



Strategy and History

Essays on theory and practice

Colin S. Gray

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A selection of Colin Gray's more important contributions to strategic debate, *Strategy and History* provides a unique perspective on the strategic history of the past thirty years. Written by a participant-observer of and in strategic controversies, the essays range widely over some hotly debated topics and address a number of issues which have contemporary relevance to strategists: the importance of history for strategic understanding today, the nature of strategy and why it is difficult to do well, the challenge of nuclear weapons, revolutions in military affairs, and arms control. Colin Gray argues strongly for the continuing significance of geography and culture and concludes by addressing the ethical assumptions which provide some useful guidance to the strategist. Ultimately the book shows how essential it is to maintain a strategic, means–ends perspective and defines strategy as a pragmatic activity.

This book will be essential reading for all students of strategy, contemporary history and international relations.

Colin Gray is Professor of International Politics and Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, UK. He is the author of 20 books, more than 300 articles, and several dozen reports for government. His most recent publications include *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (2002), *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (2004), and *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (2005).

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**For the small band of scholars and practitioners who strive to
keep the flame of strategy alight**

Strategic thought draws its inspiration each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose.

(Raymond Aron 1970)

Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order.

(Carl von Clausewitz 1832: 1976)

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Preface

Strategy and History is a selection of my writings over three decades. Despite the variety of topics represented, they share two characteristics, a strategic perspective and a controversial thesis. Other features that they have in common are explained in the Introduction. The dedication of this work is heartfelt. For thirty-five years I have been applying strategic theory, directly or indirectly, from issue to issue. I recommend strongly the truth in the words I quote in one of the book's epigraphs from that most perceptive sociologist, historian, and philosopher, Raymond Aron. "Strategic thought draws its inspiration each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose." But, as I argue in the Introduction, the inspiration provided by events needs to be educated by a grasp of the eternal lore of strategy. It is the commitment to the authority of that lore, and its application to actual and possible strategic happenings, that binds this book of collected essays and, indeed, that binds my professional record as a strategic theorist and defense analyst. This is not to claim that I have always succeeded in imposing strategic order on recalcitrant subjects, but it is to assert that I have sought to do so.

When I accepted, all too casually, Andrew Humphrys' invitation to assemble the "best of breeds" from my writings on all topics, I underestimated just how challenging that would prove to be. What criteria to apply? Readers can be reassured that there is some method in the selection. I defer discussion of content to the Introduction. The entries had to be (1) individually of high standard, (2) on topics that either in their subject matter or my treatment, or both, have some contemporary resonance, (3) on important issues or concerns, and, above all else, (4) had to present a strategic analysis. Beyond those criteria, also it was necessary to select essays that spanned the entire period, actually periods, of my professional life to date. Those years have encompassed no fewer than three reasonably distinct eras: the Cold War (–1989, or 1991, for the demise of the USSR); the inter-war period of the post-Cold War decade (1991–2001); and now the period of the so-called War on Terror (2001–). Both the scholarly pedant and the pragmatic strategist in me are well aware that one cannot wage war on an abstract noun. Nonetheless, the "War on Terror" is the fashionable term officially adopted, and widely understood, as pointing to the dominant characteristic of our current

security context. Although I bow to the inevitable, I do believe, however, that this “War” will prove to be but a transient era of only modest duration.

The essays are all controversial, some much more so than others. I offer some context for, and comment on, each essay in the Introduction. The essays themselves are reprinted without amendment. They are as they were first published. It should go without saying that I do not endorse today every sentence I have written over three decades. However, I do recommend these essays as interesting discussions of significant issues in strategic theory, strategic history, and strategic policy, which have some merit beyond serving merely as illustrative period pieces.

I am pleased to acknowledge the permission I have been granted by MIT Press to reproduce my articles: “Across the Nuclear Divide – Strategic Studies, Past and Present,” *International Security*, 2 (1977), pp. 24–46, and “Nuclear Strategy: The Case For a Theory of Victory,” *International Security*, 4 (1979), pp. 54–87. Also, I am indebted to Elsevier for granting me permission to reprint my article, “Arms Control Does Not Control Arms,” *Orbis*, 37 (1993), pp. 333–48. In addition, I am grateful to Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint, “Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back,” *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), pp. 49–69.

As well as Andrew Humphrys of Taylor and Francis who both set this venture in motion and has seen it through to publication, I must express my thanks to my friend and much respected fellow strategist, Jim Wirtz, of the Naval Post-Graduate School, Monterey, California. Not for the first time, he offered excellent advice, some of which I accepted.

I wondered whether or not to include the adjectival modifier “controversial” to the “Essays” in the title but decided that the addition would be redundant. I will allow my daughter the concluding observation in this Preface. With that perceptive wit all too characteristic of one’s nearest and dearest, she commented that I must feel as if I am returning to the scene of some earlier crimes.

Colin S. Gray
Wokingham, UK
December 2005

Provenance of the essays

- 1 “Across the Nuclear Divide – Strategic Studies, Past and Present,” *International Security*, 2 (1977), pp. 24–46.
- 2 “New Directions for Security Studies? How Can Theory Help Practice?” *Security Studies*, 1 (1992), pp. 610–35.
- 3 “History for Strategists: British Seapower as a Relevant Past,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 17 (1994), pp. 7–32.
- 4 “Why Strategy Is Difficult,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, 22 (1999), pp. 6–12.
- 5 “From Principles of Warfare to Principles of War: A Clausewitzian Solution,” unpublished essay (2005).
- 6 “Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory,” *International Security*, 4 (1979), pp. 54–87.
- 7 “The Revolution in Military Affairs,” in B. Bond and Mungo Melvin (eds), *The Nature of Future Conflict: Implications for Force Development*, The Occasional No. 36 (Camberley, UK: The Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, September 1998), pp. 58–65.
- 8 “Arms Control Does Not Control Arms,” *Orbis*, 37 (1993), pp. 333–48.
- 9 “Geography and Grand Strategy,” *Comparative Strategy*, 10 (1991), pp. 311–29.
- 10 “Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back,” *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), pp. 49–69.
- 11 “Force, Order, and Justice: The Ethics of Realism in Statecraft,” *Global Affairs*, 8 (1993), pp. 1–17.
- 12 “What is War: A View from Strategic Studies,” an unpublished paper based upon presentations at a meeting in Oxford of the Leverhulme Project on the Changing Character of War (February 24, 2005), and at the Centre for American Studies in Rome (May 10, 2005).

Introduction

Holding the strategy bridge

Strategy is the bridge between military power and political purpose. Its state of repair is highly variable. Moreover, although it is a bridge that must allow two-way traffic between tasking from policy and evidence on military feasibility, it is the former that must dominate. When policy fails to command it finds itself the servant of warfare, the reverse of the only legitimate terms of the relationship.

Despite the diversity of these essays, their spread in dates of publication, and the wide range of subjects addressed, they are all about strategy and they all reflect the author's beliefs about, and approach to, war, peace, conflict, and – for the old fashioned term – statecraft. Readers may well notice some repetition of ideas and arguments, indeed it would be strange if they do not, but the similarity that is of most note, I hope, among these essays, is that they draw from and express a distinctively strategic mindset. Following Carl von Clausewitz, concerning whom more will be said throughout, I have sought to insist that the consequences of behavior must be considered. The key question for the strategist is, “so what?” In a career as a defense professional extending over thirty years and more, I have found the “so what” question to be essential and, occasionally, deadly. I have asked it to probe the sense in nuclear war plans, in maritime strategy, and in schemes for special operations, to cite but three areas of high relevance.

The title of this book carries important messages; it is not simply a convenient label. The main title reflects the fact that historical experience is literally our sole source of evidence on strategic phenomena. The future has not happened and no technological or methodological wizardry can reveal what tomorrow will bring.¹ The value of strategic history, the benefits and the perils, has been a constant concern in my writings. For example, book-end entries here, the essays, “Across the nuclear divide” of 1977 vintage and the 2005 essay on “From Principles of Warfare to Principles of War,” both address the basic question of what has changed and what has not. It is encouraging to note that the US defense community, at the instigation of the current Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Plans, Policy, and Operations, Vice Admiral John Morgan, has been investigating the issue of whether or not the traditional Principles of War have long passed their sell-by date. What is especially gratifying to one, such as myself who has beaten the drum for history and strategy for so long, is that Admiral Morgan's

2 Introduction

conceptual project has met with a hugely enthusiastic response. I am sceptical of the American ability to sustain an interest in strategy, but still one has to applaud virtue when it surfaces.

Of course, these essays can and should be read for their analysis of particular problems. However, they can be read also as a dialogue between theory and practice. Both of the epigraphs are vital and vitally complementary. On the one hand we have available a general theory of war and strategy, one composed most persuasively by Carl von Clausewitz.² On the other hand, as Raymond Aron insists, the history of strategic thought reflects the strategic problems of the day, albeit usually with some time lag. It has been my experience that Clausewitz's claim for the educational value of a single general strategic theory holds good across any and all strategic issues, be they ever so novel in appearance.³ For example, the theory of strategy, following Clausewitz, is as applicable to space power and cyber power as it is to the other three geographical dimensions of war. I do not deny that my belief in the authority of, and necessity for, strategy has stirred controversy from time to time. For example, among these essays I include my 1979 piece, provocatively titled "Nuclear strategy: the case for a theory of victory." Whether or not that was an example of asking too much of strategy, readers must decide for themselves. However, I believed at the time, as I still do today, that every threat and use of military power should be directed purposively by strategy. Furthermore I believe that military power should only be exercised in a quest for advantage; why else would one fight? Since the superpowers had detailed plans to conduct the most destructive war in history, I felt that it was my public as well as my professional duty to try to hold them, the United States at least, to a strategic standard of contingent performance.

Aron's accurate claim for the authority of events in the history of strategic thought is really a necessary truth. The reason is that strategy is a practical business. In the immortal words of one of America's finest strategic theorists, Bernard Brodie:

Strategic thinking, or "theory," if one prefers, is nothing if not pragmatic. 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? More important, will it be likely to work under the special circumstances under which it will next be tested?⁴

The general theory of war and strategy can have nothing to say directly about the particular problems that the course of history throws at policymakers and soldiers. But, that theory teaches, those who are willing and able to learn, how they should approach their unique challenges. In other words, strategic theory is about education, not training or doctrine. Those equipped with a Clausewitzian understanding of the nature of war and the function of strategy can turn their minds to the details of the problem of the hour, confident that they have in their intellectual armory the necessary weapons to help them prevail over ignorance, confusion, friction, and stupidity. Such, at least, is one's noble hope.

Because strategy is a highly pragmatic affair, as Brodie reminds us, it is unsurprising that the demand for general theory has never been strong. Beatrice Heuser hits the mark when she observes:

In many respects, Clausewitz is thus providing something that few military practitioners are on the lookout for. While they tend to be in search of teachable and learnable rules of thumb that can be applied to a wide range of different situations, and can help them find short-cuts to decision making in stressful combat situations, Clausewitz mainly supplies philosophical reflections on the nature of war that are difficult to translate into simple, memorable prescriptions for action.⁵

Because strategy is a practical art, and in some respects an applied science,⁶ the market for theory, and even appreciation of the value of theory, tends not to be healthy. For thirty years this strategic theorist has endeavored to serve up as much theory, in as palatable a form, as civilian officials and military professionals were willing and able to digest. Not infrequently, I misjudged my audience. Policymakers and soldiers are practical and busy people who are obliged to solve, or evade, specific and busy real-world problems. They are apt to be impatient with strategic philosophy. Whereas the theorist provides better understanding of the structure of a problem, the official seeks an answer to the pressing question, “what do I do?” Whereas policymakers should be expert at making, or postponing, decisions, and soldiers preponderantly are action people, scholars preeminently are analysts. In our efforts, we scholars of strategy often seem determined to illustrate the profundity in science fiction writer Poul Anderson’s aphorism that “I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which, when you looked at it the right way, did not become still more complicated.”⁷ In my experience, policymakers and soldiers cannot be relied upon to be grateful when a scholar tells them that they face a difficult problem to which there is no clearly superior solution. Especially it is true when the official client has paid a large sum of money for the study in question. Scholarship and policymaking truly comprise two different cultures, a fact and its implications that I must emphasize in the themes I now move on to identify.

All of my work as a defense professional has been performed with the aid of an enduring set of attitudes, beliefs, and concerns that have been manifest in some persisting characteristics. Whether I was analyzing Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) basing modes, the military uses of space, maritime strategy, or the strategic utility of special operations forces, I found that my general theory of war, strategy, and statecraft would set me on what I judged to be a right enough road. My work has been characterized by

- 1 a strategic perspective,
- 2 a concern with the relationship between the theory and practice of strategy,
- 3 a deep respect for Carl von Clausewitz’s theory of war and strategy,
- 4 a willingness, indeed a determination, to seek education from history,

4 *Introduction*

- 5 recognition of the authority of politics,
- 6 attention to the importance of geography and culture,
- 7 a somewhat restrained enthusiasm for the significance of technology for strategic performance,
- 8 a determination to understand and explain the structure of a problem.

First and foremost these essays, indeed the entire canon of my work, are about strategy. In one way or another they are about the consequences of the threat or the use of force. By and large they are not about particular policy choices and neither are they about military behavior. As I strive to explain in the essay, “Why strategy is difficult,” it is extremely hard to train strategists. In point of fact, many people who are skilled at policymaking, as well as many who are exemplary soldiers, do not really understand the strategic function at all. People have no difficulty comprehending either policy or fighting, regarded separately, but to connect the two in a purposeful way, and to keep them connected, often is a mental step too far. Indeed, with thanks to Cornelius Ryan, I would go so far as to claim that on the evidence of performance, strategy tends to be a bridge too far for many policymakers and military professionals.⁸ It is not hard to see why this should be so. Politics is a profession, as is soldiering. But neither the politician nor the soldier necessarily is expert in the conduct of strategy. There are perennial efforts to make strategy a quantifiable science, but they are doomed to failure. Strategy inherently is an art, albeit a scientific one, in that some of its key enablers can and must be measured (e.g. logistics). I have waged a losing conceptual war for decades over the misuse of the adjective strategic. Strictly speaking, no weapon can be strategic. If we label some weapons as strategic, we discourage, if not outright deny, the consideration of their political consequences. It is an elementary matter of keeping instrument and effect distinct in our minds.⁹

My second theme is the difficult nexus between the theory and practice of strategy. Because of my personal professional history, I am especially sensitive to the trials and tribulations of all parties to this relationship. I have been an academic strategic theorist in three countries (the United States, Britain, and Canada), an advisor to government in two (primarily the United States, Britain), and a part-time government official (the United States). I am sufficiently old fashioned to believe both that the scholar should seek truth and that enlightenment on the nature and working of a subject is attainable. Practitioners are not generally hostile to truth, but truth is not their problem. Because strategy is a practical business, policymakers need truth that they can use. Erudite “briefings” on the dangers of particular nuclear strategies, or on the unmistakable evidence of, and most probable reasons for, persistent violation of arms control agreements are likely to be received by officials with a yawn followed by the strategist’s question, “so what?” What does it mean? Most especially, what does it mean for *my* responsibilities now? What does the briefer recommend? The scholar-briefer is probably shocked to be dragged thus brutally from the realm of truth into the rougher world of consequences. He or she probably does not appreciate that to grasp the probable nature, the structure, of nuclear war and strategy or of arms control

non-compliance is really the easy task. The difficult job is reserved for the policymaker: what to do about it.¹⁰ I strive to persuade my students that strategy, even strategic theory, is not a fine art; it is, as Brodie maintained, a “‘how to do it’ study.” Most practitioners need to be educated to recognize the relevance of theory to their search for workable solutions to today’s problems, whereas theorists must never forget that their labors ultimately only have meaning and value for the world of strategic behavior.

Theme number three, perhaps better expressed as a characteristic, is the pervasive influence of Carl von Clausewitz’s theory of war and strategy on all of my work. Bernard Brodie explained why this was likely to be the case when he wrote, unexceptionably: “His is not simply the greatest but the only truly great book on war.”¹¹ Thirty plus years ago, I was less impressed by the great Prussian than I should have been, witness my youthful preference for Sun-tzu in the essay, “Across the nuclear divide.” However, with the arrival of the Howard and Paret translation in 1976, and some maturity of understanding on my part, I soon realized that *On War* provided the basic conceptual toolkit for the education of the strategist. Clausewitz has been criticized roundly, even viciously, of late. In particular his theory of war is held by many critics to apply only to a world wherein states are the sole, or all but sole, agents. Allegedly, there was a “Clausewitzian era” which we can date, over-neatly, from the end of the first Thirty-Years’ War in 1648, either to the close of the second in 1945, or possibly to the conclusion of the Cold War in 1989 or 1991. This is nonsense. A careful reading of *On War* reveals very clearly indeed that the theory it expounds is not restricted in its relevance to one or another character of belligerent. The most vital of the critics’ errors has been their almost wilful misunderstanding of Clausewitz’s explanation of the nature of war. He did not claim that war is the product of the dynamic, indeed unstable, relationship among the people, the commander and his army, and the government. Though he did note that those three agencies were each most closely associated with particular elements of what he termed “a remarkable trinity” (according to the 1976 Howard and Paret translation). Clausewitz’s trinity comprises of “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.”¹² To date, the critics, past and present, have failed to hang a glove on him, though it certainly is not for want of trying.¹³ Readers will find Clausewitz’s theory of war either deeply embedded in, or at least lurking close nearby, the essays in this collection.

The fourth theme in these essays, in some cases explicit, is a willingness to seek education and inspiration from historical experience. There are two bases for my enthusiasm for history. The first, frankly, is simply personal interest. The second, more serious reason amounts to the default position: there is no alternative. To quote the excellent Brodie again, “[y]et the only empirical data we have about how people conduct war and behave under its stresses is our experience with it in the past, however much we have to make adjustments for subsequent