy issues by analyzing precedents in the nation's past. Across ten thematically-structured chapters, each covering a specific strategic challenge the US confronted from the end of World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Brands effectively bridges the methodological divide between diplomatic history and strategic studies, as well as the infamous "gap" between academics and policymakers. The result is a captivating historical narrative primarily suited to American (or Western) defense analysts, yet also pertinent to Cold War historians, international relations scholars, and graduate students studying history or foreign policy.

To be sure, Brands does *not* argue that the Cold War is perfectly analogous to today's great-power rivalries. Neither Russia nor China currently possess the global military reach the Soviet Union once had. The Western international order is also far more established today than it was in 1945. Indeed, when the Cold War started, there was no North Atlantic Treaty Organization, European Union, or Group of 7. Decades of scientific, technological, and financial globalization separate the contemporary world from the Cold War world, and as a result, there is significantly greater economic interdependence between America and China today than there ever was between the US and the Soviet Union.

Given these substantial differences, policymakers would be remiss to attempt to rerun "the Cold War playbook" in the post-Cold War world (p.237). History does not have concrete laws. Nor does it repeat itself exactly. The US' Cold War strategy was also fraught with flaws. With that said, learning how Washington won the conflict and assessing both the tragedies and triumphs of American diplomacy may allow today's strategists to sharpen their judgment moving forward. As Brands recognizes, historical analysis cannot provide a step-by-step "blueprint for victory" (p.237). Yet, in the words of historian John Lewis Gaddis, studying the past *can* "prepare you for the future by expanding experience, so that you can increase your skills, your stamina – and if all goes well, your wisdom" (Gaddis, 2002).

Cold War History Applied

According to Brands, wise strategists should study the history of the US-Soviet rivalry for three primary reasons.

First, though America's current cold wars are not identical to *the* Cold War, there are important continuities. Like today's rivalries, the Cold War was what President John F. Kennedy called a "long twilight struggle," which the author defines as a high-stakes, protracted competition over the future of the world order – a geopolitical and ideological contest waged in the gray area between war and peace (p.9). Competing in that twilight struggle first required Washington to diagnose its enemy, develop a theory of victory, and forge a coherent strategy striking a balance between escalation and appeasement. As Brands reveals in chapter 1, American policymakers accomplished this task by incrementally formulating the policy of "containment," a far-reaching anti-communist strategy, which maintained that full-scale war was unnecessary to achieve victory and that Washington could instead limit Soviet expansion through the measured "application of counterforce" at various "geographical and political points" (p.18). Although Brands acknowledges the imperfections of containment, especially its tendency to draw the US into morally and financially costly military interventions, he ultimately concludes that the policy was successful due to its simple, flexible, and steady nature.

For containment to work, however, the US first had to build a healthy Western alliance – a free-world community capable of resisting Soviet advances and exerting pressure on Moscow (chapter 2). And since the new US-led "free world" required a defensive shield, Washington also needed to address the military balance of power. As Brands demonstrates in chapter 3, US policymakers successfully ensured deterrence and offset superior Soviet numbers by exploiting American technological prowess and continually updating the nation's conventional and nuclear military capabilities. While the US indeed won the Cold War by strengthening the Western bloc, containing communism abroad, and conducting political warfare to undermine the Soviets at home (chapter 5), Brands also shows that engaging the enemy through meaningful superpower diplomacy was crucial to America's long-term success (chapter 6). Amid the backdrop of fierce competition, scientific and diplomatic cooperation with Moscow ultimately advanced Washington's strategic interests, as it allowed American officials to manage mutual threats (e.g., the smallpox epidemic and global nuclearization) and impose limits on the arms race when they feared the West was falling behind. As the US gears up for its new cold wars with Russia and China, it will surely face all these challenges again.

The second reason policymakers ought to study Cold War history is that it constitutes a vast reservoir of information about long-term competition. It has been over thirty years since America's last twilight struggle. Today's strategists have limited firsthand experience in dealing with rival great powers. This was not the case during the Cold War, when competing with the Soviets essentially became a "way of life" for two generations of American officials (p.2). As Brands explains in chapters 7–8, superpower conflict obliged Washington to develop a sprawling intelligence bureaucracy and mobilize an army of Sovietologists to understand and keep up with the enemy. Since official archives and private collections now contain myriad documents revealing how Cold War-era politicians and bureaucrats perceived and handled long-term competition, those who study Cold War history may gain "vicarious experience" and identify lasting qualities of great-power rivalry that remain relevant today (p.11).

A third and related reason strategists should revisit the American-Soviet conflict is that the Cold War was the *only* time the US waged a global, decades-long twilight struggle against authoritarianism. America also won that struggle peacefully by balancing coercion with magnanimity – denying the Soviets a path to victory, while simultaneously offering them a dignified path for retreat (chapter 10). Because the Cold War is the only case of successful and sustained great-power competition in American history, US policymakers should (and doubtlessly will) examine that history to better understand their nation's strengths and weaknesses in times of extended conflict. To prevent today's strategists from applying Cold War history erroneously, however, scholars "must help them use it well" (p.11).

The Contest of Systems

Though critics may take issue with Brands' attempt to draw generalizable insights about great-power rivalry from Cold War history without consulting Soviet or Chinese archives, *The Twilight Struggle* deserves praise for reminding Americans that global competition is not new and providing an informative and accessible analysis of US grand strategy across the mid-to-late twentieth century. While he does not present concrete policy prescriptions, Brands does conclude by offering twelve broad lessons for today's strategists, including the necessity of understanding balance and time, cultivating resilient alliances, knowing the enemy, accounting for one's strengths and weaknesses, and treating cooperation as a tool of competition.

Perhaps the single most important lesson of Brands' account, however, is that *values* are a crucial weapon in great-power conflict. Throughout the Cold War, callous geopolitical realism repeatedly led the US to abandon morality for expediency, especially in the Third World, where American interventions resulted in some of the most egregious ethical and strategic failures in US history. As Brands reminds us, the superpowers' contest for the "periphery" is "an aspect of the Cold War almost no one wants to relive" (p.76). And yet, Washington and its totalitarian foes are currently vying for influence across the diverse regions of the Global South. So, what might American strategists learn from scrutinizing their nation's historically flawed approach to the Third World? Above all, that prosecuting a war against authoritarianism requires aligning American policy with American principles, avoiding blatant acts of hypocrisy, and promoting humanitarian statecraft.

While the dark image of American Cold War interventionism continues to cast a long shadow over popular foreign policy discourse today, Brands argues (somewhat unconventionally) that the US had mostly recovered from the specter of Vietnam by the end of the Reagan era (chapter 4). That is, by pushing capitalist economic reform and taking up the cause of "human rights and democracy," American policymakers had effectively restored their nation's reputation and retaken the "ideological offensive" in the Third World (p.94). Readers may rightfully criticize Brands for this laudatory characterization of American neoliberalism, which he suggests "made the world richer and more humane" (p.3). It is now a commonplace that US-led capitalist globalization exacerbated economic inequality and conflict in the Global South after the end of the Cold War (Prashad, 2007; Klein, 2007; Woods, 2014). However, Brands' broader point – that long-term strategy must be both morally and geopolitically sustainable – is well-taken nonetheless.

In the end, since the Cold War was fundamentally a "contest of systems," winning it required America to live up to its democratic image (chapter 9). Defending human rights at home and abroad was necessary to gain the ideological high ground and increase the "attractiveness" of the "American way" (p.193). Of course, there is abundant evidence confirming that the US never truly actualized its professed moral aspirations. And thus, as the West prepares to confront the new twilight struggles of the twenty-first century, we must keep this final point in mind: The most effective way to subvert the power and influence of the enemy's system is to improve the moral vitality of our own.

References

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