Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Another Bloody Century Discussion Guide –

This guide is intended to help readers reflect on the perspectives contained within the book Another Bloody Century, and to consider how they might enhance their own understanding of future war.

Prep Work:
1. Required: Read the entire book.

2. Optional: Dr. Colin Gray has published widely over his forty-plus year career. In addition to reading the required text, readers are encouraged to sample his other writings, many of which are accessible online.

Discussion Questions: The list of discussion questions below is not meant to be comprehensive. Discussion leaders should supplement this list with their own questions.

1. In Gray’s view, what is the distinction between the nature of war and the character of war?

Key Take-Away: The essential nature of war does not change, but its character is constantly evolving. Gray’s distinction here aligns with the definitions presented in MCDP-1 Warfighting. The violent, unpredictable, and interactive nature of war distinguishes it from other types of human competition.

2. What does Gray say about the potential for surprise?

Key Take-Away: Surprise is inherent in war and therefore certain to occur in future conflict. Strategic intelligence is vital for all the obvious reasons, but it cannot anticipate everything since change does not proceed in a linear manner. As Gray emphasizes, “History, including strategic history, is often non-linear. Trends come in bunches, interact unpredictably, and may produce a future which, though necessarily built on familiar material from the past, is so qualitatively different from what went before as to frustrate prediction.”

3. Why does Gray take issue with “grand narratives” on war and warfare?

Key Take-Away: Grand narratives that aim to place wars into a much larger historical framework are popular and misleading. They purport to explain long-term trends, such as the rise and fall of total war and the obsolescence of interstate warfare. They are appealing because they appear to impose order and meaning on an otherwise messy historical record. But they are also misleading and typically collapse upon close scrutiny. As Gray points out, “A perennial problem with grand narratives is that they are wont to seduce their authors into constructing a story that not merely moves on, but moves on apparently purposefully. Alas, history is not like that.” In short, history is too nonlinear and chaotic to be captured in sweeping narratives.

4. What does Gray think about Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW)?

Key Take-Away: Gray acknowledges that the 4GW narrative has some truth to it, but this is only because it repackages eternal truths of warfare, albeit with a new vocabulary. Gray also criticizes 4GW theorists for recasting the historical record to conform to their grand narrative and prematurely declaring the demise of state-centric warfare.
5. Why is context so important in understanding war and its dynamics?

Key Take-Away: Understanding context is crucial because war does not occur in a vacuum. “If we are broadly correct in our grasp of the contexts that comprise the relevant future, then it should follow that our expectations about future warfare...should also be tolerably well founded,” according to Gray. Abstract discussions of war may be an entertaining intellectual enterprise, but they are of little practical. He adds: “The resort to war is highly contextual. Political decisions to fight are taken not because it is in our human nature to be belligerent, but rather because some vital interest is at stake.”

6. What does Gray predict about America’s power relative to other states?

Key Take-Away: Gray predicts that the era of American hegemony will end sooner than its champions would like to believe. He claims that “it is as close to a certainty as anything can be in the dangerous jungles of political prediction: that American hegemony will erode and come to be viewed by most sensible people in what we call the West as an all too brief golden era.”

7. How Clauswitzian is Gray’s analysis?

Key Take-Away: Gray’s analysis clearly rests upon a Clausewitzian framework. Like Clausewitz, he believes that war pursued for its own sake is devoid of purpose. Other variables, including culture, play a role in war, but politics is the key driver in determining its nature and character. In short, war is an instrument of policy and expression of political behavior. Gray also attacks John Keegan’s argument that war is primarily an extension of culture.

8. What role does Gray ascribe to culture?

Key Take-Away: The cultural elements of war are important to understand, even though they are not as important as political variables. As Gray emphasizes, “Warfare is social and cultural, as well as political and strategic, behavior. As such it must reflect the characteristics of the communities that wage it.” After acknowledging all this, Gray takes pains to add: “The important fact that war is cultural does not diminish the logical and historical authority of the argument that war primarily is political” (emphasis added).

9. The U.S. armed forces are guilty of what three “cardinal sins”?

Key Take-Away: According to Gray, the U.S. military 1) confuses military and strategic success; 2) mistakes combat with war; and 3) forgets that war should be focused on forging a better peace. The common failing lying beneath these misconceptions is the “longstanding tendency to take a narrowly military view of war.”

Another Bloody Century Discussion Key Take-Aways:

1. The essential nature of war does not change, but its character is constantly evolving.
2. Surprise is inherent in war and therefore certain to occur in future conflict.
3. Grand narratives that aim to place wars into a much larger historical framework are popular and misleading.
4. Gray acknowledges that 4GW narrative has some truth to it, but this is only because it repackages eternal truths of warfare with a new vocabulary.
5. Understanding context is crucial because war does not occur in a vacuum.
6. Gray predicts that the era of American hegemony will end sooner than its champions would like to believe.
7. Gray’s analysis clearly rests upon a Clausewitzian framework.
8. The cultural elements of war are important to understand, even though they are not as important as political variables.
9. According to Gray, the U.S. military 1) confuses military and strategic success; 2) mistakes combat with war; and 3) forgets that war should be focused on forging a better peace.

**To the Discussion Leader:**

This book provides a meaty intellectual dish, and one that is well worth digesting over time. *Another Bloody Century* is not a quick or easy read by any yardstick. Officers who have studied Clausewitz will find it easy to follow Dr. Gray’s arguments. Officers not familiar with Gray’s previous works will find his style blunt and refreshing, if somewhat repetitive.

Gray’s hardboiled realpolitik ideas will provide ample fuel for discussion. More idealistically-minded students will take issue with his assumptions and arguments. Students may question whether Gray is guilty of embracing a form of grand narrative that he condemns.

He is clearly sympathetic to America’s role as a guardian of world order, but does not mince words when criticizing its armed forces and how they are trained, organized, and equipped for future war.

Encourage the Marine to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book *Another Bloody Century*. 