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## On “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray” and Author's Response

Phillip Dolitsky

Lukas Milevski

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## On “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray”

Phillip Dolitsky  
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This commentary responds to Lukas Milevski’s article, “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray,” published in the Winter 2021–22 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 51, no. 4).

**Keywords:** Colin S. Gray, grand strategic thought, grand strategy, military strategy, military power

Few strategic thinkers were as prolific as the late Colin S. Gray. His pen touched the entire gamut of strategic thought—from nuclear strategy to strategic culture to sea power to geopolitics. Future scholars, perhaps this author, will need to consolidate Gray’s life work into the ultimate companion guide to his strategic thought. In the recent Winter issue of this journal, Lukas Milevski tipped his hand at doing just that with “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray.” He argues, “Gray’s conception of grand strategy emphasizes the agential context of military strategy” and notes Gray’s view “contradicts the mainstream interpretation particularly favored in the United States, in which grand strategy is identified as the master of policy.”<sup>1</sup> While Milevski argues these points with superb clarity, I write here to highlight two critical areas of Gray’s thought Milevski omitted in his otherwise comprehensive analysis.

The first, and perhaps more serious omission, concerns a matter of first principles. Since grand strategy is synonymous with statecraft, this strategy must consider the nature of the world order it plans to operate within. This consideration is where Gray strayed from “mainstream” international relations thought. Current international relations students have concentrated their study on the Waltz/Wendt debate of international politics, which pits “neorealism” versus “constructivism.” Yet, Gray was not a neorealist, and he disdained constructivism. Indeed, Gray referred to Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* as “a book which demonstrates that being elegantly parsimonious in theory building offers insufficient compensation for being wrong.”<sup>2</sup> He was perhaps the most vocal defender of classical realism, claiming that “flawed though the principal texts of classical realism may be, when compared with more

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1. Lukas Milevski, “The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray,” *Parameters* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2021–22): 81–94, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss4/8/>.

2. Colin Gray, “Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future Is the Past—with GPS,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 5 (December 1999): 161–82.

contemporary would-be master/mistress-works, they have an overriding virtue. To risk the vernacular, they got the big things right enough.”<sup>3</sup>

Given his embrace of classical realism, Gray had sweeping thoughts on the international system:

As a neoclassical realist I insist that the game of politics (or security communities) does not change from age to age, let alone from decade to decade. I will stop just short of claiming that the game cannot change, but only by way of a token nod in the direction of never saying never. Paradoxically, perhaps, this stance is not a conservative one. It is alert to the facts of cumulative, sometimes apparently non-linear, change in the character of international relations, including international strategic relations. It denies only the likelihood of change in the nature of those relations.<sup>4</sup>

Given his embrace of realism and the classic realist works, Gray did not support, for example, global governance as seen in his *Another Bloody Century*. He also did not endorse global governance in his thoughts on grand strategy (more on this below). This is not a small omission. Instead, it stems logically from Gray’s understanding of world politics.

While Milevski synthesized Gray’s thoughts on grand strategy, his analysis lacks the foundation upon which it rests. I contend one cannot understand Gray’s conception of grand strategy by starting with his thoughts on strategy, as Milevski does. Instead, this conception must begin with Gray’s fearless embrace and moving reverence to the great works and scholars of classical realism highlighted so well in the article, “Clausewitz Rules, OK?”<sup>5</sup> Yet, Milevski skips this step entirely, which leaves readers with a watered-down version of Gray’s thoughts on grand strategy.

Milevski’s second omission, as jarring as the first, is not mentioning Gray’s one book on grand strategy, *The Sheriff*. In this short book, Gray outlines his thoughts on what American grand strategy should look like as the “sheriff of the world order.” He deals with the elusive concept of “world order,” noting it is “neither self-enforcing nor is it comprehensively enforceable” and “every such ‘order’ requires a sheriff, or some other agent of discipline.” He also links this notion of what American grand strategy should look like to his conception of international politics, and he makes this point throughout the book (for example, see pages 37 and 55). Furthermore, Gray, from his realist perspective of world politics, sees nongovernmental organizations and multinational organizations (like the UN) as having no use in protecting the current world orders. Milevski also features

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3. Gray, “Clausewitz Rules.”

4. Gray, “Clausewitz Rules.”

5. Gray, “Clausewitz Rules.”

Gray's essay, "Harry S. Truman and the Forming of American Grand Strategy in the Cold War, 1945–1953," in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* that analyzes the grand strategy of Harry Truman. While the essay is incredibly valuable to understanding Gray's thoughts on grand strategy, it does not carry the same weight as *The Sheriff*.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps Milevski did not mention *The Sheriff* since he wanted to only discuss matters of theory. Yet, Gray was fond of quoting Bernard Brodie's quip that "strategic theory is a theory of action."<sup>7</sup> That Gray's presentation of a grand strategic "theory of action" is missing from Milevski's essay beggars belief.

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Phillip Dolitsky

Phillip Dolitsky is a master's student at the School of International Service at American University.

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6. Colin S. Gray, *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

7. Bernard Brodie, "Why Were We So (Strategically) Wrong?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 5 (Winter 1971): 151–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1147725>.

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## The Author Replies

Lukas Milevski  
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**P**hillip Dolitsky identifies what he believes to be two significant omissions in my exploration of Colin Gray’s grand strategic thought—ignoring Gray’s classical realist perspective on international affairs and neglecting *The Sheriff* as an example of how he would design a grand strategic theory for action. Neither is substantive.

The classical realist perspective is essentially irrelevant; it is an international relations identification, meaningless to the field of strategic studies. Academically and practically, strategy is international relations-agnostic. Although many practitioners might argue the two assumptions, that conflict and war are inevitable in principle—distinct from saying particular wars are inevitable in practice—and that military power remains relevant reflect a realist perspective, this is not the historical experience of the field or real-world practice. Historically, representatives of all persuasions (realists, liberals, fascists, Marxists, and many others) have thought about strategy and, except for absolute pacifists, have also practiced strategy. The cute paradigmatic/ideological distinctions of international relations collapse in the real world of strategic practice. In this context, the degree to which Gray invoked classical realism is at least as much to translate the fundamentals of his perspective to nonstrategic studies, essentially an international relations audience, as it is a statement of ideational identity.

Dolitsky, with unnecessary force, suggests it “beggars belief” that I ignored *The Sheriff* as an example of Gray’s grand strategic theory of action. Yet, *The Sheriff* is not a book about grand strategy or statecraft. It engages topics related to defense planning, strategy, and defense policy, tied together with a vision of American engagement with the world (the titular sheriff). American academics misguidedly (and typically) consider grand vision to be grand strategy, but in actuality, none of the four themes presented in *The Sheriff*, individually or together, comprise grand strategy. The book does not engage with either nonmilitary issues or nonmilitary power except in a token manner. It pertains to grand strategy only to the extent that defense planning, strategy, defense policy, and visions of one’s role in the world interact with statecraft. *The Sheriff* lacks the necessary breadth to be considered an exploration of grand strategic or statecraft theory of action.

Fundamentally, Gray did not write about statecraft or grand strategy as such; he wrote about military strategy and defense, usually explicitly acknowledging the grand strategic or statecraft context. Since he never substantially engaged with nonmilitary power, Gray never wrote, nor could he write, a theory of grand strategy or a grand strategic (let alone statecraft) theory for action. This fact is not a slight against Gray. Virtually every scholar who has sought to employ the concept of grand strategy has failed to engage with its full conceptual and practical breadth, reflecting how hard it is to theorize grand strategy. As a result, Gray did not compare the instrumental values of military and nonmilitary power—except to identify a degree of fungibility. Although perhaps relevant to statecraft as a concept, the paradigmatic debates of international relations (which essentially concern the relative values of various forms of power) hardly play a part in Gray’s grand strategic thought.

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Lukas Milevski

Dr. Lukas Milevski is an assistant professor at the Institute of History at Leiden University. He is the author of *The West’s East: Contemporary Baltic Defense in Strategic Perspective* (2018) and *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (2016).

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