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ON DETERRENCE, DEFENSE, AND ARMS CONTROL IN HONOR OF
COLIN S. GRAY

Keith B. Payne

For five decades, Professor Colin Gray's scholarly writings contributed tremendously to our understanding of strategy, and his wise counsel benefited U.S. security policies enormously. His intellectual depth, rigor, curiosity, and wit were unparalleled, as were the time, energy, and stamina he devoted to writing and lecturing. To say that Colin was prolific is a profound understatement. His scholarly published canon includes more than thirty books and three hundred articles. He also authored or contributed to scores of unpublished reports for various U.S. government offices. To achieve such a record, Colin often would work on multiple texts simultaneously. As a consequence, two substantial books he authored occasionally would be published in the same year—once, I believe, in roughly the same month.¹

Equally important, colleagues and students of all views and backgrounds greatly enjoyed and appreciated Colin's unassuming affability and easy charm. While frequently involved in the back and forth of strategic policy debates, he typically remained a gentleman—reflecting a genuine civility that seems rare today. In one extended press interview, Colin referred to a prominent Washington politician in a mildly unflattering way. When the article was published subsequently and Colin saw his comment in print, he mailed a personal apology to the politician. The latter responded to Colin that he had been called much worse but never before had received an apology.

The scope and breadth of Colin's curiosity and writing far transcended any single topic. This brief discussion focuses on only three areas of his enduring scholarly interest: deterrence, missile defense, and arms control. To summarize the scope and nuance of Colin's views on strategic deterrence and related issues would require a sizable book—which undoubtedly will be written. The much more modest goal here, however, is to provide a readable and select synopsis of his basic points and positions, which were driven by his philosophical realism and a

relentless dedication to logic and evidence—wherever that led.

THE INNOVATIVE REALIST

Colin's work typically was highly innovative, and inevitably it provided added value. It may

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be helpful to offer a few select examples of the unique creativity and insight he brought to the field of strategic studies. In a 1981 article appearing in the journal *International Security*, Colin essentially introduced the now-thriving study of strategic culture as a critical subfield of strategic studies.² He reintroduced the study of geopolitics in a 1977 book, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era*, and subsequently authored several innovative texts on the subject, including *Maritime Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Defense of the West* (1986) and *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (1988).

Colin coined the title “second nuclear age” to identify the post–Cold War era—nomenclature that subsequently was adopted internationally. More than just a new name, this descriptor reflected his countercultural view that nuclear weapons would *not* lose their salience after the Cold War—that is, the emerging era would be different, but nuclear weapons would continue to cast a long shadow over international security concerns. Recent history demonstrates that Colin was, of course, correct in this regard.

Colin’s books entitled *The Second Nuclear Age* (1999) and *Another Bloody Century* (2005) presented the harsh realities he deemed more likely than the then-prevailing near-utopian expectations of great-power comity and a cooperative “new world order.” In 1999, for example, Colin dissented from the accepted wisdom of the day that terrorism and rogue states were the only remaining threats, 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,” and predicted that China “would menace Japan.” He also then observed that the return of Russia as a political-military challenge to the West (which he fully expected) “immediately would threaten independent Ukraine [and] the Baltics.”³ Colin expected that the immediate post–Cold War period was a (likely brief) interlude before another cycle of sharp great-power competition and potential conflict. History demonstrates that Colin again was prescient.

Colin’s contrarian expectations, of course, did not reflect his preferences. They followed from his observations and realist philosophical roots, and his corresponding view that history provides the best guide for our expectations of the future. As noted, his expectations were far removed from the accepted wisdom of the day (i.e., that the arising new world order would see the dwindling salience of nuclear weapons, and that great-power cooperation and amity would replace cycles of crises and conflict). Colin did not believe that the exhaustion of the Soviet Union and the rise of China meant the dawn of a peaceful new age; to the contrary, he expected new security challenges to arise and old challenges to return. Again, recent history has shown that Colin’s projections were correct, if unfashionable.

Beginning in the 1970s, Colin’s work played an increasingly significant role in the evolution of U.S. thinking, particularly within the Department of Defense.

Very few scholars have affected U.S. policies so directly. When Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis introduced the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, he quoted Colin and referred to him as “the most near-faultless strategist alive today,” and Colin is the only academic with highlighted quotes in both the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* and the 2019 *Missile Defense Review*.⁴

THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE

An overarching theme and goal of Colin’s writings and lectures was identifying the most effective approach to deterring war, particularly nuclear war—that is, war prevention. He also recognized the possibility that deterrence could fail and nuclear war could ensue despite the best preventive efforts. Correspondingly, he reasoned that because nuclear war is possible, the United States should think prudently through “what to do” in the event. He considered an officially declared U.S. response of the 1960s and early 1970s—including a large-scale nuclear strike against Soviet society—to be complete, immoral folly and a faulty guide for measuring the adequacy of U.S. nuclear forces. His basic proposition was simple but not simplistic: the West must seek unceasingly to deter war. 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 But, if deterrence failed nevertheless and war ensued, U.S. actions should not be impromptu by default or a spasmodic nuclear response that consciously abandoned any purposeful goal beyond revenge and societal destruction. Rather, they should be guided by thoughtful planning to deter further nuclear escalation and minimize societal destruction to the extent feasible—with full recognition that, while neither goal was certain, rejecting measures that might help limit escalation and destruction would be grossly irresponsible. That is hardly a radical proposition.⁶

But openly discussing what to do if deterrence fails was outside the norms of most academic discourse. Doing so was then and continues to be criticized as reflecting a sympathy for “nuclear war fighting” as opposed to deterrence. Colin ran afoul of the reigning wisdom that the “stable” balance of terror, properly tended, would *not* fail short of irrationality, and that nuclear war was “unthinkable”—and certainly not to be discussed publicly, other than by some, occasionally, as a political tool for rousing popular opposition to U.S. nuclear arms. But that was not Colin’s purpose.

Because Colin pointed to the need to plan as prudently as possible for deterrence failure and his publications occasionally included the word *victory* (in one case, in an article’s provocative title created without the authors’ permission, or even knowledge), some critics asserted that his goal was not deterrence but rather planning to fight and win a nuclear war. This is a wholly mistaken interpretation

of his work and intent, including his occasional use of the word *victory*. As noted, he was highly skeptical of any notion that the employment of nuclear weapons would remain limited and thus could serve a political goal. Indeed, he viewed nuclear war as a potentially unparalleled horror to be prevented, if possible, through diplomacy and deterrence. These were the goals of his scholarship on the subject. In at least some cases the mischaracterization of his work as sympathetic to nuclear war fighting obviously was contrived for the purpose of creating a provocative nuclear straw man against which to argue.

In short, Colin's highest scholarly priority was to understand how best to prevent nuclear war, and he was convinced that seeking to think through the question of what to do in the event of deterrence failure both was prudent and could improve the prospects for deterring war. There was no trade-off.

ARMS CONTROL: A "HOUSE OF CARDS"

A prominent academic argument of the 1960s and 1970s was that the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race of the time was a result of "action-reaction" cycles initiated by the United States. Critics of U.S. nuclear forces typically argued that it was the United States that instigated and propelled the U.S.-Soviet arms race, because U.S. deployment of nuclear arms (the initial "action") compelled the Soviet Union to respond with a nuclear buildup (the inevitable "reaction"). This U.S.-led action-reaction dynamic supposedly explained the U.S.-Soviet arms race.⁷

The policy argument that accompanied this action-reaction thesis, of course, was that if only the United States would cease or curtail its nuclear-weapons programs, the Soviet Union could and would do likewise. Consequently, ending the arms race was a U.S. opportunity and responsibility; if the United States curtailed its nuclear armaments, the action-reaction arms-race dynamic would be replaced by a U.S.-led inaction-inaction dynamic—bringing the arms race to a close. However, if the United States continued to pursue nuclear programs, it would continue to propel the arms race as well. This prevalent argument posited an arms race continually led by the United States and its "first moves"—opponents being reactive and largely benign cogs in this mechanistic process. The same action-reaction contention, with U.S. culpability, has been on display since the 1960s and remains prominent in contemporary arguments against U.S. nuclear arms and missile defense.

One of the earliest targets of Colin's demand for logic and evidence was this fashionable, U.S.-led, action-reaction/inaction-inaction thesis. His 1976 book *The Soviet-American Arms Race* demolished this reductionist explanation of the arms race, along with the corresponding assertion that U.S. inaction would produce Soviet inaction—that is, a "peace race."⁸ He argued instead from evidence that a variety of interactive and noninteractive behaviors and motivations, not

the action-reaction dynamic, explained U.S. and Soviet nuclear-arms programs. The bottom line of Colin's work was that policies derived from the politically powerful action-reaction thesis—that U.S. actions drove the arms race and U.S. inaction would lead to Soviet inaction and an end to the arms race—were sure to be frustrated, because the Soviet Union's motives for its nuclear arms were far more complex than the reductionist action-reaction thesis. Multiple later serious studies came to the same conclusion.⁹ In 1979, the Carter administration's Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, very publicly dismissed the action-reaction thesis, noting that the Soviet Union "has shown no restraint—when we build, they build, when we cut, they build."¹⁰

Colin continued to challenge pervasive, fawning academic and government expressions regarding nuclear-arms control. The title of his most comprehensive book on the subject, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (1992), clearly signaled his conclusion, as do the titles of chapters 1 and 7, "The Magical Kingdom of Arms Control" and "To Bury Arms Control, Not to Praise It," respectively. On the basis of nearly a century of arms-control history (e.g., the extensive arms-control record of the 1920s and 1930s and the U.S.-Soviet SALT/START experience), he challenged the central, widely accepted claims for the U.S.-Soviet strategic arms-control process: that it could move the superpowers' strategic doctrines and force postures in mutually benign directions, and that the dialogue on nuclear arms itself could be the dynamic for the transformation of U.S.-Soviet relations away from hostility.

In stark contrast, Colin essentially explained that the character of political relations among countries and their respective "strategic cultures" drive their armament programs, and correspondingly the possibilities of arms control, and that those political relations and cultures typically reflect both centuries of historical experience and contemporary issues. They ultimately govern countries' armaments incentives and goals and set the boundaries for arms control. "The political antagonism that generates the objective need for alleviation via arms control—always assuming, again fallaciously, that arms control could control—is the very reason why arms control must fail."¹¹ The fundamental resolution of hostile political relations could lead naturally to significant relaxation of military requirements and to arms control, but the reverse is not true. And, of course, if previously hostile relations have become truly cordial, arms-control agreements lose much of their significance.

Colin's conclusion—that, despite all the fanfare and attention, the arms-control process is incapable of transformative effects among hostile states because it is limited by their hostility—again was wholly contrarian. However, given the Cold War history of actual arms-control practice, his general conclusion increasingly became mainstream. Secretary Brown recognized the same nexus: "The

[U.S.-Soviet] political relationship drove the success or failure of arms control much more than the other way around.”¹²

From this foundation, Colin concluded that arms control “is either impossible or unimportant.” He referred to this as the “arms control paradox” and, calling on historical evidence, demonstrated how it was reflected in “virtually all twentieth-century experience with arms control or its absence.”¹³ Indeed, the U.S. strategic arms-control aspiration to move Russian nuclear arms toward “stability” (as understood in the West) largely was frustrated until political relations improved dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union—which had little or nothing to do with the arms-control process.¹⁴ Since then that aspiration has been frustrated, once again, with the return of stridently hostile U.S.-Russian political relations.

ON DETERRENCE

In 1960, Herman Kahn observed the following about U.S. deterrence: “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.”¹⁵ But Colin did just that, methodically identifying the logical contradictions and lack of evidence behind accepted wisdom and fashionable Cold War thinking about nuclear deterrence. When he began publishing on strategic deterrence and nuclear policy in the early 1970s, he was highly critical of most U.S. government expressions and academic commentary on the subject. By the 1980s, however, U.S. policies, on a bipartisan basis, had come to reflect much of Colin’s earlier thought.

Many of Colin’s basic points about strategic deterrence and missile defense built on Kahn’s writings from the 1960s, particularly the latter’s *On Thermo-nuclear War* and *Thinking about the Unthinkable*. These two remarkable scholars often reached the same conclusions, but their routes differed. Whereas Kahn’s work manifestly was that of a physicist addressing issues of international politics and power, Colin’s approach to the same subjects came from political science, military history, and anthropology. Indeed, he focused on how the unique history, culture, and political context of nations could drive considerable variation in different leaderships’ decision-making pertinent to the functioning of deterrence. And, perhaps because of his British origins, he focused on America’s extended deterrence relationship with allies.

Colin’s views on deterrence challenged conventional wisdom. He dismissed notions widely accepted in the West that a reliably “stable balance of terror” could be expected, given the Soviet adoption of U.S. views regarding nuclear weapons (i.e., “convergence”). Because Soviet calculations generally were believed to mirror those of U.S. leaders, Soviet behavior was expected to follow familiar patterns, and deterrence therefore was expected to play out predictably and reliably.

This assumption regarding the predictability of Soviet behavior led some senior figures in U.S. national security to conclude that mutual nuclear deterrence was so stable that it functioned nearly automatically (i.e., “existential deterrence”). “The terrible and unavoidable uncertainties in any recourse to nuclear war create what could be called ‘existential’ deterrence, where the function of the adjective is to distinguish this phenomenon from anything based on strategic theories or declared policies. . . . As long as each side has thermonuclear weapons that could be used against the opponent, even after the strongest possible preemptive attack [a “second-strike capability”], existential deterrence is strong.”¹⁶

Colin considered such notions of a balance of terror built on “mirror imaging” to be a lamentable reflection of enduring traits of the American elite’s strategic culture: tenacious groupthink and a “trait of machine-mindedness” that reduces “the difficulties created by politics and opposed national policies to problems of administration, management, and engineering.”¹⁷ He expanded on Kahn’s and Albert J. Wohlstetter’s general contention that deterrence should *not* be expected to function easily, reliably, and predictably. In 1958, Wohlstetter famously described the balance of terror as “fragile.”¹⁸ Colin concurred and emphasized that an assumption of much Western Cold War thinking about deterrence “stability”—that Soviet and U.S. leaders perceived and calculated deterrence and the balance of terror similarly—very likely was dangerously mistaken.

On the basis of his reading of available historical evidence, Colin rejected this key presumption of similar U.S. and Soviet deterrence perceptions and calculations. He concluded instead that “assessments of deterrence stability err because they do not take into account” differences in political will.¹⁹ For example, the great differences distinguishing U.S. and Soviet strategic cultures would render Soviet decision-making and the functioning of deterrence unpredictable: “Sensitivity to human loss has not been a prominent feature of Soviet (or Russian) political culture. 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?).”²⁰

In short, given the potential for variation often witnessed in political-military history, Colin rejected the comforting and convenient mirror imaging that undergirded expectations of a reliably stable balance of terror and existential deterrence. He insisted that there is no relevant universal definition of rational behavior, no nondescript countries A and B, and no *Homo strategicus* leadership making predictably sensible decisions. Rather, leaderships with a wide range of strategic cultures, perceptions, beliefs, goals, and passions can arrive at very different conclusions about what constitutes the most sensible deterrence-related decision-making and behavior. Consequently, Colin emphasized—decades

before the point would become widely accepted as pertinent to U.S. deterrence policy—that the great variation in national histories, perceptions, cultures, goals, values, and so on likely will impact decision-making and behavior in unexpected ways and render the functioning of deterrence inherently uncertain.

Some U.S. leaders during the Cold War expected the strategic arms-control process to provide the opportunity to bring Soviet thinking in line with U.S. balance-of-terror thought—that is, into the “real world” of nuclear weapons and the inevitable logic of a stable balance of terror.²¹ If necessary, American tutorials on deterrence could “educate” the Soviet political and military leadership into “convergence” with U.S. thinking. Colin dismissed this notion as ethnocentric folly, given the tremendous differences in the American and Russian histories, perceptions, goals, and strategic cultures.²²

Colin rebelled against the comforting notions that the balance of terror could be made predictably stable and that strategic forces could be delineated neatly as “stabilizing” or “destabilizing,” according to formula. His willingness to express this view, along with considering what to do if deterrence fails, was viewed as heretical by most of the nuclear deterrence “priesthood” of the time—as indeed it was. Doing so 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, by definition, they ultimately would do, because they were presumed to be comparably sensible (per American sensibilities) and convergence would align Soviet views with American logic.

Colin’s rejection of this fundamental presumption of reigning deterrence theory significantly shaped his views about deterrence policy and strategic defenses. For example, he insisted that deterrence policy must be adjusted to take into account the variability in an opponent’s perceptions, tolerances, values, and goals—that is, deterrence planning must be done “with reference to the unique details of the case in hand.”²³ Correspondingly, he often explained that no such thing as “the deterrent” exists, because no single approach or narrowly defined force structure can be expected to deter. Rather, Colin concluded that U.S. deterrence planning and forces must be flexible and diverse to deter as effectively as possible, given the great variations possible among opponents and contexts. His iconoclastic views in this regard preceded by more than a decade their wholesale, bipartisan acceptance—as is reflected in numerous contemporary open U.S. policy documents and the now-ubiquitous observation by civilian and military leaders that deterrence must be “tailored” to opponents because no “one size fits all.”

Colin was not iconoclastic by nature; it was not a role to which he aspired or seemed to enjoy. Rather, the inadequacies he saw in the dominant strategic thinking of the mid-Cold War period left him little choice but to accept the role. By

1980, however, the general outlines of U.S. strategic policy, including President Carter's "countervailing strategy," were moving considerably closer to the positions Colin had articulated.

Finally, Colin did not prefer that the United States and the West rely on nuclear deterrence for their security. He fully recognized its dangers. In fact, he believed reliance on nuclear deterrence to be "foolish" *if there were a realistic alternative*.²⁴ However, in line with realism, 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. Our current security and insecurity context is the unplanned, certainly unintended, product of centuries of political history."²⁵

ON STRATEGIC MISSILE DEFENSE

Colin's conclusion that the functioning of deterrence is inherently uncertain and unpredictable also was key to his position regarding U.S. strategic defensive capabilities (i.e., homeland defense). He was well aware that limiting damage might not be feasible in many possible nuclear scenarios, but believed that it could be in others. Correspondingly, in contrast to basic balance-of-terror desiderata, he considered irresponsible a policy by which the U.S. government consciously would choose to forgo protecting society where possible. Such a policy contributed to the potential for unmitigated destruction should deterrence fail. "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 in the event of nuclear war."²⁶

Consequently, Colin emphasized that missile defense to limit the potential for societal destruction should be a policy priority, not anathema. This emphasis went fully against the grain of Western deterrence thinking that unmitigated mutual vulnerability is stabilizing and should be preserved and codified. From the American perspective, the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty served precisely this purpose by limiting strategic-missile-defense development and deployment significantly.

Colin's support for strategic missile defense, however, was a logical extension of his basic points.

1. Given the variability in decision-making, deterrence is uncertain and can fail.
2. The United States should consider prudently what to do in the event of deterrence failure.
3. In the event of war, society should be defended to the extent feasible.

Colin's support for strategic missile defense also followed from his attention to U.S. extended deterrence for allies. He contended that unmitigated U.S. societal vulnerability to attack undermined the credibility of America's extended-deterrent threat on behalf of allies. In fact, he believed that the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence "is very low so long as the United States makes no noteworthy provision for the protection of its homeland against inevitable Soviet retaliation."²⁷ His logic was clear: the Soviet Union was not likely to believe America's extended-deterrent threat to employ nuclear weapons on behalf of allies if it could not survive the certain Soviet retaliation. He feared that an unbelievable extended deterrent provided little or no protection for allies and instead might encourage Russian aggression.

Consequently, Colin advanced two basic reasons for U.S. strategic missile defense: to protect American society in the event deterrence fails, to the extent possible; and to provide credibility for U.S. extended-deterrent commitments to allies. He did not believe that strategic defense was likely to provide flawless protection against a determined nuclear attack, but argued that even plausible imperfect defense capabilities could strengthen the credibility of extended deterrence and save lives that otherwise would be lost in the event of deterrence failure. He consistently endorsed U.S. strategic missile defense for these reasons.²⁸

For a time, Colin was fairly isolated in his views on strategic missile defense. They were wholly contrary to the intent and purpose of the ABM Treaty, which received overwhelming support in the U.S. Senate and in general. However, once again U.S. policy, on a bipartisan basis, eventually caught up with much of Colin's thinking. In 2002, the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty for the purpose of deploying strategic missile defense to protect the U.S. homeland against the limited strategic-missile threats that rogue states could pose.²⁹ U.S. policy had come to recognize that missile defense that would not be effective against a great power's attack still could have great value. In 2010, the Obama administration listed as first priority defending "the homeland against the threat of limited ballistic missile attack."³⁰ This policy priority attributed to strategic missile defense by the Obama administration is repeated in the Department of Defense's *2019 Missile Defense Review*, along with a discussion of its value for deterrence purposes.³¹ The *Missile Defense Review* also includes the following quote from Colin: "U.S. missile defence can critically reduce an attacker's confidence in the prospects for success in its offensive strike planning. Given the inherent and irreducible uncertainties of war that should fuel doubt in such plans, the additional uncertainty imposed by U.S. missile defence should prove decisively deterring in the attacker's calculations."³² Colin's thoughts on strategic missile defense remained

consistent over five decades, and U.S. policy largely, if not entirely, has caught up on a bipartisan basis.

A review of Colin Gray's work reveals how easily he moved simultaneously within the two very different and often mutually exclusive worlds of academia and government policy. His scholarship, over time, contributed to the betterment of U.S. policy in a number of areas, but nowhere more than in the seemingly arcane and incredibly consequential arenas of deterrence, defense, and arms control. His scholarly writings helped move U.S. arms-control policy away from its reductionist action-reaction roots, deterrence policy away from its mechanical mirror imaging, and missile defense policy toward recognition of the value of strategic defense. Colin's ideas and writings were his currency for these developments. He was an adviser who spoke truth to power with humility and great effect, despite the harsh criticism he often received for doing so at the time—criticism he typically endured with humor and good grace. It is no overstatement to conclude that the West is a safer place for his remarkable scholarship and tenacity.

NOTES

- This essay is adapted from an article produced and released under the auspices of the National Institute for Public Policy. Original article © 2020 by National Institute Press.
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 11. Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War*, p. 174.
 12. See “SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust” (transcript of the Proceedings of the Musgrove Conference of the Carter-Brezhnev Project, Musgrove Plantation, Saint Simons Island, GA, 7–9 May 1994), p. 131, available at nsarchive2.gwu.edu/.
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 23. Colin S. Gray, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 2003), p. 15.
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 32. *Ibid.*, p. 25.