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# CLAUSEWITZ & CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

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## IN THIS EDITION

Introduction by A.E. Stahl

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Beatrice Heuser | William F. Owen | Adam Elkus

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# An Introduction to Clausewitz and Contemporary Conflict

As a Co-Founder and the Publisher of Infinity Journal, it is my pleasure to present you with an Infinity Journal Special Edition: *Clausewitz and Contemporary Conflict*. In this edition, you will find six new perspectives that focus on the Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz and his relevance in contemporary armed conflict. Given that Clausewitz died nearly 200 years ago, and his writings are necessarily an outcome of his own experience and times, it is only logical to ask, what is the need for a 'special edition' on a man long passed? The six contributions in this edition argue, in the main, that much of what Clausewitz wrote throughout his short lifetime remains highly relevant to contemporary war and warfare. His writings continue to provide much needed guidance – both in theory and practice. At the same time, Clausewitz's writings remain widely misunderstood. His theory of war and strategy – as well as many of Clausewitz's well-known ideas and concepts – is often misapplied to contemporary doctrine, reports, articles, and other forms of discourse.

War, and the conduct in war, is remarkably distinct from any other human activity and field of inquiry. In fact, so distinct are war and warfare from all other areas of action and inquiry that it seems implausible that there may be one extraordinary thinker who has succeeded in proffering an understanding – for all time – of the interworking of an activity that remains complex, violent, and unpredictable. When we reflect on other areas of complex interests and activities, we can confidently, and for the most part in concert, point to a number of intellectual giants that have conquered a wide array of vital subjects. They have graced posterity with considerable understanding and guidance that we rarely question.

When it comes to the study of war and strategy – and despite the vast array of writings penned by brilliant men and women, both historical and contemporary – at the center of it all we still find Clausewitz. He did not invent the big questions in his study on war, yet he did ask and answer them in unique ways, using distinctive methods, and he did so in greater detail than anyone before or since. The result was success in the formulation of the foundations of a theory of war and strategy that no other theorist has before or since been able to rival, however incomplete they were upon his untimely death. This, of course, is not to paint Clausewitz in an infallible light, and his theory of war and strategy is by no means flawless. However, as far as observing, comprehending, and demonstrating via writings the fundamentals of war, Clausewitz is as close to a level of perfection as any theorist of war and strategy has so far been able to reach.

It is not that Clausewitz necessarily discovered or unlocked any mystery to war and warfare, and one should not look to his writings for this reason. Nor did he offer practical instruction in the problems of war. Rather, we look to Clausewitz for a deeper, more philosophical perspective of war and the conduct in war. This, in turn, has assisted men and women in time of war, as well as those interested in understanding the subject. We turn to Clausewitz for an understanding of the meaning of war, which in fact suits all wars of all time. We look to him to understand how and why war has an irrefutable and unbreakable connection to the political domain, and why this makes war one instrument of policy. Further, we look to Clausewitz to understand the meaning of strategy, which often serves as the basis of most modern definitions of the term. In one of his greatest achievements, Clausewitz gave us the 'Fascinating Trinity', in which we are able to clearly understand ingredients within the nature of war: enmity, chance, and purpose, and how these elements interact and play off of one another in warfare throughout history. Plainly stated, Clausewitz's magnum opus, *On War*, is the finest work ever written on the most influential and formidable social activity that has afflicted and ennobled man since the advent of organized communities.

Though Clausewitz was not always clear in his writings, it remains the case that what he observed and subsequently wrote permits us to understand crucial aspects of war and strategy, which we can and should utilize when analyzing contemporary armed conflict. Carl von Clausewitz may have died in 1831, but his ideas live on, as can be seen in each article of this special edition. Today, the circle of individuals who understand what he wrote is small, and Infinity Journal is proud to present articles from six such men and women. In this special edition, each author has provided a new perspective on Clausewitz the man, his observations, and his enduring relevance.

Lt. Col. Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II writes on Clausewitz's concept of the "center of gravity" and argues that contemporary military doctrine has made the concept the prerequisite for operational art. However, as Echevarria writes, the art really lies in understanding when not to use it.

Professor David Kaiser takes issue with those who have blamed Clausewitz for the First World War. He discusses Clausewitz's influence upon the planning for that war, but adds that *On War* should have enabled statesmen and generals to draw more sensible conclusions after a stalemate developed. Kaiser also demonstrates how Clausewitz's trinity can explain how the First World War came to an end.

Professor Beatrice Heuser has taken a different approach in how to understand Clausewitz. She explains that Clausewitz himself recognized that a conflict might not be decided permanently by a military victory, but he did not want to pursue the subject of how to move from the conduct of war to a lasting peace. This implies that *On War* cannot guide us much further on this subject, and rather than adhering only to the words of one man, we must look for guidance elsewhere.

Dr. Hugh Smith writes on 'Clausewitz as Sociologist', in which he argues that Clausewitz's approach to war is imbued at every level with a sociological perspective, and it is this sociological dimension that serves as a major reason for the continuing relevance of his ideas.

William F. Owen argues what it means "To Be Clausewitzian". For Owen, one must be able to understand the value of Clausewitz's observations and insights and their relevance to actual war, such that one can use them for guidance and, with due judgment, apply them. He holds that "Clausewitzians" do not simply study *On War* out of academic interest. While not excluding other important works on war and warfare, it does mean that they use Clausewitz's observations as their start point and foundation.

Finally, Adam Elkus explains Clausewitz's distinction between policy and strategy and argues for its signal importance in 21st century strategy. He holds that it is not simply semantics: knowledge and proper application of Clausewitz's ideas about policy and strategy can assist military analysts to think better about today's security problems, while a poor understanding of the policy-strategy distinction can produce conceptual confusion.

It is my sincere pleasure to present you with *Clausewitz and Contemporary Conflict*, one of many Infinity Journal Special Editions to come.

**A.E. Stahl**  
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February 2012

# Contents

## Clausewitz's Center of Gravity Legacy 4

**Antulio J. Echevarria II**

In this article, Antulio J. Echevarria II argues that contemporary military doctrine has made the concept of center of gravity the prerequisite for operational art. But the art really lies in knowing when not to use it.

## Clausewitz and the First World War 8

**David Kaiser**

Taking issue with writers who have blamed Clausewitz for the First World War, David Kaiser discusses his influence upon the planning for that war but adds that *On War* should have enabled statesmen and generals to draw more sensible conclusions after a stalemate developed. He then shows how Clausewitz's trinity can explain exactly how that war came to an end.

## Clausewitz as Sociologist 12

**Hugh Smith**

Hugh Smith argues that Clausewitz's approach to war is imbued at every level with a sociological perspective – from his understanding of the novice soldier going into battle to the impact of social change on the capacity of European nations for war. This sociological dimension, the author suggests, is a major reason for the continuing relevance of Clausewitz's ideas.

## Ends, Ways, Means: Clausewitz and Other Prophets 16

**Beatrice Heuser**

Beatrice Heuser explains that it is just in the question of how ways and means should be related to (larger political) ends that Clausewitz decided not to furnish larger elaborations of the subject. He himself recognised that a conflict might not be decided permanently by a military victory, but did not want to pursue the subject of how to move from the conduct of war to a lasting peace. This means that *On War* cannot guide us much further on this subject, and rather than cleaving unthinkingly to the words of this one master, we must look for guidance elsewhere.

## To Be Clausewitzian 20

**William F. Owen**

What does it mean 'To Be Clausewitzian'? In this article, William F. Owen argues that one must be able to understand the value of Clausewitz's observations and insights in *On War*, so that they can be utilized for practical guidance and applied in conjunction with sound judgment. He holds that Clausewitzians do not simply study *On War* out of academic interest alone. While not excluding other important works on war and warfare, it does mean that they use Clausewitz's observations as their start point, and foundation.

## The Policy-Strategy Distinction: Clausewitz and The Chimera of Modern Strategic Thought 24

**Adam Elkus**

Adam Elkus explains Clausewitz's distinction between policy and strategy and argues for its signal importance in 21st century strategy. It's not just semantics: knowledge and proper application of Clausewitz's ideas about policy and strategy can help military analysts think better about today's security problems, while a poor understanding of the policy-strategy distinction can produce conceptual confusion.



# Clausewitz's Center of Gravity Legacy

**Antulio J. Echevarria II**

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Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II is the Director of Research for the U.S. Army War College. He has over 20 years experience in the U.S. Army, having served in a number of command and staff assignments, and has held a NATO Fulbright. He is the author of *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, among many other works. Dr. Echevarria is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the U.S. Army War College, and holds a Master's and Doctorate in history from Princeton University. He is currently on a visiting research fellowship with Oxford University's Changing Character of War Programme, where he is preparing a manuscript on contested principles in contemporary war.

If history is any guide, Clausewitz's theory of the center of gravity will remain a contested concept. Decades of research and debate have clarified some of its finer points, but consensus on the basic nature of the theory is still missing. Nonetheless, military practitioners continue to embrace the concept with enthusiasm; some have even attempted to apply it recently in the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. military currently defines a center of gravity as a "source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act." [i] This definition has some shortcomings, such as its insistence on using the word "source", which unnecessarily complicates matters. However, it has succeeded in clarifying the distinction between centers of gravity and other operational concepts, such as "decisive points" or "critical vulnerabilities". That is clearly a step forward from the situation that existed in the 1980s and 1990s, when the term was being used to describe "anything worthy of being attacked." [ii]

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some shortcomings which  
unnecessarily complicates matters**

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Yet the current official definition is, in fact, presented as a "modern" version of the one found in the 1976 Howard and Paret translation of *On War*, in which a center of gravity is described as the "hub of all power and movement, upon which everything depends." [iii] Whether the updated version actually does justice to the one Clausewitz offered is open to question. In any case, the contemporary definition deliberately links itself to Clausewitz's theory, and thus to his conceptual legacy, which also includes his contributions concerning the relationship between war and policy, and the concept of friction; among other propositions.

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**The problem, however, is that modern  
military doctrine has put more weight  
on the theory than it can bear.**

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The problem, however, is that modern military doctrine has put more weight on the theory than it can bear. For instance, U.S. doctrine insists, as it did over two decades ago, that identifying an opponent's center of gravity is the "essence of operational art" and, indeed, is the key to "all operational design." [iv] It is not clear how any theory, least of all one so hard to pin down, can be the essence of anything, least of all operational art. Moreover, if doctrine is correct, then centers of gravity must be found in order to have operational art. As there is, as yet, little consensus on the linkages between the center of gravity and operational art, this is too great a burden for the concept to shoulder.

## On Art and Gravity

Operational art, as currently defined, is the "application of creative imagination by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, and experience." [v] However, the requirement to find an opponent's center of gravity curtails creative imagination by limiting the thinking of military commanders and their staffs to one particular task. To be sure, the purpose of identifying centers of gravity is simply to assist practitioners in focusing their efforts and resources. As one former U.S. Army general explained, approaching a military problem "from the perspective of a center of gravity leads you to see very quickly that some vulnerabilities are interesting but a waste of resources because they do not

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lead anywhere useful in the end.”[vi] However, the risk of focusing only on trying to find the center of gravity is that other, perhaps more effective, solutions will be overlooked.

Moreover, despite decades of lively debate, the validity of Clausewitz's theory of the center of gravity has never been systematically challenged. Numerous historical case studies have examined whether or how the concept was applied in battles or campaigns. While these studies are indeed informative in many respects, they have not analyzed and tested the theory to determine its limits. In a word, the basic assumption has been that, if a concept appears in *On War*, it is likely valid. The only acknowledged rub has been the difficulty of applying it properly. As several officers recently noted: “Planning teams can take hours—if not days—arguing over what is and is not the enemy's center of gravity,” and it is usually not evidence or analysis but rather the “strongest personality” that wins the argument.[vii] It is a bit rash, therefore, for contemporary doctrine to turn an imprecise theory into the cornerstone for operational art.

## despite decades of lively debate, the validity of Clausewitz's theory of the center of gravity has never been systematically challenged

One might excuse the doctrinal assertions above as rhetorical excess but for the fact that scholars and practitioners have long taken the theory of center of gravity very seriously. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the center of gravity was typically thought of as the main enemy force. Broader interpretations were needed during the Cold War, and some strategists expanded the concept to include “critical aspects” of the principal types of conflict—such as continental, maritime, air, and guerilla—the control of which gave one the upper-hand.[viii]

The frequency with which the theory was mentioned rose sharply during the “American military renaissance” of the 1980s and 1990s. During those decades, the operational level of war was incorporated into U.S. military doctrine, and the concept of center of gravity became laden with institutional and service equities. Maneuver theorists, for instance, advanced an interpretation that supported their view of warfare: namely, that a center of gravity was an enemy force, a terrain feature, unit boundary, or a line of communication, which, if destroyed or neutralized, would result in dislocating the enemy either physically or psychologically. This interpretation later appeared in modified form in the operational doctrine of the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy, both of which saw centers of gravity as “sources of strength,” or the “characteristics, capabilities, or localities” that enabled (or stood in the way of) mission accomplishment.

In contrast, the U.S. Marine Corps viewed centers of gravity as “critical vulnerabilities,” but this interpretation also reflected a “maneuverist” mindset.[ix] For airpower theorists, centers of gravity were thought to be key nodes or critical points, which, if attacked, would cause strategic paralysis; this belief was duly reflected in U.S. Air Force doctrine, and supported its targeting approach to warfare.[x] The maneuverist and air-centric

interpretations clashed, infamously, in Desert Storm with senior officers of both schools of thought identifying completely different centers of gravity.[xi] Military and civilian experts in unconventional warfare kept pace, reiterating that centers of gravity in counterinsurgency campaigns were typically the “target nation's population,” - or one's own, or a combination of the two - and U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine recently reaffirmed the former, stating that the “ability to generate and sustain popular support” is “usually the insurgency's center of gravity.”[xii] Other defense scholars suggested that the key might well be successful “governance operations,” meaning those activities that follow major combat operations and help to link military actions to policy objectives.[xiii]

## U.S. policymakers explicitly highlighted public opinion as the center of gravity in the war on terror

In the meantime, U.S. policymakers explicitly highlighted public opinion as the center of gravity in the war on terror.[xiv] In short, the theory has both reflected and shaped not only what was important in military thinking at various times, but also what was important to military thinking during those times. The probability that it was sometimes misused merely for rhetorical impact only reinforces this point.

### Clausewitz's Theory Examined

That notwithstanding, the concept is a vexing one, and for that Clausewitz deserves much of the blame. Although his examples of what centers of gravity might be — such as an army, key leaders, a capital, or an alliance — align with those discussed earlier, he did not offer an objective methodology for identifying them. The process he described — deriving a center or hub from an assessment of the dominant characteristics of the belligerents — is largely intuitive in nature, which means the answer it yields would be subjective. Clausewitz's approach clearly harkens back to his general theme regarding the importance of developing a commander's military judgment. This method, however, presumes that commanders will have developed their judgment sufficiently before they attempt to apply the theory in the field.

Moreover, the fact that the theory was derived from what today amounts to nothing more than elementary physics does not always simplify matters. A center of gravity is merely a mathematical approximation that describes the point at which gravitational forces converge on an object. However, this simplicity is at times deceptive. Calculating the center of gravity for complex objects, or objects in motion, is not mathematically complicated; but it is not entirely elementary. Among other things, the process requires accepting a certain amount of artificiality, such as fixing objects in time and space, which then produces a sum that is valid only for that specific situation. Such calculations are not necessarily practical in fluid situations.

In other words, for all Clausewitz's foundational work regarding the nature of war and the influence of policy, hostility, and chance, he attempted to develop a concept

that reduces complex forces to a single point. Put differently, he tried to transfer a linear, mathematical concept to a nonlinear activity, such as war — in which elements and the relationships between them are built, destroyed, and rebuilt again but often in different ways. This is clearly problematic, though hardly impossible. Successive generations have taken the theory as an article of faith. It may indeed be worth their while to do so; nonetheless, it is prudent to manage one's expectations.

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It is tempting to think of a center of gravity as a source of strength or a concentration of force, as these are easier to identify. This is, in fact, the approach approved by contemporary military doctrine, which is at root a capability-based formula.[xv] A recent example is how the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) has applied a center of gravity framework in its efforts to help the government of Afghanistan combat corruption.[xvi] This approach focuses on identifying the presumed linkages between centers of gravity, critical capabilities, critical requirements, and critical vulnerabilities (CG-CC-CR-CV). In brief, centers of gravity possess critical capabilities — such as armored striking power — which make them centers of gravity, and which, in turn, have critical requirements — such as lines of communication — which enable them to function. The task for military planners is to find where critical requirements might have critical vulnerabilities—such as inadequately defended transportation networks — which, if attacked, could degrade the critical capabilities of a center of gravity, and thus degrade the center of gravity itself.[xvii]

However, the process does not necessarily begin with identifying centers of gravity; in fact, it is not always fruitful to begin there. Instead, the process typically starts with identifying the set of critical capabilities that would affect mission accomplishment. These may or may not have anything to do with the critical capabilities that belong to a center of gravity. Yet, they should have everything to do with accomplishing the mission, and are thus a worthwhile place for military planners to start. Nonetheless, the distinction between a center of gravity and a "center of critical capability," which is what military planners are actually identifying, is an important one in order to avoid conceptual confusion.

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## centers of gravity ought to be thought of as focal points which, if attacked or neutralized, would bring about the complete collapse of an opponent

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All of this is to say that operational art does not actually need centers of gravity, *per se*, though they obviously might prove useful. The method military planners are using today, in fact, bypasses the so-called "essence" of operational art almost entirely. The real "art" lies in translating political or strategic

aims — such as compelling the withdrawal of hostile forces, restoring a legitimate government, assuring security and stability within a region, and protecting American lives — into operational and tactical objectives. Accomplishing this aim might reveal a center of gravity, if one exists. The error lies not in believing that a center of gravity might exist in a given situation, but in thinking that it is always necessary to find one.

### Conclusion

A rigorous examination of Clausewitz's theory of the center of gravity is overdue. The fact that it has not happened is due in part to Clausewitz's legacy. Until the limits of the theory are acknowledged, it may be useful for military planners to keep a few caveats in mind.

First, unless the political and military aims are in line with the goal of rendering the enemy defenseless, searching for a center of gravity is unnecessary and possibly counterproductive. In many cases, bringing about the complete collapse of an opponent might not serve one's political purposes, and could actually run counter to them.

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## centers of gravity ought to be thought of as focal points which, if attacked or neutralized, would bring about the complete collapse of an opponent

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Second, conceiving of centers of gravity as clusters of critical capabilities is to conflate two operational concepts — while doing justice to neither. Doctrinal precision is important in order to avoid conceptual confusion. Accordingly, centers of gravity ought to be thought of as focal points which, if attacked or neutralized, would bring about the complete collapse of an opponent. They can also be thought of as the single event or activity that must happen for success to occur, and in that sense perhaps a center of gravity would indeed amount to the key to victory.

For instance, some Coalition officers believed that mosques were centers of gravity for AQI (al Qaeda in Iraq) because its *modus operandi* seemed to be to try to control villages by first controlling mosques — due mainly to the religious, political, and cultural power they represent.[xviii] Denying AQI access to mosques was, thus, the logical way forward. However, one should not rule out the possibility that multiple causes frequently contribute to an outcome; and that it might not be obvious which one, if any, was the most important. It is sometimes better, therefore, to think of an entire "set of keys" as contributing to military success (or failure), rather than just one. In any event, the discriminating criterion is determining the *effect* that destroying, or using, a center of gravity will have on one's adversary.

Third, it is generally not fruitful to search for a center of gravity unless a telling blow on one element or part of an adversary will actually have the same effect on the rest. The system should be connected enough — whether politically,



ideologically, geographically, electronically, or otherwise — to be treated as a unified body. The military planner's objective, as Clausewitz wrote, is to trace all centers of power to a single one, and to focus one's resources on attacking that.[xix] If the situation is too chaotic or the foe is too fragmented or decentralized for that to occur, then searching for a center of gravity is unlikely to prove worthwhile.

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Fourth, there may be situations in which striking a center of gravity might deliver a fatal blow; but the enemy might still be able to retaliate with a lethal or unacceptably damaging response, much like a spider whose legs continue to strike after it is dead. This phenomenon is what nuclear strategist Herman Kahn once referred to as "insensate war" and it is

still a possibility in today's globalized world, perhaps even more so.[xx] In other words, the search for a center of gravity cannot be allowed to undermine intellectual creativity or to preclude the development of approaches that could enable numerous hostile elements to be struck simultaneously.

Finally, war's fundamental nature, specifically its characteristic of uncertainty, runs counter to the level of certainty that military planners would like to have. No concept, including the center of gravity, is likely to be able to eliminate that, even if it is forced into the role of being the essence of operational art or the core of operational design. It simply may not be possible to know beforehand with any degree of certainty whether the center of gravity has been correctly determined. Making do with uncertain concepts and principles is part and parcel of what militaries do. It is when that uncertainty is disregarded - as seems to be the case with making the concept of center of gravity the essence of operational art - that problems arise.

Today's militaries would do well, therefore, to ensure that those trained in identifying centers of gravity are equally educated in when not to bother.

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# Clausewitz and the First World War

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Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* — a book that belongs on any list of the great intellectual achievements of Western civilization — surveyed his subject theoretically and generally, based largely on relatively recent historical examples. Two periods of European warfare dominate his book: the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, in which he had fought, and the wars of Frederick the Great from 1740 to 1761. Much of the greatness of the book arose from the profound difference in those two eras, a difference around which much of Clausewitz's analysis revolves. Napoleon exemplified the practice of the first kind of war which Clausewitz described in his preface, one designed "to overthrow the enemy—to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please." Frederick the Great always sought the alternative objective: "merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations." Both Book Six on attack and Book Seven on defense include chapters aimed specifically at one or the other of these types of wars, and Book Eight, Chapter 9, it must always be kept in mind, refers specifically to plans for a war "designed to lead to the total defeat of the enemy." [i] Nor is this all. Perhaps the most historical section of the book, in Book 8, Chapter 3, traces changes in the scale and methods of objectives of conflict across many centuries of European history. [ii] And Clausewitz repeatedly asked whether the massive wars of the Napoleonic era would become the model for future conflict — always wisely declining to give a particular answer.

Yet it is the fate of most great authors to be misunderstood, and despite, in my opinion, the relatively clear meaning

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## Clausewitz repeatedly asked whether the massive wars of the Napoleonic era would become the model for future conflict — always wisely declining to give a particular answer

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of the text, a number of authors, most of them British, have portrayed Clausewitz as an *advocate* of a single form of war — all-out war aimed at the total annihilation and submission of the enemy — and, more specifically, blaming him, to some extent or other, for the course of the First World War. Basil Liddell Hart introduced this idea in *The Ghost of Napoleon*, Sir John Keegan did so with gusto in 1993 in *A History of Warfare*, and more recently Hew Strachan wrote, "Those who blamed Clausewitz for the slaughter of the First World War were not guilty of finding things in the text of *On War* that were not there." [iii] Strachan's comment has some foundation: German military leaders probably drew on Clausewitz at several key points in the war. Yet this essay aims to show that Clausewitz has far broader application to the First World War than that, that he could indeed have helped statesmen and generals make much wiser decisions at various points of the conflict, and that, in short, Liddell Hart and Keegan were certainly guilty of *missing* things in Clausewitz that *were* there.

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## One could write a very long book on the applicability of Clausewitz to the First World War

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One could write a very long book on the applicability of Clausewitz to the First World War, but I shall content myself with three points. First, the Schlieffen Plan certainly showed the influence of Clausewitz, and particularly that of Book 8, Chapter 9, to which I have already referred. But second, and more importantly, Clausewitz provided ample theoretical and practical foundation upon which to build much sounder objectives and strategies for the major powers in response to the initial stalemate on the Western Front. Lastly, I shall argue that another of Clausewitz's concepts — his "remarkable trinity" — can best explain how the First World War came to an end. In short, while Clausewitz certainly did not cause the First

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World War, he might have enabled politicians and generals to fight it better, and that war revealed implications of his theories of which he, living in a different age, was unaware.

How did Clausewitz influence the war planning before 1914? Partly because none of the major powers possessed anything comparable to the United States' National Security Council, many of their war plans did not match strategy to particular political objectives. Russia pledged itself to a rapid advance into Germany in order to help its ally France, without forecasting where that advance might stop or how it might end. Austro-Hungarian leaders seem to have failed to grasp that they would have inadequate forces to destroy Serbia unless Russia stayed out of the war until it was too late. The French Plan XVII did aim directly at France's political objective, the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine. But the German general staff, acting without much political input, had under Schlieffen thought matters out more carefully. War against the Franco-Russian alliance required a quick, complete victory over one enemy or the other, and Schlieffen had chosen France. Reading *On War*, Book 8, Chapter 4, he would have noticed three recommended means of defeating an enemy: the destruction of its army, the occupation of its capital, and the delivery of an effective blow against a powerful ally. Leaving aside the third, he had written a plan to accomplish the first two objectives. The envelopment of the French Army by the advance through Belgium would destroy it and allow him to capture Paris far more quickly than the elder Moltke had in 1870-1. Schlieffen was dead by 1914, of course, and the younger Moltke had the extraordinary luck of fighting against a French war plan that could not have been better designed to help him had it been written in Berlin. However, he came a cropper. The Schlieffen plan sought a decisive battle deep in the interior of France — a strategy which, Clausewitz had warned, could indeed produce a victory with maximum political consequences, but which was also more difficult to achieve than a victory at the frontier. And so it was. The extraordinary advance of the German forces left them exhausted and undersupplied at the Battle of the Marne, and they had to retreat. Moltke had fallen into the trap Clausewitz described in Book 7, Chapter 5: he had passed the culminating point of the attack.

### **Moltke had fallen into the trap Clausewitz described in Book 7: he had passed the culminating point of the attack**

A stalemate, of course, had developed on the Western Front by the end of 1914. Clausewitz's critics blame him for the decisions reached by the Germans and the allies to continue their search for total victory for the next four years, rather than to acknowledge new military realities and make peace. In so doing, they can refer to his characterization of wars aiming at the total destruction of the enemy as most closely approaching the "pure" form of warfare, or the "theoretical objective" of war. But as I have argued elsewhere, Clausewitz in those passages is simply arguing the ideal type of absolute war that he sets up as a straw man in Book 1, Chapter 1, to show that real war is different. In real war — and Clausewitz makes this point again and again — the destruction of the enemy's forces is only one possible goal, and not always the

best one, depending both upon the relative capabilities of one's self and the enemy, the nature of the objective one seeks, and its cost.[iv] One could more fruitfully argue that Clausewitz, eighty years before the fact, told the leaders of the First World War exactly what they needed to hear, in words which many future generations would not be able to read without feeling a chill down their spine: "Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by the political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow." [v]

### **One could more fruitfully argue that Clausewitz, eighty years before the fact, told the leaders of the First World War exactly what they needed to hear**

Indeed, during the First World War many statesmen and some generals wrestled with the question of objectives, but nearly always, alas, without reaching an appropriate conclusion. German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg apparently realized by early 1915 that complete victory over all Germany's enemies was most unlikely, and he hoped the moment would come when the Allies, the German General Staff, and the German people would be willing to make peace. Because however he was not willing in December 1916 to argue that Germany could not completely defeat France and Britain, he was helpless against the naval and military demands for unrestricted submarine warfare, since it alone seemed to offer the chance of total victory. War Minister Erich von Falkenhayn also doubted the chances of total victory and laid out the problems Germany faced well in December 1915, but opted for an offensive against Verdun rather than a peace offer.[vi] In January 1918 Prince Max of Baden wrote a memorandum for the Emperor, predicting that Ludendorff's forthcoming offensive would fall short of victory and suggesting that Germany offer to withdraw from Belgium and France in return for peace within weeks of beginning the offensive. His advice was ignored, and Ludendorff pushed yet another German offensive far beyond the culminating point of his attack, wrecking his army.[vii] Various British leaders, even including Lloyd George, seem to have believed at critical moments in the war that complete victory might be impossible, but never dared try to persuade their colleagues or constituents that the time to call a halt had come.[viii] Unfortunately, both sides, for different reasons, expected total victory. The Germans had begun the war with striking successes, advanced steadily in the East, and knocked the Russians out of the war in early 1918. The Allies consoled themselves that their resources were increasing, especially after the United States entered the war in April 1917. By the time that General Ludendorff, the most powerful man in Germany, decided in early October 1918 that the time for compromise might have come, it was too late to get it from the Allies.

The termination of the First World War, indeed, can be most usefully analyzed from a Clausewitzian perspective — and specifically in light of one of his most misunderstood



concepts – his remarkable trinity. Because of the widespread misunderstanding of this idea, we will do well to begin by quoting his own definition of the trinity of war in full.

## **The termination of the First World War, indeed, can be most usefully analyzed from a Clausewitzian perspective his remarkable trinity**

*"War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant characteristics always make war a remarkable trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone."*[ix]

The elements of the trinity, then, are not the people, army and government, but rather, first, primordial violence, hatred and enmity; secondly, the play of chance and probability which occurs, as Clausewitz immediately makes clear, on the battlefield; and lastly, the policy objective for which the war was thought. Clausewitz immediately links these elements respectively with the people, the commander of the army, and the government, and adds, provocatively, that he seeks a theory that maintains a balance among these three elements, an objective which he unfortunately never followed up. Yet the concept of balance, I would suggest, explains the extraordinary manner in which the First World War finally came to an end: not as a result of straightforward battlefield victories, but because of revolutions and mutinies in one belligerent after another.

## **The elements of the trinity, then, are not the people, army and government, but rather primordial violence, hatred and enmity; the play of chance and probability; the policy objective**

Although Clausewitz had seen the greatest European war to date first hand from 1812 until 1815, he had no idea how much larger, more expensive, and more destructive war might become in the next century. The First World War made unprecedented demands upon the people of the warring nations both on the battlefield and the home front. By the end of 1914 armies numbered in the millions and casualties already numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and several of the belligerents lost well over a million men killed by the end of the war. The economic mobilization the war required transformed the warring nations, and its financial demands wrecked the currencies of every warring continental nation. The Allied blockade reduced the food supplies among the Central Powers to dangerous levels. This effort was required by the third leg of the trinity, the policy objective, since every nation, as we have seen, was fighting for total victory. In order to persuade their people to make this effort, the governments

involved had to arouse enormous passion, and they did so with the help of modern propaganda techniques. At one hundred years' distance, the civilizations of Germany, France and Britain in the early twentieth century do not seem especially different from one another, but all these nations labeled their enemies as barbarians in the course of the war. And in fact, the passion which the governments aroused eventually became the enemy of rational policy. In March 1917, after the beginning of unrestricted submarine warfare had led to a break in diplomatic relations between the US and Germany, Count Bernstorff, the German Minister in Washington, returned to Berlin and told Bethmann Hollweg that peace could have been achieved with Wilson's help had submarine warfare been held off for just four weeks. Bethmann replied that the German people would never have accepted peace without unleashing their submarines, since they believed they could be decisive in the war against Britain.[x]

## **And in fact, the passion which the governments aroused eventually became the enemy of rational policy.**

To realize their policy objective of total victory and satiate the passion aroused among their peoples, the belligerent governments depended upon the second leg of the trinity, their military leadership on the battlefield. But such was the nature of military organization and technology in 1914-18 that the generals and admirals simply could not make the necessary decisive victory come to pass. Offensives could inflict (and incur) hundreds of thousands of casualties, and by 1918 the Germans had developed techniques enabling them to break through enemy lines and make substantial advances — but they could not exploit these victories to the extent of bringing about an enemy collapse. Clausewitz's chapters on what battle could accomplish (Book 4) obviously reflected the scale and weaponry of military operations in his time, and he would surely have agreed that they must be revised when warfare, and therefore battle, changes. *The inability of armies to win the victories demanded by the objectives of their governments and the passion of their people constituted an imbalance in Clausewitz's trinity.* Deprived of decisive victories, the passion of the people and of the soldiers at war had to find new outlets — and they did. One by one, they turned against their commanders and their governments. The history of the last two years of the First World War is a series of mutinies and revolutions, initially favoring the Central Powers but subsequently bringing themselves into chaos and leaving the Allies alone upon the battlefield.

## ***The inability of armies to win the victories demanded by the objectives of their governments and the passion of their people constituted an imbalance in Clausewitz's trinity.***

In his greatest book, *The Face of Battle*, John Keegan pointed out the importance of mutiny in the First World War. "A point

was reached in every army," he wrote, "at which either a majority or a disabling minority refused to go on." [xi] The key question, he might have added, was whether these mutinies were accompanied by political upheavals. By the end of 1916 the leadership of all the warring nations was speculating frequently about which would be the first to suffer internal collapse. Dissatisfaction with Tsarist leadership brought down the Russian government in March 1917, and that summer, the Kerensky government's attempt at a new offensive led to the disintegration of the Army and, in November, to the Bolshevik Revolution and the end of Russia's active participation in the war. The French survived such a mutiny in the spring of 1917, and the Italians survived the collapse of most of their army at Caporetto late that year. Keegan notes that an entire British army went to pieces under the weight of the Ludendorff offensive in March 1918, but they too managed to recover. Events among the armies and in the capitals of the Central Powers later that year proved decisive.

Beginning in September 1918, Bulgaria, Austria-Hungary, and Germany successively suffered the same catastrophic events: battlefield reverses, the collapse and desertion of whole units, revolution, and the fall of dynasties. The German case was of course the most interesting, because Ludendorff initially tried to head off the catastrophe by asking the Allies for a cease-fire in early October. When however weeks of negotiations showed that the Allies were not going to grant him an armistice that would later allow him to resume fighting, he changed his mind. Mutiny in the navy and army and revolution in the streets of Berlin, was followed by

Ludendorff's dismissal, the abdication of the Emperor, and the proclamation of the republic. The passion of the people had destroyed the armies and governments of the Central Powers, just as it had earlier in Russia, and left behind power vacuums which in turn led to new disasters over the next 30 years, and whose effects were felt nearly until the end of the twentieth century.

## ***On War* provides us with all the tools we need to understand what happened in the First World War**

Social, political and technological changes had not made decisive victories and unlimited objectives impossible for all time by 1914-18. Both sides in the Second World War had equally sweeping objectives, but the Allies had the wherewithal actually to achieve them less than two years after they went on the offensive in 1943. As a result, the victorious governments, especially in Washington and Moscow, enjoyed unprecedented prestige and power at home and abroad for decades. Clausewitz spent little time on the danger of huge, indecisive conflicts like the First World War, because he had not experienced any. But *On War*, based as it is upon a firm grasp of war, human nature, and the effects of historical change, provides us with all the tools we need to understand what happened in the First World War — which in turn shows how difficult it is for human beings to rely mainly upon their rational faculties in the midst of the primordial violence, hatred and enmity so characteristic of a great war.

## **References**

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- [vi] See Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Sceptre*, (Coral Gables, 1972), 157-60.
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- [viii] On this point see David Kaiser, *Politics and War: European Conflict from Philip II to Hitler* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 344-5.
- [ix] Op. Cit., Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.
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# Clausewitz as Sociologist

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Clausewitz, of course, was not a sociologist (and perhaps not a strategist either – but that is another question). At the time of his death in 1831 the scientific study of society was in its infancy and Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was still to baptize it as 'sociology' in place of 'social physics'. Nonetheless, I suggest that Clausewitz can be placed in a tradition of sociological analysis and ranks as an important figure in that tradition.

Among his predecessors in seeking to understand the relationship of war and society was Montesquieu (1689-1755) whose *De l'Esprit des Lois* proposed underlying laws of social and historical development based on physical and non-physical factors. A key argument was that types of government could be distinguished which reflected their particular societies and influenced the sorts of war they fought. Clausewitz found Montesquieu's approach congenial and strong parallels in their work are evident [Aron, 1983, pp.230-2].

Perhaps a more direct influence was the German Johann Fichte (1762-1814), whom Clausewitz called the 'great philosopher' [Paret, 1976, p.169]. Fichte wrote and lectured on a wide range of social and philosophical issues: the importance of education, religion in society, the duties of citizens, patriotism, political activism, the need to prepare for war and the nature of statesmanship (with Machiavelli expressly in mind). Clausewitz read Fichte early on, later corresponding with and meeting him. Whether or not he always agreed with Fichte, he found his ideas stimulating.

Clausewitz's approach to war reflected both this sociological bent and the spirit of the Enlightenment. Scientific method was beginning to be applied to society, seeking general principles that could explain seemingly disparate and complex developments. Early success came in economics when Adam Smith (1723-1790) analysed not only economic activity in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) but also its equally important social, cultural and ethical underpinnings in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). As Smith sought principles to explain economic activity, Clausewitz did the same for war.

## Clausewitz's approach to war reflected both this sociological bent and the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Many early 'sociologists', including Comte and Saint-Simon (1760-1825) believed that industrialization and growing prosperity would lead to peace. War was dismissed as a feudal activity, dependent on a warrior class that could be more usefully occupied pursuing wealth and on a peasantry now required in industrial production. Trade, as Adam Smith had argued, would replace conquest as a means to wealth, and commerce diminish the martial spirit – a diagnosis that became the mainstream view among sociologists. While Clausewitz recognized the social, political and economic developments in his time, his response was neither to welcome it nor set his face against it. Ever the pragmatist, he saw change as a challenge statesmen and military leaders had to reckon with.

Four aspects of Clausewitz's sociological analysis of war can be outlined: the idea of war as a social act; armed forces, the state and society; the sociology of the military; and social science methodology. This broad-based approach to war, it is argued in the conclusion, ensures Clausewitz's continuing relevance.

### War is a social act

Clausewitz's starting point was that war is 'an act of human intercourse', a 'part of man's social existence' [1976, p.149]. A theory of war, therefore, cannot be confined to a narrow range of issues but must allow for 'every kind of extraneous

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matter' [1976, p.580]. For Clausewitz 'the forces that give rise to war' are 'the social conditions of...states themselves and...their relationships to one another' [1976, p.76]. The German original makes clear that this refers to social relations, not simply to the political relations that are the more proximate causes of war.

## The social foundation of war is also evident in Clausewitz's 'remarkable trinity'

The social foundation of war is also evident in Clausewitz's 'remarkable trinity' – his perception of war as combining in infinitely variable ways three fundamental tendencies of human life. First is the 'blind natural force' of human passion which includes 'hatred' and 'enmity'. 'The passions that are to be kindled in war', he says, 'must already be inherent in the people' [1976, p.89]. Even civilised nations can be 'fired with passionate hatred for each other' [1976, p.76].

As well as passion, war contains the element of reason which shapes the purposes that societies set for themselves and influences the ways in which they seek to achieve those goals. It is reason that makes possible (at least sometimes) the harnessing of war by states as an instrument of policy.

Then there is chance which war has in abundance. While chance is in one sense objective i.e. determined by the nature of things, it also has a subjective side i.e. the uncertainty that people feel about the world and the future course of events. In the dangerous circumstances of war social and psychological factors inevitably influence how people act and react.

Clausewitz's 'remarkable trinity', indeed, applies to human life in general. The idea goes back to the Ancient Greeks and was noted by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), an acquaintance of Clausewitz. Life is shaped by three factors: first is the nature of things i.e. what is pre-determined and cannot be changed (passion); second is human freedom i.e. the capacity to take control of events (reason); third is chance, the unknown and uncontrollable element of life. For Clausewitz war is governed by these 'three different codes of law' [1976, p.89] – perhaps more so and on a grander scale than any other human activity.

## War, like many social interactions, is thus dynamic, unpredictable and – in modern parlance – non-linear.

War and the prospect of war also release their own passions such as patriotism, xenophobia, the desire for vengeance or the quest for glory – all complex emotions that are felt by individuals but thoroughly shaped by social relationships. These emotions also influence war and how it is fought. The violence of war, moreover, is directed against a living subject – an army, a society, a nation – which *reacts* with its own emotions, and in ways difficult to predict. War, like many social interactions, is thus dynamic, unpredictable and – in modern parlance – non-linear.

At the heart of Clausewitz's concept of war is the idea of imposing one's will on an opponent. Getting an enemy to the point of conceding to one's demands is as much a psychological and social struggle as a military one. Importantly, concession is not determined simply by the physical encounter on the battlefield. The outcome of war often has a strong element of social convention. Since warfare entails the mutual sacrifice of human lives, there is a kind of unspoken agreement that victory in battle carries with it a certain prerogatives. Clausewitz hints at this idea when he talks of abandonment of the battlefield as tantamount to abandonment of intentions [1976, p.234; Smith, 2005, pp.95-6].

### Armed forces, the state and society

Clausewitz took a deep and abiding interest in the relationship between state and society. Different societies in the past meant different types of warfare: 'The semibarbarous Tartars, the republics of antiquity, the feudal lords and trading cities of the Middle Ages, eighteenth-century kings and the rulers and peoples of the nineteenth century – all conducted war in their own particular way, using different methods and pursuing different aims' [1976, p.586].

## Clausewitz took a deep and abiding interest in the relationship between state and society.

Clausewitz's thinking on this topic was stimulated by his analysis of the French Revolution, which was remarkably dispassionate, balanced and sociological. The French nobility had fallen into decline as an absolute monarchy turned them into mere subjects of the king, enjoying unearned incomes and undeserved privilege while being deprived of their traditional functions. At the same time, the bourgeoisie were increasingly performing useful roles in society and finding ways to make money. For Clausewitz the collapse of the *ancien régime* came about not from petty causes or the failures of individuals but from a fundamental shift in social structure.

Critically, the revolution in France had released enormous social energies as the populace, imbued with nationalism and patriotism, took up arms. As Clausewitz saw it, 'war again became the business of the people – a people of thirty millions, all of whom considered themselves to be citizens' [1976, p.592]. France had thrown down the gauntlet to states such as Prussia with absolute monarchies that relied on standing armies under the firm control of the state, limiting both their size and their military potential.

To guard its security, Prussia needed social and political as well as military change. A spirit of nationalism had to be nurtured and education promoted so that the talents of all citizens could be harnessed to the common cause. Social and corporate privileges ought to be eliminated. This did not mean the levelling of society, rather a meritocracy with an élite based on education and achievement. Governments, as Clausewitz put it, had to take the people into their confidence.

Similarly, military service should not exempt the privileged and leave the burden to the poor, the ill-educated and the weak. The people must be more fully incorporated into Prussia's army – without causing undue social and political upheaval. Hence Clausewitz's continuing and controversial interest in a militia (*Landwehr*) which was closer to the population than the regular army and could better capture popular enthusiasm for national defence. He welcomed the idea that in the *Landwehr* a nobleman could serve under the son of a grocer. But the *Landwehr*, he acknowledged, must remain subordinate to a professional standing army.

Critical in the relationship between armed forces and society is political control (or lack of it) over the military. This is a complex social and organisational matter to which Clausewitz paid much attention. The relevant institutions should ensure that war remains directed to political goals while military considerations are not ignored. Nor could personal factors be ignored. As Clausewitz knew at first hand, 'the personalities of statesmen and soldiers' could render policy-making infinitely complex [1976, p.94].

In principle, war ought to be a continuation of policy, but it is also – inevitably – a continuation of politics. For the policy of a state reflects the social and political forces within its borders. Policy is not an abstract calculation derived by brilliant minds through pure reason but a living, social force that represents – or ought to represent – all interests within a state. It ought to set goals that promote a nation's security and honour and choose the means most likely to secure those goals. But in reality national leaders may make unreasonable or unachievable demands and act mistakenly, recklessly or cravenly.

## Policy is a living, social force that represents all interests within a state

### Sociology of the military

Among the most important factors in war, Clausewitz argues, are moral forces (*moralische Größen*) – psychological, social and cultural factors which permeate war and constantly interact with the will (*Wille*) that drives war on. Unsurprisingly, *On War* is permeated with terms such as *Geist*, *Genie*, *Gemüt*, *Phantasie* and *esprit de corps*.

By modern standards Clausewitz's discussion of command in war and military genius is primitive, but it nonetheless displays subtlety and insight. In Clausewitz's telling, the great commander has a skill that is largely intuitive. He requires, firstly, qualities of mind such as *coup d'oeil*, creativity and imagination – all vital assets, though they can also lead one astray. Second, the commander needs strength of mind and character: determination in the face of adversity; calmness amidst a host of conflicting and unreliable reports; will-power to overcome the friction of his own army and of war itself; and boldness to carry through plans that chance is constantly conspiring to thwart. Venturing into psychology – another field of social science in its infancy – Clausewitz produced a four-fold typology of military leaders based on two dimensions: whether or not they were easily moved, and the depth or shallowness of feelings. The ideal type is slow to move but, having made a decision, acts with passion and logic.

Clausewitz also linked military genius to the wider society. True military genius can be found, he held, only in civilised societies that allow the capacity for reason to flourish; less civilised societies might produce a leader with great passion but they lack the level of education and understanding that nurtures the true military genius. Where the Enlightenment marginalised the study of genius, preferring objective truths valid for all rather than subjective truths that appeared to work only for some, Clausewitz's placed it at the heart of his thinking (Echevarria, 2007, p. 102).

Nor does Clausewitz overlook the psychology and sociology of the ordinary soldier. He vividly describes the emotions of young men in battle for the first time and discusses the nature of boldness and bravery in combat. Morale is a critical factor, inducing soldiers to undertake extraordinary efforts, bear great hardships and achieve unthinkable results in the face of friction, danger and uncertainty. Low morale, by contrast, causes an army to fight less keenly and put in less effort. Defeats, Clausewitz suggests, have 'a greater psychological effect on the loser than on the winner' [1976, p.253].

## Clausewitz therefore stresses the importance of lubricants that help an army overcome friction

Clausewitz also emphasises the way in which friction in war produces wear and tear on troops – not only in physical and organisational terms but also in the form of sociological and psychological factors that make military action difficult. He therefore stresses the importance of lubricants that help an army overcome friction – notably realistic training and experience of war as well as *esprit de corps* and patriotic enthusiasm among soldiers, and genius and strong will among commanders.

Finally, Clausewitz discusses what we now call 'human resource management': recruitment; the need to focus on merit rather than social class in selection and promotion; the challenge of educating future commanders in the art of war and developing military professionalism; and the motivations of individual soldiers. He is well disposed, for example, toward soldiers having a 'longing for honour and renown' which in war is 'the essential breath of life that animates the inert mass' [1976, p.105].

### Social science methodology

Clausewitz was a pioneer in social science methodology. He wanted a body of knowledge that would help a student understand war as a social phenomenon (*Kriegswissenschaft*) and help practitioners in the conduct of war (*Kriegskunst*). This was not an easy task. By embracing the social and psychological elements of war he had to reckon with complex factors, multiple causation and tenuous links between cause and effect. Earlier theorists had mostly ignored or simplified the problems, resorting to unreliable history and unsupported generalisation.

## Clausewitz was a pioneer in social science methodology.

A key part of Clausewitz's methodology was spelled out in what he called *Kritik*: ascertaining the facts of particular battles or campaigns with a degree of reliability; testing hypotheses in a rigorous fashion e.g. looking at as many similar cases as possible and taking counter-examples into account; and finally assessing the actual performance of commanders against the principles that emerged from such research. This was scientific method applied to social interaction and Clausewitz was far in advance of most of his predecessors. As Raymond Aron notes, *Kritik* became part of the common stock of social science methodology [1983, p.206 ].

Clausewitz was not looking for hard and fast rules for conducting war, which he dismissed as absurd. Rather, he sought general principles that took into account not only the more measurable factors such as numbers and geography but also the ever-changing and infinitely variable moral forces in war. To Enlightenment science, however, must be added a Romantic perspective on war. Observing principles in war requires intuition and speed of perception in the face of fragmentary information as well as strength of mind and character. Even then success is not certain and the military genius may find himself revising accepted principles.

## Conclusion

Clausewitz himself remarked that 'my nature...always drives me to develop and systematize' [1976, p.63]. Treating war as a social phenomenon, he had to work out for himself how to comprehend an activity underpinned by social forces and driven by psychological, sociological and political factors. He became a 'sociologist' out of necessity and his methodology, though primitive by modern standards, opened a door to his successors. Others had looked at sociological factors but Clausewitz was the first to embrace society as the very foundation of war.

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**He became a 'sociologist' out of necessity and his methodology, though primitive by modern standards, opened a door to his successors.**

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Yet Clausewitz's sociological contribution has not been fully recognised by either sociologists or strategists. Mainstream sociology moved towards an anti-war stance, regarding war as outmoded and armies as relics of the feudal era. In doing so, Ian Roxborough argues, it has neglected Clausewitz, to its cost [1994, p.633]. This distrust of military values and military influence on society persists today, not least in academia. Interestingly, Clausewitz enjoyed a better reception among Marxists than among mainstream sociologists – partly because of his view of war as reflecting social structure and as an instrument of the state (i.e. the ruling class).

As for neglect by strategists, Michael Howard long ago identified society as one of the 'missing' dimensions of strategy [1979]. For the social dimension introduces elements into war that military and civilian strategists often find awkward to handle; military historians may prefer campaigns and battles to behavioural science. Increasingly, however, many analysts of war are now coming to emphasise the social factors in modern conflict – culture, sociology, psychology, anthropology, ethnography and the like. In our era, it is argued, inter-state wars are in decline and war now takes place 'among the people'. War now needs social science as it once needed physics and chemistry.

This has given rise to furious debate about Clausewitz's continuing relevance or otherwise. To some he is too state-oriented (Martin van Creveld), too militarist (Mary Kaldor) or too political i.e. insufficiently cultural (John Keegan). His few insights into guerrilla war, however modern they may sound, are insufficient to rescue his outdated focus. As argued here, however, such approaches fail to recognise Clausewitz's thoroughly sociological interpretation of war. If war has indeed escaped the battlefield and spread into society, we need Clausewitz more than ever.

The debate is also being played out in the military colleges and academies where different disciplines contend for the Clausewitzian corpus. A professor at the Marine Corps University has proposed that professional military education should take him out of the clutches of historians and hand him over to social scientists [Klinger, 2006, p.87 n.29]. A US Naval Academy academic argues that he should be 'taught as poetry' to military officers, since *On War* is 'an expression of the intrinsic contradictions of the human condition' [Fleming, 2004, p.76]. Like Montesquieu, Clausewitz can be claimed by several disciplines – not least sociology. It is a measure of his greatness and his longevity.

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# Ends, Ways, Means: Clausewitz and Other Prophets

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The world is a bewildering place. In trying to make sense of it, humans have always sought teachers or prophets who can explain everything to lesser mortals. Many humans never seem to get beyond the evolutionary stage of blindly repeating what a teacher told them – to the point where “teacher” becomes an infallible prophet. Whole religions have been constructed to buttress the legitimacy of such prophets; they are proclaimed the offspring of a deity or the only human in which the deity confided his or her all-surpassing knowledge, etc. If you think about it, this negates men’s (some men’s?) critical faculties, their ability to judge for themselves where the considered views of a great mind are truly applicable and helpful; where they might have applied to a particular time and circumstance only, but not necessarily to all times and ages; and where they might be plain wrong and prejudice-ridden. For if you accept that prophets are mere humans, and all humans are fallible, then prophets are fallible, even if they are exceptionally intelligent and prescient.

To recap: great teachers are people whose understanding of their times and some of its problems impresses others as particularly insightful, as containing truths which others had not discovered. But what is “truth” in this context? Remember that there is a difference between actions and human interpretation of these actions. Defiance of a government will

be interpreted by the government itself as a rebellion; others will, in a more neutral vein, call this defiance an insurgency, and those involved in it will call it a fight against oppression and for freedom. Or is it criminal, mafia-type action, part of organised crime? Which is the truth? Any human attempt to encode truly existing phenomena in language presses any objective truth into distorting forms, namely, the words we use, with their complex, culture-bound connotations.

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## there is a difference between actions and human interpretation of these actions

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The process of interpretation, of explaining what is going on around us with words and concepts, has its own pitfalls. Every general explanation, every philosophy, every prophecy is the product of reflection on the particular circumstances of the times in which it is created, and is based on a particular selective interpretation and understanding of events known to the teacher, philosopher or prophet that have gone before that. The general explanation, and the general rule that a teacher/philosopher/prophet might deduce from this, are usually expressed in terms which suggest timeless application, while in reality it deals with particular circumstances. Consider the many times when bad fortune befell the Israelites because, in the view of one of their prophets, their moral standards had declined. This causality linking a decline in morals with (divine) punishment by bad fortune was extremely popular also among the Christian heirs of the Hebrew Bible, and has been trotted out to explain events time and again throughout the two millennia of Christianity. To any rational being, the Holocaust should have once and for all proved that this causality does not exist, as its victims had not done anything to bring this upon themselves, and the causes lay elsewhere entirely, exclusively in the perpetrators of this evil.

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## Every general explanation, every prophecy is the product of reflection on the particular circumstances of the times in which it is created

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So, when Clausewitz told us that he wanted nothing to do with generals who want to avoid battle and bloodshed (*On War* Book IV.11), he was couching the bitter experience of Prussia in his own time – namely, that attempts to accommodate Napoleon in order to avoid war with him had failed – in general terms, as though they had timeless applicability. Yes, many observers since Antiquity have noted that, when confronted with an expansionist power that does not respect any rules of inter-entity behaviour (above all that of not coveting thy neighbour's property), a weak state, especially a poorly defended but prosperous state, looks like a juicy sheep to a hungry wolf. The main problem is still posed by the wolf; the sheep's behaviour is perfectly appropriate in dealing with other sheep, or cows, horses or donkeys grazing in the same meadow.

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**There is a general consensus that Clausewitz had original insights of great wisdom, but all of these were developed by him on the basis of the particular experiences of his own times**

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There is a general consensus that Clausewitz had original insights of great wisdom, but all of these were developed by him on the basis of the particular experiences of his own times, and a reading of quite recent history – he started with the Thirty Years' War and dismissed anything earlier as irrelevant – through the prism of Prussia's recent experiences. Some of the great insights Clausewitz is credited for had previously occurred to others. On some occasions, he re-invented a wheel or two. On others, he filched some very profound ideas from others without acknowledgement, not least the title of *On War*, which he took from his colleague August Rühle von Lilienstern's publication of 1814.

Then there are things he got wrong, as he himself recognised in trying to revise his book *On War* during his own lifetime, a laudable project which he left incomplete when called away to a deployment in Poland, during which he died of cholera. There are other things he arguably got wrong which he did not recognise as mistakes. And there are important dimensions he left unexplored in *On War*, some deliberately, others by inclination, which are cardinal in investigating the question of how ends, ways and means hang together in warfare. For these dimensions, we have to turn to other thinkers, not Clausewitz, and we really should do so, rather than shrugging them off as unimportant or irrelevant, merely because "the Master" did not write about them.

#### **Some re-invented wheels**

Some ideas which continue to be very stimulating and which are usually attributed to Clausewitz had been articulated by others long before him. Clausewitz is famous for his attributing greater potential to the defensive than to offence. He drew this from the very particular experience he had as an officer serving the Russian Tsar during Napoleon's catastrophic 1812 campaign in Europe's largest state – a state so large that it spans two continents. Space, time, and General Winter

defeated Napoleon's Grande Armée to the point where only few of its soldiers survived the expedition. For any country that has copious territories and hinterland to withdraw into, the rule holds: the Prusso-Brandenburg state, too, defeated and deprived of its more important Brandenburg capital, Berlin, could withdraw to the remote Prussian capital of Königsberg, and from there organise a liberation of the occupied areas. The Spanish opposition to Napoleon had lost Madrid, but it could wage its Guerrilla throughout the Iberian Peninsula, and finally prevail. Contemporary experiences confirmed Clausewitz's observation. Consider, by contrast, the situation of Israel in the 1960s and today. Where is the depth that it could use for its defence?

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Moreover, arguments in favour of the defensive were not new: others before Clausewitz had described a defensive stance as stronger than an offensive one that carried aggression into enemy territory. Already Raimond de Beccarie de Pavie, Baron de Fourquevaux had deduced from his readings of the Classics, in his *Instructions on the Waging of War* (1548), that "A wise captain ought to resist the violence of his enemies, rather than to assault them furiously. For [a] furious [onslaught] is easily resisted by fast and sure-footed men, and if it is withstood once, the rest is nothing, both because the attackers will be out of breath, and also as their order becomes disrupted, no matter how little haste they show in marching. Also, the first heat cools down when they see the constancy of the defending force..." Count Guibert, whose *General Essay on Tactics* (1772) Clausewitz had read and paraphrased in *On War*, had articulated a perfect state which would have no reason for attacking others, but which would have enormous moral strength in resisting aggression. The state's motto would be "Liberty, Safety, Protection", and while it would be no threat to its neighbours, it would be undefeatable: "Let an enemy come and insult these happy and pacific people, they will rise justly incensed, and quit their tranquil habitation. Should they be driven to extremes, they will spill the last drop of their blood to obtain satisfaction; they will be avenged, they will ensure to themselves, by the fire, the splendour of their vengeance, a future and lasting peace."

More wisely than Clausewitz, Machiavelli did not pronounce a fixed rule, but noted in his *Discourses on Livy* (1531) that there were arguments for and against taking a defensive or an offensive stance: "He who takes the offensive shows more spirit than he who awaits an attack, and so inspires his army with more confidence; and, in addition to this, deprives the enemy of the power to utilize his own resources ..." On the other hand, Machiavelli argued, pre-empting the argument about inner lines which strategists made three hundred years later, "to await the enemy's attack has many advantages; for, without any disadvantage to yourself, you can impose on him many disadvantages in the matter of provisions and of anything else of which an army has need; you can better

thwart his plans owing to your having a better knowledge of the country than he has; and again, you can oppose him with stronger forces owing to the ease with which you can bring them altogether, which you could not do were they all at a distance from their homes; also, if you are routed, you can easily reform, both because a considerable part of your army will survive since it has a refuge at hand, and because reinforcements have not to come from a distance." Moreover, if one had a "country well equipped with arms", one would be more difficult to defeat in one's own country. If by contrast one had "a country ill equipped with arms, ... the enemy should be kept at a distance." War, in that case, would more profitably be carried into his territory.

A second key discovery usually attributed to Clausewitz is that it is crucial to identify one's war aims before going to war. Again, he was not the first to make this discovery. Already Bertrand de Loque had written in his *Two Treatises on War and on Duelling* (1589): "See first that you have perfect knowledge of what you want to undertake...and then put it into practice to effect it."

### The aims of wars

More importantly, Clausewitz was dangerously reductionist in his definition of the aim of all wars, namely, the "imposition of our will upon the enemy" (Book I.1). It is a great line, and many strategists have embraced it happily. It is doubtless what the aim of wars is. But it is not what the aim of war *should* be, if it is to have lasting effects which, on balance, are preferable to the situation before the war, notwithstanding the horrendous cost of achieving them. As many writers before him, starting with Aristotle and Cicero, had noted, and as Clausewitz had omitted to say, the only generally acceptable aim of any war can be a better peace, one which has to be tolerable to the former enemy, who must be turned into a peaceful partner in the post-war world. If he isn't, he will seek revenge, and the best victory will turn to ashes in a new war with its new sacrifices. That means, however, that a brutal, unilateral imposition of one's will upon the enemy is unlikely to lead to a lasting peace, unless the enemy is annihilated, as Carthage eventually was by Rome. A peace with which the defeated side cannot live in the long term will necessarily engender a new war to reverse the situation. Clausewitz was clever enough to recognise this. Pessimistically, he wrote in Book I.1: "*In war the result is never final: ... even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.*" Negating any possibility that defeated adversaries might be persuaded or seduced into accepting a post-war settlement by offering them conditions they could live with, he added in Book I.2: "the war, that is the animosity and the reciprocal effects of hostile elements, cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy's will has not been broken: in other words, so long as the enemy government and its allies have not been driven to ask for peace, or the population made to submit." He conceded that the hostility of the population might lead to the renewal of fighting, but in the greatest cop-out of his book, he cut this line of argument short with the words: "Be that as it may, we must always *consider that with the conclusion of peace the purpose of the war has been achieved and its business is at an end.*" If the end of

*the war is a lasting peace, however, and not merely a military victory, this is a cardinal mistake in Clausewitz's reasoning, and it is a grave fault of his to have censored his own thinking beyond military victory. Generations of subsequent strategists followed him in this mistake, and this did indeed, as Liddell Hart argued, contribute to the mass-slaughter of the wars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.*

### Aims or ends, ways and means

## Clausewitz did in fact hit on the fact that not all wars are fought for the end of absolute victory, or the absolute crushing of the enemy

In revising his book *On War*, Clausewitz did in fact hit on the fact that not all wars are fought for the end of absolute victory, or the absolute crushing of the enemy. He wrote in a note on defence written in 1827, "Thus if we perhaps find that among 50 wars, 49 ... have a limited aim and do not aim to strike down the enemy we must understand that [these 49 cases are also] part of the nature of [war] and we must not assume every time that [these limited aims and the resulting conduct of war] are due to mistaken ideas, or a lack of energy etc." He concluded that the political aims or ends of such wars differed, as war "*is guided by ... politics.*" In *On War* (Book VII.3), however, he merely listed two extreme permutations of such aims: the conquest of a country and the annihilation of the enemy's armed forces on the one hand, or the conquest merely of a "province, a strip of territory, a fortress, etc. Any one of these can be of sufficient value as political cards in peace [negotiations], either to be retained or exchanged." While he added that "The object of strategic attack, therefore, may be thought of in countless gradations, from the conquest of a whole country to that of an insignificant patch of territory", he did not take the next step, namely to consider what different strategies, or ways and means of waging war different war aims would dictate. This, by contrast, was done in considerable detail by Clausewitz's great rival Jomini. The Swiss general divided wars into several categories, according to their aims and purposes. These were:

- "Offensive wars to reclaim rights", in his view "the most just war[s]", even though they would normally be waged on territory at that stage held by the enemy (hence "offensive", involving the invasion of somebody else's territory).
- Politically defensive wars which were "offensive from a military point of view". This would include pre-emptive wars, wars in which one attacked an enemy, anticipating an attack by him.
- "Wars of expediency", to snatch something from a weak neighbour.
- "Wars with or without allies".
- "Wars of intervention" in the "internal affairs of a neighbouring state".



- "Aggressive war for Conquest and other Reasons", which could be "a crime against humanity", even though Jomini thought that "it is better to attack than to be invaded".
- "Wars of opinion" or what would later become known as ideological wars (such as the war between Revolutionary France and its adversaries).
- Wars of resistance against foreign invasion involving the mobilisation of the entire people. He had personal experience of the 1808-1813 Spanish Guerrilla against France, which he had experienced as particularly dreadful.
- "Civil Wars, and Wars of Religion".

Jomini each time considered in detail how differently these wars would be waged, as a function of their aims. We look in vain for such discussions in Clausewitz's works.

This is not to say that Clausewitz was unaware of this variable and its important effects on the waging of war. Again following many others from Machiavelli (whom he explicitly admired) to Guibert, Clausewitz wrote about the importance of the populations on both sides and their commitment to a war effort (in turn a function of how concerned they are by the war aims) in the context of his "strange trinity". But there,

again, he did not go beyond stating that the three poles of his trinity were variables, even interdependent variables, but rather examined the ways in which they could interrelate, and with which effects.

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### **Don't think of Clausewitz as infallible prophet of Mars, or fount of timeless truths.**

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There are other subjects of considerable importance that Clausewitz failed to tackle in *On War*, which include the effects of values on the ways and means of waging war, but also social, financial and economic dimensions, not to mention other more technical topics, such as logistics, or naval warfare, omissions for which he has often been criticised. None of this is to question that he was a genius, or that we can learn much from him, or that his works are worth reading and re-reading. But beware of turning humans into divinely-inspired prophets whose words of gold are applicable to all times and all circumstances. Don't think of Clausewitz as infallible prophet of Mars, or fount of timeless truths. Turn to as many wise thinkers as possible for possible explanations of and approaches to a problem you face, not just to one "great master", be it Sun Tzu, Thucydides, or Clausewitz. And use *your own* judgement and values to see if their views really help you with the situation you confront.



# To Be Clausewitzian

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While "Clausewitzian" is neither really a noun nor an adjective, there has to be some word to describe those who adhere to the writings of Carl von Clausewitz. Accepting that to be the case, it seems sensible to ask what does it mean to be Clausewitzian? How is that expressed in certain individuals and how do they differ from others.

Clausewitz is clearly a source of controversy. He is widely misunderstood, and read by fewer men than those who claim to have actually read his works. This is especially the case with his detractors, or rather those who insist that he was fundamentally mistaken in what he wrote. The reason that Clausewitz's detractors are often so mistaken and ill informed, is that they have usually not read and studied the work concerned in enough detail to gain the necessary insight. The shortcomings of Clausewitz's work that really do exist are really only understood by those who have actually studied him, and have done so in some considerable detail.

## He is widely misunderstood, and read by fewer men than those who claim to have actually read his works.

Additionally and perhaps ironically, you can really only understand where Clausewitz fell short when you understand the real genius in what he got right - and that which he did get right substantially outweighs what he got wrong, or perhaps less right.

### Adherence

Adherence literally means to "stick to" - so why should anyone "stick to" Clausewitz? While Clausewitz wrote a lot, his masterwork, *On War*, is the key relevant text to those who adhere. To Clausewitzians, *On War* stands tall because no other work of military thought gives such correct and useful guidance. Beyond anything else, "Clausewitzians" do not just study Clausewitz's *On War* out of academic interest. They use it as the basis of their thinking. This does not mean they exclude all else, but it does mean they use Clausewitz's observations as their start point, and foundation.

## *On War* stands tall because no other work of military thought gives such correct and useful guidance

One of the greatest misconceptions associated with Clausewitz is that his work is a product of his time and his period of experience. This is true, but it in no way detracts. Clausewitz's work is still proving extremely useful and practical today, and will do so in the future. Clausewitzians see no real mystery in war and warfare today. It still conforms to nearly every point and observation *On War* raised, so sticking to Clausewitz has real value. Clausewitzians are not wringing their hands over "complexity" and "understanding" because they see nothing that complex or hard to understand. War has always been one of the most complex and difficult undertakings humans face. That has never changed, and it has never become more complex for the men of time.

What is often extremely hard to understand is the lack of logic - and arguable stupidity - behind the various policies certain contemporary governments or armed groups seek to achieve via violence. However, *On War* can be effectively used to point out this lack of logic and stupidity. This is largely intolerable to those seeking reputation and/or funding as being the next man or woman with the next big idea, because Clausewitz basically tells us that these are false prophets and that there are no big clever ideas. Sometimes "War" is indeed that metaphorical sandwich packed with faeces - one from which we are all forced to take a bite! That being the case, good choices should always trump clever solutions.

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## Clausewitz basically tells us that these are false prophets and that there are no big clever ideas

So why are Clausewitzians not confused? Are they deluding themselves? Explaining why someone is not confused always rests on suggesting that they correctly understand the nature of the problem they see. Put simply, *On War* explained the nature of the problems that war presents us with, and why some solutions are bound to fail and some succeed. It really is that simple. To Clausewitzians there simply is no mystery as to why and how the US was defeated in Vietnam, or why and how stunning Rhodesian military success did not ensure the survival of the all-white regime that attempted to stand against Black Nationalist violence.

Take Mao and Giap, who were at least on some level adherents to Clausewitz. We know Mao read *On War* and went on to teach it to others. When a North Vietnamese officer observed, "That may be true. It is also irrelevant," to Harry Summers' statement that the North Vietnamese had never defeated US forces on the battlefield, it is painfully clear that the North Vietnamese were better students of Clausewitz than any of their opponents. Additionally *On War* more than adequately explains Israel's lack of success in the 2006 Lebanon War, as does his work for the outcome in any conflict. Various analysts may pontificate, and argue, but Clausewitzians will not be confused.

Thus "On War" remains vastly relevant and vastly useful. Indeed one can be rightly suspicious of anyone who indulges in military or strategic thought who is not well grounded in *On War*. This is not to suggest that a deep understanding of *On War* is a required union-card to pontificating on war and military matters. No such card should exist. But people not well-versed in Clausewitz are extremely prone to gaining insights that Clausewitz already had, and then claiming them for their own; or worse, roaming far and wide in attempts to free themselves of the logic of Clausewitz's arguments. This leads to assertions such as "counter-insurgency is not war" or that "war has changed" in attempts to reframe the argument and live outside the useful box Clausewitz constructed for us. To a Clausewitzian such thinking risks asserting that the earth is flat and that the sun revolves around it.

As previously noted, this means that if you want to be next "military thought rock-star" you will be compelled to ditch Clausewitz. The reason for this is simple: no one in Congress, the US Army or British Parliament wants to be told that a long dead Prussian General was more right than anyone else, and that the answers are all there if only they would bother to read the book and study the work.

### Politics

We can be pretty sure that the Clausewitzians are not deluded because their understanding can be tested. The observations Clausewitz made do explain existing phenomena, and thus this enables a certain degree of general prediction. There is some 5,000 years of evidence in this regard. The problems occur when people want to contest phenomena.

For example, even quite sensible people are inclined to differentiate between wars fought for reasons of "politics" and those fought for "religion." No war in the entire history of the world has ever been fought over a point of theology, no more than any war has been fought over which was the best movie of all time. Roman Catholics and Protestants killed each other over who had the power and/or freedom to live as they wished to live. They did not fight about whether the sacrament represents the body of Christ or transforms into the body of Christ - they fought over the ability of one political group to impose that view onto another. Similarly, Al Qaeda seeks political conditions and behaviours, especially via Sharia Law. Al Qaeda is no more a religious organisation than Greenpeace.

The logic, reasons and even paradoxes of almost everything Clausewitz said can be traced to the simple understanding that war is fought to gain (or thus preserve) a political condition or behaviour. Clausewitzians are rightly dismissive of ideas such as "globalization causes conflict" and "war today is more complex/complicated" because they know that those who utter such things have not realized that it is the policy that drives the violence. Just as critically, they realise that it is the results of the violence that alter or modify the policy. What seems like a good or necessary policy may seem less so 60,000 casualties later, for instance.

Understanding what Clausewitz wrote is greatly dependant on understanding the meaning of the word "policy" as a condition of behaviour people seek, and that war, and thus "strategy" is seeking it via violence. Additionally and critically, people - be they leaderships, populations or armies - set a price in blood, time and treasure on what gaining that policy is worth. That price, and the consequences of its payment, is what separates policy sought via violence from policy sought via peaceful means or diplomacy. When people can no longer pay the price of the war or the conflict, the war - at least for a time - is over.

## Understanding what Clausewitz wrote is greatly dependant on understanding the meaning of the word "policy" as a condition of behaviour people seek, and that war, and thus "strategy" is seeking it via violence.

This is not to claim that something so simple is all that there is in *On War*. Far from it, but the genius of Clausewitz was to usefully reduce war to being a matter of things that were and are fundamentally simple, and yet which context makes endlessly complicated or even impossible. Simple does not mean easy. Walking on a tightrope is fundamentally simple, but it is not easy. If you then imagine trying to walk a tight rope while being attacked by a swarm of bees, we can then see that a simple act, requiring great skill, can require even more skill if and when difficulties accumulate. Sometimes the conditions will be so bad that walking the rope will be impossible.



In that one regard, war is no different as Clausewitz so brilliantly explained when he observed that no war could be won if the policy it was being fought for was impossible or unreasonable to achieve via violence. The possibility or impossibility of this thing is usually set by the amount of blood, treasure and time anyone might be prepared to spend to gain it. Critically, we should not to confuse war with warfare. Warfare is how fighting is done, and if done badly the cost is usually too high for the policy to bear.

### Limitations

Arguably, Clausewitz never helped his case by being able to consistently write clearly and simply. More frustratingly, he died before he could get his magnum opus into anything like a publishable form. Obviously this opens the door to competing interpretations as to what he actually said and meant, and the plausible allegation that he left critical things unsaid, or was actually mistaken. This provides a rich seam for debate, and the ongoing debates amongst Clausewitz scholars that are to an extent necessary. Yet this can also imply that there are fatal cracks in the simple edifice Clausewitz constructed. There may well be small cracks, but nothing that threatens the structure.

## Clausewitz never helped his case by being able to consistently write clearly and simply

What cracks exist tend to be imagined by those seeking a perfection that can be never found. There can be no overarching "mega-theory" of war. Clausewitz was arguably a realist, though perhaps less so than Machiavelli. His work never dealt with a lot of items deemed to be of interest today, because he simply considered them as a distraction to the real issue under discussion. There are many things *On War* never discusses. Clausewitz was never concerned with "ethics" or "economics" because he simply saw no reason to be so. What leader, people or army had ever attempted to set forth a policy that they knew was "unethical." The Nazis believed their cause to be highly ethical, as did the Khmer Rouge, but not surprisingly their enemies disagreed. What people believe to be "ethical" was and is politics. The great question of war and strategy is whether the ends really do justify the consequences of the means themselves, and as Clausewitz pointed out, there is but one means and that is combat!

If you cannot afford an army, you cannot have an army. That obviously does not exclude you from political violence, but Clausewitz was no more inclined to discuss raising or supporting an Army than someone who is writing a book on Skateboarding is likely to discuss how you should save money to buy a skateboard. The premise of the work rests on the fact that the reader already owns a skateboard.

Again, this is actually one of the greatest strengths of Clausewitz's work - in that what is of equal use to communists and capitalists, governments and rebels or Zionists and Salafists. Clausewitz sought an instrumental understanding,

and it is in that regard that Clausewitz is at his most useful. He kept the theory free from political opinions in order to drive down to the basics. Much like Newtonian physics, the basics still hold good within the subjects *On War* discussed. Indeed, Newtonian physics is more than adequate for getting to the Moon, or walking a tight rope. Newtonian physics may not provide the answer to everything, but so what? If getting to the Moon or not falling off the tight rope is the task, Newtonian physics is good enough.

## Clausewitz sought an instrumental understanding, and it is in that regard that Clausewitz is at his most useful.

Simply put, Clausewitz tells you just about everything you need to know about war and what is more, he tells you what you *cannot* know because war is fundamentally human, and human beings are a bit complicated. The wondrous trinity of passion, chance and reason may not be 100% perfect, but it more than adequately explains and demonstrates why human beings are sometimes not easy to understand or predict. However, it is exactly this monstrous condition that Clausewitz helps guide us through (adequately though somewhat imperfectly) when he associates the trinity with people, leadership and armed force. It also helps us begin to see the problems when the leadership becomes the source of passion, as with Hitler or to a far lesser extent as might be alleged with the US neo-conservative idea of a "war on terror," when obviously the leadership should form the source of reason.

You do have to read a lot of Clausewitz to get to the great "Ta-da!" moments that make his work so valuable, and sadly these "Ta-da" moments or phrases tend to get quoted imperfectly or out of context. Yet that should not detract from the utility of Clausewitzian statements such as "Strategy is the use of engagements for the purposes of war." Like it or not, that is a simple, useful and not incorrect description of strategy. As more than one person is attributed to have said, "Any fool can make something complicated. It takes a genius to make it simple." Arguably Clausewitz's genius lies here, and ensures his works relevance and endurance.

Again, this can greatly vex those who want to argue as to what strategy is or what differentiates "grand strategy" from strategy. However, Clausewitz did not write *On War* to fuel the academics, theorists, and "think tankers" of future generations. He had seen war up close and he knew strategy and tactics to be entirely practical skills, requiring skilled execution in the real world. He knew guidance was required and he also knew that sound theory provided a better guide to understanding than problem specific solutions. Idealists may start wars, but realists have to fight them. He knew real peril lay in erroneously thinking there was some kind-hearted and ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy as Chapter 1 Book 1 so elegantly explains, and that the use of force logically requires restriction.

Indeed the shortcomings or inherent flaws that lie at the heart of every new big idea, be that the latest so-called theories on counter-insurgency, Fourth Generation Warfare, or

Effects Based Operations, were and are all amply predicted and explained by Clausewitz's writings, even when he could not possibly conceive that such future fallacies would raise their heads. This was because he correctly characterized the nature of war and the problems inherent to understanding that nature in a way that enables some degree of solution. (If and when a solution was or is even possible, because sometimes there simply is no comfortable or clever solution.) While never explicit, though strongly implied, Clausewitz warned that stupid things badly done were always bad and sometimes "both parachutes fail". A successful business relies in large part on the basic requirement of having a product or service people wish to pay for. If you do not have that service or product, you are doomed. How you use violence to force political conditions and behaviors onto others is in no way exempt from such fundamental and simple ideas.

### Here's To The Clausewitzians!

Sticking to Clausewitz does not merely mean having read and understood *On War*, though that is largely required. Nor does it mean being a scholar of the work, replete with a detailed knowledge of its author's life and times - though that helps, and being grossly ignorant of those things will not aid your understanding. It really just means that you "get what he was saying". If you see the simple ideas that link into one coherent understanding, and those stand the tests of history and theory, then you are a Clausewitzian. Clausewitzians are not confused about war, warfare and strategy, because they read a book that explained about 90% of what could be usefully explained.

More importantly, the information in that book provides guidance, which can still be used today.



# The Policy-Strategy Distinction: Clausewitz and The Chimera of Modern Strategic Thought

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The policy-strategy distinction is one of the most important issues in the neo-Clausewitzian canon.[i] "The political object is the goal," Clausewitz notes, and "war is the means of reaching it." [ii] Clausewitz further notes that strategy is the "the use of engagement for the purpose of the war." [iii] This essay explains policy and strategy and argues for the importance of a sound understanding of their complex relationship in modern strategic thought and practice.

While this debate is primarily intellectual, it also has manifold policy implications. Tactics and strategy are frequently mistaken for policy, and policy mistaken for the strategies needed to execute them. Widespread ignorance of policy-strategy in, among others, America holds back a sound analysis of modern security threats and retards the development of intellectual tools needed to cope with them.

## Widespread ignorance of policy-strategy holds back a sound analysis of modern security threats

### Policy and Strategy 101

To put it simply, policy is a condition or behavior. Strategy, in turn, is an instrumental device that is given meaning by the policy. Policy is that which a government decrees, and strategy is a highly technical set of steps to accomplish it. Operations and tactics are the building blocks of strategy, the process by which lofty strategic dreams become reality. While politics and policy sit on top of a military hierarchy, the relationship between these various components should be

understood as dynamic and nonlinear. A strategy cannot be executed without tactics and operations. Bad strategy can lose a war even if the policy is sound. The idea that "amateurs study strategy, while professionals study logistics" is not helpful, since while logistics enables strategy, logistics loses all meaning without a strategic aim.[iv]

A government or *governing* entity formulates policy through an often-fractious political process and then seeks to institute it over another entity. Policy can be the superb distillation of a guiding statesman's strategic insight, a messy cobbled-together compromise brokered between competing domestic political elites, or both. Moreover, while Clausewitz is clear that the political object is what determines the military objectives and the methods by which they are reached, the object cannot be used as a sole standard of measurement to evaluate a war's progress. War is not an abstraction, and the political object can only be used as measurement in the context of two mutually opposed forces at war with each other.[v]

## A government or governing entity formulates policy through an often-fractious political process and then seeks to institute it over another entity.

While this sounds simple enough, it is significantly more difficult in practice. Take, for example, the case of the "AF-PAK" conflict. It is the policy of the United States that terrorism against its citizens must be prevented. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, this ostensibly translates into a strategy (mis-labeled as a policy) to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat" al-Qaeda.

Notice, however, that the actual focus of American tactics and operations in the region has been to build the authority of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan — which does not necessarily relate to the expressed policy aim. These divergent tactics can be explained by the adoption of a different policy and corresponding strategy. While Gian P. Gentile has written soundly on counterinsurgency's "strategy of tactics," it may be said that there actually was a strategy in Afghanistan. This strategy served a policy aim of building a pro-Western,

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democratic, and stable state.[vi] The same political process that produced the initial AF-PAK policy aim generated a different policy, and thus a different strategy. As the previous example indicates, those seeking to understand the neo-Clausewitzian paradigm should not expect that policy is rational, or that strategy will always serve the policy. Policy is the product of a political process, the fractiousness of which can vary by political culture. However, one should not assume that the policies of authoritarian nations are more coherent than democracies. Authoritarian governments merely bring the endemic domestic political battles of democracies within the Politburo, substituting the covert sniping of courtiers and bureaucrats for multi-party electoral conflict.

Clausewitz, perhaps because of the difficult translation of *politik* from the original German, does *not* argue that war is an abstract expression of direct policy. Rather, he states the obvious: war is an outgrowth of existing political dynamics that manifest themselves in purposeful violence. And just because a given policy goal has been determined does not mean that the task of the strategist is easy — the strategist faces enormous difficulties in coping with fog, friction, and the purposeful actions of the enemy.[vii]

Second, it is important to qualify what policy and strategy are *not*. Strategy is not another word for a military doctrine or activity. There is no such thing as a distinct counterinsurgency “strategy” because there is also no such thing as a counter-sniper or anti-aircraft strategy. Strategy is also not an aspiration or an idea, as recent grand strategy debates suggest. Without a policy, there can be no strategy. A strategy only has meaning within the context of policy. Without policy, strategy is simply the political-military equivalent of a vestigial organ. Similarly, strategy is often mistaken for policy. There is no such thing as a policy of using unmanned aerial vehicles to attack terrorist militants, although different military engagements can form the core of a strategy that accomplishes a policy. [viii]

## Strategy is not another word for a military doctrine or activity.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the policy-strategy nexus is that impeccable strategy can still fail to realize a delusional policy. When the Pentagon screened the film *The Battle of Algiers* after the September 11, 2001 attacks, they curiously missed the film’s central point. The policy of the French government was that Algeria would continue to remain a French possession. But it is difficult to see how better strategy would have dealt with the political problems inherent in the policy: a sizable chunk of Algerian citizens did not wish to be part of an inequitable colonial system. Any strategy that accomplished such a policy would inevitably rely on overwhelming force, and such force proved so disruptive to French domestic politics that Charles DeGaulle eventually chose to let Algeria go in order to save France. Unfortunately, the lesson that some took from this experience was that a better counterinsurgency strategy that avoided the use of torture could have compensated for a poor policy.

## From Semantic to Strategic Confusion

Examples of confusion about policy and strategy are commonplace in modern strategic thought and discourse. Much as barbed wire trapped World War I soldiers seeking to climb over trenches and evade deadly fire, confusion over policy and strategy holds back strategists and policymakers seeking to provide solutions to security problems. Without clear definitions of policy and strategy — which Clausewitz did provide — it is difficult to make accurate critiques of current security problems or think rigorously about future policies, strategies and operations.

## Grand strategies are the creations of historians, analytical devices useful only in retrospect for thinking about an accumulation of best practices over an extended period of time.

Take Frederick Kagan’s description of grand strategy, for example: “Grand strategy is the use of all of a state’s resources to achieve all of its objectives. It is not a plan, but a process of evaluating the global situation; developing clear objectives; understanding available resources; recognizing enemies, threats, and challenges; and then putting resources against tasks in an iterative fashion, adjusting objectives, approaches, and resource allocation as appropriate to the changing situation.” What Kagan describes is a mishmash of policy (the “why”) and strategy (the “how”). It is also something essentially impossible for any one government to actually formulate, which at least partially explains the spate of articles decrying the lack of grand strategy since the Cold War.[ix] Grand strategies are the creations of historians, analytical devices useful only in retrospect for thinking about an accumulation of best practices over an extended period of time. Strategy does not have meaning without policy, making grand strategy an artful exercise in constructing a bridge to nowhere. Certainly, strategy on a large scale can be “grand,” but this is distinct from the ideational — sometimes wholly ideological — way grand strategy is described in strategic debate.

But confusion is unfortunately not limited to the writings of grand strategists, as evidenced by the perennial issues surrounding formal American national security strategies (NSS). The NSS is rarely ever a “strategy” in that it makes choices about the allocation of resources or matches them with capabilities. Is it policy, then? Unfortunately the document is more a reflection of the political *process* than a clear or useful statement of policy priority. The NSS is an extended campaign speech — in reality the budget is truly policy.[x] Semantic quibbling? Given that all defense planning documents flow from the guidance set by the NSS, imprecision has actual operational costs.

When it comes to counterinsurgency, policy-strategy confusion is truly endemic. Admiral Mike Mullen’s comments that the US could not “kill [its] way to victory” in counterinsurgency operations defies strategic logic on multiple levels.[xi] If the United States, like France in Algeria, could not use force to achieve a policy goal, then the policy goal itself should

have been questioned. Armed forces exist primarily to fight. Instead of re-examining the policy goal, Mullen's comments implied that the US would still pursue the same unachievable goal, except this time substituting development projects and other forms of political engagement for the M4 rifle and the precision-guided bomb.

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## When it comes to counterinsurgency, policy-strategy confusion is truly endemic.

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David Galula's favorable quotation of Mao Zedong that a revolutionary war is 80% political and 20% military also misunderstands the meaning of the "political." Both Vladimir Lenin and Carl Schmitt, though diametrically opposed in ideology, inverted Clausewitz by claiming that war is not political intercourse with the addition of violence, but politics itself. Mao was essentially expressing an ideal of all-out warfare that fused ideas, organizations, and weapons together into an organic and lethal assemblage. Had Galula better understood the policy-strategy distinction, he might have understood the problems with this ideal. The phrase is both banal — war, revolutionary or not, always privileges the political — and dangerous in its paradoxical acceptance of ontology rooted in a doctrine of ideological total war.[xii]

We similarly find confusion when thinking about Israel's so-called "policy" of targeted killing. As A.E. Stahl and William F. Owen have observed, a policy cannot be an action. Israel has a policy of continued national existence, which implies the defense of its citizens from terrorists. Israel has a strategy of targeted killings to accomplish this aim. Similarly, given the United States has a *policy* that terrorism against its citizens not be tolerated. Targeted killings by drone, manned aircraft, or a team of Special Forces is a strategy designed to accomplish this policy aim.[xiii]

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## By mistaking strategy for policy, critics of targeted killings make the error of assuming that the means are indistinguishable from the policies that give them purpose.

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By mistaking strategy for policy, critics of targeted killings make the error of assuming that the means are indistinguishable from the policies that give them purpose. Given that the respective policy goals — the existence of Israel and the continued safety of American citizens — are universally agreed upon — the debate is precisely over the strategies used to achieve them. As Dan Trombly argues, the unfortunate fact that Yemen's government uses American counterterrorism to benefit itself does not invalidate the use of force against al-Qaeda terrorists in Yemen. A different strategy, which bypasses the Yemeni government to independently develop targeting information, may achieve the same aims.[xiv]

It matters little whether counterterrorism or counterinsurgency is an intrinsically better suite of tactics and operations.

Rather, the question is whether the tactic, operation, or strategy accomplished the *policy*. Many, for example, failed to understand the point of William F. Owen's piece "Killing Your Way to Control," because they mistook his *strategy* and *tactics* of using force to quell insurgencies for a *policy* of Roman annihilation. The difference is not trivial — a correct understanding of Owen's writing reveals he is talking about using lawful force against opponents to support a (presumably correct) policy. With an incorrect policy, force is an empty device. Understood wrongly as policy, the article was cast as a retrograde relic of an era before the new science of using force in the new "complex adaptive" era of military operations.[xv]

Sometimes the consequences of ignoring the policy-strategy distinction can prove fatal. The Prusso-Germans, who believed war to be truly autonomous from policy, eventually subjugated the entirety of the state to the purpose of the war. War must serve war, Field Marshall Erich Ludendorff decreed. German strategy in the age of machine warfare not only killed millions, but also perpetrated the harmful *dolchstoß* mythology of military victory and political betrayal.[xvi] The result? A divided Germany, millions dead, and a ruined Europe.

### Towards a Better Understanding

The strategist, unfortunately, cannot control how language evolves. Policy and strategy have different meanings to different professional communities. Colloquial meanings also increasingly abound. There may be even aspects of external strategic thought that military-strategic thinkers may find cause to emulate and ponder, as the influence of business strategy on the discipline of Net Assessment attests. However, it is vitally important to have a clear understanding of policy and strategy in war.

The pedant, unfortunately, must be given his due. When even informed commentators mistake tactics or strategies for policy, both discussion and practice of national security revolves around an endless discussion of technical ways and means to accomplish objectives rather than the objectives themselves. Likewise, when policies or aspirations are mistaken for strategies, documents are produced in which strategic goals are proclaimed with little of the "how" needed to actually turn them into reality. Endless calls for new strategies are issued, without deep thought about whether or not the policies they support are fundamentally realizable.

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## Ignoring the significance of the distinction robs military analysts of the ability to tell tactics, strategy, and policy apart

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The policy-strategy distinction deserves the attention lavished on other neo-Clausewitzian dualisms such as war's grammar and logic. Ignoring the significance of the distinction or dismissing it as a semantic issue robs military analysts of the ability to tell tactics, strategy, and policy apart. Clausewitz is remarkably clear on the difference between

the political object and the violence needed to institute it upon an unwilling opponent, but strategically incoherent military concepts and government documents reject this admirable simplicity. While Clausewitz cannot cure all of

the 21st century's "wicked" problems, his elegant depiction of the complex relationship between policy, strategy, and tactics can help future strategists overcome the conceptual confusion that currently characterizes modern strategy.

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