

**Charles N. Edel, *Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 329 pp.**

**ALEX BRYNE – THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM\***

The role of biographies within historical scholarship is an oft-debated topic. Unless they provide more than an overview of an individual's life and overcome their unique stylistic pitfalls, biographies risk being labelled as old-fashioned and have their contributions to knowledge questioned.<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that it is now far more common to see biographical studies using the individual as a lens through which to view specific historical themes, rather than focusing on the individual themselves. In this vein, Charles Edel's biography of John Quincy Adams, *Nation Builder*, is structured around the concept of grand strategy and explores how the life of the sixth President of the United States influenced the nation's rise to power. Recognising the plethora of Adams biographies that have already been written, Edel posits that *Nation Builder* is the first to apply Adams' career to the concept of grand strategy and seeks to answer the following questions in his study: what did Adams think of the United States' ascendancy, what did he do to promote its national advancement, where did he succeed in his aims and what is the contemporary applicability of his thinking? (5) Whilst the reader is still treated to occasional anecdotal stories that normally fill biographies, such as Adams' fondness of swimming naked in the Potomac River before work, there is a pointed direction in this study.

To Edel, Adams' varied political career is an ideal case study for which to view early United States conceptions of grand strategy, as his pursuit of America's long-term interests was constantly visible. Edel defines grand strategy as 'a comprehensive and integrated plan of action, based on the calculated relationship of means to large ends', which in national terms involves defining long term objectives and 'integrating the military, diplomatic, economic, political, and moral resources of a nation to accomplish its goals' (5). As Edel outlines in the first chapter, Adams was instilled at a young age with the idea that he was to become a great man and learnt to put the ambitions of the nation before his own personal happiness. By the time he was studying at Harvard, Adams had already consolidated a conception of

---

\* Alex Bryne is a PhD candidate in the Department of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham and a Reviews Editor for 49th Parallel. His thesis aims to explore the meaning of the Monroe Doctrine in early twentieth century America.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent assessment of the field of biography see, Daniel Snowman, "Historical Biography" *History Today*, November 2014, <http://www.historytoday.com/daniel-snowman/historical-biography> (accessed 28 October, 2014).

the United States' future and had become committed to improving the life of America's citizens, begun to conceive of the correct balance between equality and liberty, developed a faith in strong central governance, gained a 'wary admiration' of the British system of governance and understood that American republicanism stood in opposition to the monarchical systems of the Old World (41-42). These were the core beliefs that would underpin his grand strategy, one which was ultimately designed to 'reduce security risks...and vindicate republicanism as the form of government best suited to the promotion of human progress and liberty' (295).

The majority of *Nation Builder* examines how this grand strategy was acted upon by Adams in the varied positions of power he held. Edel describes how, as a diplomat, Adams strove to isolate the United States from European conflicts in order to allow the young nation to develop. Independence in foreign affairs was deemed as paramount, but Adams also sought unity within the domestic sphere simultaneously (61-63). As Secretary of State, Adams' role in formulating the principles of continental expansion and the Monroe Doctrine demonstrated that he was planning a long term strategy, putting into place pieces of a 'geopolitical puzzle' that were to be left to his successors to be acted upon (183). When he became President, Edel argues that Adams sought to implement systems that would permit the long-term development of the nation's infrastructure, education and commerce (189). Finally, as a Congressman, Adams fought against slavery in an effort to reconcile what he conceived as the nation's moral aspirations with reality (287).

Edel concludes that Adams was successful in setting into motion a grand strategy even if he was not able to witness its benefits within his lifetime. The ramifications of Adams' thinking and subsequent actions were numerous: one cannot overstate the importance of the Monroe Doctrine in later American foreign relations and Edel points to numerous instances in which successive Presidents and statesmen built upon his various foundations (297-299). What *Nation Builder* additionally helps to explain, in Edel's words, is '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 a deliberate pursuit' (10). Whilst many other statesmen had grandiose visions of the future for the United States, it was Adams who first articulated a strategy that 'integrated the nation's political objectives, set priorities among them, and sequenced them' (295). If this assertion of the importance of one man in the ascendance of the United States is not quite to all readers' tastes, we can at least attempt to benefit from Adams' grand strategy in the present day. As a closing point, Edel posits that Adams' grand strategy offers lessons for contemporary strategy, advising strategists to be conscious of the limits of power, to advocate change but not upheaval, and to recognise the benefits of domestic peace and prosperity to national power just as Adams once did (300-302). In short, *Nation*

*Builder* is a focussed and thought-provoking study of Adams that demonstrates a useful manner in which to examine the life a President of the United States.