

The guerre the 21st Century

Interview with Brigadier general (Retired)
Philippe Voute,

*who translated Colin Gray's book «Another Bloody Century»
published by Economica and entitled «la guerre au XXI^e siècle»*

Q. Sir, why were you interested in this book?

During a stay in the US in the late 90s, I took part in seminars that endeavored to define threats that were likely to threaten the US Army by 2025-2030, and therefore to define likely organizations, missions, and doctrines (this was the *Army After Next* program). Though I retired, it did not suddenly delete my interest for operations in the future or war's future. Moreover, because of my deep interest in history - and it seems that our armed forces give the impression to have skipped over it for nearly two dozen years - I could only take an interest in an author that considers that History is our best guide to the future, even the only one.

Q. Did you already know Professor Colin S. Gray?

No, I didn't! Despite his links with the Carlisle Strategic Studies Institute (Pennsylvania), with which he is still

working, I do not remember to have ever met him. Anyway, his double European and American culture, and his deep professional knowledge within strategic decision-making agencies as within research university centers, seemed to me to be positive assets for this prospective issue to be dealt with. And he did it, mastering seriously and competently the subject.

Q. But can we really anticipate the strategic future with certainty?

No, we can't! Incidentally, Colin S. Gray warns us about the lack of humility of some people and about fashionable prophecies. Thus, he mentions a series of passed prophecies that are as many unintentional jokes. But he affirms that History provides us with constants and trends in the evolution of these fields, as well as examples of breaks, whatever they are: "revolutions in military affairs, in strategic affairs, or in security affairs, etc..."! It is up to us to consider and look for what will remain

constant, what will change, eventually what will totally break with the past... without forgetting that surprise and unpredictable issues are not only likely but unavoidable.

Q. Can you give us an example about these constant factors?

Yes, I can! The fact is that warfare is a standing issue in human condition; thus, the reasons for waging war are always limited to Thucydides triad: "honor, fear, and interest". Let me insist on the quite Clausewitzian author's approach that makes a distinction between the unchanging nature of war - a violent act carried out for political purposes - and its changing character depending upon the geographical, cultural, social, or technical environment at the moment.

Q. By the way, is not the technical factor the essential one and the factor that transforms the future of war?

You remind me of an outstanding French comic strip in the 70s about the development of armament, from clubs to nuclear weapons, and whose pages always ended with this expression: "with such a weapon, war becomes impossible"! More seriously, Colin S. Gray takes technical evolution into account, but he warns us that it cannot have more importance than standing factors such as danger, chance, friction, tiredness, fear, or uncertainty. What has more gravity: he anticipates an unavoidable extension of warfare to new geographic dimensions, space and cyberspace... and he does not forget to deal with weapons of mass destruction in detail, which are at the disposal of belligerents and are tried and tested weapons.

Q. And what about terrorism in all this?

Indeed, Colin S. Gray is one among a few authors to consider a revival of major inter-state regular wars. Let's

not worry; terrorism is dealt with within the framework of irregular wars, and it is only one mode of action - among others - which can be contemplated. The United-States launched themselves into GWOT (*Global War On Terrorism*) as it is being called; but will this phenomenon - to which an increased use of Special Forces is linked - be a specific feature of the 21st century? The author is doubtful about it.

Q. Could you and the author miss changes or revolutions in other parts of the world, as both of you focus on the United-States?

Of course, I know neither Russian nor Chinese languages, and this book is quite focused on North-America. But the author explains it: the United-States are still (but for how long?) the hyper-power that has the will, ideas and assets to have a global strategic action. It is important to take an interest in their achievements and their vision; however, it does not mean that we forget Chinese and Russian (or French) ideas, and the author uses them a lot, as bibliography and quotations show it. On the other hand, Colin S. Gray warns us against the US capability to create concepts - "fourth generation war", "effect-based operations", etc. - and acronyms that only hide old ideas and disturb us about the war phenomenon.

Q., Has the author - dealing with war - an opinion on peace?

Of course and it is also the theme of the last part of the book entitled "Taming the beast". We do not wage war for war but in order to reach a just peace... or an advantageous one, which could be the starting point for another conflict. Without entertaining illusions and with strong realism, Colin S. Gray proves that war has some natural limits... but he considers that "only dead people saw the end of the war" as Plato said.

Q. You seem to be quite enthusiastic about the contents of this book! Do you share all the designs of the author?

Of course, no! This book is not «the Bible and the Prophets»! Anyway, our fellow countrymen could set their teeth on edge here and there because they could consider that the vision of the US new-conservatives is hypercritical towards the French position about war in Iraq. But, beyond these details - that enable us to question ourselves and to see that everyone in this world does not share our "Gaulish" vision - we have to admit that this book will be a red-letter one for all those who are fond of defense issues.

Q. Thank you, Sir, for your patience. May be a last comment?

In fact, I have to express regret and hope. My regret is about not having rushed to the United-Kingdom in 2005, as soon as this book was published, to let know how rich its contents are and enable the French defense community to grasp these data before drafting the White Paper. I hope that young officers become aware of the risks and challenges to which they could be faced in the coming years through this translation - and despite its weaknesses; I hope that they use this book as a rich source of thought and that they find solutions to their problems when the time comes.