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Modern Strategy

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BOOK REVIEWS

A Subject Worth Studying

Gray, Colin S. *Modern Strategy*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999. 400pp. \$29.95

Does strategy, or the study of strategy, still matter? Colin Gray, professor of strategic studies at the University of Hull in the United Kingdom, shows that it does. Neither the end of the Cold War nor the promise of new weapons alters the need for understanding strategy. Gray has been writing about, professing, or “practicing” strategy for thirty years, and whether or not you agree with him, he is among the few scholars of strategy who should never be ignored.

Gray proposes that all strategic experience is universal. He develops this idea through the flak of competing theories and criticisms, proposing “to advance the understanding of strategy by exploring the relationship between the growing complexity of modern war and a general theory of war and strategy that, when properly formulated, is indifferent to the specifics of history.” In thirteen chapters, he develops his thesis through the widening gyre of strategy, which now includes land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, and such problems as nuclear weapons, the changing “grammar” of war, and “low-intensity conflict.” His database is twentieth-century warfare.

According to Gray, “nothing essential changes in the nature and function (or purpose)—in sharp contrast to the character—of strategy and war.” He writes this to counter the common error he sees in strategic studies of confusing “tactics with strategy and, as a consequence, changes in the character of events with changes in their

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nature." He declares that a person who understands today's strategy will also understand the strategy of the twelfth century.

He digs deeply into the famous work by Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, for ways to approach the subject of war and strategy today. He avoids treating it as canonical, however, showing how restrictive some of Clausewitz's ideas were, while he expands on others to accommodate the increasing complexity of our modern world. For example, Gray updates Clausewitz's definition of strategy from "strategy [as] the use of engagements for the object in war," to "the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy." He devotes a whole chapter to discussing the dimensions of strategy, an accommodation to complexity barely envisioned in *On War*. Where Clausewitz admitted five dimensions to strategy (moral, physical, mathematical, geographical, and statistical), Gray groups seventeen dimensions into three clusters (people and politics, preparation for war, and war proper). Like Clausewitz, however, Gray finds that there is no single "master" dimension of strategy, that most failed strategic works tend to emphasize dominance in a single dimension of strategy.

He also faults critics who argue that Clausewitz is no longer relevant to modern strategy. Two prominent critics, military historians John Keegan and Martin van Creveld, argue that Clausewitz's ideas apply only to the nineteenth century, that somehow warfare at the end of the Cold War has been "transformed." Gray illustrates that these authors have fallen prey to the fallacy that a change in means is a change in purpose. Yet he struggles with the writings of others who fault Clausewitz, especially when they analyze chapter 10 of *On War*, "Small Wars and Other Savage Violence." Gray admits that the prolific writings of Ralph Peters give him the most trouble, and he agrees that some substate actors may be motivated by nonpolitical goals.

Because the subject of strategy is extremely complicated, this book is dense and does not make good bedtime reading. No good work on strategy, however, could be otherwise. A contributing factor is Gray's use of inductive theory, generating principles from numerous particular cases, often toward the end of a chapter. Also, his writing is complex. All too frequently he employs negatives, nominalizations, or redundant modifiers that obscure his points or hide their force. But his thesis is worth understanding; modern (indeed all) strategy is

still a subject worth studying. Anyone interested in learning more about it will benefit from this work.

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Pearlman, Michael D. *Warmaking and American Democracy: The Struggle over Military Strategy, 1700 to the Present*. Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas, 1999. 393pp. \$45

Warmaking—the pursuit of political objectives by military means—ineluctably involves trade-offs not only in determining appropriate goals but also in determining the means by which they may be best pursued. While recent military action in Kosovo highlights the truth of this statement, the struggle to achieve a coherent military policy is not simply a contemporary problem for this nation. In this work, Michael D. Pearlman, a historian and associate professor at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College, traces this problem from the pre-Revolutionary colonial wars through to the present, providing a comprehensive survey not only of America's wars but of the continual push and pull between the practitioners of military art and the politicians who direct them. In doing so, Pearlman demonstrates the difficulties faced by a

pluralistic democracy in obtaining a consensus on either the most effective means for fighting a war or on justifiable ends of the wars being fought. While pursuing an explanation of the sources of these difficulties, he also illuminates a warmaking goal that is perhaps peculiar to America—that of fighting in order to banish doubts that a democracy can win its wars.

War, it should be remembered, has as its essential end the achievement of foreign-policy objectives; it is not simply about the practice of the military art. The connection between the ends and means is what we usually call strategy. Pearlman makes the case that American warfighting strategy is not and has never been determined in practice the way one might hope that it is in theory—through the seamless coordination of economic, political, moral, and military assets for the most efficient and effective accomplishment of the desired end. Rather, national strategy is the resultant of a competition between many actors in