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Publication date

01-01-2003

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Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Shaw, M. (2003). *Strategy and slaughter* (Version 1). University of Sussex.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23312471.v1>

Published in

Review of International Studies

Link to external publisher version

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210503002699>

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Article (Unspecified)

Shaw, Martin (2003) Strategy and slaughter. *Review of International Studies*, 29 (2). pp. 269-277. ISSN 0260-2105

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Martin Shaw

(This is a draft version of article published on Review of International Studies volume 29, 2, 2003 ,pp 269-277)

[The ubiquity of strategy](#) / [Discrimination and slaughter](#) / [Antitheses of strategy](#) / [Half-life of a tradition](#)

Colin Gray is a landmark in international studies and this, he claims, is 'a landmark work' in his thirty-year career. The sense of fixity is not accidental; as readers of Gray's recent essay in this review will be aware, he is an apostle of eternal verities and an unrelenting critic of all those who (in his view) neglect them. A prolific, usually lucid, sometimes playful writer, he is a scourge of liberal 'fashion' (pet targets include Ken Booth, an editor of this review, and John Keegan, the military historian, both of whom he suspects of going soft on strategic values). This book is a *defence* of strategic thought, even if its author avows only to 'help readers better to understand modern strategy'.

As Gray is aware, his career, including a stint as presidential advisor in the 1980s during the Reagan administration's extensive nuclear rearmament, might be held against his ideas. Gray's record is not, of course, irrelevant to his views. While this book contains a (non-specific) *mea culpa* for 'wrong conclusions' reached and even 'wrong objectives' sought (xi), it can also be read (as we shall see) as a partial *apologia pro vita sua*. To read the book as a whole simply in this light would lead, however, to a serious underestimation of Gray. He is an able exponent of classic strategic views, and proposes a serious argument for their durability.

The obvious issue is whether this argument works and here I shall concede some ground. The more important question, however, concerns not the durability but the *relevance* of these positions. The thrust of my critique is that even if central strategic propositions are not - indeed as Gray claims *cannot* be - simply outmoded, they do not tell us, indeed have never told us, much of what is important to the understanding of war. To the extent that Gray is right, we should still pause to ask - so what? I suggest, therefore, that if Gray achieves part of the intellectual advantage that he claims over the forces of soft-centred liberalism, it is a Pyrrhic victory. He wins a battle - that in reality is hardly engaged - but loses the war or, to be more accurate, the peace.

The ubiquity of strategy

In order to justify these claims, I shall need not only to penetrate Gray's defence, but also to suggest an alternative vision for post-strategic war studies. As the last sentence suggests, strategy is everywhere: its grammar of power has infected all spheres of social relations and social thought. Even critics will be hard put to avoid its pervasive concepts. However Gray claims not this wider triumph of his tradition - which has occurred as the century of total war has given way to that of the global market - but the viability of the classic tradition of military strategy.

There is a paradox here. A major, if understated thrust of *Modern Strategy* is to partially detach strategy as a way of thinking from the blood and gore with which it has had intimate links. Not, of course, that Gray has any ambitions to deny the horrors of war: 'Warfare varies in scale, weaponry, geographical medium, and measure of symmetry between foes, but it does not vary in intensity from context to context. For people at the sharp end of war ... there is only one level of intensity, the one that threatens life and limb.' (274). It is just that he doesn't see this as what *strategy* is about and he wants to insist (here the self-justification for the Reagan years enters in) that military strategy can be rational even when war is irrational.

Gray's attitude to 'small wars and other savage violence' (273) is a useful entry-point to his thinking. On the one hand he wants to separate strategy from uncivilized excess: 'If torture is exciting, rape is fun, and looting is profitable for ... "violent actors", it can be hard to find a role for strategy. "War" for fun is not really war; it is a form of recreational brigandage.' (277) At the same time, however, he wishes to insist that strategy 'can and should make sense of the apparently chaotic world of small wars and other savage violence.' (278) He identifies twin errors in dealing with this world. One is 'to regard the realm of real war and "real soldiering" as coterminous with symmetrical conflict'; the other, 'to regard small wars and other forms of savage violence as the wars of the future that will largely supplant the allegedly old-fashioned state-centric "regular" wars of a Westphalian world.' (279)

The case for seeing a strategic element in the most 'senseless' violence of 'new' wars has been well made by Stathis Kalyvas, who points out that even an archetypal case of 'senselessness' like the hacking off of women's hands in Sierra Leone had a strategic explanation. As the anthropologist Paul Richards documented, the rebel movement depended for its supply of fighters on capturing young people. If - handless - women could not harvest, there would be no food in the villages, and hence no incentive for captives to return. However the intellectual 'triumph' involved, in finding a twisted strategic rationale in such brutality, only underlines the limitations of strategic thought. For the clash of arms no longer claims - if it ever did - only, or even principally, the enemy fighter. Strategy itself has long been turned against women, against children, against each group in society, indeed against society as a whole.

Discrimination and slaughter

War is always more than indiscriminate slaughter. No one can deny, however, that from the point of view of the majority of society (in many regions) who are its victims, its *indiscriminateness* is at least a pronounced tendency as the strategic *discrimination* practised or intended by combatant forces. It is evident, moreover, that this dual character is hardly a product of 'savagery' (as a near-racist undertone to the argument suggests) but a fundamental feature of war itself. War is both the rational, purposive activity that strategic thought guides *and* the necessarily unpredictable, uncontrollable, irrationally destructive clash of opposing wills that real combatants and victims experience - and humanist critics emphasize.

The greatness of Karl von Clausewitz, Colin Gray's hero, was that he enabled us to understand the inextricable links between these two sides to war. True, as a practitioner, and despite the butchery of the Napoleonic wars in which he participated, Clausewitz's premise and conclusion remained that wars could and had to be fought. This emphasis was understandable in his time - even later in the nineteenth century few thinkers disputed it. Despite the wishful thinking of sociological optimists like Auguste Comte, initially industrialism only intensified the apparent usefulness of slaughter, the belief in which was not seriously contested even by revolutionary thinkers like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels - the latter, indeed, a particular admirer of Clausewitz.

Like his teacher, Gray does not deny the murderousness of war, but he hardly dwells on it, still less sees it as capable of undermining his tradition. And here is a problem. *Modern Strategy* comes almost 170 years after *On War*. What was understandable in Clausewitz is less easily pardoned in Gray. Events in the latter part of the nineteenth and, especially, the twentieth century have led many in society as well as in the academy to look differently on war. It is with good reason that these have not been easy times in which to defend a classic strategic approach to war. Gray knows this all too well; but he relishes the challenge too easily.

Historical changes do not mean, of course, that strategy's share of the truth has been simply invalidated. In principle Gray is right: so long as there is war, it cannot lose all its force. However the indiscriminateness of 'discriminating' slaughter has been deeply intensified, in tendencies that have little to do with 'savagery' and everything to do with anti-human tendencies in modern state power, the enormous lethality of modern weaponry, even dehumanizing tendencies in modern thought. Thus there is reason to suggest that modernity has deeply reinforced the tendency of 'rational' strategy to produce 'irrational' outcomes.

Gray's index does not include genocide and he would not see the mass extermination of civilians as war. And yet the separation of these two phenomena - and hence Gray's neglect - is difficult to sustain. The first big twentieth-century genocide, the Turkish slaughter of the Armenians in the First World War (often seen as laying tracks for the Holocaust), already showed disturbing connections not just with war but with the strategic tradition. The common view that the slaughter's crucial ideological ingredient was Young Turk nationalism neglects the critical role of the military beliefs that its leaders imported from Germany.

Turkish officers applied 'total war' doctrines, with their ethic of 'annihilating' the enemy, to a mass civilian population. The genocide happened, as James Reid has pointed out, 'primarily because the military ethics of the time permitted generals to view civilians as valid targets of war.'

Clausewitz was a founding figure of this tradition of strategic thought. Of course, to blame him for the Turkish genocide - or for that matter the massacres of the *Einsatzgruppen* and methodical extermination in gas chambers - would be as absurd as to blame Marx and Engels for Stalin's genocides. In principle strategy, like Marxism, can be distinguished from the ideologies that appropriated it to produce mass extermination. And yet, after the experiences of the 'century of total war', strategy cannot escape the challenge that they throw at it, any more than Marxism can escape disturbing questions about revolution.

Strategic thinking lent itself remarkably well to mass murder. The struggle against the Jews was definitely war for Adolf Hitler, and his forces pursued it as part of their larger struggle against the Polish, Soviet and other states. As Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett argue in their new study of the Second World War, 'From the first day of the war, the Germans embarked on the Führer's ideological program to remake Europe's demography.' Nor was this an aberration of the political leadership: the slaughter of Soviet prisoners of war underscored 'the convergence of the army's ideology with that of the Third Reich.' Likewise in our times, with simpler weapons and organization but equally devastating effect, Rwanda's Hutu nationalist regime waged armed campaigns against the Tutsi people at the same time as against the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Slobodan Milosevic planned to expel the majority of the Albanian population to make Kosovo safe for Serbian power. Such enormous excesses of both major and minor wars may hardly be dismissed as non-strategic violence, still less 'recreational brigandage': in each case they were clearly major parts of what these wars were actually about.

Genocide has been commonplace in modern wars. War is the context in which genocide has generally occurred. The crime was codified as a result of German and Japanese activities during 1939-45, and the success of the victors of that war, in erecting a legal barrier between genocide and strategy, must also be regarded as dubious. Everyone knows that 'strategic' bombing, reinforced by atomic weapons, produced mass slaughter of civilians on a scale to match the supposedly 'non-strategic' killing of Auschwitz. There were very important differences between the motivations and outcomes of Nazi and Allied crimes. But the commonalities were profound and should remain uncomfortable for anyone trying to make strategic sense of warfare today. They barely touch Gray, for whom even Nazism's 'racial doctrine' seems relevant only as a 'simultaneously functional and dysfunctional' component of German 'strategic culture'. (148)

Antitheses of strategy

For Gray it is only in the context of nuclear war that the problematic character of modern force seriously intrudes into the strategic case. Even here, he enters a double qualification to Lawrence Freedman's judgement that (during the Cold War) 'The position we have now reached is one where stability depends on

something that is more the antithesis of strategy than its apotheosis. ... *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la stratégie.*' First - although at one point Gray appears to accept that nuclear war could not '*après Clausewitz*, be a rational instrument of state policy' (316) - he still maintains that while nuclear war 'must always be a terrible event ... there are degrees of terrible, and those degrees could matter.' (307) In justification of the strategic world that he inhabited in the 1980s, he contends that 'nuclear deadlock might have proved a temporary condition, at least in the calculations of one side's war-planners. It is not easy to convey to readers the full domain of the realm of necessity that engulfed the strategic theorists, defence analysts and officials of East and West.' (316)

Second, Gray offers us the distinction between nuclear war and nuclear weapons. 'The fact that by the late 1960s a large-scale bilateral nuclear war could not serve reasonable political purposes does not deny nuclear weapons classification as weapons, nor does it deny that nuclear weapons are a truly strategic instrument. ... Nuclear weapons can work directly on the source of real action in world politics, in the minds of the policy-makers.' (322-23) Here is a curious argument. So far as it goes Gray is clearly correct that nuclear weapons have uses as means of power short of war: 'To be nuclear-armed probably does not add to a country's influence in the world, except, that is, where it really matters.' (330) And yet he is too realistic about the relationships between deterrence and war to believe that the distinction between the non-war and war-fighting uses of nuclear weapons can be absolute. He quotes with approval Michael Quinlan's dictum: 'Weapons deter by the possibility of their use, and by no other route; the distinction sometimes attempted between deterrent capabilities and war-fighting capabilities has in a strict sense no meaningful basis.' Hence the strategic significance of weapons derives, in the last instance, from their possible effects in war.

What is the continuing relevance of strategy in this situation? Uncontentiously, it becomes a means of warning against the unacceptable face of war: 'Nuclear weapons have not retired strategy, but strategic reasoning has certainly helped to confine the writ of these weapons in defence plans.' (302) Gray adds a distinctive caution for our times, which he defines as a 'second nuclear age' of proliferation: 'The lack of actively nuclear history ... has induced a widespread inclination to belittle the strategic significance of nuclear weapons. ... a condition of nuclear incredulity has set in.' (348) He correctly points out the danger of this 'practical disbelief in nuclear menace from nuclear-proliferant powers. ... not until there is a nuclear war somewhere ... will these weapons descend from abstraction into the zone of pressing problems.' (348)

The contentious, and less clearly stated, argument is that like his own generation in the 1980s, statesmen and strategists in the twenty-first century will be forced to live with nuclear weapons: 'Overall, the subject of the influence of nuclear weapons in world politics is an exercise in attempting to understand the realm of necessity - the weapons exist and cannot safely be banished entirely - not of policy discretion' (330) This is reinforced by the more specific 'prediction' that 'the current second nuclear age, which is dominated by the problems of proliferation among regional polities, will be succeeded within two decades by a bipolar security architecture that pits American against Chinese power and influence.'

(326) In this 'third nuclear age' as in earlier periods, statesmen and strategists will still be 'trapped in the existential conundrum that they may be obliged to wage a form of war - nuclear war - that they believe unlikely to have any outcome other than bilateral disaster.' (315)

Putting these arguments alongside each other makes it easier to separate the valid from the invalid elements in Gray's position. Clearly nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented and so long as they can be obtained relatively easily by any medium-sized state - even by terrorist organizations - they are part of 'the realm of necessity'. However it does not follow that one cold war must lead to another. The discovery of China as the new adversary (although a shrewder bet than, say, Islam as a 'civilizational' enemy) seems a little too convenient after a decade in which Gray like other realists appeared lost for a foe. Still less does it follow that statesmen could be *obliged* to wage nuclear war and produce disaster, even if we imagine that some might be stupid enough to do so.

The China question is crucial here. Clearly Gray is unwilling to rest the future of strategy on local wars in places like Sierra Leone, medium-level contests between the West and 'rogue' states, or even nuclear rivalries of regional powers like India and Pakistan. He needs a big, truly polar confrontation at the centre of the world system if the classic place of strategic thinking is to be maintained in Western and global thought. Certainly, one possible line of medium-term development is that large non-Western powers like China (and India) will utilize their economic growth and population to take the world stage as military rivals of a West that - although still strong - could be in relative decline. Turn-of-the-century sabre-rattling over Taiwan (or Kashmir), taken in isolation, could point in that direction. It takes only a little imagination, however, to see very different possibilities. We don't need to give too much credence to liberal globalizing myths, according to which trade and economic interdependence will automatically engender world peace. But even Gray should take note of fundamental developments in twentieth-century history, which have fundamentally altered the scope for major wars.

The creation of the Western bloc after 1945 and its survival and deepening integration - even after its principal enemy imploded in 1989-91 - are striking demonstrations of the possibilities of internationalized state power. At the centre of the contemporary world system stands a huge agglomeration of Western power, which is busily spawning a worldwide web and regional complexes of internationalized law and institutions - as well as markets. Non-Western states, from the smallest micro-state right up to great powers like Russia and China, cannot but be extensively involved in these processes, which are reinforced by the democratic revolution which has spread from Latin America and Eastern Europe to Asia and Africa. None of this means that there cannot be wars (on the contrary, these political upheavals are clearly stimulating local conflicts) or even major wars (although this is much less certain). Still less does it mean that the accumulation of awesome weaponry will cease to be part of the political self-aggrandisement of ruling elites. It does mean, however, that in the largest terms the stakes have changed. Ironically it is the twentieth century's three major military contests, the world wars and Cold War, which are largely responsible for this transformation in the role of military power in the world system.

Thus China's future (like that of other major states) may lie less in becoming a polar military antagonist of America and the West, than in a combination of political fragmentation and partial integration in Western-dominated, increasingly global institutions. We should not underestimate the national ambitions of Chinese leaders - or, for that matter, those of the Gray's former masters in the American elite. However both can surely see not only the writing on the (global) economic wall, but also the overriding need to avoid being 'obliged' to detonate their nuclear totems. Although rulers cling to nuclear weapons as ultimate expressions of power, few find the supremely dangerous power play that they were used for in the early 1980s a credible model for the future.

Half-life of a tradition

Where does this leave strategy? As a way of thinking about power we find it in marketing, electoral mobilization, sport, even academic rivalries - everywhere that organized competition prevails. In the historic military sense preferred by Gray, it faces not rapid redundancy but gradual supersession. People and governments increasingly view war as an *illegitimate* extension of politics. As the genocidal character of war is renewed in 'savage violence', there is a powerful tide against war in general. After a century in which laws of war have been honoured chiefly in the breach, there is a growing tendency for war itself to be seen as a 'crime' - against humanity as well as against peace.

The demand for justice in war has, of course, facilitated a limited rehabilitation of military power. The overtly genocidal tendency in local wars may be prevented by politics and punished by legal action, but it can probably be *halted* only by greater force. If genocide is a form of war against civilian populations, it requires opposing arms to defeat it. From the Holocaust to Cambodia and most recently Bosnia and Rwanda, genocidal power has been defeated in war - respectively by the Red Army and the Allies, by the Vietnamese, by Croatian and Bosnian armed forces supported by the West, by the Rwandan Patriotic Front.

However as Gray's neglect of this phenomenon also suggests, it hardly provides sufficient scope for a general rehabilitation of strategic thinking about force. For one thing, the new demand for justice in war subjects even counter-genocidal violence to unprecedented scrutiny. From condemning war *as* crime to examining the 'war crimes' even within a 'just war' is a small step. Some of those who documented the abuses committed by Serbian power in Kosovo were among the first to examine breaches of international law in NATO's bombing campaign, launched to halt them. If this trend is taken much further, it will be increasingly difficult (at least for Western states) to carry out much more than peacekeeping operations.

Colin Gray has relatively little time for 'small wars' and seemingly less for law and morality as disciplines within which war may be understood and judged. He hinges his case on trends towards nuclear proliferation and renewed great power rivalry, which might give new life to the way that strategy operated in the Cold War. He is in for the long haul. But it is precisely in long-term perspective that the eternal verities are looking increasingly abstract. However valid the short- and

medium-term scope for military actions of the kind that we have seen in recent years, the big lesson that human society has begun to learn in the last century concerns *limits* to the valid use of force. After Hiroshima and Auschwitz, we briefly began the task of constructing an inclusive, peaceful world order. After the huge historic detour of the Cold War, that is once more the big agenda, however hesitantly today's world leaders address it. If we fail, and in the pitfalls along the way, classic strategic wisdom will remain a necessary fallback. To the extent that we succeed, it will slowly recede to memory and the margins of both politics and understanding.

Thus historic perspective defines a critical difference between Colin Gray and his mentor. Clausewitz was a revolutionary thinker, who brilliantly grasped the meaning of war in the light of the new phenomena of his times. He defined a tradition of thinking about war that dominated, for good or ill, for more than a century. Gray is the defender of that tradition now that its time is slowly passing. Converting historic truth into truism, he misses the emergent truths of our times.