

8-29-2023

## Book Review: *Strategia: A Primer on Theory and Strategy for Students of War*

Phillip Dolitsky

Follow this and additional works at: [https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters\\_bookshelf](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters_bookshelf)



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#)

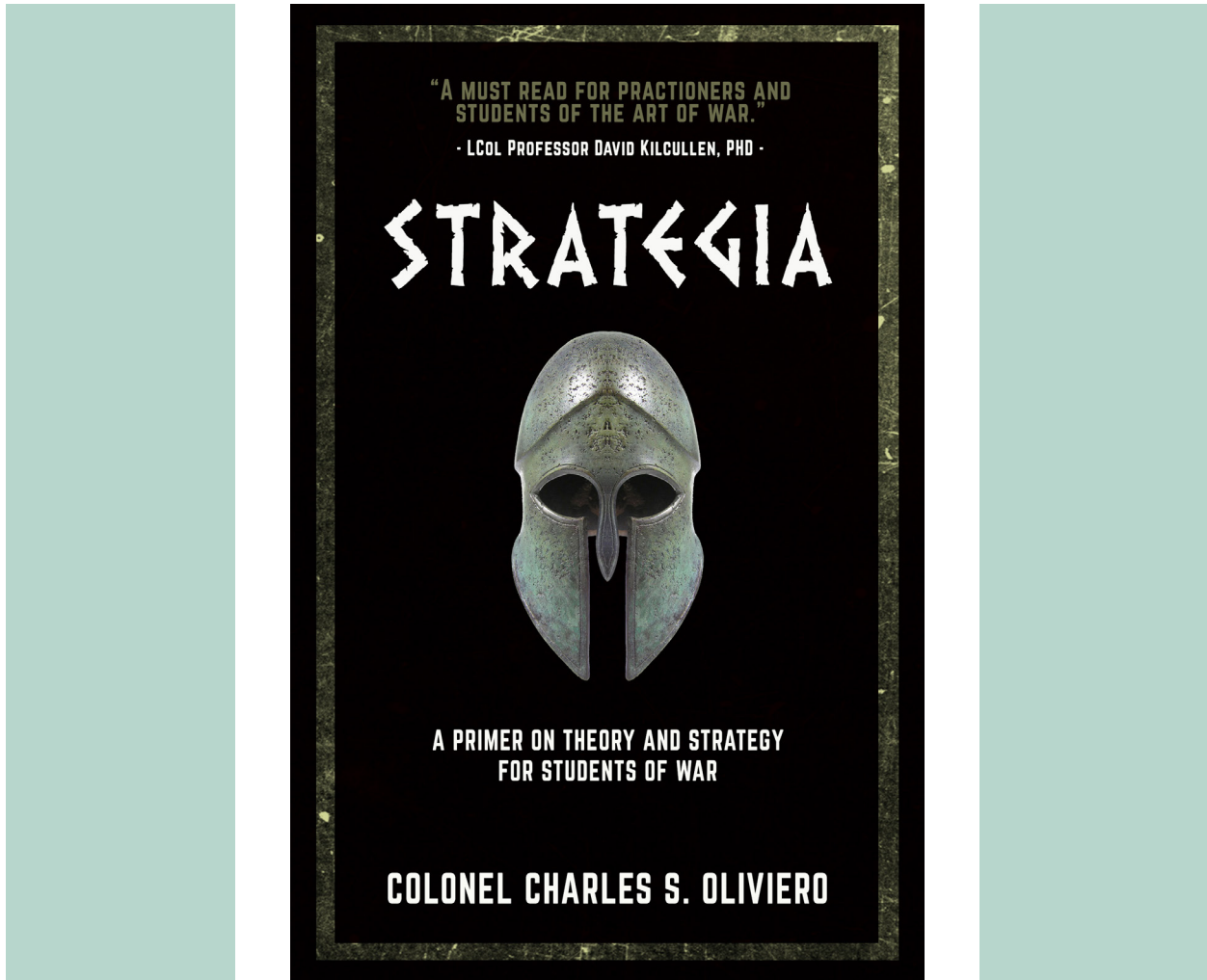
---

### Recommended Citation

Phillip Dolitsky, *Book Review: Strategia: A Primer on Theory and Strategy for Students of War* (US Army War College Press, 2023),  
[https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters\\_bookshelf/21](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters_bookshelf/21)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Parameters and Associated Collections at USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Parameters Bookshelf – Online Book Reviews by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.

## — PARAMETERS BOOKSHELF —



Reviewed by Phillip Dolitsky, master's student at the School of International Service,  
American University

**C**harles S. Oliviero begins *Strategia: A Primer on Theory and Strategy for Students of War* with a straightforward proposition: “[M]ore than two millennia of investigation has brought Western society only marginally closer to understanding the nature of war” (2). He repeats this claim with a slight revision in the beginning of Chapter 1:

What is the true nature of war? The question is deceptively simple; but the answer is not. In fact, whether the true nature of war can be understood at all is moot. However, there is value in the pursuit. The premise here is that despite more than two thousand years of active consideration, Western society has gained little in its understanding of the nature of war (5).

Oliviero then outlines a metaphor for understanding the problem, which he returns to later in the book. Then, noting that war is “surely political, social, economic, and more,” Oliviero wonders whether war’s destructive absurdity comes from the fact that “humanity does not understand it” (6).

Oliviero blames the Western professional military education establishment for the dismal study of “Military Theory” and war’s true nature. The German *Bundeswehr*, he notes, only teaches

Carl von Clausewitz, while the Canadian Forces College “does not teach Military Theory at all, *per se*” (6). Those colleges that do offer courses in military theory only teach a select few students. Moreover, he criticizes the study of “modern Military Theory” outside the joint professional military education world, noting that it has been “hijacked” by sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists (19). To explain how military theory ought to be understood, Oliviero describes a “Complex Matrix of Military Theory” that “embodies the interconnectivity of philosophies, theories, policies, and strategies, as well as tactics, doctrine, war, and warfare” (12).

Oliviero’s central claim is that 2,000 years of study has not garnered much understanding of the nature of war. He is dismissive of Clausewitz, noting that the Prussian’s “pervasive influence has acted to blind many professional soldiers and scholars to all other military theorists” (65). In the section on Clausewitz, Oliviero does not mention Clausewitz’s insight about war being an extension of politics and only casually mentions Clausewitz’s “trinity” (though not by name) to note it was borrowed from Newtonian physics. He chides “most military officers” to whom “Military Theory equates to quoting Clausewitz” (192).

In chapters 4–6, “War on Land,” “War at Sea,” and “War in the Air,” Oliviero offers vignettes of “the most important and influential military philosophers, theorists, and strategists” (53). In this motley crew of individuals, some important names are absent (J. C. Wylie, Raymond Aron, Colin S. Gray, and Edward N. Luttwak, to name a few). Perhaps the most serious omission is Thucydides, whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* is a treasure trove of prescient gems of strategic and military wisdom and who articulated a robust understanding of the nature of war. While the need to make omissions is understandable—he says so himself (201)—much less so is Oliviero’s selection.

Chapters 4–6 are troubling in another way. Far from learning about how war on land is waged, readers leave chapter 4 with two main conclusions. In Oliviero’s words: “First, that there is a necessary difference among philosophers of war, military theorists, and military strategists. . . . Second, that even though Western military thought and theory is an intricate and growing matrix of thoughts, beliefs and practices, most of the men studied here repeatedly tilled the same ground” (85). Readers do not learn about the land environment and its political importance, variety, friction, and opacity. Nor do readers learn—from anywhere in the book—about theories of attrition, coercion, terrorism, and other vitally important areas of military thought.

As a primer on theory and strategy, *Strategia* falls short; as a work of sustained criticism against strategic studies’ teaching about and understanding of war, it leaves the picture incomplete and fairly morose. It is hard to recommend it against the many other introductory works on strategic theory and practice.

Toronto, CA: Double Dagger Books, 2022 • 227 pages • \$19.99

---

**Keywords: Clausewitz, military theory, Thucydides, Raymond Aron, Colin Gray**

Disclaimer: Book reviews published in *Parameters* are unofficial expressions of opinion. The views and opinions expressed in *Parameters* book reviews are those of the reviewers and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.