ROUNDTABLE: Remembering Colin Gray

July 27, 2020

Table of Contents

Summary

In this roundtable, a number of distinguished scholars who were influenced by Colin Gray remember the man and the scholar who passed away in February at age 76.

1. Introduction: A Roundtable to Commemorate the Work of Colin S. Gray (Dec. 29, 1943 – Feb. 27, 2020)

Beatrice Heuser

It is a bittersweet honor for me to present this roundtable of articles to commemorate the work of my former colleague, Colin S. Gray. The contributors represent three generations of scholars and practitioners with whom he worked on both sides of the Atlantic. It speaks to the influence he had on both continents that they were willing and eager to participate in this small endeavor to honor Gray's memory.

Professor Keith Payne was his colleague over many years in Washington, where they established the National Institute for Public Policy. Payne is professor emeritus of the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University and a former deputy assistant secretary of defense. Gray and Payne worked closely together from the late 1970s until 2020.

Frank Hoffman, another close friend and colleague, is a distinguished research fellow at the National Defense University in Washington. He is a retired U.S. Marine infantry officer and former Pentagon analyst, and has served in the Department of Defense for nearly 40 years. During 2014 and 2017 he served as a special assistant to the deputy secretary and secretary of defense.

Thomas G. Mahnken is president and chief executive officer of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and a senior research professor at the Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. He currently serves as a member of the National Defense Strategy Commission and the Board of Visitors of Marine Corps University. His previous government career includes service as deputy assistant secretary of defense for policy planning.

Geoff Sloan is associate professor at the University of Reading's Department of Politics and International Relations, where Gray held his last chair. Before coming to Reading, Sloan was head of the Strategic Studies and International Affairs Department at Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. He has also been a visiting professor at the United States Naval Academy and a defense fellow at St Antony's College Oxford.

Jeannie L. Johnson and Kenton White are former Ph.D. students of Gray from the University of Reading. Johnson is an assistant professor within the Political Science Department at Utah State University. She worked within the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence as a member of the Balkan Task Force from 1998 to 1999. White is a teaching fellow at the Department of Politics, University of Reading.

A. Bradley Potter is the Stanton visiting scientist at the Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies at the U.S. Air Force Academy and a Ph.D. candidate (exp. 2020) in the Strategic Studies Department of Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies. Between 2019 and 2020 he was a predoctoral research fellow at the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs. He can thus be taken to represent the third generation of scholars influenced by the work of Gray.

Gray has left behind his widow, novelist Valerie Gray, and their daughter, Antonia, a librarian. Books were and are the family trade. He will be missed not only by us but also by his many other former colleagues and students throughout the world. When reading the following contributions, I encourage you to raise a glass in Gray's memory, and to listen to the "Radetzky March," which he particularly liked, or to "O'er the Hills and Far Away," the old English folk song. That is as I like to imagine him, o'er the hills and far away, but still with us in spirit and through his many outstanding publications.

Beatrice Heuser holds the chair in international relations at the University of Glasgow.

2. Colin S. Gray: The Innovative Realist

Keith B. Payne

For five decades, Professor Colin S. Gray's scholarly writings contributed tremendously to the policymaking and academic communities' understanding of strategy.[1] Colin's intellectual depth, rigor, curiosity, and wit were unparalleled, as were the time, energy, and stamina he devoted to writing and lecturing. His published canon includes more than 30 books and 300 articles. He also authored or contributed to scores of unpublished reports for various U.S. government offices. Very few scholars inside or outside of the government have so directly affected U.S. policies. When Secretary of Defense James Mattis introduced the Department of Defense's 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, he quoted Colin and referred to him as "the most near-faultless strategist alive today."[2]

Colin's work was highly innovative. In a 1981 article, Colin introduced the now-thriving study of strategic culture as a critical sub-field of strategic studies.[3] He re-introduced the study of geopolitics in a 1977 book, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era*, and subsequently authored several texts on the subject, including *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (1988). He coined the title "Second Nuclear Age" to identify the post-Cold War

---

[1] This article is adapted from Keith B. Payne, "On Deterrence, Defense and Arms Control: In Honor of Colin S. Gray, *Information Series*, No. 461 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 17, 2020), https://www.nipp.org/2020/06/17/payne-keith-b-on-deterrence-defense-and-arms-control-in-honor-of-colin-s-gray/.

[2] Department of Defense, "Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy," January 2018, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/.

[3] Colin S. Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example," *International Security* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1981), 21-47, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538645. See also Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Press, 1986). He attributed "landmark status in this regard" to Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom, Helm, 1979).

era, nomenclature that reflected his countercultural view that nuclear weapons would *not* lose their salience with the end of the Cold War. Recent history demonstrates that Colin was correct in this regard.

Two of Colin's books — *The Second Nuclear Age* (1999) and *Another Bloody Century* (2005) — present the realities he deemed more likely than prevailing near-utopian expectations. He did not believe that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of China meant a cooperative "new world order." In 1999, he pointed to "the strong possibility that world politics two to three decades hence will be increasingly organized around the rival poles of U.S. and Chinese power," noting that China "would menace Japan." Colin also observed that the return of Russia as a politico-military challenge to the West — which he fully expected — "immediately would threaten independent Ukraine [and] the Baltics."[4] Again, recent history shows Colin's prescience.

Thinking About the Unthinkable

Colin's writings and lectures were devoted to identifying the most effective approach to deterring war, particularly nuclear war. He recognized that deterrence could fail and nuclear war ensue despite preventive efforts. Correspondingly, he reasoned that the United States should — to the extent possible — prudently think through what to do in the event of a nuclear war. He considered the officially declared U.S. response of the 1960s and early 1970s, which included a potential large-scale nuclear strike against Soviet society, to be immoral folly and a faulty guide for measuring the adequacy of U.S. nuclear forces. Colin had no confidence in the notion that nuclear employment once initiated would remain limited or that nuclear war could serve a political goal.[5]

---

[4] Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (London: Lynn Reiner Press, 1999), 39-41.

[5] Colin S. Gray, *Theory of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 122-123.

His basic position was that the West must unceasingly seek to deter war; but, if deterrence fails, U.S. actions should not be an impromptu or spasmodic nuclear response with no apparent purpose beyond revenge and societal destruction. Rather, according to Colin, U.S. planning should seek to deter further nuclear escalation and minimize societal destruction to the extent feasible. He fully recognized that limiting escalation and destruction might prove infeasible but emphasized that to reject measures that might help do so would be grossly irresponsible.

Because Colin believed in prudently planning for the possibility of deterrence failure and occasionally included the word "victory" in his work, some critics asserted that his goal was not deterrence but, rather, planning to fight and win a nuclear war. This assertion illustrates a wholly mistaken interpretation of Colin's work and use of the word "victory," a misinterpretation occasionally contrived to create a provocative strawman of his work. In fact, Colin viewed nuclear war as a potentially unparalleled horror. Preventing it through diplomacy and deterrence was his overarching goal.

Arms Control: A "House of Cards"

A prominent theme of the 1960s and 1970s was that the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race was a result of an "action-reaction" dynamic initiated by the United States. Critics of U.S. nuclear forces typically argued that U.S. nuclear arms propelled the arms race because they compelled a subsequent responsive Soviet nuclear buildup — in other words, "action-reaction." The policy argument that typically followed from belief in this action-reaction thesis was that if the United States curtailed its nuclear weapons programs, the Soviet Union would do the same. The action-reaction dynamic would be replaced by an inaction-inaction "peace race." Ending the arms race was a U.S. opportunity and responsibility.

Colin's 1976 book, *The Soviet-American Arms Race*,[6] demolished this fashionable action-reaction thesis and the corresponding assertion that U.S. inaction would produce Soviet inaction. He argued from evidence that a variety of interactive and non-interactive behaviors and motivations — not an action-reaction dynamic alone — explained U.S. and Soviet nuclear arms programs. Policies derived from the politically powerful action-reaction thesis were sure to be mistaken because Soviet motives for nuclear arms were far more complex than the reductionist action-reaction thesis. Multiple serious studies published later came to the same conclusion.[7] And, in 1979, the Carter administration's secretary of defense, Harold Brown, publicly dismissed the action-reaction thesis; he observed that the Soviet Union "has shown no restraint— when we build, they build, when we cut, they build."[8]

The title of Colin's most comprehensive book on the subject, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (1992), clearly signaled his conclusion. Based on nearly a century of arms control history, he explained that the character of political relations between countries and their respective "strategic cultures" drive their armament programs and correspondingly set the boundaries for arms control.[9] The resolution of hostile political relations could lead naturally to the significant relaxation of military requirements and arms control — but the reverse is not true. Yet, if previously hostile relations have become truly cordial, then arms control agreements lose much of their significance. From this foundation, Colin concluded that arms control "is either

---

[6] Colin S. Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race* (Lexington Books: Lexington, Mass, 1976). See also Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 50-51, 64.

[7] See Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, Thomas W. Wolfe, and Alfred Goldberg, eds., *History of the Strategic Arms Competition 1945-1972*, Part II, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, March 1981, 810-811, https://archive.org/details/HistoryoftheStrategicArmsCompetition19451972Part2.

[8] Harold Brown, "Statement on February 27, 1979," in *Outlook and Budget Levels for Fiscal Years 1979 and 1980, Hearings Before the Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, 1st Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 492.

[9] Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War*, 174.

impossible or unimportant." This phenomenon is the "arms control paradox" that, as he demonstrated, is reflected in "virtually all twentieth-century experience with arms control or its absence."[10]

On Deterrence

In 1960, Herman Kahn offered a noteworthy comment about U.S. deterrence policy: "In spite of our reliance on the idea that deterrence will work, we usually do not analyze carefully the basic concepts behind such a policy."[11] Colin methodically identified the logical contradictions and lack of evidence behind accepted wisdom and academically fashionable thinking about deterrence. He deemed the widely accepted notion that a predictably reliable and "stable balance of terror" should be expected given the Soviet adoption of U.S. views regarding nuclear weapons to be dangerously mistaken. Because Soviet calculations were generally believed to mirror those of U.S. leaders, Soviet behavior was expected to follow familiar patterns and deterrence was, thus, expected to play out in a predictable manner. This "mirror-imaging" assumption led some senior figures in U.S. national security to conclude that mutual nuclear deterrence was so stable that it functioned almost automatically.[12] Colin considered this U.S. notion of a stable balance built on "mirror-imaging" to be ethnocentric folly given the enormity of the differences between American and Russian histories, perceptions, goals, and strategic cultures.[13] He believed it to be a lamentable reflection of American strategic culture, what Colin called "machine-mindedness" that reduces

---

[10] Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), x, 16-19.

[11] Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 556.

[12] McGeorge Bundy, "Bishops and the Bomb," *New York Review of Books* 30, no. 10 (June 16, 1983), 3-4, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/06/16/the-bishops-and-the-bomb/.

[13] Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style*, 137-139.

"the difficulties created by politics and opposed national policies to problems of administration, management, and engineering."[14]

Colin concluded that "assessments of deterrence stability err because they do not take into account" differences in political will.[15] The great differences between U.S. and Soviet strategic cultures would render Soviet decision-making and the functioning of deterrence unpredictable. For example, "Sensitivity to human loss has not been a prominent feature of Soviet (or Russian) political culture," he wrote. "Anyone who believes that nuclear war should mean the same to Americans and to Great Russians should reflect deeply on the contrasting histories of the two societies." Thus, "there is massive uncertainty over 'what deters' (who? on what issue? when?)."[16]

Colin emphasized decades before it would become widely accepted as pertinent to U.S. deterrence policy that the great possible variation in national histories, perceptions, cultures, goals, values, and so on will likely impact decision-making and behavior in unexpected ways and thus render the functioning of deterrence inherently uncertain. Consequently, he concluded that deterrence planning must be done "with reference to the unique details of the case in hand."[17] Expressing this view challenged the most cherished presumptions regarding the dominant balance of terror deterrence formula: that it would be predictably stable as long as the contenders played according to the rules of "stability," which they would do because they were presumed to be comparably sensible.

---

[14] Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War,* 174.

[15] Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1984), 46.

[16] Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning,* 66, 47.

[17] Colin S. Gray, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 2003), 15.

Colin's rejection of this fundamental presumption of dominant deterrence theory and policy significantly shaped his views about deterrence policy. For example, he insisted that U.S. deterrent forces must be flexible and diverse given the great variations possible among opponents and contexts. His iconoclast views in this regard preceded — by decades — their wholesale, bipartisan acceptance, as is reflected in the now-ubiquitous observation by civilian and military leaders that deterrence must be "tailored" to opponents because no "one size fits all."

Finally, Colin fully recognized the dangers of nuclear deterrence and deemed Western reliance on it to be "foolish" *if there were a realistic alternative*.[18] However, he foresaw no plausible alternative:

There is no alternative, benign international political system. ... Any rational person, one might think, should be able to design a very much more reasonable and safer global security system than we have today. I suspect that this is true but alas, entirely beside the historical point."[19]

On Strategic Missile Defense

Colin's conclusion that the functioning of deterrence is inherently unpredictable was key to his position regarding U.S. strategic defensive capabilities. He was well aware that limiting damage would not be feasible in many nuclear scenarios. Colin believed, however, that it would be feasible under certain conditions and that the U.S. policy choice to leave American society largely undefended — in deference to the requirements for a stable balance of terror — contributed to the potential for

---

[18] Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning,* 88, 92.

[19] Colin S. Gray, "Foreword," in Keith Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020), xi-xii.

unmitigated societal destruction in the event of war. For Colin, the proper direction was clear: "Nuclear war is possible, and the U.S. government owes it to generations of Americans — past, present, and future — to make prudent defense preparations to limit damage to domestic American values to the extent feasible."[20] This conclusion went against the grain of reigning Western thinking, which maintained that unmitigated mutual vulnerability is "stabilizing" and should be preserved and codified. From the American perspective, the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty — which had overwhelming support — served precisely this purpose by significantly limiting strategic missile defense development and deployment.

Colin's support for strategic missile defense also followed from his attention to U.S. extended deterrence for allies. He contended that the credibility of U.S. extended deterrent for allies "is very low so long as the United States makes no noteworthy provision for the protection of its homeland against inevitable Soviet retaliation."[21] His logic was clear: The Soviet Union would not likely believe the U.S. extended deterrent on behalf of allies if the United States could not survive the certain Soviet retaliation. Colin feared that an unbelievable deterrent provided little or no protection and might instead encourage provocation.

Colin consistently endorsed U.S. strategic missile defense for these reasons.[22] For a time, he was fairly isolated in these views. However, once again, U.S. policy has evolved *on a bipartisan basis*. In 2002, the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty for the expressed purpose of deploying strategic missile defense to protect the U.S. homeland against the limited strategic missile threats posed by rogue states. Similarly, in 2010, the Obama administration listed its first

---

[20] Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning*, 8.

[21] Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning,* 82-83.

[22] See Colin S. Gray, "A New Debate on Ballistic Missile Defense," *Survival* 23, no. 2 (March-April 1981), 60-71, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338108441952.

priority as defending "the homeland against the threat of limited ballistic missile attack."[23] This policy priority was repeated in the Defense Department's 2019 *Missile Defense Review*, along with a discussion of the value of missile defense for deterrence purposes.[24] Colin's thoughts on strategic missile defense remained consistent over the span of five decades; U.S. policy has largely caught up.

Conclusion

Colin S. Gray moved simultaneously in the two very different and often mutually exclusive worlds of academia and government policy. Over time, his scholarship led to the betterment of U.S. policy in a number of areas — but no more so than in the seemingly arcane and incredibly consequential arenas of deterrence, defense, and arms control. His scholarship encouraged the evolution of U.S. arms control policy away from its reductionist "action-reaction" roots and U.S. deterrence policy away from its mechanical mirror-imaging, and to U.S. recognition of the value in strategic defense. Colin's ideas and writings were his currency for these developments. He spoke "truth to power" with great effect despite the criticism he often received for doing so at the time — criticism he typically endured with humor and good grace. The West is a safer place thanks to his remarkable scholarship.

Keith B. Payne is co-founder, with Colin S. Gray, of the National Institute for Public Policy and professor emeritus in the Graduate Department of Defense and Strategic Studies, Missouri State University. He is a former deputy assistant secretary of

---

[23] Department of Defense, Office of Public Affairs, *2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR) Fact Sheet*, March 3, 2010, 2, https://archive.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20FACT%20SHEET%20March%202010%20_Final_.pdf.

[24] Department of Defense, *2019 Missile Defense Review*, 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/17/2002080666/-1/-1/1/2019-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.PDF.

defense, senior advisor to the Office of Secretary of Defense, member of the 2009 Congressional Strategic Posture Commission, chairman of the U.S. STRATCOM Senior Advisory Group Policy Panel, and award-winning author, coauthor, or editor of 40 published books and monographs and more than 200 published articles.

✦

3. The Translator in Chief:

Colin S. Gray's Approach to Strategy & War

Thomas G. Mahnken and A. Bradley Potter

Few strategists enjoy the wealth of citations that Colin S. Gray amassed over the course of his career. A longtime professor of strategic studies, Gray's work spans the discipline's breadth, from foundational questions regarding the nature of war and strategy to detailed analyses of irregular, regular, and nuclear war. Prolific writing positioned Gray as a major influence within defense communities straddling the Atlantic Ocean from the 1970s to today. And, his work will continue to shape scholarship for decades to come. His scholarship is especially influential in professional military education institutions, where it has been used to educate generations of uniformed leaders.[25]

This essay examines the influences that shaped Gray's thinking on war and strategy. We detail these influences — particularly the power of classical theorists and intellectual competition — and explore how they molded Gray's contributions to the study and practice of strategy. His work stands on its own and is accessible to novice and professional students of strategy alike, but the origins of his ideas contextualize

---

[25] This influence was largely the product of several monographs written by Gray for various war colleges. For notable examples, see Colin S. Gray, *Weapons for Strategic Effect: How Important Is Technology?* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, January 2001); Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, April 2002); Colin S. Gray, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, August 2003); Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, March 2006); Colin S. Gray, *Always Strategic: Jointly Essential Landpower* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, February 2015).

his prolific writing and shed light on its contemporary relevance. Our analysis benefits from an interview with Gray in May 2019, nine months before his death.

Classics at Work

Colin Gray spent most of his life at universities and think tanks in the United Kingdom and the United States, engaging in various security debates. He also occasionally moonlighted as an advisor to the U.S. government. The roots of his career trace back to undergraduate studies with Professor John Erickson at the University of Manchester. The well-known historian made war studies accessible for a young Gray through discussions exploring the Korean War and stories about interviewing Soviet marshals following the Second World War. For Erickson, matters of strategy were personal and profoundly important. Gray took to the momentousness of the subject, especially since "memories of [World War II] were all around" his childhood England, from the list of the fallen at his primary school to his father, a Royal Air Force veteran. By the time he arrived at Oxford for doctoral work, strategic studies had already captured his imagination.[26]

Through his education at Manchester, Gray came to know his greatest intellectual influence — Carl von Clausewitz — and his seminal book *On War*. A Clausewitzian sensibility permeates Gray's later scholarship. "Whether I have been studying nuclear targeting, the leverage of seapower, or the strategic utility of special operations, Clausewitz's *On War* has been my constant companion and by far the most heavily used book in my library," he once wrote.[27] Adopting Clausewitz's views on war and strategy meant Gray frequently reflected on several key themes.[28] Most importantly,

---

[26] Colin S. Gray, Interview with Thomas G. Mahnken, May 3, 2019.

[27] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xi.

[28] For especially good examples of the centrality of these themes, see Colin S. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford

he was captivated by the earlier theorist's conception of the relationship between policy, strategy, and war.[29]

Borrowing from Clausewitz, Gray regarded war as an act of policy in the pursuit of political objectives yet conceived of strategy as the mechanism bending armed conflict toward such objectives.[30] To fully appreciate these relationships, Gray adopted Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity." That war was an act of policy informed by politics reflected its instrumental, rational logic — the trinity's first third. For Gray, miscomprehension of this point was "irredeemable."[31] But even the best-constructed strategies suffered from chance — the second leg of Clausewitz's trinity — generated by friction and fog.[32] All kinds of things go wrong in war and cause friction even as fog, or uncertainty, shrouds combatants from the information needed to optimally construct and execute strategy. Gray also considered how human nature, especially passionate violence as captured in the final leg of Clausewitz's trinity, defined war.[33] While the centrality of violence and the interaction among belligerents made neatly matching military action with political ends difficult, human emotion and chance often confounded strictly instrumental strategy. Moreover, fashioning and executing strategy occurred in the context of an inherently strained relationship between political and military leaders.[34] According to Gray, strategy was not merely an

University Press, 2010); Colin S. Gray, "Why Strategy is Difficult," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1999), 6-12, http://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-22.pdf. Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

[29] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 55-58.

[30] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 17, 93-94; Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 167.

[31] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 92. For a more complete treatment, see Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 15-53.

[32] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 94-95.

[33] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 91-92.

[34] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 58-64. See also Colin Gray, "Conclusion," in *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present,* eds. John Andreas Olsen and Colin S. Gray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 294.

intellectual endeavor but also a profoundly human one demanding personal and bureaucratic skill.

Gray was not above disagreeing with his intellectual hero. He highlighted how *On War* failed to define "the meaning of policy" and that it is *incredibly* difficult to actually coordinate "the conduct of war with the pursuit of particular policy goals."[35] Equally problematic, the book included little discussion about enemies, how to understand them, and their relationship to war's dynamic interactions.[36] Clausewitz also misjudged intelligence.[37] The changing character of war, including the advent of new technologies, made executing intelligence, deception, and surprise more feasible than in Clausewitz's day. Additionally, the Prussian strategist did little to theorize about the other major domain of combat of his time — the sea. "War is war, strategy is strategy, across time, geography, and technology, but the terms of engagement between offense and defence are different among the distinctive geographical environments," Gray wrote, arguing that war at sea deserved special consideration from strategists.[38]

Clausewitz fit into a broader constellation of classical and neoclassical realists who inspired Gray. Specifically, Gray lauded Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, E.H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, and Henry Kissinger as essential inspirations for modern strategists and as sources of wisdom in his own work.[39] In his estimation, these men "offer much timeless wisdom because they all shared an accurate enough vision of an enduring reality." That vision acknowledged the consistency of human nature, employed enduring assumptions about the world such as international anarchy and the machinations of power, and avoided the "snare"

---

[35] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 101-102.

[36] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 103-104.

[37] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 105-106.

[38] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 109-110.

[39] Gray, "Clausewitz Rules," 162. See also Gray, *Modern*, 80-81.

and "delusion" of transformational theory.[40] From these foundations, Gray worked to amend, clarify, and interpret an earlier tradition for modern scholars and practitioners.

Consistent with his intellectual heroes, Gray took a historically informed approach to studying war, eschewing many of the theoretical and methodological trends in his own field of political science.[41] He rejected scientific theory in favor of classical theory, worrying less about identifying causal mechanisms or generalizations and more about describing the contingent essence of particular conflicts and training the mind though historical study.[42] Gray lamented how many strategists in the United States are "trained in economics, mathematics … using a rational-choice approach to political science."[43] He also decried scholars looking for elegant, reductionist models of military behavior while forgetting the softer, more contingent aspects of the human experience of war. In Gray's opinion, a real strategist is "a person who sees, even though he or she cannot possibly be expert in, all dimensions of the 'big picture' of the evolving conditions of war."[44]

To this end, he challenged students of strategy to train in disciplines that get at the quirks of human nature, imploring future strategists to "read a lot of history" since "there is no good alternative" for learning to think strategically.[45] Gray argued for strategists to develop a rich historical sensibility, which provided essential context and mental training. The grist for the mill of informed strategic thinking was the rich, varied stories of the past. Gray was an old-fashioned conservative — a "realist" in the classical sense. History taught that neither human nature nor the essential features of

---

[40] Gray, "Clausewitz Rules," 182.

[41] Gray, interview, 3 May 2019.

[42] Gray, "Conclusion," 290.

[43] Gray, *Modern*, 334.

[44] Gray, *Modern*, 52.

[45] Gray, interview, 3 May 2019.

war and strategy had changed over the centuries, even as the tools of war evolved from clubs to missiles.[46] As he told his readers, "there is an essential unity to all strategic experience in all periods of history because nothing vital to the nature and function of war and strategy changes."[47]

But, these classical influences brought blinders, too. Skeptics of strategy and war's immutability found themselves questioning Gray.[48] Beliefs about a constant, enduring human nature always put him at risk of overlooking important points of discontinuity and change in international politics. Meanwhile, some younger scholars might fault Gray's rejection of modern social scientific methodology and his strict embrace of old-fashioned history. This approach to strategic studies did not mean strategists were *not* generalizing. Rather, they were being less explicit about their assumptions, causal mechanisms, and relationships between the past and present.[49] Such scholars might also question what it meant to develop a historical sensibility, arguing that even careful students of history grasp for common denominators across cases and develop implicit causal theories.

Additionally, despite his embrace of history, Gray's writing rarely featured deep engagement with primary historical sources. Instead, it frequently employed brief case

---

[46] Gray, "Conclusion," 287-291.

[47] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 1.

[48] Thomas G. Mahnken, "Strategic Theory" in *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies*, 6th ed., eds. John Baylis, Jim Wirtz, Eliot Cohen, and Colin Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 68.

[49] On the importance of causal thinking in strategy, see Jessica D. Blankshain and Andrew L. Stigler, "Applying Method to Madness: A User's Guide to Causal Inference in Policy Analysis," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 3 (Published On-Line June 2020), https://tnsr.org/2020/07/applying-method-to-madness-a-users-guide-to-causal-inference-in-policy-analysis/; Jim Golby, "Want Better Strategists? Teach Social Science," *War on the Rocks*, June 19, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/want-better-strategists-teach-social-science/.

studies selected to support a particular argument. He had a tendency to repeat, rephrase, and repackage Clausewitz, often boiling strategic thought down to lists of maxims. Picking up a few of Gray's most important books — *Modern Strategy*, *The Second Nuclear Age*, and *The Strategy Bridge* — was all one needed to understand the big ideas associated with his career. If you have read some Gray, you have likely read all of Gray.

Nevertheless, Colin Gray embraced these critiques. Many of the criticisms dealing with his method or the consistency of human nature were precisely the kinds of reactions he intended to provoke. Meanwhile, criticism that his work was repetitive or selectively historical largely stands, though readers may disagree over the severity of the charge.

Intellectual Competition

Long-dead strategists were not the only scholars informing Gray's worldview. Clashes and collaborations with contemporary scholars also shaped his perspective on strategy and war. This was especially true in Gray's approaches to nuclear strategy and strategic culture, two lines of inquiry where he left a notable mark.

Donald G. Brennan, one-time president of the Hudson Institute and a "mutually assured destruction" skeptic, and Herman Kahn, best known for his nuclear war "escalation ladder," stand out as prominent influences. Gray wrote that he owed "great professional debts" to these men, noting how they "set standards of personal integrity, courage, and intellectual breadth and depth that shine down through the years."[50] It was Brennan who hired him at the Hudson Institute and Kahn who escorted him into the nuclear strategy community. Gray also praised Bernard Brodie

---

[50] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, xi.

and Albert Wohlstetter. "[E]ach in his way was a giant in the field and a source of personal inspiration," he reflected.[51] Brodie's "writings on deterrence are better than anyone else," making him an essential intellectual grindstone.[52] Gray often engaged and questioned these ideas, especially the notion that the essential value of nuclear weapons was in their non-use.[53] Meanwhile, he frequently found common cause with Wohlstetter, particularly on nuclear counterforce targeting and questioning the "delicate balance of terror."[54]

Debates and intellectual marriages marked Gray's career. He welcomed learning from his intellectual competitors and felt that he was "indebted especially to five scholars with whom [he had] crossed pens."[55] These scholars included Ken Booth, Lawrence Freedman, Michael Howard, Robert Jervis, and Martin van Creveld — a veritable "who's who" of strategic and security studies thinkers from the last third of the 20th century.

---

[51] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, xi.

[52] Gray, Interview. Of particular importance see Bernard Brodie, Frederick Sherwood Dunn, Arnold Wolfers, Percy Ellwood Corbett, and William Thornton Rickert Fox, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York, Harcourt, 1946); Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

[53] For examples, see Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory," *International Security* 4, no. 1 (Summer 1979): 54-87, http://www.jstor.com/stable/2626784; Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne, "Victory is Possible," *Foreign Policy* 39 (1980): 14-27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148409.

[54] Colin S. Gray, "Unsafe at Any Speed: A Critique of 'Stable Deterrence' Doctrine," *RUSI Journal* 118, no. 2 (June 1973): 23-27, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847309423518. For a later example, see Gray, *Second Nuclear*, 143-146. On "delicate balance of terror," see Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 37 (1958): 211-234.

[55] Gray, *Modern*, xii.

Gray clashed with Booth over the value of classical realism, with Booth questioning its lasting utility.[56] Freedman and Jervis became foils and inspirations for many of Gray's arguments regarding the utility of nuclear warfighting. His colleagues asserted that nuclear weapons changed the nature of great-power war, with their destructiveness obviating their use and ushering in a "nuclear revolution."[57] As with his critiques of Brodie, Gray was uncertain about this "revolution" and reliance on deterrence; instead, he insisted on thinking through nuclear warfighting. Howard and Gray similarly disagreed over nuclear strategy despite their shared Clausewitzian perspectives on other matters.[58] Meanwhile, as scholars like van Creveld looked to highlight transformed features of war — the political units capable of waging it or technologies employed in it, for instance — Gray responded with what he considered timeless, classically informed retorts.[59] These interactions across the pages of journals and books produced sharper ideas and informed dialogues on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Gray also engaged in fierce debate on questions of strategic culture.[60] His earliest arguments contended that the cultural setting of a state's strategic decision-making

---

[56] For example, see Ken Booth, "Security in Anarchy: Utopian Realism in Theory and Practice," *International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (July 1991): 527-545, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2621950.

[57] Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[58] For an especially pointed critique of Gray's approach to nuclear warfighting, see Michael E. Howard, "On Fighting a Nuclear War," *International Security* 5, no. 4 (1981): 3-17, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538710.

[59] Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991). For commentary on this point, see Thomas Mahnken, "Modern Strategy," *Survival* 24, no. 4 (2000) 163-174, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/713660253.

[60] For the evolution of Gray's views on strategic culture, see Colin S. Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example," *International Security* 6, no.2 (Fall 1981): 21-47,

worked as essential input into strategic choice.[61] Over time, he emphasized the contextual aspects of culture's importance rather than its value as some kind of independent variable.[62] Intense disputes with Alastair Iain Johnston, who claimed that Gray's early work blended strategists' ideas with their actions in a way that led to tautological arguments, informed this evolution.[63] In many ways, however, it was a methodological debate between an eclectic social scientist committed to thick descriptions of cultural habits and a political scientist looking to understand the effects of strategic culture on war.

Gray's Legacy

Today, Colin Gray is best thought of as an evangelist for the classical approach to understanding war and strategy. He tended an intellectual flame ignited by earlier theorists and worked to apply age-old insights to modern-day challenges. Like Michael Howard and Peter Paret, the editors and translators of the definitive edition of *On War,* he made the ideas of Clausewitz accessible to both scholars and practitioners. Aspiring strategists should consider his most influential pieces not because of their

---

https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538645; Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1999): 49-69, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097575;Colin S. Gray, "Strategy and Culture," in *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security,* eds. Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 92-107.

[61] For example, see Gray, "National Style in Strategy," 21-47.

[62] Gray, *Modern*, 142.

[63] For a cross section of this debate, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "Strategic Cultures Revisited: Reply to Colin Gray," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 3 (July 1999): 519-523, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097615; Stuart Poore, "What is the Context? A Reply to the Gray-Johnston Debate on Strategic Culture," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (April 2003): 279-284, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210503002791.

novelty — they often draw on and restate earlier titans in the field — but because they serve as maps for navigating the classics.

This is no small accomplishment. Many try and fail every year in seminar rooms, essays, and books to understand and convey the essence of Clausewitz's work. Gray, however, largely succeeded. He helped his readers understand how insights from the Napoleonic era are both relevant to modern strategy and essential to its theory and practice. A serious consideration of strategy rooted in classical theory and history is all the more important in an era characterized by the emergence of the novel and the seemingly novel. New adversaries, domains of warfare, and weapons are emerging, but carefully delineating what is genuinely different from what is timeless is one area where Gray's scholarship can offer guidance.

Gray was also an active educator. His legacy is defined by how his teaching and writing influenced a new generation of strategic studies thinkers. Over the course of his university appointments, he served as the principal advisor for at least 36 PhD students from around the world and instructed thousands of undergraduate and graduate students.[64] Through his work at think tanks, Gray cultivated a vibrant network of scholar-practitioners that continues to fill national security roles in Washington and London today. Gray's writings continue to reach a growing community and are listed as required readings on syllabi throughout graduate-level strategic studies programs and professional military education institutions

---

[64] Gray, Interview, May 3, 2019.

worldwide.[65] His work remains popular in other corners of the strategic studies field while standard collections invariably contain his essays.[66]

The durability of Colin Gray's strategic vision is forever linked to that of Carl von Clausewitz. Gray offers a powerful corrective to faddism in strategic studies, challenging his readers to consider how the tendencies of today relate to the past and pushing them to think hard about enduring aspects of war's nature and strategy's logic. This ensures the durability of his approach to strategy for years to come.

Thomas G. Mahnken is a senior research professor at the Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and president and chief executive officer at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

A. Bradley Potter is the Stanton visiting scientist at the Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies at the U.S. Air Force Academy and a PhD candidate in the Strategic Studies Department at Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

---

[65] For an example, see W.T. Johnsen, United States Army War College, Department of National Security and Strategy, "Theory of War and Strategy," 2018, unpublished syllabus, https://www.armywarcollege.edu/documents/Directives/AY18%20Theory%20of%20War%20&%20Strategy%20Core%20Course.pdf.

[66] See Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo, *Strategic Studies: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014) and John Baylis, Jim Wirtz, and Colin Gray, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

4. A Phoenix From the Ashes:
Colin Gray and Classical Geopolitics

Geoffrey Sloan

I first met Colin Gray in 1979 at the Hudson Institute located at Croton-on-Hudson in upstate New York. It seems like a lifetime away now. I was immediately struck by his easy smile and warm demeanor.

What had compelled me to visit him was a book he published in 1977, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era: Heartland, Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution.*[67] At the time, I was a first-year doctoral student conducting research in U.S. libraries and archives for my doctoral thesis, "Geopolitics and US Foreign Policy." *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era* was one of two books that had drawn me to this subject. I was relieved to come across a contemporary book on geopolitics and intrigued to discover Professor Gray's purpose in writing it. In the late 1970s, geopolitics was still regarded as an intellectual pariah. The disciplines of international relations and geography had disowned it. My supervisor, the late John Vincent, was one of the few people who encouraged me to study geopolitics in greater detail.

Within minutes of meeting Professor Gray that day on the Hudson, I was convinced that I had not made a gross error of judgment in my choice of research topic. He explained to me how his purpose was to show that the political and strategic meaning of geography had not been rendered irrelevant by nuclear weapons. I was struck by the close congruence he had with one of the functions identified by the founder of

---

[67] Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era: Heartland. Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution* (New York: Crane, Russak & Co, 1977)

classical geopolitics, Sir Halford Mackinder: the ability to "give judgement in practical conduct.[68]" Gray's interest in public policy was clear.

Looking back on our first meeting at the Hudson Institute, there were a number of things that would become apparent only with the passage of time. First, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era* became the all-time best-selling monograph of the National Strategy Information Center.[69] It was the first book published in English since 1945 that had the word "geopolitics" in its title. Second, Gray was on the cusp of being given the opportunity to exercise "judgement in practical conduct." In 1982, President Ronald Reagan appointed him to the General Arms Control and Disarmament Committee. Receiving his parking permit for the White House meant he had arrived! The previous year, he set up his own consulting company in Washington D.C., the National Institute for Public Policy, which is still going strong today. Finally, we would be colleagues 27 years later in the same department at the University of Reading — a university founded by Sir Halford Mackinder. Colin revived the school of classical geopolitics, including the work of Mackinder, in a way that would have a deep impact on scholarship and policy over the course of his long career.

Gray and the Heartland Thesis

While there is a close similarity between Gray's writing and that of Mackinder in regard to their understanding of geopolitical theory, their published works had a divergent public trajectory.

The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era stated clearly why geopolitics was important:

---

[68] See L.W. Lyde, "Types of political frontiers in Europe," G*eographical Journal 45,* no. 2 (Feb.1915), 143, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1780250.

[69] The National Strategy Information Center was a non-partisan, tax-exempt institution organized in 1962 to conduct educational programs in national defense.

The principal argument of this study is that the *leitmotiv* of the
geopolitical perspective enables one to discern trends, and even
patterns, in power relations. The meaning of physical geography is, of
course, altered by technology and by national "moods" which emerge as
specific, widespread responses to particular events.[70]

This assertion was based on an epistemological innovation forged by Mackinder. One
of his biographers has summed this up:

[A] unifying methodology based on a search for causal relations [which
was] to be achieved by defining geography as the science of the
interaction between society and the environment. Thus united,
geography was to bridge the gap between the science and the
humanities. He rejected environmental determinism.[71]

Mackinder's Heartland thesis had three iterations in 1904, 1919, and 1943. The essence
of his argument was that, on the Eurasian continent, there was a geographical area
that was inaccessible to sea power. The 20th century would enhance the political and
strategic importance of this area with developments in transport technology —
particularly railways. This would be abetted by the creation of a new social mechanism
forged by a social organizer, the essential features of which emerged as a consequence
of the French and Bolshevik revolutions. The result was that the Heartland had the
potential to acquire "momentum." This was an engineering concept that included not
only mass and velocity but also directionality. For Mackinder, geopolitical analysis
depends on an appreciation of population size, speed of change through both

[70] Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era*, 6.

[71] Brian Blouet, *Dictionary of National Biography,* Volume 35 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004),
649.

technological and organizational innovation, and the strategic capabilities and intentions of leadership. These factors would become pivotal in a closed international political system where the struggle for relative efficiency would be of defining importance.

Mackinder's Heartland thesis provided Gray with the frame of reference he deployed to articulate the challenge the West faced — specifically, how "Democracy must reckon with Reality."[72] Gray highlighted the analytical shortcomings of international relations and strategic studies in the late 1970s by arguing that both subjects "tend to make only the most minimal explicit use of geopolitical perspectives."[73] His specific innovation was to reinterpret geopolitics in the context of nuclear weapons. As stated at the beginning of this article, nuclear weapons — despite their immense destructive power — had not made geography redundant. Gray was alarmed at the West's acquiescence over shifts in the Soviet-American balance, the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks, and the modernization and forward deployment of Admiral Gorshkov's blue-water navy. Like Mackinder, he recognized that there was no such thing as equality of opportunity for nations. Gray appreciated that geopolitics placed these developments in a broader context: "The prime virtue of geopolitics is that it does … direct attention to factors of enduring importance."[74]

In the penultimate chapter of *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era*, Gray articulated a geopolitical praxis, namely "that Heartland and Rimlands on the World Island must never be organized by a single political will." Maritime power provided a pathway of deliverance: "most of the Eurasian–African Rimlands are, in theory, protected by the

---

[72] This phrase is taken from the final sentence of Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1919), 208.

[73] Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era,* 5.

[74] Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era,* 5.

fact that oceanic distance and ocean highways *connect* rather than *divide*."[75] The world's oceans provided interior lines of communication along which a maritime alliance led by the United States could project power with comparative advantage over the heartland power of the Soviet Union. In terms of its epistemology, Mackinder's "new geography" had pivoted on melding particularizing and generalizing strategies of inquiry.[76] Colin Gray adopted a similar approach: "The strength of geopolitical grand theory is that it places local action, or inaction, within a global network."[77] Furthermore, those who wanted to understand the underlying realities of international relations needed to master the key concepts of geopolitics. It was a typically bold assertion.

The Insular Super State

In 1986, after a gap of nine years, Gray published M*aritime Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Defense of the West.*[78] It was his second monograph on geopolitics. Much had changed for him and the world during the intervening period. Gray had experienced policymaking in the Reagan administration, advocated the Strategic Defense Initiative, and witnessed firsthand the crafting of a maritime strategy designed to exploit sea control and sea denial in the event of a future conflict with the Soviet Union. Emblematic of this strategy was the creation of Navy Secretary John Lehman's 600-ship navy. The book reflected these changes: "the United States is a continental-size insular power, which is able to secure a working command of the most strategically relevant sea lines of communication." The United States could "knit together" a

---

[75] Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era,* 58.

[76] See John R. Hall and Robert Bierstedt, "Toynbee and Sociology," in Robert Bierstedt, *Power and Progress: Essays on Sociological Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1974), 73-86.

[77] Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era,* 65.

[78] Colin S. Gray, *Maritime Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Defense of the West* (New York: Published in the U.S. by Ramapo Press for the National Strategy Information Center, 1986).

maritime alliance directed against the Soviet Union that would encompass countries producing the bulk of the "gross world product."[79]

Gray argued that if someone wanted to understand the security problems and opportunities of the United States, the ideal starting point would be geography in all its different iterations: political, physical, economic, and cultural. In geographic terms, the United States was an insular super state and the principal organizer of a truly global maritime alliance.

Maritime Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Defense of the West included an incisive summation of the evolving relationship between geopolitics and nuclear weapons. From the end of the Second World War to the mid-1960s, nuclear weapons served as an equalizer that enabled the U.S. maritime alliance to organize and hold a forward "containing line" against the Eurasian land power of the Soviet Union: "The 'extended deterrent' represented by the US nuclear arsenal was *the* security guarantor for Rimland Eurasia against Soviet conquest and/or hegemony."[80] This had a close congruence with Mackinder's idea that there were specific geographical locations that were of pivotal strategic importance.

Gray advocated an "active containment" policy that precluded both evolution and benign change in the Soviet system. While containment was a defensive policy, it could be enhanced by offensive tactics: "security-tie dalliance with Beijing, military assistance for Afghan, Angolan, Nicaraguan, *et al,* freedom fighters, and the encouragement of political destabilization in Poland."[81] Ideology and geostrategic policies were embedded in what he called a "forward containment policy" manifested

---

[79] Gray, *Maritime Strategy*, 49.

[80] Gray, *Maritime Strategy*, 17-18.

[81] Gray, *Maritime Strategy*, 42.

in three types of commitments — multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral — which he articulated comprehensively.

The book ended with a stress on the interdependency of sea power and land power. This was an old theme that Gray reinterpreted creatively in the context of the late 1980s:

> Superior seapower, protected by a sufficient strategic-nuclear counter-deterrent, is a prerequisite for the basic national security of an insular contemporary United States, as it was for the Britain of the Napoleonic era and well beyond. Then as now, however, success at sea needs to be married to competence on land.[82]

Rising Like a Phoenix

In 1988, Gray synthesized the arguments of his two previous books. *The Geopolitics of Super Power*[83] marked a change in his thinking and focused on what could be described as the strategic meaning of geography. The emphasis on the interaction of strategy and geography would remain a theme that he developed in his subsequent books. For instance, in *The Future of Strategy*[84] published the year after he had retired from Reading,[85] Gray offered a forward-looking examination of strategic interactions with China. He argued that the application of strategy always requires translation from an abstract idea into a discrete plan of action that is specific to a particular time, place, and geopolitical circumstance. He continued to complain that "theorists of

---

[82] Gray, *Maritime Strategy*, 81.

[83] Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1988).

[84] Colin S. Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

[85] He was now Emeritus Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Reading.

International Relations … have been unwilling or intellectually unable to 'boldly go'-to employ the dubious grammar of *Star Trek*-into the inclusive field of geopolitics and geostrategy."[86] Venturing into unknown terrain was something that Gray had never been afraid to do.

Prophetically, Gray used geopolitics to understand the challenge that China now posed to the United States. He stressed the asymmetry of influence "on- and offshore the coastal Rimland of Asia-Pacific" stemming from the fact "that the People's Republic of China is itself politically present there, while the United States is not."[87] Today and in the future, the United States will require bases in the Pacific Ocean much farther west than the Hawaiian Islands to offset the growing regional power of China. Guam in the Marianna Islands will be as important in the future as it was during the Second World War.

One of Gray's lasting achievements was his contribution to classical geopolitics in the 20th century. The field of geopolitics has repeatedly risen like a phoenix from the ashes to defy the intellectual and political opprobrium that has been heaped upon it. Jeremy Black has commented in a recent keynote lecture that experts in foreign policy tend "to depoliticise the politics of their own country" by ignoring geopolitics — even as they seek, as Mackinder recognized, "to give judgement in practical conduct," making recommendations presented as both necessary and inevitable.[88] Sir Halford Mackinder's *Democratic Ideals and Reality* exemplified this desire for policy relevance. Though he understood what British war aims were, the traction in the public domain was initially poor. The British Conservative politician Leo Amery recalled: "Mackinder's views attracted little attention in the Anglo-Saxon world where they

---

[86] Gray, *The Future of Strategy*, 88.

[87] Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power*, 89.

[88] Jeremy Black, "Why Geopolitics Matters," *Foreign Policy Research Institute,* January 17, 2020 https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/01/why-geopolitics-matters/.

were treated as fanciful exercises of academic imagination."[89] Then came Pearl Harbor and, in 1942, the reprinting of Mackinder's book, followed by a paperback edition in 1944 that entered the *New York Times* bestseller list. By late 1945, however, the phoenix went down in flames: Classical geopolitics suffered from the stigma of association with the German school of geopolitics that was used to justify Nazi expansionism. Books with "geopolitics" in their titles were not published for 32 years, until Colin Gray rescued the bird from its ashes.

Where Colin Gray led others followed. In his book *White House Years,* Henry Kissinger used the term "geopolitics" extensively.[90] In *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski presented a geopolitical and geostrategic vision for the 21st century.[91] Gray was the first to recognize after 1945 that geopolitics possessed the ability to apprehend international changes and perceive the strategic potential inherent in the human environment. This was not far from the analytical claim Mackinder made in 1904 during the discussion of his paper at the Royal Geographical Society: "My aim is not to predict a great future for this or that country, but to make a geographical formula into which you could fit any political situation."[92]

Today, the flight trajectory of geopolitics is an upward one.[93] While Mackinder and Gray were committed to the defense of the West as an ultimate geopolitical value,

---

[89] L.S. Amery, *My Political Life, Volume I* (London: Hutchinson,1953), 229.

[90] Henry A. Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little Brown Company 1979).

[91] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books 1997).

[92] Spencer Wilkinson, Thomas Holdich, Mr. Amery, Mr. Hogarth and H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History: Discussion," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no.4 (Apr. 1904), 443, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1775499.

[93] A Google search (conducted May 21, 2020) for "geopolitical theory" generated 7,230,000 hits, and a search for geopolitics generated 5,400,000 hits.

both advanced that defense by articulating a geopolitical method and perspective that continue to illuminate the foundation and subtleties of international conflict.

Colin Gray never forgot that strategy, at its core, was about consequences rather than some inherent "quantity or quality in itself." In a writing and teaching career that spanned over 50 years, classical geopolitical theory enabled him to provide plausible answers to the greatest statesmen's and strategists' questions. He has left us a powerful and enduring legacy.

Geoffrey Sloan is an associate professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading and was formerly head of the Strategic Studies and International Affairs Department at Britannia Royal Navy College, Dartmouth. His latest book, Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History *was published by Routledge in March 2017.*

5. Strategic Culture in the Service of Strategy:

The Founding Paradigm of Colin S. Gray

Jeannie L. Johnson

The foundational scholarship of Colin S. Gray within the field of strategic culture was both unorthodox for the social sciences and eminently useful for practitioners and has provided the support structure for generations of scholars. Animating Gray's work was the practical ambition of executing a strategic plan superior to one's adversary. The definitions of strategic culture that Gray accepted and endorsed across his decades of scholarship are instrumental in nature and aimed at improving the performance of a nation as it exercises its military instrument in the service of intended political aims. Gray himself defined strategic culture as "the socially constructed and transmitted assumptions, habits of mind, traditions, and preferred methods of operation—that is, behavior—that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community."[94] His beliefs about what a study of strategic culture can achieve register in a modest category: an enhanced understanding of our own and others' cultures on their own terms; an improved ability to discern enduring policy motivations and predict possible actions; a refined ability to communicate what one wishes to communicate; and finally, increased accuracy in interpreting the meaning of events in the assessment of others.[95]

Those who have built on the paradigmatic foundation laid by Gray have often done so with tactical or operational improvements in mind, i.e. with ambitions lesser than that of strategic victory. Despite being one of the first international relations scholars to draw attention to strategic culture, Gray tended to caution against overemphasizing

---

[94] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

[95] Colin S. Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example," *International Security* 6, no.2 (Fall 1981): 22-23, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538645.

this approach: "Strategic culture ... is a useful notion provided one does not ask too much of it."[96] His even-handed approach might be captured in three primary maxims — an approach he would have liked.

Maxim 1: *"One cannot make a virtue of cultural ignorance."*[97]

It is strategically advantageous to understand as much about the adversary as possible. Common sense demands a study of the national and organizational cultures that inform the moral and political vision guiding strategic thought and behavior.[98] Speaking of the United States in particular, Gray warned, "For a state that now accepts, indeed insists upon, a global mandate to act as sheriff, [a] lack of cultural empathy, including a lack of sufficiently critical self-knowledge, is most serious."[99]

Maxim 2: *Cultural analysis is not the golden key to strategic victory.*[100]

Ever an advocate of the long view, Gray warned against exaggerating the effects of strategic culture by treating it as deterministic and, thereby, damaging the credibility of its study. To drive his point home, Gray accused Sun Tzu of hyperbole: Though the ancient strategist was right to claim "high significance" for the study of culture, he

---

[96] Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1999): 57, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097575.

[97] Colin S. Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture," in *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights and Comparative National Security Policymaking*, ed. Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, and Jeffrey A. Larsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 233.

[98] Colin S. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 108.

[99] Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, March 2006), 34.

[100] Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context," 62.

was wrong to claim it as a guarantee of victory. Gray points out that culture is only one of many dimensions analysts must consider when anticipating adversary strategy.[101] Intervening factors might prevent an enemy's policymakers and warfighters from acting on their cultural preferences.[102] Whether for this reason or for others internal to its own polity, a warring power may find it difficult to translate cultural knowledge into effective military action. Finally, cultural knowledge may simply be overwhelmed by the superior advantages of an adversary. Culturally ignorant powers have, in fact, achieved victory on occasion.[103]

Maxim 3: *Strategic culture and positivist social science are unlikely to enjoy a happy marriage.*

Gray took shots at fellow scholars for the drift away from policy relevance within the academic field of international relations. He believed that an obsession with refining the sophistication and scientific precision of the field's methodology had become an altar of worship inspiring "painstaking assaults upon rather trivial problems."[104] Gray's published dispute with Alastair Iain Johnston clarified his approach to strategic culture — to see it as an "instrumentalist" path — which treats culture as context and not as an independent variable.[105] Accordingly, Gray did not track the influence of strategic culture through a linear cause-and-effect formula that isolates cultural influence and tests for its impact on strategic decision-making in isolation from political, economic, or security influences. Instead, he insisted that the method of inquiry must bend to the reality of the subject matter and not the other way around.

---

[101] Gray, *Perspectives*, 237.

[102] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 129.

[103] Gray, *Perspectives*, 80.

[104] Colin S. Gray, "The Practice of Theory in International Relations," *Political Studies* 22, no. 2 (June 1974): 138, https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1467-9248.1974.tb00013.x.

[105] Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context," 49-69.

Culture, he argued, is context. All strategy is encultured since it is forged by humans who are themselves encultured and who operate through profoundly encultured institutions. Culture is comprised of both beliefs and behavior. One cannot be separated from the other. Further, the very agents influenced by culture — humans — are themselves both its carriers and its constructors. They mold and adapt the culture in which they live. As culture is intimately intermeshed with all aspects and agents of strategy-making, it cannot be prised apart as a testable variable in the ways required by most social science methods.

Fully cognizant that any derision of cherished social science practices would earn him permanent enemies, Gray chose to remain on the side of utility, accessibility, and common sense: "I sympathize with scholars who strive to find and isolate [culture] as an explanatory variable. Plainly, theirs is mission impossible. If one asks the wrong question, one is unlikely to find a useful answer."[106] Through a forceful and compelling argument, Gray forged an alternative path for strategic culture studies within the social sciences and made room for a flourishing body of scholarship, which insists that "strategy is a practical business and the holy grail is not perfect knowledge or elegant theory, but rather solutions to real-world problems that work well enough."[107]

A few subordinate maxims — submaxims — follow the primary three detailed herein.

Submaxim 1: *Strategic cultures are pluralistic.*

Strategic cultures are the products of multiple, often competing, subcultures that may fall under the various labels of national, public, political, military, and organizational

---

[106] Colin S. Gray, "British and American Strategic Cultures," in *Democracies in Partnership: 400 Years of Transatlantic Engagement*, The ACT/ODU Jamestown Symposium, April 18-19, 2007 (Norfolk, VA: HQ Allied Command Transformation, 2008), 9.

[107] Gray, "Irregular Enemies," 7.

culture. Gray noted that interplay between these subcultures and the resulting impact on strategic performance remain underdeveloped aspects of strategic studies literature.[108] Much of the scholarship using the strategic culture paradigm is, in fact, a close examination of one of these subcultures to the exclusion of the others. Gray rejected the artificiality of this approach and insisted on a holistic view. The sheer difficulty of examining strategic culture in all its dimensions is a task so formidable, however, that Gray predicted it might "cease to find widespread favor once officials, soldiers, and sensible scholars come to appreciate just how difficult a subject it is."[109] Strategic cultures are rife with contradictions. For instance, American national culture has championed isolationism as its dominant approach to foreign and security policy during some eras yet supported a national mandate for policing the globe during others. Both cultural narratives are quintessentially American and have reigned and receded according to context-driven domestic and foreign events.

Submaxim 2: *Strategic cultures are dysfunctional.*

Because strategic cultures are forged within a particular geography while practiced and reinforced across a particular national history, the net result tends to be preferred ways of war that perform functionally well in some contexts but not in others.[110] Strategic cultures are not functional or dysfunctional in absolute terms — although Gray pointed out that the Russian version possesses some consistently self-destructive elements.[111] Rather, functionality is contingent on the type of security problem being addressed at the moment. Gray used the American experience in Vietnam to illustrate this point. Americans waged their "preferred way of war in

---

[108] Gray, *Perspectives*, 98.

[109] Gray, "Out of the Wilderness," 239.

[110] Gray, "British and American Strategic Cultures," 7-8; "Strategic Culture as Context," 64-65.

[111] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 147.

conditions where that way could not deliver victory,"[112] and then refused to learn most of the lessons it had to offer. "Cultures, including strategic cultures," he concluded, "are capable of ignoring what they wish to ignore."[113]

Neither national publics nor their military machines are perfectly rational about the positive utility of preferred ways of war. Cultural norms, including military practices, may be infused with moralized beliefs and tied to a sense of identity. Given their cultural baggage, there is more at stake than a simple swap for superior tactics when preferred practices fail. It is an emotional event when cherished strategic cultural norms fall short of producing desired results:

Strategic cultural belief is not likely to be unconditional, but the immediate consequences of an apparently undeniable objective disproving of cultural tenets by events is as likely to be confusion, demoralization, and despair, as rapid cultural re-education and reprogramming.[114]

Submaxim 3: *Strategic culture changes — but likely slowly and not through an act of will.*

For Gray, traits meriting the term "cultural" should be of a nearly semi-permanent quality. He conceded that strategic cultures are adaptable but not infinitely so. Radical change is possible only after a "seismic political, social, or military shock."[115] Gray's insistence on strategic culture's intractable nature is rooted in geography:

---

[112] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 146.

[113] Gray, "British and American Strategic Cultures," 23.

[114] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 101.

[115] Gray, "Out of the Wilderness," 237.

There was physical geography before there were human societies with their cultures and their several histories. No matter exactly how one defines and understands culture, the geographical setting, both physical and perceptual, has to be recognized as the most pervasive and generically enduring influences.[116]

Gray assigned the "pole position" in the development of strategic culture to geography, with historical experience running a close second. Given the "moral force" that cultural habits born of geography and history acquire over time, the result is a set of strategic culture default settings that are firmly entrenched.[117]

Gray's second contention within this submaxim — that one cannot significantly change strategic cultures for the better — is quite depressing. He holds that "a strategic culture [cannot] be discarded by an act of will, at least not rapidly and thoroughly, save in circumstances of direst necessity." Further, "[e]ven if you recognize some significant dysfunctionality in your strategic and military cultures, you may not be able to take effective corrective action."[118] Like much of Gray's work, this curmudgeonly — Gray would claim "realistic" — contention sparks rebellion in the hearts of progressives who yearn for better tomorrows. To those who try to shine a light on deficiencies in order to improve American strategic culture, Gray would point out that this effort is itself a classical manifestation of U.S. strategic culture, which produces "wishful thinking" as a consequence of "an optimistic ideology that believes profoundly in progress."[119]

---

[116] Gray, *Perspectives*, 90.

[117] Gray, *Perspectives*, 102-104.

[118] Gray, *Perspectives*, 232-233.

[119] Colin S. Gray, *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 49.

All is not lost, however. While not sufficient for radical change, self-awareness of one's own strategic culture can identify "some pathways to improve performance," accelerate adaption to new warfighting contexts, and help planners anticipate warfare types likely to pose particularly sharp difficulties for the dominant strategic culture.[120]

Concluding Maxim: *Strategic culture is not sensitivity training.*

The concluding maxim in this tribute to Gray's work is primarily directed at those in the U.S. defense community who have become attached to the rather unfortunate notion that one studies culture for the primary purpose of not offending locals on the ground. While Gray strongly advocated the virtues of understanding local history and culture in order to achieve a "mastery of local conditions" and avoid creating unnecessary friction in population-centric warfare,[121] the bulk of his scholarship has focused on the strategic competition of near-peer powers. Writing during the Cold War, Gray warned against mirror-imaging: "In order to understand why the Soviet Union thinks and behaves as it does, it should be useful to seek to trace that thought and behavior to fundamentally influencing factors." Hardnosed competition, not sensitivity training, is the objective: "Soviet drives for further influence abroad need be no less menacing because Americans think they understand what lies behind them."[122]

For Gray, the central purpose of cultural study was to achieve strategic advantage in a potentially deadly contest of wills. To drive home this point, he cited the most celebrated of strategic forbearers:

---

[120] Gray, "Irregular Enemies," 29-30.

[121] Gray, "Irregular Enemies," 27-28.

[122] Colin S. Gray, "Comparative Strategic Culture," *Parameters* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1984):28, https://webarchive.loc.gov/all/20120609103806/http://www.carlisle.army.mil/USAWC/Parameters/Articles/1984/1984%20gray.pdf.

Clausewitz tells us that "to impose our will on the enemy" is the object
of war … The strength of the enemy's will, and indeed the strength of
ours, cannot help but be a fit subject for cultural enquiry. Recall
Thucydides and his famous triptych of "fear, honor, and interest", as the
dominant motives in statecraft and for war. Culture contributes to all
three, but it rules in the realm of honor … The most important
battlespace in conflicts of all kinds is that in the minds of people. And
human minds, all human minds, are encultured.[123]

Strategic Culture Legacy

Colin S. Gray has left an indelible mark on the field of strategic culture. His
commitment to producing scholarship relevant to strategists has resulted in him being
quoted as often as Clausewitz in U.S. war colleges and service academies. His
signature prose, which was most often written in longhand in the comfort of his
garden shed, rings with such wit and precision as to render paraphrasing criminal.
Most remarkable is his uncanny prescience, which no one can really explain or
attempt to compete with — but which accounts for the great respect in which he is
held by leading practitioners. Jim Mattis, as a general and then as the U.S. secretary of
defense, sought the advice of Professor Gray on more than one occasion and
consistently recognizes him as "the most near-faultless strategist" of his generation.[124]

Few scholars can be credited with establishing an enduring paradigm. While Gray did
not invent the notion of strategic culture — which is properly attributed to Jack

---

[123] Gray, "British and American Strategic Cultures," 5.

[124] Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, *Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy*,
(19 January 2018), https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1420042/remarks-
by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/.

Snyder and Ken Booth [125]— he made it fit for strategic practice. His scholarship provided the intellectual foundation for the second and third generations of strategic culture inquiry that continue to expand and refine the field. As the next generation of strategic culture enthusiasts pushes the frontiers of the paradigm and tests its utility and limits, such enthusiasts would do well to keep Gray's first-generation admonition in mind: "a little theory goes a long way."[126]

Jeannie L. Johnson is the director of the Center for Anticipatory Intelligence (CAI) at Utah State University and is an associate professor in the Political Science department. Her most recent book, The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture: Lessons Learned and Lost in America's Wars *examines US strategic culture and its implications for future irregular conflict.*

---

[125] Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, R-2154-AF (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1977) https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2154.pdf; Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom, Helm, 1979).

[126] Gray, "British and American Strategic Cultures," 4.

6. Strategy: Theory for Practice

Kenton White

"... strategy is about ideas for action, not action itself."

War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History

The use of strategic theory to support the practice of the use of military force was the subject of many of Colin's books, articles, and lectures. Strategy must convert policy from ideas and objectives into the use or threat of military force. It is this conversion that I will examine here through Colin's works, my conversations with him, and my experience teaching his works to my students.

An understanding of Clausewitz and Thucydides is fundamental to Colin's approach to strategy. He succeeded in developing strategic theory from their practical methods, creating the concept of strategic history almost single-handedly.[127] As a practitioner, he sought to provide the firmest of foundations for those charged with the conversion of policy into the use of force.

My students have occasionally suggested to me that Colin's work is complex and difficult to comprehend. Indeed, in *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory*, Colin wrote that his own "dense prose" was perhaps too forbidding for non-academics.[128]

---

[127] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*, 2nd ed (Abingdon, UK : New York: Routledge, 2011).

[128] Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), 3.

Some reviewers have criticized his work for the same fault.[129] Many of the concepts with which he wrestled require sophisticated language to fully express their complexity. Despite this, to paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt, the knowledge gained is certainly worth the effort necessary to understand the full breadth and depth of Colin's work.

The Use of History

Colin argued that the theory of strategy should be taught and understood, while maintaining that the process of designing and creating strategy itself was unteachable: "Strategists cannot be trained, but they can be educated."[130] Strategic theory is there to guide the strategist, but the theories need to be understood within the context of the political objective for which the strategy was conceived. History can teach lessons which may guide the strategist and indicate available options, but the strategist must always operate within the current context and modify the design of strategy accordingly. One cannot take a successful strategy from the past and apply it, unchanged, to a current or future circumstance. Colin's employment of examples from history were central to illustrating his approach to the use and validity of theory when compared to practice.[131]

Colin was a great advocate of the use of history to inform current strategy, viewing that history through the lens of strategic theory. Strategy must be viewed as a whole, with the distinctions of "ends, ways, and means" valuable to the foundational understanding of what makes a strategy. These distinctions, however, may not necessarily illustrate how to make a *good* strategy. Whatever the high-level definitions

---

[129] Keith B. Bickel, "Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History," *The Journal of Military History* 68, no. 1 (2004): 321–22, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3397316.

[130] Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Politics* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 59.

[131] Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

of strategy are, its mechanisms reach down to the operational and tactical level of
military action. These are the tools of strategy. Tactics and doctrine are taught, as is
the operational level of war. These can draw immediately from historical examples and
current capabilities. Colin's overall position was that the past is a reservoir of
knowledge that should be used for guidance of *what* can happen and *how* it happens.
Even if the circumstances leading up to important events were different in some way,
their consequences may not change significantly.[132]

Originally, my work with Colin looked at the development of NATO's capacity to meet
its strategic goals over the last two decades of the Cold War, which included the
period of Colin's engagement in the Reagan administration. Our research investigated
the capability of the NATO countries to prosecute a nonnuclear strategy. He asked at
our initial meeting if I intended to write a counterfactual "history" of a Third World
War. Once I had assured him that was not what I intended, he warmed to the subject
of my research. He guided me to the works of Bernard Brodie. Although much of
Brodie's work was directed at developing nuclear strategy, his straightforward
approach to strategy itself was simple, but important: "Strategy is a 'how to do it'
study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently. As in many other
branches of politics, the question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work?"[133]

We attempted to draw a metaphorical line from the strategy known as "flexible
response" designed by NATO and adopted in 1967, through the means provided to
NATO by the alliance members, ending with the ways for executing the defense of
Western Europe. Under Colin's expert eye, I employed strategic theory to identify
those actions which should be undertaken to obtain success. As a method for

---

[132] Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).

[133] Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics: A Major Statement on the Relations Between Military Affairs and Statecraft by the Dean of American Civilian Strategists* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 452.

converting political objectives into military action, strategy requires clear and consistent objectives, supported by the means and ways to achieve it. As the components of strategy (ends, ways, means, and assumptions) diverge, the risks increase. At all times the attendant assumptions and risks of any strategy should be reviewed and assessed.

The conclusion we drew, from extensive archival research, was that no NATO country could successfully counter a potential Soviet invasion of Western Europe for more than one or two days. Regardless of the tactical competence of the NATO forces, simple arithmetic calculating ammunition use against the level of stockpiling showed a lack of essential supplies. Ammunition for anti-tank guided weapons would have been exhausted by the second day of the war. NATO command would have used tactical nuclear weapons to stop the Warsaw Pact advance. This scenario was practiced several times within the manuals for the British government's Transition to War exercises.[134] The alternative to nuclear first-use was a complete surrender of NATO. This simple fact indicated a dislocation between ways and means to achieve the required ends. The implication was extreme risk if war ever came to Europe.

This conclusion led to long conversations between Colin and myself over whether the armed forces of Western countries have been, or were being, adequately prepared for a given strategy. From an historical perspective we were not optimistic. The wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) would demonstrate that there was a dislocation between long-term political objectives and the military means to carry them out. Colin was insistent that strategy must be good enough to achieve the objectives set by the polity. But equally, the polity must set realistic goals for the use, or threat of use, and effects of military force. The conclusion was that while most forces were "good

---

[134] For example, see the minutes for WINTEX 75 Committee Meetings 1975, found in Cabinet Papers (CAB) 130/801, the National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA); 'WINTEX-CIMEX 83 Committees', 1983, CAB 130/1249, TNA.

enough" for short-term operations, the military and political systems in many Western European countries were not adequate to fight a peer adversary. The source of the threat — whether China or Russia — would be uncertain. This emphasized the need for flexibility against any developing confrontation.

"Trust, but Verify"

Colin often doubted those who predicted dramatic changes in the style of warfare or a revolution in warfare caused by new technology. In seminars, lectures, and general conversations, Colin argued that the importance of counter-insurgency in the last decades had been overstated, and that it was not the future of warfare. Changes in the character of war, especially those of technology, should not be overestimated when assessing the options for strategic thinking. Throughout our time working together, Colin frequently reminded me that it was almost impossible to predict the future. The bases of strategy, those of policy, theory, and context, meant that one could not predict what strategy would be "good enough" for future conflicts. The strategist, perhaps prompted by optimistic politicians, must not fall into the trap of predicting future events around which a strategy should be built. "What matters above all else," Colin wrote, "is that we all, especially our military planners, never forget that a decision to wage war is ALWAYS A GAMBLE and the historical record does not demonstrate that bold decisions for war initiation typically are rewarded with conspicuous success."[135]

Colin was particularly skeptical regarding the reliability of treaty verification. Having been a practitioner under the Reagan administration, he said that this was one of the most difficult areas in nuclear and conventional strategy. He mentioned problems with

---

[135] Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Strategy – A Tale of Consequence," *Military Strategy Magazine* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 6–10, https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/nuclear-strategy-a-tale-of-consequence/.

the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks and the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (SALT and START), as well as the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). The Soviet Union, and afterward the Russian Federation, were obstructive when it came to verifying their adherence to any particular treaty obligation. Colin was insistent that the United States kept to its side of the bargain. President Ronald Reagan, in his speech at the signing of the INF Treaty in 1987, used the old Russian proverb, "trust, but verify," in recognition of this problem.[136] The development of nuclear strategy required clear verification of the force sizes on both sides, but this applied to conventional forces as well. Practical actions based on false or unverifiable information are a fool's errand. Colin understood that real-world knowledge of the opponent's capability, political will, and determination is key for designing a competent strategy and converting that strategy into the use, or threat, of force.

Because many historians and politicians, as well as some strategists, focus on warfare rather than war, Colin warned that: "The principal wrecking beacon for the understanding of strategy is the attractive power of the military instrument itself. The use of force is confused with the use made of force. The difference is small on the page, but cosmic in understanding."[137] In one of his last articles, Colin emphasized that the postwar end-state one wishes to achieve is the most important consideration of strategy. It is the *raison d'être* of choosing to use military force in the first place.

Mentioned frequently by Colin was the necessity for a Plan B (or C or D) when a decision to use force is made. Strategic success relies not only on the capability of the

---

[136] "Remarks on Signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/120887c. The original Russian is Доверя́й, но проверя́й. The direct translation was verified by Dayana White, in whom I have complete trust.

[137] Gray, *Strategy for Chaos*, 81.

forces involved but on the flexibility of the command of those forces and the ability of those forces to adapt to differing environments and circumstances. Fighting the "wrong war" quickly reveals flaws in the strategy of any nation, as Colin explained in Maxim 25 of *Fighting Talk*.[138] The enemy always gets a vote in any conflict. Simply because your forces excel in one facet of warfare does not imply overall success. Making a strategy in a vacuum to exploit this "excellence" is dangerous and entirely without merit. Should your adversary possess a superior strategy, or should they possess knowledge of yours, either through subterfuge or educated guess, your success will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. A good strategy can succeed even if the forces available are only "adequate." A poor strategy will not be saved even by the most effective of forces. In other words, the strategy will not work. While theory gives strategists a solid foundation from which to work, its practical application must reflect the adaptability that real life requires.

In his book *Strategy and History*, Colin proposed some potential scenarios which might influence future strategy making, while emphasizing the caveat that "none of the dire developments just outlined have occurred."[139] Certain situations were more likely to occur, such as the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The likelihood of each event analyzed by Colin was based on an understanding of previous events and on the demands placed on military forces over time. He posited scenarios, such as the geopolitical effects of climate change, which current strategists should consider as possible options, and argued that strategic thinking should take possibilities into account, even potential surprises, to retain the flexibility necessary for success. Changes in the balance of power, and shifts of focus, perhaps to the Pacific and China, need to be considered in any strategy design. Climate change will also put pressure on resources, which may significantly affect many states' security, leading to the use of

---

[138] Colin S. Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2007), 107.

[139] Gray, *Strategy and History*, 189.

force either to secure one's own resources or to stop an attempt by another state to take them.

Thus, my discussion of Colin's ideas comes full circle. How strategic theory can be applied to the creation of strategy to address the current situation was always foremost in his thinking. The application of theory to practice was tempered by the knowledge of the past, both successes and failures. Context, as Colin would emphasize, was important in understanding the practice of strategy. The problems of security, whether it is national, resource, or data, are nothing new, but at the same time unique. Politicians and military leaders alike make the mistake of ignoring history at their peril.

Dr Kenton White is a lecturer in Strategic Studies and International Relations at the University of Reading, England. His current research looks at strategic theory and practice over the last 200 years.

7. Distilling the Essence of Strategy

F.G. Hoffman

I am certain of one thing: Colin Gray would be exasperated with claims that "Grand strategy is dead."[140] What he would have called a "banality" is commonplace these days.[141] Some question the need for grand strategy; others contend the United States has lost the art of developing one.[142] Not that Colin would disagree with the difficulty of strategy, or American shortfalls: "In war after war," he noted, "America demonstrates an acute strategy deficit."[143] There is plenty of evidence over the past two decades to suggest that a deficiency in conceptualizing and conducting national strategy afflicts the United States.

I strongly suspect that Colin's retort to the demise of grand strategy would draw upon a theme from his book *Another Bloody Century* — namely, that we will see the end of history well before the value of sound strategy is eclipsed. It is an enduring human

---

[140] Daniel W. Drezner, Ronald R. Krebs, and Randall Schweller, "The End of Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2020), 30-40, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-04-13/end-grand-strategy. For an immediate response see, Andrew Ehrhardt and Maeve Ryan, "Grand Strategy is No Silver Bullet, But It Is Indispensable," *War on the Rocks*, May 19, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/grand-strategy-is-no-silver-bullet-but-it-is-indispensable/.

[141] Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski, *The End of Grand Strategy*, *US Maritime Operations in the Twenty-First Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

[142] Frank Hoffman, "Enhancing American Strategic Competency," in Alan Cromartie, ed., *Liberal Wars, Anglo-American Strategy, Ideology and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2015); Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, Raphael S. Cohen, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, October 2014).

[143] Colin S. Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 49.

function, eternally tied to human nature.[144] Strategy will retain its utility as long as security communities have interests, and as long as policymakers and military commanders need to counter challenges and align resources to obtain desired objectives.

Dr. Gray ensured any debate began with a clear definition of basic terms. His concise formulation of grand strategy has much to commend it. "Grand strategy is the direction and use made of any or all the assets of a security community, including its military instrument, for the purposes of policy as decided by politics."[145] Like most scholars, Gray believed that true grand strategy requires the conceptualization of all of the elements of national power, not just its military power. As an unreformed Clausewitizian, our dear friend knew that strategy is defined by policy and decided by the intercession of politics.

While embracing the eloquence of this unique definition, one modification should be offered. The use of "development" rather than "direction" captures one of the potential uses of a strategy: the shaping of instruments to better achieve defined policy outcomes. The final purpose of strategy, too often overlooked, is the development of either missing capacity or the inadequate capability of an instrument of national power. Grand strategies can be anticipatory and long term, seeking to shape the development of instruments of state power, adding new agencies and new forms of power. They do more than just guide their integrated application towards defined goals.

Some in the academy focus on narrower pieces of the strategy process by analyzing specific documents. Few think of it holistically or consider the dimensions that

---

[144] Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005); Colin S. Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015), 7–22.

[145] Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

constitute what Colin termed the "whole house." Colin was rare in this regard. While some might find his penchant for creating enumerated lists distracting, including his noted "17 dimensions of strategy," the 23 "dicta," and 40 maxims, many found it instructive. Colin believed that applying the art of strategy required the "whole house" or all the dimensions of strategy.[146] These considerations represent critical components that Colin Gray sought to teach aspiring strategists as they struggled to achieve their nation's policy and security interests.[147] This short list provides the gist of the holistic understanding of strategy as a practical art and comprises the main theme of Colin's intellectual contribution to security studies. Such an understanding was something our honored colleague always endeavored to help us appreciate.

Context and Culture

The first and principal consideration for the strategist is a firm grasp of the strategic environment and context in which one's strategy is to be conducted. Professor Gray referred to the "sovereignty of context" to highlight its importance. The sources of this foundation were listed as political, military, socio-cultural, geographic, technological, and historical context.[148] Our comprehension of the strategic context frames our understanding of our adversary and the particular environment in which strategy will operate. It is clear that shortfalls in strategic performance by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan stem from shortfalls in understanding the particular context and culture that the US and its allies sought to change. Gray emphasized that strategic culture is neither fixed nor determinant, but it does cue or frame problem

---

[146] Colin S. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 191–205.

[147] An earlier version of this list, now revised, can be found at Frank G. Hoffman, "Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations," *Orbis* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014), 472–485, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2014.08.002.

[148] Colin S. Gray, *National Security Dilemmas*: *Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 36–149.

recognition and initially forms a lens on solutions.[149] Good strategy presumes some grasp of the "other" and must incorporate an understanding of the relevant history, geography, sociology, and anthropology.

Compromise and Councils of War

This consideration deals with the development of strategies and the essence of strategy as a process. What Eliot Cohen once called the "unequal dialogue" occurs in war councils. Civil-military interaction in the development of strategy is critical to strategic success, and, of course, a great source of tension.[150] The council table is also where policy aims and operational options are integrated. The discourse required to create and refine strategies is rarely the product of a single master strategist. Ultimately, policymakers "must weigh imponderables through structured debates that pare away personal, organizational, and national illusions and conceits."[151] They must squarely face the parochial interests of bureaucracy, accurately discern strategic options, and make choices with imperfect information.

There is a tendency in American strategy circles to insist on linear and rational processes, as if politics can be isolated. As Clausewitz argued, military strategists must accept that politics frequently intrudes in strategy and war. The strategist, who holds the proverbial bridge between policy and military means, must accept the historical fact that purely rational methods are not the norm in crafting strategy. Rather, strategy's natural spawning grounds are the confluence of politics, complexity,

---

[149] Gray, *Perspectives,* 202.

[150] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58; Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, 3.

[151] Macgregor Knox, "Conclusion: Continuity and Revolution in the Making of Strategy," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 645.

uncertainty, and constraints. As Colin noted in his lucid definition, national strategies are developed to support the attainment of "policy as determined by politics."[152] This is the best definition, as politics influences or drives policy and thus has an impact on strategy as well.

Competitive Strategies

As Andrew Marshall and others like Dr. Gray consistently argued, strategy must be competitive. To be *competitive* means that the strategist recognizes that any strategy operates in an interactive and adversarial setting in which other parties seek to advance their own interests. A competitive strategy respects the choices and options that the opponent can pose. It reflects the reality that war is a reciprocal duel, an interactive exercise of action, response, and counteraction. This consideration is the part of strategy-making where one considers the relative strengths and weaknesses of one's self as well as one's opponent. Many strategies do not always give credit to this consideration. As Colin noted, policymakers often seem "to forget that the enemy too has preferences and choices."[153]

Coherence

This is the essence of the strategy function, whereby the strategist exploits the comprehension generated from context and cognitively creates a strategic concept and logic that promises to attain policy ends within the means allocated and the constraints laid upon them. It is not enough for the ends and means to be simply

---

[152] Colin Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 7.

[153] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 20.

"proportionate."[154] A good strategy must have an internal logic that ties policy to both ways and means to create desired strategic effects. That logic is a continuous thread of thinking that provides strategic intent and informs ways, creating linkages in strategic design that then drives operations. Creating and sustaining coherence is the part of strategic practice where the strategist *earns their keep* and applies their creativity and experience.

Coherence reflects the balance and internal logic in the enduring formula of ends/ways/means. Adapting one part automatically alters the logic of that formula and the resultant strategy. In another direction, coherence must be sustained across all instruments of national power. The strategic concept divined by the strategist should establish this logic and coherence, and they must strive mightily to keep them connected. Colin rightfully calls this the "heroic duty" of the strategist.[155]

Constraints

Strategy is made and executed in the real world, an environment that ultimately deals with constraints. The most obvious of these are time, information, and resources. War in general, and operations more particularly, are competitive and decisions must be made in a context that rewards timely actions. There are advantages to getting strategy "good enough," as Colin would put it, and fast enough to outmaneuver one's opponent in the temporal dimension of strategy. By anticipating, deciding, and acting with time as the most precious resource, one can create and sustain advantage. The same is true with information. Strategy relies upon intelligence and knowledge of the other side, but as Colin stressed, the future is not foreseeable and strategy is laid on a

---

[154] William James, "Grandiose Strategy? Refining the Study and Practice of Grand Strategy," *The RUSI Journal* (2020), 5–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2020.1767364.

[155] Colin S. Gray, "The Strategist as Hero," *Joint Force Quarterly* 62 (July 2011), 37–45, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-62.pdf.

foundation of assumption, guesses, and genius. The essence of strategy is the resolution of choices, tradeoffs, and risks produced by uncertainty.[156]

Contingency

This consideration reflects the role of chance in human affairs. We do not fight inanimate objects, but real people with ideas and will of their own. Clausewitz's concept of friction exists at more than the operational and tactical level. It exists at all levels, and thus Colin Gray's emphasis on the need for prudence in risk-taking and for adaptability in strategic thinking cannot be overestimated. Sir Winston Churchill knew about the impact of chance from his own military and ministerial experiences. He exclaimed that "The Statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events."[157] Making allowance for uncertainty and chance were linked to Colin's repeated stress on prudence in affairs of state and strategy.

Continuous Assessment and Adaptation

The confluence of contingency and competitiveness produces the need for an additional component — that of constant evaluation of ongoing operations and continuous measurement of progress. Since strategy is an evolving contact sport, one should avoid what Lord Salisbury called the most common error, "sticking to the carcass of dead policy."[158] Thus, strategies should be thought of as adaptive in nature.

---

[156] Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Thoughts for Defence Planners," *Survival* 52, no. 3 (June–July 2010), 159–178, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2010.494883.

[157] Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (New York: Scribner), 232.

[158] Quoted by Steve Meyer, "Carcass of Dead Policies: The Irrelevance of NATO," *Parameters* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2003-2004), 96, https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA597083, citing David Steele, *Lord Salisbury: A Political Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 121.

The making of strategy is an iterative exercise that is dynamic, irregular, and discontinuous.[159] Colin stressed the interactive aspect of strategy and insisted on adaptability to deal with uncertainty and the uncanny propensity for opponents to not do what they are expected to do. While taking note of Clausewitz's emphasis on focused aims, Gray grasped that "the practicing strategist has to be ready to adapt as the unique and unpredictable, though not necessarily unanticipateable, course of a war unfolds."[160]

Causality

Recently, scholars have begun challenging the basic elements of strategy, including the ends/ways/means relationship. Some scholars suggest we drop it entirely.[161] But in exploring the literature, it became apparent to me that the "black hole," or missing element in strategy, was also missing from my own set of fundamental considerations. For a while I thought I had found a critical element in strategic planning and grand strategy that even the giants like Colin Gray had overlooked. This new consideration centered upon the need to focus on the critical and causal logic of a strategy which deals with creating a "way" that connects ends and means. The "way" is a strategic concept that represents an untested hypothesis, one which can plausibly attain policy ends within the means allotted and existing constraints. A good strategy must establish a causal logic that links both the ways and means towards gaining the desired policy aim and strategic effects. That logic is a continuous thread of thinking that provides strategic intent and informs ways, creating linkages in strategic design that drives the application of means via military operations. This factor is the

---

[159] Henry Mintzberg, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 318.

[160] John Andreas Olsen and Colin S. Gray, eds., *The Practice of Strategy*: *From Alexander the Great to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 295.

[161] Jeffrey W. Meiser, "Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2016–17), 81–91, https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3298.pdf.

component that involves calculation, cunning, and the creation of a strategic logic or chain of effects.

Before publishing my putative discovery, I did some further research and found that I had overlooked this central element in Gray's body of work. He once stressed that "strategies are theories, which is to say they are purported explanations of how desired effects can be achieved by selected causes of threat and action applied in a particular sequence." [162] This is not the only occurrence discovered belatedly. In *Schools for Strategy,* he emphasized:

A plan is a theory specifying how a particular goal might be secured, *ceteris paribus.* Until the course of future events unfolds, the chief planner and the commander, who may be one and the same person, are deciding and acting only on the basis of a theory of success.[163]

This idea of a strategy being a theory or hypothesis to be tested is a key part of sound strategic logic as it forces the strategist to think about the causal link between ends and means, and is too often overlooked. But one cannot accuse Gray of that oversight.

Conclusion

Strategy is a messy and nonlinear process, as Colin often stressed. It must be done, but just slightly better and faster than one's opponents. The ability to challenge conventional wisdom, to see through the chaff and discern the essence of a problem, to uncover illusion or conceit, and craft a strategy that advances a theory of success is

---

[162] Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30.

[163] Colin S. Gray, *Schools for Strategy: Teaching Strategy for 21st Century Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, November 2009), 44.

hard work. Sound strategy is not an illusion or hubristic; it is simply the best antidote for strategic poverty and the best insurance any polity has against catastrophe.

This succinct set of considerations provide the fundamentals distilled from a detailed review of Professor Colin Gray's studies. There is nothing guaranteed in the realm of human affairs, but strategists who recognize these considerations will increase the likelihood that their strategy will be "good enough." There is heroic difficulty in resolving the competing tensions inherent to crafting and implementing strategy, and only a few heroes that have taught this craft with Colin's intense style. He will be remembered for keeping the strategic flame alive and passing it along to future generations of strategists.

Dr. Hoffman is a distinguished research fellow at the National Defense University. His research portfolio centers on national defense and military strategy, military innovation and adaptation, and defense economics.