
REVIEW ESSAY

Back to Clausewitz

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Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War, A Biography*. *New York: Atlantic Monthly Press*, 2007. Pp.194 and notes. \$20.95/£14.09, HB. ISBN 0-871-13956-1.

Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*. *Oxford: Oxford University Press*, 2007. Pp.197. £44/\$99, HB. ISBN 0-199-23191-5.

Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*. *Oxford: Oxford University Press*, 2007. Pp.328. £49/\$99, HB. ISBN 0-199-23202-4.

These three books represent a revival of interest in Clausewitz – one which the author of this review looks at from a particular perspective. There is nowhere in the world, I am quite certain, where a highly trained group of academics and a constantly shifting cast of field-grade military officers give such sustained attention to *On War* as in the Strategy and Policy Department of the US Naval War College, and I have belonged to that department for 18 years. I arrived simultaneously with Michael Handel, who certainly rivaled Peter Paret and Sir Michael Howard as one of the outstanding Clausewitz scholars in the Western world, and whose presence had a most stimulating effect on all his colleagues. After his untimely death in June 2001 (which among other things deprived us of his insights in the new era of warfare that was about to burst upon us), I became the Clausewitz lecturer in the department, forcing me to systemize my own ideas. My colleagues and I have also benefited, as I can see more clearly after reviewing these works, from our continual use of Clausewitz's ideas to analyze the

widest possible variety of wars, from the fifth century BCE Peloponnesian War all the way through today's war on terror.

In my opinion, and I believe that nearly all of my colleagues share it, his fundamental insights remain valid across time, and it does not surprise me that Antulio Echevarria, Hew Strachan, and most of the contributors to the Oxford reader agree. The reader seems to have been designed, to a certain extent, as a refutation of other contemporary writers such as Martin van Creveld and Mary Kaldor who have denied Clausewitz's relevance.

Taken together, these books raise nearly as many questions as *On War* itself. While I cannot say for certain (to paraphrase the great master) that a Newton or an Euler would quail before the task of doing them all justice in a short essay, I confess that a Kaiser (this one in any case) finds it well beyond his powers, and I shall not attempt it. Instead I shall confine myself to summarizing Echevarria, Strachan, and the more interesting contributors to the reader, and to focusing on some of the more critical points they raise, both as regards a proper understanding of Clausewitz's thinking and his implications for the present and the future. I shall conclude in particular with one point that neither he nor they, for different reasons, gave as much attention as they might have: the problem of grandiose political objectives, the curse of the twentieth century and, it would seem, still a threat as we complete the first decade of the twenty-first.

Hew Strachan is an excellent and eminent military historian (Chichele Professor of War at Oxford), and he begins his short book with an analysis of Clausewitz's influence through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, showing how various generals and thinkers – including the elder Moltke, Gerhard Ritter, Lenin (probably, in fact, history's most influential student of Clausewitz), Ludendorff, Raymond Aron, Hitler, and American theorists of the Cold War – have tried to adapt Clausewitz to justify their own beliefs about war, generally to argue either for less or for more restraint in its conduct. He then writes a biographical chapter, laying particular emphasis not only on the impact of the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon on Clausewitz's thinking, but on Clausewitz's own insistence upon resisting Napoleon after the Prussian defeat of 1806–07, which led him in 1812 to abandon the Prussian court and go into Russian service.

On War reflects both the Enlightenment tradition of enquiry and the great dramas Clausewitz lived through. The latter included the extraordinary change in warfare introduced by the French Revolution, which changed the scale both of battle and of victory; the cataclysmic defeat of Prussia by Napoleon in 1806–07 and Napoleon's creation of an empire including all of western and central Europe, which Clausewitz refused to accept; and Napoleon's invasion of Russia, the

formation of the sixth coalition against him, and his eventual defeat, in which Clausewitz was a participant.

Briefly tracing the influence of these various developments upon Clausewitz's thought, Strachan at times, I think, reads too much subsequent history into *On War*. Thus, because Clausewitz was so eager for a Prussian war of revenge against Napoleon from 1807 until 1812, even favoring the kind of 'national uprising' that began in Spain in May 1808, Strachan accuses him being as much a Romantic as a child of the Enlightenment.¹ Certainly Clausewitz was no more immune than any of us to the emotions generated by defeat, but by the time he wrote *On War* he had settled fully into a contemplative mode, and his discussion of national uprisings – like virtually the entire rest of the book – is analytical rather than romantic.² It is simply one more chapter of Book VI, on defense in war, and a national uprising is treated simply as one means that a defeated state may choose to employ.

A more serious problem that emerges here, however – and one that trips up quite a few of the authors under review – involves Clausewitz's conception of various types of war, and, more importantly, its implication for the future of warfare. We are dealing here with one of the most fundamental aspects of Clausewitz's thought, and because it is so often misunderstood, I shall now take a detour to explore it at some length and give my own opinion.

The issue relates to Clausewitz's mode of inquiry, which consisted of an intellectual opposition of pure concepts (or 'ideal types') on the one hand, and reality on the other. *The role of the pure concept was not to establish the goal which reality should strive to achieve, but rather to set up a standard of comparison that would bring out the critical features of real, rather than theoretical war.* This technique dominates the most important part of *On War*, Book I, Chapter 1, in which Clausewitz describes the characteristics of a theoretical 'absolute war' but quickly moves to distinguish it from reality. He begins by defining war, famously, as an act of force designed to compel the enemy to do our will, but then jumps immediately to a logical extreme.³ A pure struggle between two combatants, he argues, would begin suddenly and for its own sake; it would involve a single, all-out exertion of strength; and it would end *only with the complete destruction of one side.*

¹Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War, A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press 2007), 92, 101.

²Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Introductory Essays by Peter Paret, Michael Howard, and Bernard Brodie, with a Commentary by Bernard Brodie. Index by Rosalie West (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1984), 479–83.

³*On War*, 75.

Logically, various factors would push both sides to the most extreme effort possible – but that is not the case, he hastens to add, in *reality*. Clausewitz continues referring to absolute war throughout the book, but always as a theoretical template which can usefully be differentiated from reality.⁴

In fact, as he quickly explains, a real war differs from the theoretical concept in three major ways, relating to its beginning, middle, and end.⁵ To begin with, wars do not spring from nowhere, but result from political quarrels. That means that the conflict develops over time, and it also means that the specific political object of a given war will profoundly influence the level of effort devoted to it. Second, for a wide variety of logistical, tactical, and psychological reasons, real wars almost never consist of a single blow. And lastly, few wars last until one side is completely destroyed; most (including even World War II in the Pacific) end when one side decides that it is better to quit now in hopes of better days later. When one has firmly assimilated these principles, a great many confusing passages in *On War* become much clearer. And it is not mainly ‘friction’, as Strachan argues,⁶ that prevents real war from becoming absolute. Above all it is politics, which establishes the value of the object of a conflict and thus profoundly influences the level of effort that will be devoted to achieving it.⁷

A failure to understand the theoretical nature of absolute war has led some commentators (of whom Sir John Keegan is probably the most noteworthy) to accuse Clausewitz of *advocating* absolute war.⁸ This mistake – and that is what it is – is related to another of Clausewitz’s polarities, the critical distinction he made in his introductory note (which most of the authorities under review now date to 1827):

‘War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy* – to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations.’⁹

The first type refers especially to the Napoleonic Wars of 1803–15, in which first Napoleon, and then his opponents, had brought about the complete destruction of enemy armies and the complete submission (though not necessarily extinction) of their states (including Clausewitz’s own Prussia in 1807). The second type, for Clausewitz,

⁴*On War*, 75–8.

⁵*On War*, 78–80.

⁶Strachan, *Clausewitz’s On War, A Biography*, 153.

⁷*On War*, 81.

⁸John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

⁹*On War*, 69.

always called to mind the wars of Frederick the Great, designed in the first instance to seize Silesia and in the second to hold onto it. Strachan discusses this distinction effectively in his last chapter, but he muddies the waters slightly by claiming that Clausewitz in 1827 recognized two types of wars, 'wars of observation and wars of decision'.¹⁰ In fact, Clausewitz uses war of observation to refer to conflicts that never break out because the state with a positive aim does not care about it sufficiently to risk actual conflict.¹¹

The goal of the first type of war (called in my department a war with an unlimited objective), it must be stressed, does not necessarily include the *disappearance* of the enemy state, and Clausewitz's definition rather brilliantly leaves open the issue of the kind of peace that the victor will demand. Two problems of interpretation have emerged here, one of which is partly the Prussian's fault. It is entirely clear from the whole of the text, including both Book I and Book VIII, that the first type of war was *not* equivalent to theoretical absolute war, although it did approach it much more closely. Here Clausewitz was at fault because on one or two occasions in the book itself he referred to war achieving its absolute form under Bonaparte, yet it is obvious from his discussions of Napoleon's campaigns¹² that that is not what he meant, and this is one case where I am inclined to believe that another round of editing would have fixed the problem.

Certainly Napoleon's wars both involved an unprecedented mobilization of men and materiel and produced battlefield victories and political defeats on a new scale, but they still began because of political quarrels, involved a series of battles and campaigns, and ended when the defeated side (including France in 1814 and 1815) decided the time had come to quit. They were not absolute wars and did not change the basic distinction between the theoretical and the real.

Perhaps however because Clausewitz talks about such wars as having 'approached the ideal', various later commentators have concluded that he *preferred* such wars and regarded them as an advance. Certainly it would be fair to say that, given the previous and *potential* future results of such conflicts, Clausewitz felt they deserved the closest attention. Surely it is not accidental that the very last chapter of the book, 'The Plan of a War Designed to Lead to the Total Defeat of the Enemy', not only deals generally with this kind of conflict, but anticipates the possibility that the rest of Europe will once again have to fight such a war against France.¹³ But both Book VI on defense and Book VII on

¹⁰Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War*, 191

¹¹*On War*, 81.

¹²The most pronounced example is *On War*, 595.

¹³*On War*, 617–37.

attack include chapters devoted to the proper way to fight *each* type of war. Throughout the book Frederick the Great features as the exemplar of the political and military leader in wars of limited objectives, just as Napoleon exemplifies the leader determined to subdue the enemy.

And in fact, one of the greatest features of the book, in my opinion, is the almost completely value-free nature of Clausewitz's inquiry. He is no more inclined to regard war of the first, larger type *superior* to the second than a taxonomist would automatically rate a lion superior to a leopard because it is larger. Nor is he at all certain that the Napoleonic paradigm was the wave of the future. At the end of the longest historical discussion in the book, he specifically (and wisely) refused to reach this conclusion¹⁴ – and indeed, not for nearly another century, until 1914, did European war achieve a Napoleonic scale again. Moreover, during the same discussion, he noted in reference to the decline in violence over the course of the eighteenth century that 'All Europe rejoiced at this development.'¹⁵ There is no indication that he believed Europeans were wrong to have done so, or that he would not have regarded a lesser scale of violence as a good thing.

Now on the one hand, Strachan in his concluding chapter acknowledges that the Prussian theorist refused to predict the shape of future wars, but here he turns what I would regard as a virtue into a vice. 'Clausewitz's refusal to be dogmatic on the shape of future war', he writes, 'highlights an extraordinary gap in his perceptions of war's nature', because he paid no attention to the potential of technological change, only of political change such as he had lived through.¹⁶ To the extent that that characterization is true, it simply reflects reality – political changes had been more profound than purely technological ones during the era 1792–1815. Clausewitz was too much the empiricist to spend much time speculating about future weapons, but he surely would have evaluated them all based on their strategic implications.

Meanwhile, Strachan points out that a variety of generals and theorists, including the elder Moltke, Ludendorff, and the French theorist Raymond Aron, have in effect accused Clausewitz of advocating either absolute war or, at a minimum, the most complete victory possible over the enemy. This in turn leads Strachan to the same mistake, when he accepts a link between Clausewitz's ideas and the catastrophe of World War I, Strachan's own specialty. 'Those who blamed Clausewitz for the slaughter of the First World War were not guilty of finding things in the text of *On War* that were not there', he writes.¹⁷

¹⁴*On War*, 586–93.

¹⁵*On War*, 591.

¹⁶Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War*, 192–3.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 146.

With this I cannot agree. Certainly Clausewitz would not have faulted the military leaders of 1914 for beginning their war plan with the goal of destroying the enemy's forces, *if* – and this is another critical point to which we shall return – the goal of their government was completely to subdue the enemy. (The government of Imperial Germany, as I have argued elsewhere, certainly had that goal.) But Clausewitz obviously understood, as we shall see, that any goal had to be evaluated in light of contemporary political and military realities. The Prussian General Erich von Falkenhayn had realized by 1915 that complete military victory over the Allies was most unlikely, and Clausewitz could easily have done the same. The problem of the powers during 1914–18 – and especially of Germany – was their inability to adjust their objectives based upon realistic assessments of probabilities.

Near the end of the book Strachan takes up the issue of people's war, which Clausewitz treated in Book 6, Chapter 26, 'The People in Arms'. Tactically that chapter remains highly relevant, describing as it does how small bands of guerrillas, while avoiding battle, can absorb a significant portion of the strength of a conventional army. It is however less significant to our time strategically because Clausewitz saw this kind of war (which he noted prophetically was not yet very common, while wondering whether its emergence was a good thing) merely as the ultimate defensive tactic of a state whose army had been defeated. Spain in 1808–14 and Russia in 1812 had employed it to great effect; Austria and Prussia had repeatedly declined to do so. Yet as other contemporary commentators point out, the idea of a political movement that relied entirely on such tactics – at least at first – would not have presented any new theoretical problems for the Prussian general. Any entity, as Strachan obviously agrees, using violence to achieve political purposes, is illustrating Clausewitzian theory.

Lieutenant Colonel Antulio Echevarria, the Director of Research at the United States Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute, has written a concise and very ambitious survey of *On War*, designed to summarize its major points, illuminate its methodology, criticize some of its concepts, and highlight its implications for contemporary wars. Like Strachan, Echevarria has been studying Clausewitz for some time and he has read very widely among the Prussian's collected works, in the works of Clausewitz's contemporaries, and in the secondary literature. He too includes a biographical sketch focusing on Clausewitz's own military experience, and has interesting things to say about Clausewitz's intellectual debts to a professor of mathematics and logic named Johann Kiesewetter. In my opinion Echevarria understands the essence of Clausewitz quite well, but has not completely grasped a few specific points. Once again, the great master turns out to have anticipated quite a few of the criticisms of a much later student.

Echevarria certainly understands Clausewitz's distinction between absolute and real war. While he calls the former 'objective' – that is, based purely on logic – and the latter 'subjective,' instead of emphasizing (as we do at the US Naval War College) that absolute war is a theoretical ideal, whereas real war occurs in real life, he still makes the essential point quite effectively. Absolute war, he says, would logically escalate on and on, with both sides exerting ever greater efforts. That is not, actually, how Clausewitz saw it: he defined it quite specifically as a sudden, all-out exertion of strength which would in fact end when one side had been completely destroyed with no hope of ever rising again.¹⁸ Echevarria understands very clearly that Clausewitz did not regard absolute war as a practical possibility, much less as a goal which warring parties should strive to attain. It is merely a theoretical construct against which to measure reality (and it has remained so, interestingly enough, even after several decades in which the United States and the Soviet Union possessed the technical means to unleash such a war at a moment's notice, yet never chose to do anything of the kind.)

Echevarria also returns repeatedly to Clausewitz's fundamental distinction, stated in his introductory note of 1827, between two types of war: the first designed to bring about the complete submission of the enemy, forcing him to accept any peace the victor might choose, and the second aiming only at the conquest of a small piece of territory or a compromise peace.¹⁹ And Echevarria makes very clear that several of Clausewitz's most quoted concepts – such as that of the center of gravity – deal specifically with wars of an unlimited objective, that is, those seeking the enemy's complete defeat. His discussion of centers of gravity is one of the most sophisticated parts of his book.²⁰

Echevarria also – like Christopher Bassford some years ago – gives a thorough and accurate analysis of Clausewitz's most misunderstood concept, his trinity. The three elements of the Clausewitzian trinity are *not*, as so many amateurs believe, the people, army and government of a warring state (a mistake propagated, as he notes, by the late Colonel Harry G. Summers); they are rather passion and hatred (which Echevarria refers to as 'hostility'), chance and probability (which Clausewitz, in my opinion, clearly used to refer to what happens on the battlefield), and policy, the guiding intelligence of the war.²¹ I do not agree with Echevarria that it has become possible to fight wars

¹⁸*On War*, 75–80.

¹⁹*On War*, 69.

²⁰Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2007), 177–90.

²¹*On War*, 89.

without provoking hostility – to me, the elements of Clausewitz’s trinity resemble the three sides of the fire triangle, and one cannot have a war without them.

Echevarria also understands that the associations that Clausewitz did posit between hostility and the people, probability and chance and the commander of the Army, and policy and the government are not meant to be exclusive, but oddly, he slips up, in my opinion while discussing the relationship between policy on the one hand and war on the other, surely one of the most critical points addressed in *On War* and one that has enduring relevance: the relationship of policy, or politics, to war.

Echevarria certainly acknowledges that Clausewitz says repeatedly that politics, or policy (and one must always remember that in his own German language both meanings rested within the same word, *Politik*), is the guiding intelligence in war, and that which gives it meaning. Yet the American author suggests that later historians and theorists, in their zeal to restrain the military in a century of world wars and nuclear weapons, have given these statements too much significance by implying that they give political authorities a right or a duty to restrain military action. Clausewitz, it is true, did not focus on such restrictions, but he insisted repeatedly that the use of the military had to be appropriate to whatever political goals the government was trying to achieve. And when Echevarria gets down to later historical cases, and particularly to the Prussian Field Marshal Count von Moltke the Elder, it develops that he is not as sensitive to some of Clausewitz’s points as he might be.

Because only politics provided the basis for military action, Clausewitz wrote, political considerations became critical for the planning of wars, campaigns, *and even of battles*.²² History is replete with such examples. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) in 1942 overruled Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall and insisted upon an Allied invasion of North Africa – which Marshall thought would delay decisive victory in the war – because of important political reasons relating to the overall conduct of the war, and Marshall eventually admitted that FDR had been right. Echevarria rightly points out (as did Clausewitz) that the political leadership’s intervention could be mistaken as well. Proper strategy depends upon the proper estimate of what will defeat the enemy, and anyone, sadly, can be wrong about that.

However, Echevarria does not fully explore the implications of the kind of counterargument which military leaders such as General Douglas MacArthur and Moltke have put forward – the position that once the war has begun, the proper conduct of the conflict is the business of the military leadership, who will simply tell the civilians when the maximum result has been achieved. Moltke’s views led him to

²²*On War*, 606.

try to prolong Prussia's 1866 Seven Weeks War against Austria after Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had already achieved his political objectives, and probably made it harder for Bismarck to make peace with France in 1870–71 as well. Forty-five years later, Moltke's successors refused to contemplate a compromise peace during World War I because they insisted that they alone had the right to determine whether Germany could still win a military victory. Clausewitz understood that the political leadership had to retain the right not only to begin the war, but to end it.

Echevarria also shows some misunderstanding of Clausewitz's belief that the nature of a particular war is determined by politics. This problem, the Prussian general made clear in Book I Chapter 1, would not arise if absolute war actually existed – every war would be the same kind of all-out exertion of strength. But since no real war is absolute, it becomes crucial for the statesman and the commander to understand 'the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.'²³ What few if any critics have noticed is that Clausewitz kept the promise of his next sentence and explained this statement further in Book 8, Chapter 2. (I am indebted to US Navy Commander Dan Withers, retired, a former teaching partner of mine, for this point.)

We said in the opening chapter that the natural aim of military operations is the enemy's overthrow Since both belligerents must hold that view, . . . hostilities could not end until one or other side were finally defeated. . . .

Why is it that the theoretical concept is not fulfilled in practice? The barrier in question is the vast array of factors, forces, and conditions in national affairs that are affected by war . . .

To discover how much of our resources must be mobilized for war, we must first examine our own political aim and that of the enemy. We must gauge the strength and situation of the opposing state. We must gauge the character and abilities of its government and people and do the same in regard to our own. Finally, we must evaluate the political sympathies of other states and the effect the war may have on them.²⁴

²³*On War*, 88–9.

²⁴*On War*, 579–80, 585–6.

Wars, in short, would all have the same nature if they were all absolute – but since no real war is, each has to be understood in its own terms, *beginning with the stakes of the two sides and the resources they devote to achieving their aims*. Echevarria accuses Clausewitz of ‘political determinism’ in Book 8 and claims that it is a logical fallacy. The counterargument, which he claims that Clausewitz did not address, is that ‘destroying the enemy’s military capabilities as quickly as possible opens the door to achieving any political objective’.²⁵ But Clausewitz most certainly did address that counter-argument, most notably in Book I, Chapter 2, ‘Purpose and Means in War’. *In theory*, he said again and again, destruction of the enemy’s forces would always be the highest goal, but in practice it often would not, partly because that goal also carried the greatest risk.²⁶

The primacy of politics, for Clausewitz, was not simply an ideal, but a fact. Domestic and international political conditions determined not only a state’s objectives but the extent of the resources the state would be able to commit to them. A war that nations pursued after its costs had exceeded its potential benefits would be a logical absurdity – although he must have known, as we do now, that the role of emotion in human affairs still makes this situation all too frequent.

The Prussian’s emphasis on this point, it turns out, was more than historical. Daniel Moran, in an essay we shall return to later, tells how in 1827 a young staff officer, Karl von Roeder, asked Major General Clausewitz for his analysis of a staff exercise based upon a possible war between Austria and Prussia. Clausewitz replied in effect that he could not do so because the exercise (alas, like so many subsequent peacetime military plans) said nothing about the two sides’ objectives in a war. There was, in short, no such thing as purely operational war – one had to know what the two sides were fighting about to talk intelligently about how they should fight.

But the primacy of politics does not guarantee, obviously, that wars will be successful. Echevarria writes that in democracies, ‘civilian authorities have the right to be wrong; they should get the wars they ask for, even if they are not the ones they really want; in other words, military practitioners should not take creative liberties with the guidance they receive from their civilian heads’.²⁷ As a matter of American constitutional law this is correct, but it is far from clear that clinging blindly to this principle serves the interests either of the US government or the American people. While civilians have the authority to make the ultimate decisions of war and peace, military leaders can,

²⁵Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 96.

²⁶*On War*, 97–8.

²⁷Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 97.

and in my opinion should, do what they can within legal limits to prevent them from disastrous exercise of it. In practice, this means that the military leadership needs to be both well-informed and blunt about what the military instrument can and cannot achieve. We do not expect doctors to salute and attempt to cure hopeless cancers, or lawyers to spend limitless resources on hopeless cases; we want them to tell us the truth about our prospects.

Civilian leaders desperately need the same honesty from their military subordinates. The critical question in any war – and Clausewitz clearly recognized this – is whether a particular military result will in fact secure the desired peace. Alas, the Prussian soldier, great genius that he was, could only conclude that one could never be certain in advance. Yet any civilian leader would in my judgment be most unwise to override the judgment of senior military leaders on this point – as the Bush administration evidently did in 2002/3 with respect to the size of the army needed to occupy Iraq.

Both Strachan and Echevarria have written coherent summaries of Clausewitz's thought, yet both books suggest at least to me that something will always be lacking in such theoretical surveys. Clausewitz's most important points, in my opinion, can only be understood with the help of detailed historical analysis, not only of the wars of Napoleon and Frederick the Great, from which most of his own examples come, but of other subsequent wars as well. How elements of this theory work out in practice, as he explained again and again – depend upon specific military and political conditions, which determine the various different ways that any war might have turned out. (Clausewitz himself does this at several points, most notably in Book II, Chapter 5, 'Critical Analysis', where he discusses political and military issues in some of Napoleon's campaigns.) To paraphrase Clausewitz, his theory is also a chameleon whose lessons change according to circumstances – and therein lies its enduring value.

Many of the same basic theoretical points come up again in the 16 chapters of Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe's reader, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, which grew out of what must have been a most stimulating conference held by the Oxford Leverhulme Programme on the Changing Character of War. In their introduction the editors take dead aim at Sir John Keegan, Martin van Creveld, and Mary Kaldor for suggesting that Clausewitz has lost his relevance, and they and their contributors certainly demonstrate it again and again.

The trinity, that complex interplay of passion, probability (on the battlefield), and rationality, comes in for a good deal of highly sophisticated discussion in this book. In a schematic but very sophisticated essay, Alan Beyerchen argues very convincingly that Clausewitz was anticipating the modern concepts of non-linear,

complex systems in this characterization of war – mathematical models, one might suggest, before which even a Newton might quail.²⁸ Fourteen years ago Christopher Bassford, with Edward J. Villacres, took the lead in pointing out that Clausewitz’s trinity did *not* refer to the people, army and government of a warring state.²⁹ Here Bassford picks up where he left off, retranslating the critical passage to bring out some important problems in the translation of Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret that contributed to this continuing misunderstanding. (Bassford seems understandably frustrated that his 1995 article has not managed to stop the spread of the people/army/government misreading.)

Problems involving absolute war also show up in this collection. Jan Willem Honig argues that Paret and Howard’s translation privileged the idea of rationality over what he calls the ‘imperative of destruction.’ Although Honig recognizes (p.64) that absolute war is ‘a conceptual construct’ and ‘an ideal which can never be achieved in reality’,³⁰ he then states, ‘Clausewitz’s argument that the ideal of absolute war reveals the escalatory tendency that is inherent in “real war” suggests that there should be only one type of real war: the one that aims at making the enemy defenceless through destroying his armed forces in decisive battle.’³¹ Like so many others, Honig is confusing a *purely theoretical ideal*, absolute war, with what Clausewitz recognized as the limits upon what could be achieved in practice.

Jon Sumida’s essay, ‘On Defence as the Stronger Form of War’, identifies one of Clausewitz’s most important beliefs and traces it through the book. He notes a most important and neglected point in Book VI, Chapter 6 – that the defender enjoys an important *political* advantage because the states of Europe have an interest in one another’s survival, and are therefore more likely to come to the aid of the state that is attacked. Sumida, however – like every other commentator I have come across – left out the most politically incorrect part of that chapter, and probably of *On War* as a whole. The three partitions of Poland from 1772 through 1795 (and which continued through the rest of Clausewitz’s life) seemed to disprove this theory, the Prussian recognized, but he tried to explain the anomaly by claiming that Poland was not really a European state, but rather a

²⁸See *On War*, 576.

²⁹Christopher Bassford and Edward J. Villacres, ‘Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity’, *Parameters* 25 (Autumn 1995), 9–20.

³⁰Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2007), 64.

³¹Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, 66.

Tartar state and was therefore swallowed up because of its ‘chaotic public life’ and ‘boundless irresponsibility’.³²

That, however, is a sidelight, and the prestige of the United States is surely suffering today because it effectively surrendered the superiority of the defense when it decided to occupy Iraq in 2003 – all the more so since the legal and moral superiority of the defense is now embodied in the charter of the United Nations. Sumida also mixes up the distinctions between absolute and real war, but his piece is an important one.

Three contributions – Christopher Daase, ‘Clausewitz and Small Wars’, Antulio Echevarria, ‘Clausewitz and the Nature of the War on Terror’, and David Lonsdale, ‘Clausewitz and Information Warfare’, specifically address Clausewitz’s relevance to the so-called War on Terror. Daase makes the essential point that the Prussian’s model of political actors using violence need not apply solely to states. Echevarria argues more specifically that both the United States and Al-Qa’eda and its allies are animated by political objectives and hostility and are both looking for battlefields on which they can make their views prevail – and thus, the conflict between them includes all three elements of Clausewitz’s trinity and is fundamentally a Clausewitzian struggle. A complicating factor, quickly recognized by my Naval War College students some weeks ago when we listed the aims of the two sides on the blackboard, is the visionary character of the objectives of both sides. The revived Caliphate sought by Al-Qa’eda and the democratic, pluralistic Middle East for which the United States claims to strive are both highly unlikely to occur in practice, and both sides in the end will have to settle for much less. We shall return to this issue and its broader implications, as Clausewitz might say, in our concluding section.

David Lonsdale’s contribution, ‘Clausewitz and Information Warfare’, is a sophisticated critique of recent literature proclaiming that information dominance has produced a new revolution in military affairs, or RMA. He rightly points out that such discussions often omit the crucial dimension of policy – that is, what the purpose of the war being fought is, beyond the simple disabling of the enemy’s forces – and do not ask how, for instance, precision-guided munitions are going to create a democratic spirit in Iraq. One could, indeed, go an extra mile, and point out that the United States is now trying to use military force to alter the political institutions of a large and populous part of the globe (Afghanistan and Iraq together number more than 60 million people, and adding Iran into the mix would double that number) with military forces that by the standards of the twentieth century have become very small.

³²*On War*, 375.

The role of policy and politics in war inevitably recurs again and again in all these works. Several authors, including both Strachan and Echevarria, make the important linguistic point that Clausewitz used only one German word, *Politik*, to refer to both, and that Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret chose to use ‘policy’ in the vast majority of cases. I was delighted by a quote from Howard, reported by Christopher Bassford, which confirmed my own sense of the distinction between ‘policy’ and ‘politics’ as it has evolved in English. ‘During the Clausewitz conference at which this paper was first presented’, Bassford writes,

Sir Michael Howard, in his usual matter-of-fact manner, said that he and Paret actually gave no systematic thought to the choice of when and whether to use policy or politics when translating *Politik*. But he said that he was biased in favor of the word policy primarily because of its grandeur: policy is what great states do on the grand stage of history, whereas politics is a sordid process carried on incessantly, by everyone, but particularly by objectionable little men called politicians, in grubby, smoke-filled back rooms. That is an interesting and revealing notion.³³

That is more or less the distinction I have been proposing to my War College students for years, but it leads me in another question. What we really need to ask, it seems to me, is whether we Anglo-Americans are simply kidding ourselves by insisting upon the distinction between rationally crafted ‘policy’ and grubby, ambitious ‘politics,’ and whether the German (and for that matter the French) languages more accurately combine the two linguistically *just as, one might suggest, they are always combined in reality.*

The issue which in my opinion received too little treatment in Clausewitz – for understandable reasons to which I shall return in a moment – is the problem of bad policy (or politics) and how it generates misguided and hopeless wars. This was not a problem of which he was unaware – indeed, he refers to it in the midst of his one actual definition of policy:

It can be taken as agreed that the aim of policy [politics?] is to unify and reconcile all aspects of internal administration as well as of spiritual values, and whatever else the moral philosopher may care to add. Policy, of course, is nothing in itself; it is simply the trustee for all these interests against other states. *That it can err, subserve the ambitions, private interests, and vanity of those in power, is*

³³Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, 83–4.

neither here nor there. In no sense can the art of war ever be regarded as the preceptor of policy, and here we can only treat policy as representative of all interests in the community. [emphasis added]³⁴

There are in my opinion two reasons why Clausewitz acknowledged but hastened to dismiss the problem of errant, vain, policy – one methodological and one historical. To begin with, his goal in Book VIII, Chapter 6 where this quote appears was simply to elucidate the proper relationship between politics on the one hand and war on the other, emphasizing that political objectives determined the character and the conduct of any war. But at the same time, I do not believe that Clausewitz could have tossed off this problem so easily had he been an Athenian writing around 400 BCE, or a German writing in the second half of the twentieth century, or an American after 1975 – or, interestingly enough, even a Frenchman writing in the 1830s. *On War* is in one sense an optimistic book in so far as it holds out the model of rational policy controlling war at least as an ideal type to strive for in reality. As such it reflects the age in which it was written, both intellectually (Clausewitz was a child of the Enlightenment) and politically since war, especially for Napoleon's enemies, had genuinely in the end served rational political aims.

During the 1980s I wrote *Politics and War: European Conflict from Philip II to Hitler*, dealing with four periods of general war in Europe.³⁵ Although I had not yet studied Clausewitz in any detail the book revolved around exactly the point we are discussing: whether the European powers, in various different eras, were fighting for *genuinely achievable goals*. I concluded that in the first and the last of my four periods—1559–1659, and 1914–45 – they were not. In the first of those periods the European monarchs fought to extend their authority well beyond their capabilities; in the last, they fought both to acquire self-sufficient economic empires and to create homogeneous national states, two goals that were either hopeless or, as it turned out, murderous. But in the middle two eras – the age of Louis XIV on the one hand, and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic era on the other – they fought for achievable goals. And the climax of that period coincided with Clausewitz's adult lifetime. First, using a combination of military skill and political reform, Napoleon redrew the European map on an unprecedented scale with the help of a series of short wars. Then, in 1813–15, the Sixth and Seventh Coalitions used the military tools he had developed against him and

³⁴*On War*, 606–7 (which is partially, but never fully, quoted in several of the works under discussion.)

³⁵David Kaiser, *Politics and War: European Conflict from Philip II to Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1990).

re-established a world of independent European states. As it turned out, they laid the foundation for a lasting peace. Clausewitz as a Prussian and a European had no reason to be displeased with their outcome, and no fundamental reason, based upon his own experience, to make an extended examination of the problem of bad policy.

Things looked very different west of the Rhine. As the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl showed in his classic work *Napoleon, For and Against* (trans. 1946), Napoleon's *political objectives* became the focus of an enormous amount of engaged French scholarship for well over a century. In particular, French historians of both the Left and the Right blamed him for his endless escalation of his objectives, which in the end threw away the great achievement of the Revolutionary era, the 'natural frontiers' of the Rhine and the Alps. Clausewitz, however, never really discussed Napoleon's broad political objectives in *On War*. There Napoleon emerges mainly as the exemplary practitioner of war designed to lead to the complete defeat of the enemy.

That is how one must understand one of the most provocative and, in a way, confusing passages in *On War*: the discussion of the campaign of 1812 in Russia.³⁶ Here Clausewitz argues (as Daniel Moran points out in his interesting essay in the Strachan and Herberg-Rothe reader, 'The Instrument') that Napoleon conducted the campaign correctly. He was trying to subdue Russia as he had subdued Prussia and Austria – by smashing its army and occupying its capital. His campaign failed '*because the only way to achieve success failed*'. Moran goes a little too far, however, when he writes, 'Napoleon did not fail because he made some kind of logical error in the reconciliation of ends and means. In Clausewitz's judgment the end was feasible enough, and the means adequate.' Here the first sentence is correct – logically, Clausewitz is arguing, Napoleon chose the means that were appropriate to his end. The second, however, is not. Here is what Clausewitz himself said at the climax of this passage:

We maintain that the 1812 campaign failed because the Russian government kept its nerve and the people remained loyal and steadfast. The campaign could not succeed. Bonaparte may have been wrong to engage in it at all; *at least the outcome certainly shows that he miscalculated*; but we argue that if he was to aim at that objective, there was, broadly speaking, no other way of gaining it. [emphasis added]³⁷

³⁶*On War*, 627–9.

³⁷*On War*, 628.

Here as in so many other cases, the meaning of the passage is clear enough provided that one situates it within its chapter. It occurs in the very last chapter, Book VIII, Chapter 9 – ‘The Plan of a War Designed to Lead to the Total Defeat of the Enemy’. *Because that was Napoleon’s objective, Clausewitz is saying, he used the right plan.* But the quoted passage certainly questions the wisdom of the objective. Had the Prussian eyewitness been French he would probably have been more categorical on that point, as so many French writers were – the campaign was obviously Bonaparte’s most catastrophic mistake. As it was, Clausewitz must actually have felt some gratitude towards Napoleon for undertaking it, since had he not done so Prussia and Europe might well have remained under French domination for the rest of Clausewitz’s life.

In another essay under review, Benoît Durieux’s ‘Clausewitz and the Two Temptations of Modern Strategic Thinking’ argues that the United States and Europe are now divided by opposing conceptions of the purpose and means appropriate to war, with the United States seeking absolute victories while Europeans seek a mirage of non-violent conflict. That is an interesting but somewhat simplistic analysis.

What is critical is this: it is the problem of good and bad policy – and particularly, of political objectives that can or cannot be achieved by military means – that has intermittently plagued the United States since the middle of the twentieth century. After history’s most massive application of force defeated the Axis in 1945, the United States and allies fought an ultimately successful limited war in Korea. Enormous American military power could not however secure US political objectives in Vietnam, and now it is far from clear that the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq have actually advanced American political goals in the war on terror. The United States is now using military force in unprecedented ways to try to achieve almost unprecedented ends.

Clausewitz has provided the framework with which to analyze this problem, but the solution, as he understood so well, depends upon the correct appreciation of a multitude of political and military factors which he could not possibly have anticipated. The task of the political leader and the strategist – as in 1792, 1914, and 1965 – begins anew. Success or failure depends upon the measure of political and military genius which they can bring to bear upon it. A new and very Clausewitzian drama has begun.

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