The Continuing Relevance of Clausewitz

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A Note From The Editor

As someone with a reputation for adhering to the teachings of Carl von Clausewitz it would seem odd if I were to do anything but commend the writing contained in this *Military Strategy Magazine* Special Edition to our readers, so please take that as a given.

My introduction to Clausewitz came via the late Colin Gray and his work *Another Bloody Century*. To that point I had been deeply skeptical of Clausewitz and his academic fan club, never having set foot in a university, attended any lectures and left school at 16. Thus it speaks in Clausewitz's immense favor that when I actually engaged with the text and the more commonsense commentaries about it, *On War* immediately began to answer questions that had so far left me confused and bewildered as to the unedifying, confused and clown infested swamp which is modern military thought – and if you think that harsh, Clausewitz would probably not argue with that description because he wrote to clarify and inform his peers, not confuse them further with reputational writing intended to show how clever he was. Clausewitz may not live in the Corporals club, but he should be more of a welcome visitor than many think.

Clausewitz really lives and dies in Professional Military Education (PME). Romping through *On War* next to other works is a miserable introduction yet that is how many come to meet Clausewitz's work, yet why should anyone bother? To quote Colin Gray, "if not Clausewitz, then who?"

Ironically, if PME was as practice and evidence based, as some claim, no one would need to teach or even read Clausewitz because a 189-year-old book should have been surpassed by clearer and better work found in modern curricula but barring this somewhat nugatory observation it is fair to state that both reading and understanding *On War* will never set you wrong or harm your understanding of War and Warfare.

In well over a decade as Editor of *Infinity Journal*, now *Military Strategy Magazine* (MSM), and many, many email exchanges and 'blog' posts, I have seen all the critiques of Clausewitz flounder, mostly on the simple fault of not having read the book, or not understood the words on the page.

As I have said many times before, Clausewitz is not beyond criticism. There are things he did not say, and things he did not say clearly or well. He was prone to overstatement and using analogies that were perhaps not the best. He didn't mention naval forces. He didn't deal as well as he might with Logistics or Intelligence, but very few have, and no other military theorist is held to same semantic standards or levels of rigor as Clausewitz, mainly due to the efforts of more failure prone theorists such as Fuller and Liddell-Hart, post 1918.

Read Clausewitz. Read *On War*. Everything and anything Clausewitz ever wrote, and make sure to read it more than once. If you don't get it or think it's turgid and boring, try and speak to those who don't and ask for clarity and insights. No soldier or officer was worse at his job for having engaged with Clausewitz.

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Editor, *Military Strategy Magazine*
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Clausewitz's Supreme Question: Reconsidering his Legacy

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About the author

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Carl von Clausewitz's well-traveled assertion that war is the continuation of policy, or politics, by other means remains enormously popular; so much so, in fact, that scholars have repeatedly chosen to emphasize it as the most important part of his legacy.[i] But they ought to have known better. That assertion is no more representative of the sum of his thinking than the phrase "will to power" signifies the totality of the thought of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The folly of reducing the thoughts of any great thinker to a single phrase is well known, though some Cold War-era Clausewitz scholars had good reasons for doing so. From the standpoint of his influence and legacy, however, privileging one dimension of war over others merely distorts the value of his three-dimensional model of armed conflict, his "wondrous trinity," and all but mutes his emphasis on critical inquiry. To preserve both the intricate and analytical aspects of his model, we ought to elevate Clausewitz's "supreme question," his imperative concerning the importance of understanding the type of war at hand according to its circumstances, to a more prominent place in his legacy.

The Supreme Question

To be sure, Clausewitz's contributions to military theory also include such concepts as friction, center of gravity, and the defense as the stronger form of war. Nonetheless, as important as these concepts are, they pale in comparison to his warning to heads of state and military commanders that they must "recognize the kind of war they are undertaking, neither mistaking it for, nor attempting to turn it into something it cannot be because of the nature of the circumstances." He regarded this task, furthermore, as "the first, the supreme, the most decisive act of judgment" policymakers and military strategists must make.[ii]

And for good reason; failing to understand the type of war one is about to embark upon makes it almost impossible to craft an appropriate strategy beforehand, save by accident. At a minimum, that failure can cause one to pay a higher price than necessary for victory; in extreme cases, it can lead to catastrophic defeat. This question is also central to the strategic direction of military actions during a conflict, the active component of strategy.

As is well known, Clausewitz's approach to theory hinged on critical analysis: the purpose of theory was to explain rather than to predict. In fact, the supreme question, critical inquiry, and the trinitarian model of war's nature go hand in hand in determining the type of war one is about to undertake. For, however one reads the trinity—whether as its primary elements of hostility, chance, and purpose, or in terms of its secondary elements, the populace, the military, and the government—its crucial point is that a uni-dimensional or a bi-dimensional understanding of war is inadequate. Like "three codes of law," each dimension must be obeyed; each must be given its analytical due.[iii]

Unfortunately, answering the supreme question is simple in concept but difficult in practice. It can involve inflexible or simplistic categories of war, for instance, as well as lead to a counterproductive clash of opposing views of war's nature or character. The example of US strategic thought

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during the Vietnam era (discussed below) illustrates both problems. While answering the supreme question is difficult, that fact only serves to underscore its importance; like any useful skill, it must be exercised.

Categorizing the Vietnam Conflict

American strategic thinkers recognized four types of war by the early 1960s: total or all-out war, general war, limited war, revolutionary war. The first meant a war in which at least one party uses all means at its disposal including nuclear weapons to "destroy" its opponent. The second referred to a war similar in nature to total war, but which did not involve nuclear weapons. Limited war entailed fighting for restricted objectives, with only a portion of one's resources, and within a geographically circumscribed area. Revolutionary war was defined as a conflict in which a nongovernmental and a governmental party attempted to destroy each other.[iv] As Samuel Huntington and others noted at the time, these broad categories were considered mutually exclusive in theory, though the boundaries between them were not precise. Beneath this typology, one also finds a lesser category called "forms of warfare." This category describes different species of military activity involving specific military forces, weapons, and tactics. Guerrilla warfare, naval blockades, and aerial bombardments were considered forms of warfare.[v]

Unfortunately, the mutually exclusive nature of these four categories, along with the vagueness of their boundaries, created confusion for US strategists. More precisely, it enabled America's strategists to see what they wanted to see in the entry into, and conduct of, the conflict in Vietnam. Indeed, the type of war Hanoi was waging essentially spanned all four types, including all-out war in the sense that the major parties acted as if nuclear weapons might be used, even though they never were. US Army Colonel Harry Summers, for instance, would later argue the Vietnam conflict was not a revolutionary war, but a general conflict mistakenly fought as a limited war. He saw only the first Indochina War (1945-1954) was a revolutionary war; the second conflict (1959-1975) he regarded as a war of conquest in which Hanoi attempted to dominate all Indochina. He regarded Viet Cong activities as nothing more than a "simulated insurgency," a strategic distraction, that drew attention away from Hanoi's main effort, the operations of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).[vi] He was hardly alone in these beliefs. On the other hand, the CIA's Major General Edward Lansdale saw the conflict as a revolutionary struggle, or people's war, almost from the outset.[vii] His views were seconded by several others, including former foreign service officers, such as Douglas Pike, and military analysts such as George Tanham and John J. McCuen.[viii]

Still others, such as Bernard Brodie, Robert Osgood, Thomas Schelling, and Henry Kissinger, saw the conflict as a limited one that had to be waged as the war in Korea had

been fought—with self-imposed constraints. They held this view even though few of the preconditions necessary for conducting a limited war, as laid out in Osgood's seminal work, *Limited War*, existed with respect to Vietnam.[ix] In fact, Osgood outlined three "conditions" and three "rules": (a) the fighting should involve only a small number of major participants, preferably two; (b) hostilities should be contained geographically, and operations should be restricted to military targets only; (c) the conflict should require minimal commitment of each belligerent's resources so as not to disrupt their economic, political, and social activities; (d) the political objectives must be restricted and clearly communicated to friends and foes alike; (e) open communications must be maintained to enable negotiations to commence as early as possible; and (f) the physical dimensions of the conflict must be restricted insofar as doing so accords with the political objectives.[x] Of these, only (d), (e) and (f) obtained in Vietnam, and only inconsistently.

Nevertheless, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and later US National Security Advisor Kissinger, both mindful of the real and obvious need to avoid unwanted escalation, attempted to turn America's involvement in Vietnam into the type of war they believed it had to be—a limited conflict—rather than as the *synthetic* war it was. US strategists missed the fact that the Vietnam War was not one particular type, but rather a synthetic combination of all categories (save all-out war involving nuclear weapons, though the threat of escalation on the part of Beijing and Moscow was present). Whereas US strategic thinkers were constrained in their thinking by the categories of conflict they had established, and by debating which one the Vietnam War fit into, Hanoi had managed, perhaps unintentionally, to achieve some strategic synergies by fighting a series of general, revolutionary, and limited campaigns.[xi] The lesson here is one should not allow oneself to be held captive by one's categories and should, instead, assess a conflict according to its circumstances. It is well known Clausewitz eschewed rigid categories, though it is impossible to avoid some form of classification.

Debating the Nature of the Vietnam Conflict

Confusion over the type of war the United States faced in Vietnam also revealed a fundamental disagreement over the general nature of the conflict. As Summers openly admitted, "Almost a decade after our involvement, the true nature of the Vietnam war is still in question."[xii] In fact, two principal paradigms of war's nature underpinned American strategic thinking at the time—traditional and political—and these were at odds with one another.[xiii] The first saw war's nature as an extension of human nature, and it favored prosecuting a conflict with the Jominian core principles of concentration, offensive action, and decision by battle foremost in mind. The second paradigm saw war's nature in mechanistic terms. It believed a single,

ill-considered action could trigger runaway escalation, not unlike the violent uncoiling of a tightly wound spring. This paradigm upheld political purpose as the *alpha* and *omega* of armed conflict, and as the only meaningful element in the Clausewitzian trinity. It essentially embraced the "great dictum," presumed policy was intelligent, if not rational, and ascribed to it the role of controlling the military's core principles, which it likened to instincts, and the public's passions, which it considered irrational. Accordingly, it endeavored to direct violence in a precise and incremental manner to avoid provoking an escalatory response from Moscow or Beijing.

After the war, as the number of analyses of public support for the conflict increased, the traditional paradigm expanded but did not "shift" in the Kuhnian sense of the term.[xiv] It continued to regard armed conflict as a violent extension of human nature, but it increasingly associated that nature with social groups: societies behaved as individuals but on a larger scale.[xv] As a result of this revision, however, the social dimension of armed conflict rose to the same level of importance as its military and political dimensions. In short, the revised traditional paradigm anticipated, by some thirty years, what British General Sir Rupert Smith astutely observed regarding the ubiquity of modern war's social dimension, namely, that armed conflict now takes place "amongst the people," in environments marked by constant confrontation, and the chief role of military force is to create conditions conducive to convincing rather than killing.[xvi]

Nor did the political paradigm undergo a Kuhnian shift. On the contrary, it became more convinced of its appropriateness and thus more resistant to revision. It transferred blame for the failure of the US intervention in Vietnam to the American populace, claiming the public lacked the culture necessary to support a limited war, a culture it needed and ought to have if its government were to retain its position as a leader of the free world. Put differently, this paradigm faulted the public for failing to appreciate Clausewitz's dictum that war was merely the continuation of policy, or politics, by other means. Ironically, if indeed the public lacked the will to surrender its blood and treasure to a vaguely defined and poorly conceived limited war, then US grand strategy ought to have developed a different course of action, one that could have succeeded despite that particular circumstance. An example of just such a course of action would have been to draw the line of Containment elsewhere—not in Indochina—to encompass

only those allies and strategic partners along the Pacific rim that mattered. Defending South Korea, Japan, Formosa, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand, with Singapore, Malaya, and Indonesia as potential trade-space, would have been easier to accomplish and to sell. In other words, if the Domino theory was the excuse for intervention, then draw the line where the dominoes are more capable of withstanding the threat. Instead, US strategists attempted to walk the tightrope between doing what was necessary to maintain public support for the intervention in Vietnam and not doing so much as to arouse hawkish passions. But both the White House and the Pentagon proved incapable of walking that line.

Conclusion

It would be an error to conclude the United States lost the war in Vietnam because its leading strategic thinkers failed to appreciate the importance of Clausewitz's supreme question, though most of them claimed to have read *On War* so ought to have been familiar with the question. There were many reasons for the failure of America's intervention in Vietnam. But answering the supreme question performs a valuable service by requiring strategists to confront a host of crucial questions, which will in turn expose risky assumptions and unwarranted expectations.

Clausewitz's supreme question reflects a three-dimensional model of armed conflict that goes beyond the two-dimensional framework (political and military) that still dominates much of US strategic thinking in the twenty-first century. One may debate whether it ought to be enlarged to include economic or technological elements, thereby squaring the trinity or converting it into a pentagram. Regardless, when US strategic theorists have managed to move beyond their prevailing framework—and have done so without denigrating the crucial role of political influence—the greater potential of Clausewitz's legacy will have been realized.

To be sure, a legacy is both more and less than the body of works an individual has left behind. It consists, unavoidably, of only those gems scholars selected from a possible trove of jewels. For too long, those researchers who searched among Clausewitz's works have found and admired the same gems. As a result, familiar nostrums about the relationship between war and policy have been persistently and reflexively repeated. We now have an opportunity to prevent that verse of history from repeating itself.

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[ii] C.v. Clausewitz, Vom Kriege, 19th Ed. (Bonn: Dűmmlers, 1980), 212; On War, 88.

[iii] Vom Kriege, 213; On War, 89.

[iv] Samuel P. Huntington, "Guerrilla Warfare in Theory and Policy," in Franklin Mark Osanka, ed., Modern Guerrilla Warfare: Fighting Communist Guerrilla Movements (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), xv-xxii; Richard H. Sanger, "The Age of Sociopolitical Change," Naval War College Review 22, 2 (Oct. 1969), 16. US military doctrine carried similar definitions.

[v] Huntington, "Guerrilla Warfare," xvi.

[vi] Harry G. Summers, On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (Novato: Presidio, 1982), 84-85, 90.

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[xv] Consider: Herman Kahn and Anthony Wiener, eds., American Values: Past and Future, vol. I, Values, Attitudes, and Life-Styles in a Changing World (Croton-on-Hudson: Hudson Institute, Dec. 31, 1974); Henry E. Eccles, Military Power in a Free Society (Newport RI: Naval War College, 1979).

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Clausewitz's Definition of War and its Limits

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Any book on the nature of war needs to identify its subject. So how does Clausewitz define war? What are the boundaries of that definition? What are its limitations, if any, in the contemporary world?

In Book I of *On War* Clausewitz tackles the problem of definition in two distinct ways. One is bottom-up, focusing on the very practical business of war, namely fighting and killing; the other is top-down and begins by imagining war in its most abstract form.

War as fighting

Clausewitz goes 'straight to the heart of the matter'. 'War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale' – a physical contest between people, each using force 'to compel our enemy to do our will'. [75] [i] 'There is only one means in war: combat' (*das Gefecht*). [96] In essence 'war is fighting' (*Kampf*). [127] It is the spilling of blood that makes war 'a special activity, different and separate from any other pursued by man'. [187]

The focus on combat is sustained. *On War* has over 600 references to battle (*Schlacht* – which also means *slaughter* in German). No armchair theorist, Clausewitz was actively engaged in combat on at least 20 occasions between 1793 and 1815, and received a bayonet wound to the head in May 1813.[ii]

Obviously, Clausewitz does not equate all fighting with war. Wrestling may be 'fighting of a kind' [127] but it is not war. Nor does he include murders, gang-fights, riots, massacres and the like in his definition. Human beings fight and kill one another in many ways and for many reasons without this necessarily constituting 'war'. War, Clausewitz insists, must be 'a serious means to a serious end'. [86] There are two requirements.

First, war entails 'a clash between major interests.' [149] For Clausewitz it is the interests of states that constitute the 'serious end'. Individuals and groups other than states do not normally wage war. Second, 'serious means' refers to fighting by soldiers as part of a state's military organisation. Combat, Clausewitz says, 'is not a contest between individuals' but between soldiers who are 'recruited, clothed, armed and trained' to be able to '*fight at the right place and the right time*'. [95] Most of the references to fighting in *On War* are to clashes between national armies under the command of a state.

But Clausewitz recognised that war could be more complex. [iii] He knew of the American War of Independence when irregular forces played a significant role in defeating the British (though he does not mention the conflict in *On War*). He knew more of the Vendée uprising in which lightly-armed peasants fought against France's revolutionary regime from 1793-96. And he was very familiar with the war in Spain where Napoleon's army had struggled against a combination of partisans, irregular troops and the armies of England, Portugal and Spain itself. Clearly, war could embrace combatants other than uniformed regulars.

What interested Clausewitz most about these wars were the tactics employed, notably the use of mobile forces, often lightly-armed, to harass enemy soldiers, attack weak points or gather intelligence. Such tactics were often favoured by insurgents unable to recruit large, regular armies or mount major attacks. Like others before him, Clausewitz recognised that standing armies could also employ some of these tactics. Today these might be termed 'special operations' but were then known as *guerrilla* or 'small war'. While posted to the War College in Berlin in 1810-11 he gave a series of lectures on what he termed 'little war' (*Kleinkrieg*).[iv]

But what he did not contemplate was that war could be conducted by insurgents or non-state groups alone, with

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partisans and irregular forces employing 'small war' tactics. He did not anticipate that such groups might drive out an occupying power or defeat regular forces by relying on nationalism and/or ideology simply by sustained use of irregular methods of war. The fate of Spain, Clausewitz believed, was determined primarily by the armies of England and France.

At the same time Clausewitz understood the importance of governments mobilising popular support and participation in war. Napoleon had done this with spectacular success and Clausewitz, deeply impressed, urged Prussia to follow suit after its humiliation by the French army at Jena in 1806. He advocated what he called people's war (*Volkskrieg*) even more vigorously after Prussia had been forced to join Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. People's war for Clausewitz was above all a means of strengthening a nation's fighting forces both materially and psychologically rather than a free-standing form of warfare.

Pure War

At the other end of the spectrum from the harsh reality of combat is the idea of pure war. For Clausewitz this is war free of all constraint and limitation. He mostly refers to *absoluter Krieg* which is best translated as 'pure war', following Kant's practice of identifying the unadulterated essence of a concept or activity.[v] 'Pure war' is thus not to be found in the real world though sometimes Clausewitz lapses. In admiration of Napoleon's military triumphs, he remarks that 'with our own eyes we have seen warfare achieve this state of absolute perfection'. [580]

In strict terms, however, the idea of 'pure war' means stripping war of all its real-world characteristics – soldiers and armies, generals and statesmen, the social and political context. It means war without its normal dynamics such as strategic interaction and friction. It is thus 'a wholly isolated act, occurring suddenly and not produced by previous events in the political world'. It is simply collision – 'a clash of forces freely operating and obedient to no law but their own'. [78]

Clausewitz stresses that this is a 'logical fantasy' and can never occur in the real world. [113] To understand actual war one must move from concept to reality. Now 'the whole thing looks quite different' [78] – and far more complex.

First, we must replace abstract entities with human beings and real organisations with all their emotions, limitations, variety and unpredictability. War is not a collision between inanimate objects but 'always the collision of two living forces'. [77]

Second, in real war interaction occurs between combatants over a period of time. At tactical, strategic (campaign) and national levels each side responds to the actions of the other, evaluating its options in the light of possible

reactions. Belligerents rely on information and judgement but these will vary greatly in quality and reliability. The goals of warring states, moreover, will be influenced by the course of the war. Real war is a complex of interactions, multi-layered and often unpredictable.

Third, the complexity of actual war is evident in what Clausewitz calls a 'remarkable trinity' [*wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit*] of passion, reason and chance that underlie war (and, one might add, all serious human activity). The passion of war is the 'primordial violence, hatred and enmity' [89] that motivate people to fight. The reason of war is the calculation of means to achieve ends and the reckoning of costs and benefits.

Finally, chance and uncertainty beset the whole enterprise. This unholy trinity varies not only from war to war but also within each war.[vi]

The function of war

Clausewitz also seeks to define war by its function in human affairs: 'what does it do?' rather than 'what is it?'. His answer has two elements that are fused in the German word *Politik*. This refers both to 'policy' – the aims and ambitions of individual states – and to 'politics' – the workings of human interaction on a large scale.

War as an instrument of policy

This is Clausewitz's best-known depiction of the function of war though earlier thinkers also speculated along these lines.[vii] War occurs when states seek goals that clash with the goals of other states and choose to pursue them through violent means. The decision to use force must be mutual. As Clausewitz observes wryly, wars actually begin when the defender decides to fight in preference to simply surrendering to the aggressor. [377] Both take up war as a means to differing ends.

Clausewitz's key insight is that policy – which originates in a combination of passion and reason – does not cease to exist once war breaks out but runs through the entire course of hostilities. It explains not only the motives for war and the objectives set but also the degree of effort made by belligerents. [81] In its simplest expression: 'war is nothing but a continuation of policy with other means'. [69] It is therefore 'only a branch of political activity [and] in no sense autonomous'. [605]

Some wars have ambitious goals, evoke huge effort and cause great destruction; others seek only marginal advantage and show little 'hostile spirit'. [218] A war may start as one type but transition to the other. Escalation may occur since war contains an inherent tendency for each side to increase its effort in order to outdo the other, making for a rise to 'extremes'. [77] Alternatively, ambitions may dwindle and

costs mount up so that war becomes 'nothing more than armed neutrality' [218].

Clausewitz's position here is not that war *is* necessarily an instrument of policy but rather that war *ought* to be treated as an instrument of policy. He acknowledges that this is no easy task. A government can set wise or foolish objectives – these are matters for policy. [606-7] But whatever their goals they should constantly seek to understand what war can and cannot achieve and the costs and risks involved.

War as part of human society

A second function of war is found in Clausewitz's assertion that war is 'part of man's social existence'. [149] It is inherent in the system of states that emerged from around 1500. Since war cannot be eradicated from human affairs, a state must be prepared to fight in order to defend its interests, its honour and even its survival. Also critical for security are alliances and the balance of (largely military) power among states, topics to which Clausewitz devotes considerable attention. He warns, for example, that allies can never be fully trusted since they will ultimately pursue their own interests. [603]

In this context Clausewitz sees the function of war as that of settling disputes: war is thus a 'clash between major interests, which is *resolved* by bloodshed (*sich blutig löst*)'. [149, emphasis added] How is this to be done? The simplest method is to disarm the enemy so that he is powerless to prevent you imposing your will. More complex is the use and threat of force such that an opponent will sooner or later choose acquiescence rather than resistance.

If war holds out the promise of resolving conflicts, however, it rarely produces permanent results – as Clausewitz acknowledges. Even a decisive victory may turn out to be a passing triumph while defeat as may prove 'a transitory evil' for the defeated. [80] Prussia's 'catastrophe' at Jena in 1806 is clearly in Clausewitz's mind here. Any self-respecting state will seek ways to restore its honour and independence. War cannot guarantee solutions, only that things will be different.

Modern War and the Modern State

Clausewitz's understanding of war was developed in the context of the modern state that emerged in Europe from around 1500. There were many factors at work: greater internal order, more efficient administration that facilitated collection of taxes and conscription of citizens, growing international trade, and technological advances, both civilian and military. The Enlightenment also encouraged greater faith in reason as a guide to human affairs.

European states ceased to feel threatened by barbarians outside the gates while still fearing war among themselves.

But these modernising states could hope that war, if it could not be prevented, might be made more civilised. European armies were slowly becoming more disciplined, more educated and more professional in the exercise of violence. There were also efforts to separate fighting from civilian life partly out of humanitarian sentiment, partly to avoid economic disruption, partly to reflect military codes of honour. Expanding diplomatic contacts meant that states knew more about the outside world and might better judge their true interests. The resort to war promised to be more rational and conduct of hostilities more controllable.

These changes tied in with Clausewitz's view that war reflects the 'social conditions' within states and the relations between them. [76] Hence war conducted by civilised states differs from war fought by 'uncivilized' (*ungebildet*) peoples. Primitive warriors, Clausewitz believed, knew little of limitation or restraint. They put prisoners to death and lay waste to cities for no reason other than vengeance or wanton cruelty. [76] Lacking political purpose and rational control, their 'wars' are driven by sheer hatred. [607] By contrast, wars between 'civilized nations' are 'far less cruel and destructive than wars between savages'. The simple reason is that '[s]avage peoples are ruled by passion civilized peoples by the mind'. [76]

Yet Clausewitz is far from saying that modern war is bloodless. 'Even the most civilised of peoples' he acknowledges, 'can be fired with passionate hatred for each other'. [76] He has little time for laws of war: their effect on the conduct of war is 'imperceptible' and 'hardly worth mentioning'. [75] Humanitarianism in war is sheer folly: it invites an enemy 'with a sharp sword [to] hack off our arms'. [260] If there is some constraint on war it is through reason which may be found in the political element. Also important is the concept of military honour which requires amongst other things the fair treatment of prisoners and the sparing of non-combatants. Though Clausewitz says little explicitly on this topic, it underlies much of his thinking about his profession.

The changing face of war

How has Clausewitz's understanding of war fared in in the contemporary world? Is it relevant to the many internal conflicts that have occurred since 1945? Has it adapted to the atomic age when resort to nuclear weapons could well result in mutual annihilation? Is it ultimately misguided in promoting the idea that war can be an instrument of policy rather than an expression of culture or human nature?

Anti-modern War

Fighting among groups other than states, of course, existed long before the modern era, has continued to exist, and will no doubt persist into the future. Ferocity of will and improvisation often allow such warriors to triumph with

little planning or control.[viii] Leaders of armed groups may be little more than brigands or warlords with large personal ambitions.

The ability of non-state actors to take up arms has grown enormously in recent times. Weapons are more accessible, more varied and more destructive. Violent attacks can be carried out with relative ease within states or across international borders. Force can be used against any targets and for any cause. This sort of fighting displays characteristics that are the antithesis of what Clausewitz saw as modern war and can be labelled 'anti-modern' (rather than pre-modern or post-modern).

Not all such violence is of sufficient scale and scope to warrant the term 'war'. Where is the line to be drawn? For Clausewitz, as we have seen, war requires the clash of 'great interests'. What has happened since 1945 is that the idea of 'great interests' has been broadened. Prior to WWII the general view was that 'war' meant conflict between two states or at least entities that looked like states – as in the American Civil War. But after 1945 pressure grew to apply the term 'war' to a wider range of conflicts, and this became most evident with regard to the laws of war.[ix]

In 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions extended their coverage to hostilities directed against colonial rule, foreign occupation and racist regimes (as in South Africa). The requirement for uniformed armies was changed to organised, armed groups under responsible command; the scope of hostilities was widened to situations where belligerents exercised control over territory such that they could carry out 'sustained and concerted military operations'; and 'combatants' need not wear uniforms but must carry arms openly while preparing for and during a military action. Significantly, the term 'armed conflict' replaced 'war' with its state-oriented connotation.

Clausewitz was not interested in legalistic definitions of war and would perhaps approve of the adoption of more or less objective measures to determine whether 'war' existed. He may well have recognised as war certain armed struggles where there is a clear political objective such as overthrowing an oppressive government or securing independence from an imperial power; where there is a measure of central control over the use of violence; and where those fighting may wear a uniform of sorts and somewhat resemble a modern army. To this extent Clausewitz's 'war' retains its relevance.

Where he would draw the line is where the current law of armed conflict also stops. Fighting cannot be recognised as war when fighters rely on tactics and choose targets that are essentially civilian rather than military; when their attacks are small-scale and not part of a wider campaign; when they lack central control; and when there is no prospect of success. In such cases governments will likely treat them as criminals rather than enemies with whom

some resolution of the conflict might be achieved, whether by force, negotiation or a combination of both.

Hyper-modern war

By 1945 the demands of modern war had led to weapons of mass destruction capable of destroying entire cities in an instant. Soon after, missiles were developed that could deliver nuclear weapons to any part of the globe in a matter of hours or even minutes. Modern war appeared to have burst its natural bounds – it was now 'hyper-modern'. In all probability a nuclear war would see no combat among soldiers, no campaigns, no political direction of a sustained national effort. It would resemble Clausewitz's imaginary 'pure war': 'an isolated act', taking the form of 'a single short blow' with weapons already in existence, and proving 'decisive' with a 'final' result. [78-9]

Strategists were immediately divided about the continuing relevance of Clausewitz's view of war. Some argued that nuclear war could never serve as an instrument of policy since it was likely to escape the control of governments and the cost of a nuclear exchange would be out of proportion to any reasonable objective. Moreover, even an unspoken threat of nuclear attack might panic an enemy into striking first. Others, however, claimed that Clausewitz's admonitions about war as an instrument of policy were now all the more important: do not take the first step without considering the last, means must be matched to ends, wars have a natural tendency to escalate, and political control must be maintained at all times.

From this debate a consensus emerged that the role of nuclear strategy was not to fight war but to avert war – by convincing any opponent that they would gain nothing and perhaps lose everything from initiating the use of nuclear weapons. The term 'Cold War' came to define a situation in which threats – explicit and implicit – were managed among the nuclear powers. The most likely causes of a nuclear war became accident or misunderstanding rather than deliberate decisions.

Some of this thinking may have been comprehensible to Clausewitz. But he would certainly have found strange national strategies aimed above all at deterring war rather than actually preparing to fight one. The idea that strategy might deliberately abandon rationality with threats that 'leave something to chance' (in Thomas Schelling's formulation) would also have been troubling. Debates over nuclear strategy, moreover, would lack historical examples that could provide guidance. Like the idea of pure war, nuclear strategy could appear disconnected from the real world, 'a kind of war by algebra'. [76]

Instrument of policy?

Clausewitz is also criticised by those who claim that he fails to take into account fundamental drivers of war. It is true

that he approaches war from the demand side, as something that states require for their purposes. And he says little about the supply side of war, about why groups, including states, may see war as valuable in itself rather than simply as a means to an end. While Clausewitz recognises that hatred can exist between peoples, critics argue that war originates from deeper factors that undermine the notion of war as simply a rational instrument of policy.

One line of attack is that Clausewitz's idea of war ignores culture and therefore 'does not fully encompass the causes of war'.[x] John Keegan, for example, asserts bluntly that 'war is not a continuation of policy by other means' because it 'reaches into the most secret places of the human heart, places where self dissolves rational purpose'. [xi] Communities embody this underlying truth and fight, not for 'political' reasons but instinctively for the sake of the tribe or society, for religion or ideology, or simply as a way of life. A straitjacket of means and ends may be imposed on war, but this does not capture its true nature. On this interpretation societies value war for itself – a view Clausewitz could never countenance in relation to modern war.

A related criticism is that Clausewitz neglects the individual psychology of war. Fighting, Martin van Creveld suggests, 'can be a source of joy, perhaps even the greatest joy of all'. The simultaneous risk of death and prospect of glory make it 'one of the most exciting, most stimulating' of human activities.[xii] War tests the manhood of young men and separates the brave from the unworthy. Duty, obedience and self-sacrifice become sacred values and are reinforced by ceremony, uniforms, flags and medals. There is always a supply of people ready, even keen, to fight whether in a modern, disciplined army or a rag-tag anti-modern outfit.

Conclusion

There is no 'right' definition of war – only definitions that are more or less useful for a given purpose. Clausewitz is interested in war in his own time because it reflected enormous changes taking place in politics and society. His principal concern is that war should serve as an instrument of policy for states with effective governments and regular armed forces – and be used to protect their independence and their honour. It is also an activity that can be to some extent 'civilised' by reason and by its separation from civilian life.

Clausewitz's approach to war is essentially normative. War ought to be an instrument of policy and ought, as a matter of practice and of principle, be kept separate from civilian life. His view of 'modern war' is thus a reference point, a standard against which other kinds of war can be measured. For him, and many since, wars that lack rationality, manifest little or no control by a political leadership, and ignore discrimination between combatants and non-combatants do not merit the name 'war' – or must at least be regarded as 'uncivilised' wars.

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CLAUSEWITZ AND CONTEMPORARY WAR

Antulio J. Echevarria II
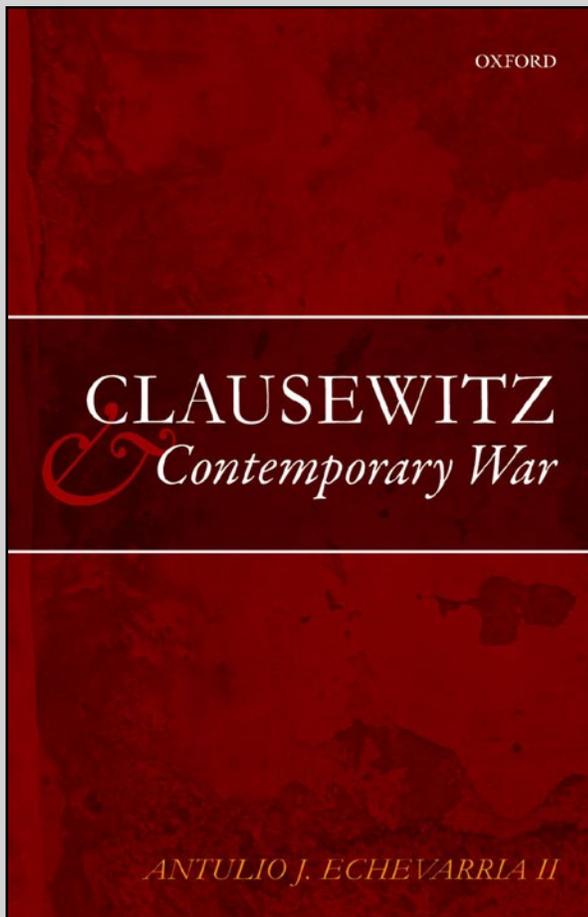
While many scholars agree that Clausewitz's *On War* is frequently misunderstood, almost none have explored his methodology to see whether it might enhance our understanding of his concepts. This book lays out Clausewitz's methodology in a brisk and straightforward style. It then uses that as a basis for understanding his contributions to the ever growing body of knowledge of war. The specific contributions this study addresses are Clausewitz's theories concerning the nature of war, the relationship between war and politics, and several of the major principles of strategy he examined. These theories and principles lie at the heart of the current debates over the nature of contemporary conflict. While understanding *On War* is no more a prerequisite for winning wars than knowledge is a requirement for exercising power, Clausewitz's opus has become something of an authoritative reference for those desiring to expand their knowledge of war. By linking method and concept, this book contributes significantly to that end.

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Antulio J. Echevarria II is Director of Research, Strategic Studies Institute at the United States Army War College in Pennsylvania.

The Mirage of Post-Clausewitzianism: Understanding War and Politics on the Frontier of Clausewitzian Thought

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Lukas Milevski is an assistant professor at the Institute of History at Leiden University, where he teaches strategy in the BA International Studies and MA International Relations programs. He has published two books with Oxford University Press: *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (2016) and *The West's East: Contemporary Baltic Defense in Strategic Perspective* (2018).

It used to be fashionable to decree that Carl von Clausewitz and *On War* had become obsolete, especially in the 1990s when Martin van Creveld, John Keegan, and Mary Kaldor each developed notions of war and warfare which were purportedly post-Clausewitzian. Keegan even suggested that war had almost never been and actually should not be Clausewitzian. None of them produced a convincing portrayal of post- or non-Clausewitzian war and each received substantial pushback from the field of strategic studies, particularly anyone acquainted with Clausewitz's work. Attempts to replace Clausewitz have diminished since then, the most notable of the few by Emile Simpson in 2012.

Nonetheless, such attempts provoke a question: what could post-Clausewitzian war actually look like? In a certain sense, this is the same as asking to identify the limits of Clausewitz's theory of war. However, not all limitations are equally significant. Clausewitz did not write about sea power, or technology, or the economics of war, each of which represents a limitation, but one of omission rather than of logic. They do not fatally affect the logic or structure of Clausewitz's theory of war. Such limitations of omission have been compensated by subsequent thinkers such as Julian Corbett, who imported some of Clausewitz's ideas into the study of sea power. Limitations of logic are more important; in principle they represent the basis for repudiating the Clausewitzian system of knowledge for understanding war and replacing it with something else.

This article begins by briefly explaining the various cases made against Clausewitz by van Creveld, Keegan, Kaldor, and Simpson, what these critiques all have in common, and what they reveal about Clausewitz's theory of war. Thereafter, the focus shifts to the cultural context of the critics and its importance in providing definitions of key concepts such as policy and politics which are not only incompatible with Clausewitz's theory of war but are even in and of themselves problematic.

The Cases Made Against Clausewitz

Harold Winton has suggested that theory serves four distinct purposes: explanation; categorization; establishing relationships with other fields; and anticipation.[i] All four

of the major challenges to Clausewitz of the past 30 years (van Creveld, Keegan, Kaldor, and Simpson) have focused on one single element of theoretical purpose: establishing relationships. All four also focused on a single relationship, between war and politik, whether translated as policy or politics.

Martin van Creveld sought to provide an explicitly post-Clausewitzian perspective on war: "this work aims at providing a new, non-Clausewitzian framework for thinking about war".[ii] He did this by (incorrectly) suggesting that the Clausewitzian trinity comprised the government, army, and people, all presumed to be possessed by a state: "That organized violence should only be called 'war' if it were waged by the state, for the state, and against the state was a postulate that Clausewitz took almost for granted".[iii] Further, "[a]rmies were defined as organizations which served the government, whether monarchical, republican, or imperial."[iv] Thus van Creveld concluded that "Clausewitz's ideas on war were wholly rooted in the fact that, ever since 1648, war had been waged overwhelmingly by states."[v] The state-orientation he forced on Clausewitz infected his understanding of politics as well:

> Whatever the exact meaning of the term 'politics,' it is not the same as 'any kind of relationship involving any kind of government in any kind of society.' A more correct interpretation would be that politics are intimately connected with the state; they are, indeed, the characteristic form that power-relationships assume within the kind of organization known as the state. Where there is no state, as was the case during most of human history, politics will be so mixed in with other factors as to leave room neither for the term nor for the reality behind it.[vi]

Thus van Creveld characterized Clausewitz's theory of war as state-centric in such a way that one of the key relationships the latter enunciated—that war is a continuation of politics with the admixture of violent means—breaks down in all but a very particular set of circumstances. He mischaracterizes both war and politics.

John Keegan similarly assaults the war-politics link; the first sentence of his first chapter starkly asserts "[w]ar is not the continuation of policy by other means."[vii] Although he acknowledges that a fixation on 'policy' is a quirk of translation and suggests that *politik* should more accurately translate as 'political intercourse', he then lofts the same state-centric banner as van Creveld. "It implies the existence of states, of state interests and of rational calculation about how they may be achieved. Yet war antedates the state, diplomacy and strategy by many millennia."[viii] His reasoning for innately associating politics and the state was even weaker than that of van Creveld; he simply passed it over as a given. Instead, he contrasted politics with culture by suggesting that non-Western forms of warfare "defied altogether the rationality

of politics as it is understood by Westerners ... to perceive how incomplete, parochial and ultimately misleading is the idea that war is the continuation of politics."[ix] Keegan, although he characterizes war acceptably, mischaracterizes politics even more extremely than van Creveld. Not only is it state-centric, but politics must also be rational in a way understood by the West, otherwise it is not politics. Implicit in Keegan's writing is the suggestion that the Western understanding of politics is simultaneously right—the rational standard to which all non-Western politics, to be politics rather than culture, must be measured—*and* wrong—unable to comprehend forms of politics outside the West's culturally narrow understanding of the phenomenon. Yet, for Keegan, the problem was not the West's, or his own, understanding of politics, but the relationship between war and politics expressed by Clausewitz.

Mary Kaldor follows van Creveld and Keegan in associating Clausewitz with state-centric understandings of both war and politics, with similarly poor justification. She leaps with even more haste than Keegan from Clausewitz's definition to invoking the state: "Clausewitz defined war as 'an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will'. This definition implied that 'we' and 'our opponent' were states, and the 'will' of one state could be clearly defined. Hence war, in the Clausewitzian definition, is war between states for definable political end, i.e. state interest."[x] Despite mischaracterizing, then critiquing Clausewitz, her ambition was not to supplant him as such, but to highlight differences between her view of the prevalent thinking and what she believed to be empirical reality in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, her critique's focus on the Clausewitzian relationship between war and politics, again misrepresented politics as something inherently state-based and rational.

Of the four critiques of Clausewitz, Emile Simpson's is the most sophisticated and best elaborated. It also is based on a traditional-Clausewitzian versus contemporary war distinction, particularly regarding the relationship between war and politics. Simpson distinguishes between two such relationships:

> "first, the use of armed force within a military domain that seeks to establish military conditions for a political solution, a practice traditionally associated with the concept of war; second, the use of armed force that directly seeks political, as opposed to specifically military, outcomes, which lies beyond the scope of war in its traditional paradigm."[xi]

The former is purportedly Clausewitzian: military action, on the basis of the physical results achieved, enables new politics to occur, leading to the end of war and a new pattern of interaction between prior belligerents. The latter is an ill-defined concept which seems essentially to boil down to others not interpreting action the same way as the acting belligerent. As Simpson explained using the example

of Israel's 2006 war with Hezbollah, "Israel's actions in war were not interpreted by the Lebanese people and government, a key strategic audience, in accordance with Israel's interpretive structure of war. Thus what for Israel was part of a battle in Beirut was for the Lebanese the death of family or friends. The capture of a military objective for Israel was seen by various constituencies, particularly in parts of the Muslim world, as a heroic fight by Hezbollah for Palestinians in Gaza and Islamic militants generally."[xii] Essentially, it is about being aware of how other parties (not simply the direct enemy) think about one's military activities. Yet again, the critique focuses on the relationship between war and politics, this time on the basis of differing perceptions of that relationship among belligerents and bystanders.

In concentrating on this one aspect of theory, all these works inadvertently highlight the fundamental problem of trying to imagine post-Clausewitzian war. Clausewitz's theory of war is highly multi-dimensional and encompasses myriad aspects: a handful of different definitions of war; the wondrous trinity; the methodology of historical *kritik* by which to study war; the relationship between offense and defense; military genius and the qualities of military command; and so on. Although some of Clausewitz's insights are less crucial than others, *On War* alone contains hundreds of pages of insight, let alone other works which Clausewitz also wrote during his lifetime. This leads to the question of how *much* Clausewitz must be refuted before one's vision of war is truly post-Clausewitzian? This is not to catalogue and rate his ideas, but rather to suggest that moving past Clausewitz is difficult and complex. It is also why the critics, including but not limited to these four, focused not on the content of Clausewitz's theory of war but on the one element of theory inherent in defining external relationships with other fields and other key concepts—particularly *politik*, whether policy or politics. By questioning his relevance in this way one may try to refute Clausewitz without engaging with the bulk of his theory. Van Creveld was honest about this, still recognizing *On War* as the second best book on war ever written.[xiii] Implicitly it is not that his ideas are wrong, but that the relationships are—or, became wrong over time as social and political conditions changed.

Clausewitz, Culture, and Context

Underlying the critiques of Clausewitz is the assumption that relationships his theory defined between war and politics/policy have been culturally conditioned in an age of states, making his theory state-based with relevance that rises and falls along with the fortunes of the state as a method of political organization. Both policy and politics are therefore activities of and products by the state; they cannot exist beyond it. This is outright wrong. As his writings evolved Clausewitz actually moved *away* from ascribing the state a dominating role: "In one of his earlier

manuscripts, Clausewitz regarded war as the continuation of '*l'intérêt naturel des états*', being much in conformity with the primacy of policy as we know it today. This gradually however changed first into *Staatspolitik* and finally into *Politik* when he wrote his last version of *Vom Kriege* after 1827."[xiv] Beyond this factual point, however, it is notable that those making this culturalist critique ignore their own cultural context and its effect on their thinking about key concepts—in particular, on both politics and policy—and in turn how this has affected their judgments on Clausewitz's theory of war.

Central to the cultural context of the critics is the assumption that policy is inherently rational, where rationality is generally defined using key elements such as a narrow (usually material) understanding of self-interest and the efficient pursuit of goals to maximize gains. Rationality has often been understood in the light of its two potential sources: either human beings themselves are innately rational, or the processes by which humans behave and act in organized social settings may be designed to force otherwise irrational creatures to make rational choices. [xv] This is the culturally dominant understanding of rationality in the West and has been prevalent in the social sciences, from economics to business management and administration, political science, international relations, and indeed strategic studies, since the 1920s, despite recurring challenges to such notions of rationality and rationalism such as those posed by the very occurrences of the Second World War and the Cold War.[xvi] Rationality is a word culturally imbued with very particular meaning.

Thus in combating Clausewitz's critics, his defenders dispute his purported state-centrism but often not the centrality of rationality to policy; rather, they similarly also assume its importance. Christopher Bassford's definition of policy is "rational action, undertaken by an individual or group which already has power in order to use, maintain and extend that power."[xvii] Bassford also leans heavily on rationality in his description of the Clausewitzian trinity, shortening Clausewitz's primordial violence, enmity, and hatred; play of chance and probability; and subordination to reason simply to irrationality, nonrationality, and rationality.[xviii] Peter Paret similarly invokes rationality as a defining element of policy.

Implicit in both sides of the Clausewitzian debate is therefore the assumption that policy concerns fulfilling narrowly-defined, usually material goals as efficiently as possible to maximize gains. Yet basic acceptance of rationality by Clausewitz's defenders continues to leave him open to criticism on the basis that often throughout history war has *not* been a rational instrument of policy or a rational continuation of political intercourse, especially when judging by outcomes. For example, even without the state fixation, Keegan's criticism still stands if policy is assumed to be inherently rational because policy-makers (and not just non-Western policy-makers) often

take broader interpretations of their self-interest and the interest of their polity than mere material benefit, and they often do not seek to maximize gains outright but satisfy themselves with lesser achievements. Such stances exceed the bounds of rationality as it is generally culturally understood in the West—at least in Western academia—yet are politically normal even in the West. The fixation on rationality produces an understanding of politics and policy which cannot even encompass Western politics within and between states, let alone also politics in non-Western and non-state contexts. The rationality focus produces an inapt understanding of political behavior which in turn excludes much political behavior as nonpolitical because it does not fit the definition of rationality. Moreover, this emphasis on rationality is also an inaccurate depiction of Clausewitz's understanding of politics; his "ideas are more complex than these crude depictions of strict political rationalism suggest."[xix] Yet the centrality of rationality is so culturally ingrained that, rather than question their own limited and inapt understanding of policy, Clausewitz's critics attempt to undermine his contention that war is the continuation of *politik* with grand statements which deride Clausewitz and establish ever grander counter-concepts such as culture.

Simpson's more distinct critique of Clausewitz is founded on ways of teaching strategy, war, and Clausewitz himself which are culturally unique not just to the West, but even more narrowly to professional Western militaries. Although Simpson did not emphasize states, such teaching tends to emphasize their importance; one may note the military cultural importance of the self-described Clausewitzian Harry Summers' *On Strategy*, which depicts—in line with later critics—a state-focused Clausewitzian trinity. Second, it reflects the professional military's preference to imagine a military-only, politics/policy-free zone of activity in the operational level of war.[xx] Only in such optimistic fantasy thinking does war establish exclusively military conditions for subsequent political consequences, rather than being thoroughly infused by politics throughout the whole experience. As Clausewitz wrote to a colleague, "the political element even extends to the separate components of a campaign; rarely will it be without influence on such major episodes of warfare as a battle, etc. According to this point of view, there can be no question of a *purely military* evaluation of a great strategic issue, nor of a purely military scheme to solve it."[xxi] Although Simpson was presumably taught this operational perspective professionally as if it were Clausewitzian thinking, it in fact reflects modern Western military culture and professional predilections rather than Clausewitz himself.

Conclusion

When considering Clausewitz, the critics are actually criticizing but a stylized understanding of Clausewitz, commonly shared but nonetheless wrong. Kaldor comes closer than most to both recognizing and acknowledging this: "it is the stylized notion of war that still profoundly affects our thinking about war and dominates, even today, the way policy-makers conceive of security."[xxii] This stylization of Clausewitz, and of the understanding of war his caricature came to represent, emerged principally out of the 1970s, to which the popular 1976 Michael Howard and Peter Paret translation contributed, and from which the critics could not escape even as they criticized what they believed to be Clausewitz's actual theory of war. Hew Strachan has recognized this, writing back in 2007 that

> [t]he Clausewitz so readily condemned by commentators of today, such as Martin van Creveld, John Keegan and Mary Kaldor, is the Clausewitz who was fashionable in the 1970s. The fact that the rationality of the "formula" of war's relationship to policy looks less clear in 2007 does not invalidate it as an interpretative tool. The problem has arisen from its artificial exclusivity, from its being taken so very much out of context. There is much more to On War than one hackneyed catchphrase, and the tragedy for the armed forces of the United States and their allies today is that greater attention to rather more of the text would have provided the intellectual underpinnings for greater self-awareness and strategic sensitivity than has been evident over the last half decade. We need not to ditch On War but to read more of it, and to read it with greater care.[xxiii]

Yet it is not just Clausewitz whom we must treat with greater care. We must treat all of our ideas and their sources with greater care and, in the context of Clausewitz and strategic studies, particularly those ideas to which Clausewitz connects war and to which strategic studies as a field connects itself. Many of Clausewitz's critics, in lieu of questioning their own knowledge and its contexts, preferred to fault Clausewitz's theory of war. Today the prospect of wholly surmounting Clausewitz and studying war without him remains a mirage, although the need to move beyond inapt stylizations of Clausewitz, as well as of other key concepts in strategic studies such as war, strategy, politics, and policy, remains eternally necessary.

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In Search of a Point: The Blob at War

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David Betz is Professor of War in the Modern World in the Department of War Studies, King's College London and Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. His most recent book is *Carnage and Connectivity: Landmarks in the Decline of Conventional Military Power* (Hurst 2015). His current work is on the resurgence of fortification strategies.

Why should we ask about the contemporary relevance of Clausewitz in the first place? Does War Studies really need constantly to have its major philosopher subject to permanent tribunal? It's been many years already since Martin Van Creveld testified for the prosecution, as it were, measuring the great man's ideas as he understood them against reality as he saw it and finding them to be distinctly wanting.[i] A little while later, Colin Gray, hardly a less illustrious scholar, reached entirely the opposite conclusion.[ii] Speaking for the defence, he declared (I paraphrase): Clausewitz was, Clausewitz is, and Clausewitz will ever be—hallowed is his name.

Whichever side you are on, perhaps we ought to agree to disagree and move on?

But then again, it does seem at the present juncture that it would be worthwhile getting a bit philosophical. I mean, consider that the greatest military power in the world today has not won a war in seventy-five years. So accustomed now is the world to this fact that it seems unremarkable when statesmen and commanders regularly voice the most astonishing garbage. 'There is no military solution', they say while deploying military force somewhere to do something, with a fig leaf of 'whole of government' other means— almost always badly-organised, ill-conceived, and under-skilled, though surprisingly often well-funded.

When asked in 2009 to define 'victory' in Afghanistan, President Obama demurred. The word worried him, he said.[iii] It's not as though Obama was talking out of school, either. The irrelevance of 'victory' in contemporary conflict is in fact the orthodoxy taught in the staff colleges and university departments of international affairs where the foreign policy establishment (aka the 'Blob') is trained. Perhaps no one should be surprised at this since as far as the academy is concerned the simple question 'what is war?' is also a matter of debate.[iv]

Recently, ex-Secretary of Defence James Mattis, also by reputation one of the toughest and most capable of modern American generals, co-wrote a pre-emptive rebuke of whoever should take over the presidency in January 2021, Donald Trump or Joe Biden. American involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere must not be dismissed as 'endless' or 'forever' wars. The 'work' of building the capacity of other nations to govern themselves in ways that suit the Blob is neither 'quick' or 'linear' but is an 'investment' in 'security'.[v] For readers not fluent in Blobbish, that means 'forever wars', just don't you dare call them that.

In other words, the situation is that we frequently use military force as a tool of policy; the complication is that we have policy desires that are often strategically ridiculous, usually because they are props in domestic political theatre more than anything else, and/or hubristic and not actually achievable by military force. We have lost track of what war is for, and that is the case because (crazy as it sounds) we have lost track of what war is. Hence, the contemporary relevance of Clausewitz because for all of his faults he had a distinct view on that point.

Clausewitz's Rules

It is a basic principle of science that a theory is discarded when its explanatory value is surpassed by another one. What is laid out in *On War* is a theory of war, or as close to a theory as one gets in social science—a description of the thing that explains how it works. If we declare that Clausewitz is irrelevant, then it behoves us to understand exactly what it is that we are putting in the proverbial

recycle bin. For myself, with all respect to the great number of other scholars who have pored over the text with all the assiduousness of a madrassa valedictorian with the Koran, it comes down to this:

'War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.'

Accept this as true and there is a lot that follows logically from it. For a start, it presupposes that there is some form of 'violence' involved. It is important to be precise about this, for which Thomas Schelling's definition of force in war as the causing of *pain and destruction of value* is very useful.[vi] There are non-physical ways of doing both, and always have been, which means that there is (contrary to the chorus of airport-grade 'new war' analyses) nothing paradigm shattering about 'cyber', for instance.

It presupposes also that there is another thinking entity on the other side which has its own will, determination not to submit to yours, and the ingenuity to resist creatively. War, therefore, is *reciprocal*. What you may imagine doing to your opponent they can also imagine and prepare for accordingly or do something different from expectation in the hope of confounding your plans. You might say war is in a sense a competition of imaginations. It is significant that Napoleon once explained his extraordinary success in those sorts of terms:

> If I always appear prepared, it is because before entering on an undertaking, I have meditated for long and have foreseen what may occur. It is not genius which reveals to me suddenly and secretly what I should do in circumstances unexpected by others, it is thought and meditation.[vii]

Eventually, though, the die is cast, somebody takes a shot, and the exchange of war's 'currency', which is how Clausewitz described combat, begins to generate its own dynamic. In theory this is escalatory as both sides are driven by logic to exert the maximum possible pressure on one another.

In practice, however, the tendency to maximise force is modified by the political object, or original motive, of the war. It may be that you wish for something from your opponent very desperately and are prepared to fight correspondingly hard to get it, whereas your opponent might well care less about the object and wish, therefore, to fight more economically, to 'invest' in the war to a more limited degree. The reverse is possible as is, too, the case where both sides are equally committed—and any number of combinations in between. The point is that, to an extent, war is governed by *reason* the province of which is the statesman.

While reason may tend to limit escalation in war, keeping the costs of violence within the bounds of the expected benefits generated thereby, it is not necessarily the case that this will suffice. That is because war is also governed by emotion. More precisely, the ultimate wellspring of war is a 'blind natural force' made up of 'hatred, enmity, and primordial violence', which Clausewitz called *passion*. When whole societies are possessed by mutual fear and loathing that may trigger an explosion in a given war's conduct that is wholly disproportionate with the original motive.

Finally, another thing Clausewitz tells us is that there is an irreducible *chanciness* in war. It is impossible to know exactly what the consequences will be of any particular action. No technology has yet taken it away, though that claim is often made; and there is no foreseeable technology that might, though some current futurists claim that AI might do the trick. Dealing with the 'play of chance and probability' in war is in essence the art of the commander.[viii]

I have left many other points unsaid and have obviously simplified quite a lot. Experts will disagree on matters of detail. It is well known that *On War* is an unfinished text, possesses a good number of apparent contradictions and ambiguities, and exists in a range of English translations that vary in tone, expression, and word choice.[ix] For purposes of moving on, however, the above is what I think are the main elements of Clausewitz's answer to the question 'what is war?'

There are other ways of looking at it. Let's consider a few.

War is a 'big effort' against something really bad

Everyone is familiar with phrases like the 'war on drugs', the 'war on poverty', and more recently the 'war on COVID'. The logic here is every simple: you have a genuinely bad thing which people fear and dislike and which, arguably, requires a large collective effort to address. It is natural in such cases for politicians to reach for the vocabulary of war when they talk about 'campaigns' to 'defeat' these sorts of 'threats' to national 'security' understood as an element of a state's existential wellbeing.[x] We used to understand this as usually no more than a rhetorical device—good, emotive speechwriting, basically.

But then we had the 'War on Terror' which rather considerably blurred the matter. On the one hand, most people recognised that you cannot make war on an abstract noun; on the other hand, the 'war' was quite real in terms of the volume of militarised killing and dying. For that matter, too, it turned out that the 'war on drugs' involved a good amount of organised violence. Is this sort of war just metaphorically 'war' then or is it, in fact, the real deal?

The late, great military historian Sir Michael Howard was amongst the first to try seriously to understand what the War on Terror was about. His answer, rather reluctantly, was yes—we were at war, or at any rate that was the term with which we were stuck. The really interesting part, though, was his view on what the war was about. What

we are dealing with, he said, was a 'state of mind', quite literally a mood of 'sullen resentment' that had overtaken the Islamic world.[xi]

How do you combat a mood? Can you suppress it with napalm? Can you stab it in the eye with a bayonet? Though the term itself was banished from official usage even before the end of the Bush administration, the global 'War on Terror' in all but name is still going strong at nineteen years and counting. In all that time, despite the launch of ten thousand glittering careers in 'strategic communications' no one really has figured out a plausible strategy for a war of ideas. One thing that would seem apparent is that making 'war' on the mood of sullenly resentful people makes them more resentfully sullen.

Q. What kind of war is it that does not have an enemy? A. A euphemism.

War is a thing that we use to 'hold the ring' until politics sorts itself out

Quite obviously, this raises the supremely pertinent question: if armed forces are to be used in this war-but-not-quite-war then how and for what purposes? One influential answer to this rests on the premise that war, in the words of British general Rupert Smith, understood as 'battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs', simply no longer exists.[xii] There is no war anymore.

The current paradigm instead is one of 'war amongst the people' which is characterised by a continuous criss-crossing between 'confrontations' (i.e., political competition between nations with an admixture of military means) and 'conflicts' (i.e., military operations with an admixture of political communication/machination). The typical job of the military in this context is to create or restore in a society that has been deranged by war conditions that will allow 'normal' civil life to reassert itself in which case a 'political solution' may be found.

How exactly to do this is a matter of considerable debate. If you imagine a broken society as a sort of wonky machine that is barely working or seemingly at risk of some catastrophic failure, then the job is to fix it—while it is still operating. 'It' could be anything from the justice system to the transport network or power and communications grid, or all of the above quite likely. In theory, it's not the army's job to do the fixing; rather, it is to provide the security needed for other state agencies and NGOs to do that work. In practice, however, it doesn't usually work out that way. The military ends up doing most of the heavy lifting, sometimes enthusiastically and creatively, but generally not well.[xiii]

We call these sorts of wars 'stabilisation' or more often 'counterinsurgency' (the distinction between the two is

esoteric) which is perhaps a slight improvement over the previous term of art: Military Operations Other Than War. Current doctrine is packed full of 'lessons' for doing them which, to judge from Afghanistan and Iraq, are rather dubious. There is an argument that under current constraints for Western military powers counterinsurgency is politically impossible.[xiv] For certain, such wars (if we may call them that) are 'protracted, thankless, invertebrate' and best avoided as the guru of small wars C.E. Callwell explained over a hundred years ago.[xv]

The primary problem is the passionless-ness that is at the heart of the way of war the West has developed. Oft-described as 'post-heroic', its essential conundrum is this: politicians perceive that they must 'do something!' about a horrific situation that is broadcast into the consciousness of their electorate by global media; that something usually takes the form of military action.[xvi] It is imperative to be seen to have acted while the cameras are running, not so much to have succeeded in the long term (by definition someone else's problem)—see the earlier point on victory.

The precepts that underpin 'do something!' wars are usually couched in morally transcendent terms such as defending against terror at home by fighting radicals abroad, or the need to prevent mass suffering (i.e., the 'responsibility to protect' people against their own governments). However, the strategies that value-maximising politicians adopt for dealing with them are usually low and dishonest. No one understands this better than those on the receiving end of 'assistance'. Why should foreign elites decide to govern their countries in ways that are congenial to our interests rather than their own? It is eminently possible to buy partial and temporary compliance with one's wishes but in the absence of wherewithal to compel that is as far as it goes.

Q. What kind of war is it that is seemingly so deficient in will? A. A lost one.

War is something we use to prevent war

Everybody's heard the Vietnam War-era line 'we had to destroy the town to save it.' It long ago entered the popular lexicon—a convenient and recognisable phrase for journalists to use as a 'hook' when describing anything both macabre and ironic. The fact is, though, that it is also unfortunately quite applicable to the doctrine of preventive wars that came to the fore of American security policy after 11 September 2001. It does not matter that the *New York Times* trenchantly observed that it was a failure 16 years ago.[xvii] It is the default condition of modern strategy even now.

The logical mechanics of war prevention by war are not complicated. It starts with a threat hypothesis of something that is both extremely bad and also plausible. Think of it as the international politics version of being 'credibly accused'

of something heinous. The hypothesis is transmuted into a societal perception of crisis through an assailment of rhetoric of disaster, emergency, catastrophe and apocalypse lest action not be taken. There is no alternative, is the core message. We must fight now so that we don't have to fight more later; people must suffer now so that they do not suffer more later.

It works well because it is not intrinsically logically wrong. Normal people are perfectly familiar with all kinds of instances in life where voluntarily enduring pain now is better than involuntarily getting more of it later. But there is more to it. Consider these lines from the aforementioned article by Gen. Mattis on the direction of American foreign policy:

> International engagement allows the United States to see and act at a distance, as threats are gathering, rather than waiting for them to assume proportions that ultimately make them much costlier and more dangerous to defeat. Defeating emerging threats in particular puts a premium on having visibility far from the homeland to allow for early warning and rapid adaptation to unanticipated developments.
>
> ... failure to adequately invest in relationships with allies and partners and to cooperate with them to shape the international environment risks the erosion of this network—allowing a long-tended garden to become choked with weeds. Even worse, it could result in the emergence of other, competing networks, presaging an international order from which the United States is excluded, unable to influence outcomes because it is simply not present.

The first paragraph follows the logic already described. In this case specifically it is the rationale for why 'there is no alternative' to remaining in Afghanistan despite, i) the war having been demonstratively lost since at least 2008 and, ii) 'pack up and go home now' being an obvious option.

The second paragraph, though, does something quite different. It is a near perfect example of the status quo-maintenance orientation of the current elite, which seeks to keep things as much as possible as they are. As it says elsewhere in the article, the current international order is 'manifestly advantageous', and it follows therefore that no one should be permitted to mess with it.[xviii]

There is nothing intrinsically wrong about wishing to keep things the same. In 2004, the Republican political strategist Karl Rove infamously described the nature of America's place in international order:

> We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how

things will sort out. We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.[xix]

The surprising thing was not so much what he said *per se*. It was, rather, the in-your-face way that he said it. Normally, the Blob is more diplomatic in its choice of words, provides a little more lubricant before administering the suppository. For example, America is very powerful, yes, but it is no dread empire. It is rather a gardener closely tending its patch against the encroachment of weeds. Same message, just nicer.

I think, however, that what is of particular interest to the present discussion is what I would describe as the difference between 'positive' and 'negative' strategies. A positive strategy proceeds from the question 'how do I produce the thing in the world which I want?' whereas a negative strategy works from the opposite 'how do I prevent the occurrence of the thing in the world which I fear?' The wars that are conceived in positive strategies have an independent point, for better or worse. That is normally what we think of as strategy.

Those that are conceived in negative strategies do not have a distinctively independent point. Whatever they are for basically depends on what the enemy (should one be actually definable) is against. That is what strategy is about now.

Q. What kind of war is it that has no point? A. An endless one.

Conclusion

Usually, one hears that Clausewitz needs to be knocked from his pedestal because when he wrote *On War* there were no machine guns, computers, social media, and so on and so forth. It seems to me that that is all irrelevant. None of those things really challenge 'Clausewitz's rules' as I understand them. Perhaps nuclear weapons do, as noted below; but technological change in itself is not a problem for the theory. A more important challenge, but harder to get at from the perspective of many contemporary international security analysts because they are trained so exquisitely in theory, and usually obsessed with technology, but are generally ignorant of history and dismissive of culture, is the frankly quite alien place from which he wrote.

It is said that 'the past is a foreign country'. The part of the world which Clausewitz lived in and which he addressed was at the beginning of the modern era, a highly mechanistic period of history, it was optimistic, and it was bold. The West, particularly, was culturally and politically ambitious, believed strongly in the superiority (i.e., universality) of its values, and in its responsibility to rule other people for their own good. It believed that war worked and that it could (indeed, should) be applied rationally to the advancement

of certain goals.

The hubristic overreach of these ideas has caused terrible consequences, as is now obvious from our perspective at the beginning of the 'information age' sometimes described as the era of postmodernity.[xx] However, that the project of modernism was on the proverbial hiding to nothing was not obvious at its start. It took a hundred years and the First World War before the likes of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin were able to remark on the bitter fruit of this essentially optimistic outlook:

> One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals… This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution.[xxi]

Even then, Berlin was an outlier. Twenty years later in the wake of an even more savage world war, not to mention the holocaust, George Orwell's *1984*, a grim warning of the reversal of human progress towards freedom, caught more public attention. By the 1960s postmodernism was the dominant belief system of the cultural elite, as brilliantly observed in Tom Wolfe's 1975 novel of the art world *The Painted Word*. Nowadays, though, a mood of defeated expectation, frustration at the failure to create utopia, miasmic apprehension of multiple overlapping crises, and perception of manifest decline, is practically universal.

In effect, the modern age ultimately put Western civilization in a conundrum. Science and engineering produced dazzling technologies in every field from the generation of energy, to the velocity of communications, the power of computing, the speed of mobility, and of course to ever more powerful weapons. But the problems of the world increased at the same rate. War between great powers, in particular, grew steadily less plausible as a rational act as the destructive power of weapons increased—the exploding of the atomic bombs on Japanese cities in 1945 marking the tipping point; meanwhile the decisiveness of 'small wars' also receded as 'the rest' gradually developed war strategies and techniques to defeat the West.

It is not, to my mind, that Clausewitz's rules are irrelevant to the present day. They are fundamentally true—*fundamentally* in the sense that they were true before he even existed let alone when he wrote them down. The main problem is that postmodern society has serious problems with the truth. It believes that everything is socially constructed, that words make reality, even when it comes to war. It is not surprising then that the Blob has tried to imagine into existence all kinds of wars that would suit it better than the real kind on offer.

We have tried to have war without enemies, because it is 'dehumanising' and 'othering' to call people so; but that has not diminished the pain and suffering of war one bit. We have gotten ourselves involved in plenty of wars on the basis of laudable moral principles; but in precious few have we shown the will to pay the cost to see them through to resolution. We now fight wars continuously for the purposes of status quo maintenance—preventing change as opposed to making it.

In summary, it is not Clausewitz who is wrong about war. It is us. His rules are simple, in essence. When better one's come along let's use them. In the meanwhile, let's respect them a lot more and maybe use war a lot less.

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[iii] 'Nightline Interview with President Obama', RealClearPolitics (23 July 2009), https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/07/23/nightline_interview_with_president_obama_transcript_97608.html

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[v] Kori Schake, Jim Mattis, Jim Ellis, and Joe Felter, 'Defence in Depth: Why US Security Depends on Alliances—Now More than Ever', Foreign Affairs, Vol. 99, No. 6 (November/December 2020), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-11-23/defense-depth

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[vii] Quoted in Carl H. Builder, Steven C. Bankes, and Richard Nordin, Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1999), p. 117.

[viii] The text I have based my assessment upon is Michael Howard and Peter Paret's translation of Carl Von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), basically chap. 1.

[ix] For what it is worth, of the many currently available discussions of the relevance of Clausewitz the one that has influenced me the most is Antulio Echevarria's, Clausewitz and Contemporary War (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[x] See Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, Security: A New Framework for Analysis (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 1998).

[xi] Michael Howard, 'The Long War', Survival, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2006), pp. 7–14.

[xii] Rupert Smith, The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 1.

[xiii] I recall in 2008 at an Afghanistan counterinsurgency conference in which I participated at the UK Defence Academy talking to two British Army colonels about their efforts marketing Afghan apricots to the big British supermarket chains. They were impressive. Is it not an odd thing, though, for a country to take 25 years to train someone to command a brigade in combat only to employ them as traveling salesmen? There are many thousands of such examples, though. Hands down, the best-informed scholarly account of them is Frank Ledwidge's Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

[xiv] M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones, The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency: Strategic Problems, Puzzles, and Paradoxes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[xv] C.E. Callwell, Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice, 3rd ed. (Abingdon: Purnell Book Services, 1906), p. 12.

[xvi] Edward Luttwak, 'Toward Postheroic Warfare', Foreign Affairs, Vol. 78, No. 4 ((July/August 1999).

[xvii] 'Preventive War: A Failed Doctrine', New York Times (12 September 2004),

[xviii] To be clear, personally, I do not think that the current international order is manifestly advantageous, on the whole. Obviously, though, the current elite feels that it is, otherwise they would not be a current elite.

[xix] Quoted in Ron Suskind, 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', New York Times Magazine (17 October 2004), https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html

[xx] See Frank Webster, Theories of the Information Society, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), chap. 9 'Information and Postmodernity'.

[xxi] Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Isaiah Berlin, The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 237.

The Occam's Razor of Strategic Theory: The Relevance of Clausewitz for Political Conduct

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Having written some of the initial defences of the enduring legacy of Clausewitz, nearly twenty years ago, against what I considered some highly flawed critiques that emerged from the 1990s onward, [i] I am somewhat reluctant to enter the fray yet again. What I needed to say I said back then. Moreover, those studies that appeared subsequently have, undoubtedly, articulated the case more effectively than I could have done. Volumes by Antulio Echevarria, Hew Strahan, and Chris Coker, amongst others, have examined the contemporary significance of Clausewitz in depth,[ii] while shorter essays, often by younger and emergent scholars, have also offered commendably succinct justifications for his continuing relevance.[iii]

Many of these commentaries have done much to shore up Clausewitz's reputation as the preeminent philosopher of war and I have no wish to embellish further the admirable points that they have made in his defence. At the same time, I would also acknowledge the strength of some of the more sophisticated criticisms of his work that have manifested in recent years. Two decades ago, I was responding to denunciations of Clausewitz by those like Martin van Creveld, John Keegan and Mary Kaldor, who alleged that his thinking was outmoded.[iv] I still think their interpretations are faulty, based on either partial or inaccurate readings of his work. Nevertheless, while superficial denigrations of Clausewitz still arise from time to time, it is the case that one can raise legitimate questions about the ultimate value of his writings in *On War*.

The Case Against Clausewitz's Relevance

William J. Olson has, perhaps, offered one of the most trenchant broadsides against what he considered 'the continuing irrelevance of Clausewitz'.[v] Olson claims that the incompleteness and abstract nature of his writings render his legacy elusive, giving later generations of analysts something to pointlessly cogitate over for the rest of recorded history. '[O]ne might be forgiven', he maintained, 'for concluding that Clausewitz did not really exist but is a figment of necessity, conjured up to prove any and all points currently in and out of fashion'. *On War* was merely a 'smorgasbord', and that 'given this contradictory array that Clausewitz is irrelevant to any discussion of war and peace since any source that can lend aid and comfort to such a range of arguments really argues nothing worthwhile at all'. [vi]

These points against do have some force. It is valid to assert that *On War* does not constitute a proper theory of war in any philosophically recognisable way. It is true also that one chooses to be a believer or a non-believer in Clausewitz, and that 'either position is justifiable in that there is no way to prove, beyond one's own sense of satisfaction, the underlying contention'.[vii] It is, furthermore, undeniable that disputes over Clausewitz's exact meaning can have a theological quality to them and that debates about what he did or did not miss out are both stale and meaningless.

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Choosing the 'Good' Bits

It is also very much the case, as Olson discerns, that Clausewitz's admirers invariably adopt a pick'n choose approach to his writings. We accentuate his 'good' bits – Book One along with a few nuggets scattered in the rest of *On War* – while discarding the rest.[viii] As a strategic theorist interested in exploring the means/ends dynamic in social action, rather than someone with an antiquarian interest in dissecting the minutiae of what Clausewitz may or may not have meant, I would argue that this approach is justifiable. One reads Clausewitz for his observations into the lasting essence of war, how it always seems to move on its own goal and at its own speed, uniquely conditioned by the interplay of passion, chance and reason.[ix] A modern analyst doesn't read *On War* for its advice on fortifications, billeting or mountain warfare any more than one would read Thomas Schelling's *Strategy of Conflict* for its abstruse mathematical equations.[x]

In other words, one engages with influential thinkers such as Clausewitz for *some* of their timeless insights on certain facets of human conduct, not because everything they ever said remains relevant or coherent. Few amongst us who have pondered military and strategic affairs will be lucky enough that our writings are read with sympathy in the future as having withstood the test of time, if indeed they are read at all. Thus, we read Clausewitz, in spite of a great deal of things of which he wrote, not because of everything he wrote.

To that extent, a case can certainly be made, as some have, that the bulk of *On War* has little utility as a way of thinking about contemporary warfare, and that it should not be taught in military colleges.[xi] In fact, I would suggest that it would be exceedingly foolish to hold out *On War* as some sort of guide for modern military operations. Much of the text of *On War* is linguistically difficult, often obscure, and full of arcane notes about early nineteenth century military management, clearly limiting its appeal and applicability in the current context. Contemporary military practitioners can, and should, be forgiven for being sceptical about the value of wading through such a dense tome.

On Politics

However, by way of offering a slightly new twist on an old theme, I wish to put forward the proposition that although Clausewitz may well have limited practical significance for the modern soldier and even a declining utility for thinking about military strategy *per se*, his thinking does have continuing, and arguably much greater relevance, for policy makers and politicians. If we abstract the 'good' bits of Clausewitz then these encompass his understanding of the fundamental relationship between political ends and military means.

When Clausewitz stated that war 'is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case' he perceived that all wars are unique in their origins, shape, and practice.[xii] They are sculpted by their particular time and place. What governs any war, its causes, its conduct and its conclusion is going to reflect the contingent circumstances of each case.[xiii] For Clausewitz, the foremost influence in this regard was politics. When he described war as a continuation of politics by violent means, he meant not only that politics gives rise to war, but that it also exerts a continuous influence over the manner in which it is conducted.[xiv] Warfare is not, in other words, a self-contained set of technical practices, but an activity that must be shaped in accordance with the primary political purposes for which it is undertaken.

Politics and Proportionality

Effective strategy, and not just in times of war, must therefore always remain sensitive to the political context and essentially this means that the principle of proportionality should be observed. Proportionality is the vital element that keeps war within the realms of rational action: it is the assumption that in order for any effort to be instrumental it must align with a calculation that determines what price should be paid to achieve a particular end. Attempting to achieve goals with little or minimum effort risks not achieving them at all, while too higher exertion threatens to negate the pursuit of the goal itself: if you achieve your goal but fatally damage yourself in the process you are not acting with proportionality.

Clausewitz helps clarify the connections between ends and means, with the aim of keeping one's strategy proportional to the goals being sought, and this is fundamentally a *political* calculation not a military one. The good bits of Clausewitz therefore provide a parsimonious understanding, and point of entry for considering issues of proportionality in political conduct, not just in war but in all goal orientated decision making.[xv] Clausewitz, for this reason, remains the Occam's Razor of strategic theory.

To illustrate the continuing relevance of Clausewitz for understandings of political conduct, it is possible to highlight how the agendas embedded in some of the modern critiques of Clausewitz have served only to underline both the eternal verities to which his writings allude, and the problems that are created when they are ignored.

Bombing to Make the World a Better Place

Connoisseurs of dark political humour might be familiar with journalist Tucker Carlson's on-air intellectual mauling of Max Boot, military writer and Senior Fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, in July 2017.[xvi] Unimpressed by his credentials as an expert in foreign policy, Carlson

derided Boot for exaggerating the threat to American national security from Russia, and calling out his advocacy for further United States military intervention in the Middle East, and the dire consequences that such policies have undoubtedly wrought.

In *Ship of Fools* (2018), Carlson expanded his uncompromising view of the American foreign policy establishment's predisposition towards endless wars based on moral imperatives to remove 'bad' regimes across the globe: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Pakistan, Syria and Iran have all at one time or another been on, or remain, candidates on the target list. For Carlson, the post-Cold War penchant for military interventions, aerial bombings, and latterly drone strikes, reflected a bizarre form of kinetic social engineering: bombing countries to 'make the world a better place'.[xvii]

The force of Carlson's polemic resided in the foreign policy establishment's bewildering record of predictive ineptitude, with nations on the receiving end of US military attentions consistently failing to re-make themselves into stable democratic polities, and the phenomenal costs – both human and financial – inflicted upon both the US and the countries of concern themselves. Contrasting an earlier caution towards military involvement in foreign wars, especially on the part of the Democrat Party in the 1960s and 1970s, Carlson cited Senator Eugene McCarthy's challenge to President Lyndon Johnson's policies in South Vietnam: 'I am concerned that the administration seems to have set no limits to the price that it is willing to pay for military victory'.[xviii]

Taking the Temperature of the Population

As Carlson noted, McCarthy's position was 'not that the war could not be won but that winning wasn't worth it'.[xix] The price that a society is willing to pay to achieve any social goal lies at the heart of considerations about proportionality in strategic action. For Carlson the most 'dangerous force of all' is an activist establishment convinced of its own moral virtue, and the unremitting record of strategic failure and foreign policy disaster, both for the United States and its coalition allies, that this agenda has occasioned.[xx] It raises the question about how we have ended up here?

If we turn to Clausewitz for enlightenment, his stress on the moral factors in war is instructive. In order for any military operation to succeed the 'temper of the population' has to be behind the action.[xxi] 'If policy is directed only toward minor operations', he averred, 'the emotions of the masses will have to be stirred'.[xxii] What we can detect in terms of Clausewitz's contemporary resonance is that policy makers, especially in democratic nations, have to understand the 'temper' of the people and their capacity to have their passions engaged by any particular political cause, especially foreign military adventures.

Reason versus 'Reasonableness'

If we examine some of the modern critiques of Clausewitz's relevance we find that they alight on his thinking about the role of 'reason' as a factor in war. For Kaldor, her thesis was about so-called 'new' wars. These supposedly sprang up all of a sudden after the end of the Cold War and were motivated by identity politics. Identitarian concerns, in her view, were 'forged through fear and hatred'.[xxiii] Such passions rendered war 'rational' only in the sense that war was instrumental and serviced the ends of malign agendas. Such wars, while they may be 'reasoned', Kaldor argued, 'they are not reasonable', according to 'universally accepted norms that underpin national and international law'.[xxiv]

In effect, Kaldor sought to re-fashion Clausewitz's observation that the course of any war is, amongst other things, influenced by the interplay of popular passions moulded by the reason of politics. Instead, she wanted to supercharge Clausewitz's observation with an ethical assertion that 'reasoned' thinking about war in the contemporary era inheres in a morally righteous policy elite committed to abstract, cosmopolitan, ideas of justice that sees the virtue of intervening in foreign wars to 'make the world a better place'. Kaldor was explicit on this point. The 'primary task of the military in such situations', she maintained, was to create 'spaces' that would facilitate 'non-sectarian identities', in order to 'construct a politics based on reason and not fear'.[xxv]

The Follies of Substituting Utopianism for Politics

Given the failed attempts to re-mould the political geography of many areas of the globe founded on moral justifications to 'construct' a new reasoned form of politics, reveals how relying on a self-selecting foreign policy establishment that advocates armed intervention based on the claim of superior moral insight begins to endanger the principle of proportionality. Removing or discounting ideas of popular passion as anything but inspiring the forces of hatred, leads to the inability to discern the 'temper of the population' and its willingness to support military commitments abroad. If notions of upholding utopian ideals of virtue become the basis for war making, then we arrive at the hubris of neo-liberal interventionism that sees the 'price' to be paid for such adventures as endless external commitments at open-ended cost.

A rationale for political and military conduct conceived on such lines has little inclination to understand the 'temper' of the population because the motivation for action is one of perceived moral necessity, not popular support. Moreover, the abandonment of a key Clausewitzian tenet that facilitates the notion of proportionality, in favour of acting as the vanguard of cosmopolitan norms, unsurprisingly leads to interventions that are not only exorbitant in terms of

injury to human and financial resources but, crucially, lack domestic endorsement, especially when such interventions go bad, as they invariably do.

Abandon Politics at Your Peril

Neglecting the intellectual checks on thinking that a careful reading of Clausewitz enables has led to a foreign policy establishment, in both the US and Europe, that is distinguished not only by its record of reckless advocacy and colossal analytical and policy failure, but one that is constantly surprised when the consequences of such failure help produce outcomes in the domestic sphere that it clearly finds repugnant. The 2016 vote by Britain to leave the European Union, the election of Donald Trump as President in the US, and the rise of 'populist' leaders elsewhere, appalled the policy elites. Yet their attenuated understanding of the politics of proportionality and the disastrous policies that arose as a result, were to a significant degree responsible for inducing the very popular backlash they so despised.

In effect, disconnecting the use of force from a proper understanding of politics, subordinating it to a belief in one's own analytical and moral rectitude, western foreign policy elites conspired to misunderstand their own nations and the extent to which the national temperaments were willing to tolerate their hubris and the disproportionate costs inflicted on the rest of society as a result their failed advocacies.

If a policy influencing and policy making community cannot be bothered to understand the sentiments of their own populations, then they certainly cannot be trusted to deliver useful strategic advice. Absent a Clausewitzian sensibility that gives serious attention to the relationships between politics, popular sentiments and military operations, then it really can be said that foreign and defence policy is far too important to be left to the self-proclaimed experts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, this is why an understanding of Clausewitz remains important: because his thinking provides the point of entry for decision makers – and I would argue for other analysts or advocates of military, economic and all other social action more generally – to consider the necessity for a meaningful strategic dialogue based on a realistic set of political ends that are proportionate to the goals and the means employed to achieve them. For sure, these are matters that rely on the cultivation of 'good judgement', an indefinable quality at the best times. One cannot be taught 'good judgement' from reading *On War*, or any other text. A considered reading of Clausewitz, though, does pay off in terms of facilitating critical analysis. In that sense, while it can be claimed that his writings don't have a great deal of utility for modern military practice, his lasting insights reside in the realm of political conduct. They prompt us not stray too far from his injunctions, lest our hubris and follies be exposed. Above all, his observations remind us of the timeless verities of politics that actions can only be truly effective if they are proportional to the outcome, and that understanding one's own society is key to that aim, and thus to the construction of 'good' strategy.

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Strategy, War, and the Relevance of Carl von Clausewitz

Lennart Souchon - Founder of the Clausewitz Network for Strategic Studies

About the author

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Strategy and Clausewitz

Wars undergo a process of tectonic decentralization and globalization accompanied by revolutionary technological capabilities. The 21st century requires a strategic understanding of high-risk conflicts against vicious adversaries in a frictional environment.[i]

Strategy is a discipline of abstract thinking and a practical art. It requires the decision-maker to combine systematic thinking, political purposes, military means, and people with each other in such a way as to maintain the ability of self-determination and achieve essential overarching purposes in the face of resistance and friction. A *military strategy* is an architectural keystone that enables the government to exert a guiding influence on the armed forces with regard to warfare. Clausewitz uses the term *war plan* synonymously with *military strategy* to refer to a mechanism that links the government with the commander and his forces.[ii] Due to the primacy of politics, a war plan defines the objective of the use of military force and determines the appropriate means for achieving it.[iii] Networked competencies and holistic synergetic thinking and action in near-real time will help develop strategies in the future.

In an age of global information networking, one must develop approaches that allow strategic decisions to be made on a specific event in a short amount of time. This calls for high-level decision-makers to stay closely connected with military commanders and to be able to apply a systematic approach. The courses of action that are available to react to security threats range from demonstrative observation to major combat operations, serving a clearly defined purpose and are resourced with the required means. Assessing complex security situations, developing a grammar of war, drawing up war plans that encompass the entire act of war are the multi-layered benchmarks of this challenge.

Carl von Clausewitz's theory offers an intellectual foundation for the development of strategic thinking and action. One can comprehend the essence of strategy best by applying the basic features of Clausewitz's lines of thought. To emphasize this point, Clausewitz's *basic ideas* (*Hauptlineamente*) are of pre-eminent importance to think about war.[iv] This article shows that these timeless lines of thought assist in grasping the essence of wars in the 21st century.

Prior to any operational planning, a thorough analysis within the framework of the Fascinating Trinity is necessary. This work requires a good understanding of the complex challenges, recognizing their basic features, identifying tendencies, and assessing strengths and weaknesses compared to an assertive belligerent opponent has to be done. Friction, probability, and chance, which alter the planned course of wars considerably, must be given just as much consideration as the meandering stages of development, as they turn from confined, short-term interventions into simmering unresolved conflict or military firestorms. Conclusions such as whether an action

is to be taken and with what intensity must be laid down in a war plan.

In the fog of war, commanders' decisions have considerable impact. They pursue the political purpose with a blend of reason, disposition, and in combination with the virtues of their forces. Coordination at the international level should not begin until the national level has comprehended an imminent war and has adopted a clear standpoint based on a transparent rationale. The public discourse and the struggle for the authority of interpretation in the mass media and cyberspace are essential benchmarks that one must consider.

This article has the objective to introduce Clausewitz's basic ideas - strictly oriented on his original work "Vom Kriege"[v] – as guiding theory for the renaissance of the strategic culture and as a foundation for the education of up-and-coming creative, knowledgeable and experienced future commanders.

Clausewitź s Basic Ideas

Reality is the starting point and the end of every Clausewitzian analysis. It does not confine itself to the character of war but also analyses human factors, the commander's moral qualities, and the army's virtues.

As used by Clausewitz, the term *war* describes a state that is initially characterized by a duel.[vi] At the combat level, the interactive process of imposing one's will on the opponent, who, in turn, wants to do just the same, is seen as an interaction between two strategic wills in the context of the *Fascinating Trinity*. In accordance with Hegel's logic of essence, this is the pith of what Clausewitz merges in the *Fascinating Trinity* to form a synthesis of his ideas.

What is unique about Clausewitz is that he reckons that the opponent will act rationally in his rationality and be an equal match in the dynamics of war.

The basic ideas of war drawn in his work are the *appropriateness of means*, the relations between the *purpose, objective, and means*, as well as *probability, chance and friction*, the *commander's genius*, and the *military virtues of the army*. The *Fascinating Trinity*, one of the "consequences for theory," is included at a higher level as it enables us to make an initial differentiation and identification of its major components."[vii]

In an initial step, - see Figure 1 - one has to study through the *Fascinating Trinity*, those factors, and their properties that significantly affect the war's character and direction see Figure 1.

Step 1: Holistic estimation of the strategic situation regarding each warring party individually in its *Fascinating Trinity*, then in comparison with those of the others and finally from a third-party perspective.

Step 2: Analysis of the political purposes and capabilities of the individual warring parties in assessing the *appropriateness of means*. The *decision to go to war* or not is formulated.

Step 3: Defining the purposes, ultimate and intermediate objectives and courses of action and specification of the means along with the relations between *the purposes, objectives and means* in conjunction with the definition of the combat power and sustainability required by the armed forces and of interfaces to civilian and other actors.

Step 4: Estimates of the *frictions, probabilities, and chances* likely in a planned war and discussion of courses of action and suitable alternatives.

Step 5: Summary of the results in a *war plan*.

Figure 1: Agenda for a war plan oriented on the basic ideas (Hauptlineamente) of Clausewitz

The Exegesis of the Fascinating Trinity

The *Fascinating Trinity* is an epistemological research method that enables a holistic understanding of the conflict situation. It combines the characteristics of war and the actions in it in a three-dimensional space and leads from Clausewitz's philosophical reflections to the reality of action in which the opposing forces, sustained by their political wills, interplay freely - within living action-reaction - in a frictional environment. It transforms the hierarchical relation of politics and war into an objective space of action in which three independent variables determine war: its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to *reason alone*, a *blind natural force* composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, and the *play of probability and chance* within which the creative spirit is free to roam.

In this way, Clausewitz condensed his basic ideas about war into three independent tendencies. Thus, the theory of war is **floating** (*schwebend*) in a three-dimensional field of force of specific characteristics and tendencies.[viii] Clausewitz writes a "systematic theory of war, full of intelligence and substance,"[ix] which goes far beyond the rational nature of an instrument of policy and defines its inherent characteristics. In the *Fascinating Trinity*, he captures the essence of the unpredictability in war, which is of timeless validity.

The following interpretation of his theory of war floating among three tendencies stands out from the other interpretations to date. It represents the independent tendencies of war as a three-dimensional system in which each tendency corresponds to one dimension. This view allows the quantification of the theory of war in accordance with its particularities and to picture it as free-floating in a three-dimensional space. Figure 2 defines the three dimensions as the X, Y, and Z-Axis[x]:

- **X-Axis:** The commander and his army master the aspects of probability and chance. The advent of the creative spirit in armies' leadership may change, limit, or eliminate it as the war progresses.

- **Y-Axis:** War is a rational instrument and the responsibility of the government. The superordinate position of this instrument is qualified antithetically in that it is represented as one of three equivalent axes in a tripolar system.

- **Z-Axis:** Primordial violence acts as a blind natural force and is hence firmly rooted in the people's character. It is either unleashed in a war characterized by violence, hatred, and enmity or causes the tension to abate due to its manifestation as an absolute longing for peace and stoic forbearance.
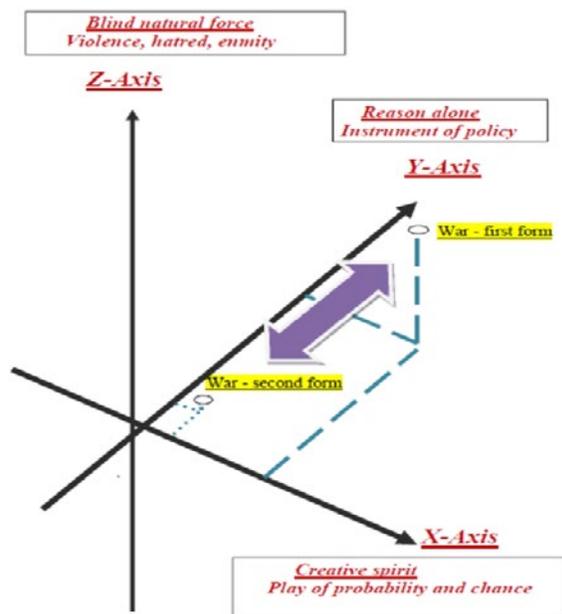

Figure 2: The Fascinating Trinity in Three Dimensions[xi]

Representing the trinity in a three-dimensional space opens up new dimensions for understanding it. Clausewitz took the theory of war from the cause and effect level and created a holistic ambit as an analytical tool. The three-dimensional representation of a war's course permits visualization of the dynamics that lead to different types of war based on specific tendencies, intensity level, and the resulting transformations, i.e. long wars (first form) vs. short wars (second form).

The *Fascinating Trinity* must be applied to each belligerent separately, then analyze it as a whole and finally assess how it bears relation to oneself. An assessment of the primordial violence inherent in one party's people compared to that inherent in an opponent must include the characteristics, histories, religions, cultures, and traditions of both peoples. Comparing their way of dealing with probability and chance with that of the opponent shows a party its options. The ability to conceive the trinity in a three-dimensional system helps analyze the origins and characteristics of war and their dynamic interactions in quantitative and qualitative terms.

A theory of war floating between the three tendencies reveals a state that can change quickly and significantly under the pressure of events. Political decisions are made along the principal axis of *purpose, objective, and means* and are quantifiable by measuring the *appropriateness of means*.

Appropriateness of Means

The *appropriateness of means*[xii] allows us in step two to evaluate the tendencies and characteristics of the *Fascinating Trinity* and to reveal whether it is prudent to wage war and what means are required to do so. To determine appropriate options, it is necessary to compare the political purpose, the states' strength and situation, the government's character and capabilities, the armed forces and the people with that of the opponent, and finally examine possible effects on third-party states. The comparison must also address the assumption that the opponent will make precisely the same evaluation, determining the means he sees as appropriate and acting equally to make the most of his strengths. The appropriateness of means quantifies courses of action, capabilities of the armed forces that are to be employed, and the necessary effort. It connects the purpose with the possible courses of action, that is to say, with the strategy. This is, in turn, the basis from which to derive the war plan. Weighing this up is a creative activity critically shaped by the qualities of mind and character of the men taking the decision, statesmen and commanders alike. This relationship may change significantly in the course of a war and must be re-gauged and adapted accordingly. Bringing the war to a victorious end requires a continuous evaluation of the enemy.

The result of this comparison enables an informed decision on whether or not to start a war and, if so, on what strategic course to take it. A genius's highly developed mental aptitude is needed to sift out the most relevant findings from the plethora available. According to Clausewitz, the next step of this analysis concerns the interplay between the purpose, objective, and means and aims at gauging the

required resources to accomplish a political purpose.

Purpose, Objective, and Means

The relationship between *purpose, objective, and means*[xiii] links in step three the superordinate political purpose, the military objective, and the necessary efforts that have to be made. It has a logical, limiting effect on the interrelations that otherwise would tend to extremes. Any change in the objectives and means during the war can also modify the purpose.

The establishment of the relations between the purpose, objective, and means is a rational categorization process to enable the complexity of war to be comprehended. Built on the *appropriateness of means* and established within the *Fascinating Trinity*, they offer a system for strategic thought to link the political will with military means in the war plan based on reason rather than passion. Hence, they are an essential part of a war planning process covering all the forms in which war can manifest itself and limits the courses it can take.

Before deciding to wage war, it is necessary to answer the questions of what is to be achieved *by* it (purpose) and *in* it (objective) [xiv]. These central issues determine the scale of means and energy necessary. It is irresponsible to start a war without conducting a rigorous analysis of its *purpose and objective and the means* required.

Frictions, Probability and Chance and Moral Factors

Following this establishment of the vertical context is examining the unexpected events and *frictions* in step that can arise and hinder or even prevent the pursuit of the war's objective. One must, therefore, closely examine the course of action planned for the war and plan alternatives.

Probability, chance, and the opponent's actions cause military operations to divert from the original plan and lead to considerable friction during the war. While this friction can radically change the course of a war, it simultaneously creates room for maneuver for the commander that he can exploit. If the fighting is intense, chequered, and protracted, the political purpose usually changes and hence its dominating influence on the action taken. Frictional

difficulties become increasingly frequent, and unexpected room for maneuver arises. It takes these extreme conditions to bring out the commander's true moral quality and his army's virtues.

The *moral factors* are a decisive aspect of warfare. They are the product of the commander's genius, the armed forces' military virtues, and the people's characteristics. Genius is the quality that enables a commander "in reducing war's many complexities to simple, yet accurate expressions."[xv]

War Plan

The war plan defines in the final step the political purpose and the operational objective for the planned act of war. Clausewitz writes in Book Eight: "War plans cover every aspect of a war, and [...] must have a single, ultimate objective in which all particular aims are reconciled."[xvi]

A war plan only makes sense if it balances military means with all aspects of a civil society that is well-informed and actively participates in the discourse on security.

Conclusion

Clausewitz's theory offers an intellectual foundation for coping with the fundamental changes in warfare since its main lines of thought provide a framework of how to think rather than what to think. Clausewitz's work "is an *education course*, creating clear concepts, allowing the spirit of things to be grasped in the inner correlation and offering valid insights, in other words, *a basis for judgment*."[xvii] His epistemological and action-oriented basic ideas allow war's fundamental features to be analyzed and enable informed and deliberate decision making.

The synopsis of the characteristics of war is the core element of Clausewitz's lines of thought. It proceeds from theoretical war, floating within the *Fascinating Trinity*, to war in reality and enables the rationality of the *purpose, objective, and means* to be adapted hermeneutically in the face of *friction* and emphasizes the importance of emotional factors for the overall course of a war. Clausewitz's work is a premise for a renaissance of strategic thinking and action. It provides intellectual guidance for understanding the essence of war as a whole and for finding individual strategic answers in the 21st century.

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