

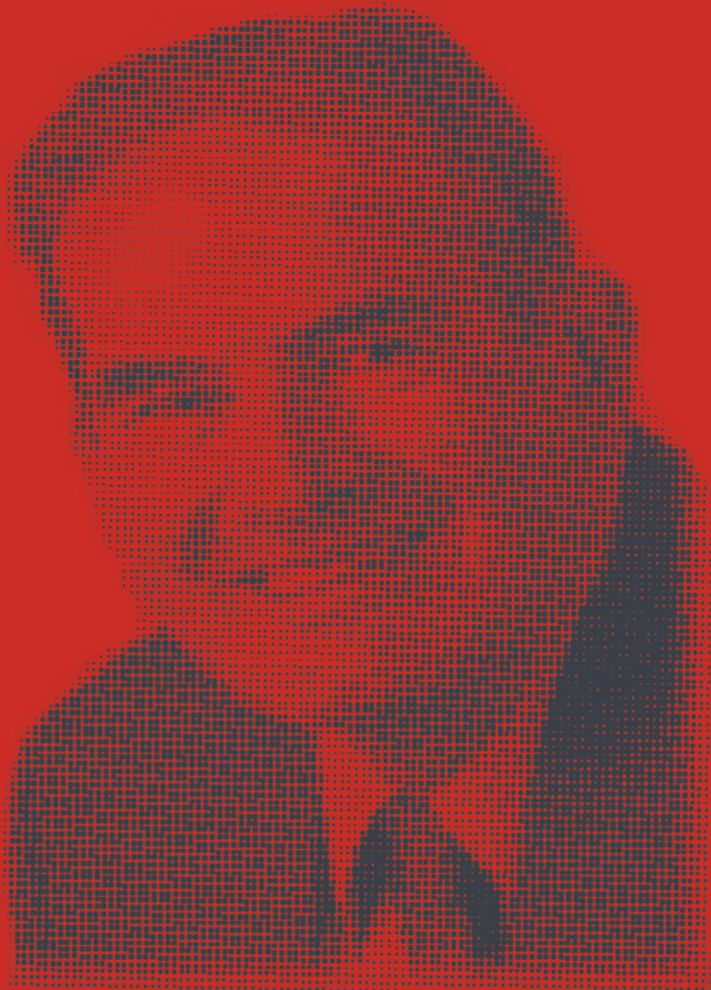


DISTILLING

THE ESSENCE

OF STRATEGY

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I am certain of one thing: Colin Gray would be exasperated with claims that "Grand strategy is dead."¹ What he would have called a "banality" is commonplace these days.² Some question the need for grand strategy; others contend the United States has lost the art of developing one.³ 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."⁴ 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 function, eternally tied to human nature.⁵ 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."⁶ 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 Clausewitzian, 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 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

1 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/>.

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

3 Frank Hoffman, "Enhancing American Strategic Competency," in ed. Alan Cromartie, *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).

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

5 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.

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

house” or all the dimensions of strategy.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 United States and its allies sought to change. Gray emphasized that strategic culture is neither fixed nor determinant, but it does cue or frame problem recognition and initially forms a lens on solutions.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.”¹² 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, uncertainty, and constraints. As Colin noted in his lucid definition, national strategies are developed to support the attainment of “policy as determined by politics.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

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

8 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>.

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

10 Gray, *Perspectives*, 202.

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

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

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

14 Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 20.



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 “proportionate.”¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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

15 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>.

16 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>.

other side, but as Colin stressed, the future is not foreseeable and strategy is laid on a foundation of assumption, guesses, and genius. The essence of strategy is the resolution of choices, tradeoffs, and risks produced by uncertainty.¹⁷

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."¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ Thus, strategies should be thought of as adaptive in nature. The making of strategy is an iterative exercise that is dynamic, irregular, and discontinuous.²⁰ 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 unanticipatable, course of a war unfolds."²¹

Causality

Recently, scholars have begun challenging the basic elements of strategy, including the ends/ways/means relationship. Some scholars suggest we drop it entirely.²² 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 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."²³ This is not the only occurrence discovered belatedly. In *Schools for Strategy*, he emphasized:

17 Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Thoughts for Defence Planners," *Survival* 52, no. 3 (June–July 2010), 159–178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039638.2010.494883>.

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

19 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.

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

21 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.

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

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

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.²⁴

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 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. ●

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Image courtesy of Antonia Gray

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