



# Book Recommendation

By Ismail Johari Othman

## Teaching Common Sense: The Grand Strategy Program at Yale University

Writer: *Linda Kulman*

One of the more popular English words, especially in places exposed to the British system, is *common*: Commonwealth, common law, and house of commons are some of the examples. Like government, *gomen* in colloquial Bahasa Malaysia, the word *common* has its own version, namely *koman*. Despite its favourable connotation, a famous writer profoundly pointed out, "*common sense is not so common*". Last year, Prospecta Press published a book that focuses on a year-long, admission-by-invitation only leadership-related programme called the Grand Strategy Program, which was established in year 2000 by Professors John Lewis Gaddis, Paul M. Kennedy, and Charles Hill of the prestigious Yale University. The professors define common sense as "*sound and practical judgment in everyday matters*". It appears that, like oxygen, common sense gets thinner the higher one climbs. As such, it is imperative

to equip the younger generation with a solid foundation as far as common sense is concerned.

This four-part book started with a general idea about the programme that gives considerable emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, effective communication (verbal and written), and work in an interdisciplinary team. Whilst the delivery of this programme may sound a bit vocational, the professors believe that the intellectual content is rooted on great liberal arts education. Students, comprising of undergraduates, postgraduates, and even practitioners, are exposed to masterpieces of over two and half millennia such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Thucydides's *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Kant's *Political Writings*, and Jay's *The Federalist*. Interestingly, the idea of such a grand programme came about over lunch. The professors were

concerned with their students who appeared to look at merely the ‘*corners of problems*’. Given the fact that many of them are likely to assume decision making roles in the future, such a trend is certainly a concern. The diversity that the professors have in terms of their background put them at the right starting point for the programme. Thereafter, they rigorously refined and experimented with their idea. The 9/11 attack in 2011 was somewhat a blessing in disguise to the growth of the programme. Together with the students, they created a talk series called *Democracy, Security, and Justice: Perspectives on the American Future*. This interdisciplinary discourse helped shape a sense of hope and purpose, especially among the students.

The third part of the book illustrates the underlying wish that this programme has on its students going forward, using the analogy of growing cherry trees instead of the more popular cherry picking approach. The rationale is that cherry trees grow from a seed, a small sprout, a trunk, leaves, and then fruit. It is effectively about logical sequence that is often derived from clarity and brevity which could be trained through reading, understanding, and reflecting on the earlier mentioned masterpieces.

The last part of this book comprises of four mini cases to offer some vivid imagination to the programme as well as

adding vigour to discussions in the earlier parts. After all, this book is about grand strategy – ideally it ends grandiosely. The cases relating to the students’ summer project and presidential briefs (simulation) are appealing. The projects seem wide ranging from the influence of China in Africa to the Venezuelan and Cuban connection. Whilst submission of essays is the end in mind, prior work on the ground is mostly the highlight of the project. Some of the students interviewed the Vatican to source for information. The emphasis for time by the professors during the simulation is worth noting – the words “*the world does not stand still while you are preparing*” are always drummed into the student’s ears.

Like any other programme, there is always concern about continuity. Eventually, the day will come when professors retire. To that effect, a public health scholar was brought on board in 2016 as part of the programme’s succession planning. Among her earlier moves was to define grand strategy as “*the study of the achievements of large end in the limited means*”. It sounds a mouthful, but perhaps sensible as far as common sense is concerned.

This book is highly recommended to aspiring and evolving leaders looking to explore alternative approaches to leadership development. This book could

also be useful to decision makers as a guidance and reminder on the importance of common sense despite the

advancements and sophistications invented to-date.