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In My View

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IN MY VIEW . . .

Vietnam, Political Objectives, and Clausewitz

Sir,

Lieutenant Mark J. Perry, USNR, in his letter in the Summer 1992 *Naval War College Review*, defends Clausewitz by claiming, “most of Clausewitz’s theories worked quite well during Desert Shield and Desert Storm.” In contrast to the Vietnam war, which Perry feels was not fought according to Clausewitz—as if Clausewitz set forth a neat, simple recipe guaranteed to produce success if followed precisely—Perry claims that “Desert Storm faithfully followed the tenets of Clausewitz, with stunning results,” and that “this whole scenario could have come right out of Book One in *On War*. . . .”

Perry claims in contrast that the Vietnam war was fought with a “lack of national will,” that political decisions did not support “a clear-cut set of goals,” and that “the lack of defined goals and of a dedicated national will would cost us any chance for success in Southeast Asia.” But in fact Perry errs when he glibly states that there was no national will behind the war. Actually public opinion polls for that era indicated that a majority of the American people supported the war. And America did in fact have a clearly defined policy goal in the war: maintaining the independence of South Vietnam under a non-Communist government. And military actions were directed with the intent of achieving that policy goal.

Perry doesn’t ask The Big Question: Was victory really possible in Vietnam? Perhaps given the Vietnamese history of protracted resistance to outside control, and the Vietnamese nationalist traditions manifested in the determination of the North and of many in the South to unite Vietnam into one country even if they had to continue fighting for decades or even centuries, victory as defined by the United States, i.e., an independent South Vietnam accepted by North Vietnam,

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was an impossibility. Another point of speculation, one which is generally not given adequate consideration, is whether the military methods used in Vietnam, and their direct and indirect results, were counterproductive to the goal the U.S. sought.

The killing and maiming of South Vietnamese civilians, mass relocations from land owned by families for generations, the support of corrupt and, by many, hated governmental officials, the disruption of the South Vietnamese economy by the infusion of billions of dollars spent by American soldiers and civilians, all derived from a military solution to the Vietnam war and had the effect of decreasing the support the South Vietnamese gave to the South Vietnamese government and increased the support of the Communists. In other words, one could convincingly argue that the military conduct of the Vietnam war to achieve the American political goal actually thwarted the realization of that goal.

I am skeptical of digging through *On War* with the assumption that Clausewitz had all the answers to everything, for he wrote so much that one can find statements to support or oppose many positions. But since Perry obviously places great store in Clausewitz, I present from *On War*, Book One, Chapter One, Section 11, a quote which could be applied to the failure of America to succeed in Vietnam: "At other times the political object itself is not suitable for the aim of military action." One could take this to mean that according to Clausewitz the political goal of America in Vietnam was one which could not have been achieved by military action, because according to Clausewitz not every political objective can be realized by military operations.

I must also dispute Perry's assertion that according to Clausewitz, "when the goals of a war are decided, limited or total, they must be pursued with total dedication." In *On War*, Book One, Chapter One, Section 10, Clausewitz said that if the extreme absolute of war is not to be sought because we are dealing with ideal conceptions but with actual situations, "it is left for the judgement to determine the limits for the efforts to be made. . . ." In Book One, Chapter One, Section 11, Clausewitz said, "the political object, as the original motive of the War, will be the standard for determining both the aim of the military force and also the amount of effort to be made." Later in Section 11, Clausewitz said, "Thus it is explained how, without any contradiction in itself, there may be Wars of all degrees of importance and energy. . . ." and also, "Further, the smaller our political object, the less value we shall set upon it, and the more easily shall we be induced to give it up altogether." Obviously Clausewitz did not believe, as Perry claims, that the goals of war always "must be pursued with total dedication." On the contrary, Clausewitz believed that the value of goals in war determine the dedication with which they are to be pursued.

Perry also errs in assuming, as many others do, that Clausewitz was being prescriptive rather than descriptive when he discussed war, political intercourse and politics in his work *On War*, Book One, Chapter One, and Book Eight,

Chapter Six. If we examine carefully and thoughtfully what Clausewitz actually said, we see that when he discussed war as political intercourse and as an instrument of policy, he was not asserting what he thought war ought to be, but was describing what war was. He was discussing the essential nature of war. He wasn't setting forth "follow-the-dots" rules for conducting war. He wasn't claiming that war should be an instrument of policy but often wasn't. Rather he was saying that war by its nature is always an instrument of policy. He didn't cite examples of wars which failed because they weren't instruments of policy or didn't adequately fulfill the role of instruments of policy. He didn't cite examples of war which succeeded because they were instruments of policy. The assumption that Clausewitz set forth rules to be followed and requirements to be met in order that war can be an effective instrument of policy is erroneous. There is no Clausewitzian way of waging a war as an instrument of policy contrasted to a non-Clausewitzian way of waging a war which is not an instrument of policy. All wars, according to Clausewitz, are inherently instruments of policy.

The source of some of the misunderstanding about what Clausewitz meant seems to derive from an inadequate reading of Book Eight, Chapter Six, where Clausewitz states in a paragraph, "To leave a great military enterprise, or the plan for one, to a *purely military judgement and decision*, is a distinction which cannot be allowed. . . . [Indeed,] it is an irrational proceeding to consult professional soldiers on the plan of a War, that they may give a *purely military opinion*. . . ." Clausewitz did not imply that it was a practice for purely military judgments and purely military opinions to govern wars and that he was objecting to this practice. Rather he was merely making a speculative observation. He was saying that *if* this occurred—without claiming that it ever occurred—it would be wrong. He stated in the rest of the paragraph (which seems to be often unread) that "notwithstanding the multifarious branches and scientific character of military art in the present day, still the leading outlines of a War are *always* [emphasis my own] determined by the Cabinet, that is, if we would use technical language, by a political not a military organ."

Joseph Forbes
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Giulio Douhet Vindicated

Sir,

Coalition air forces rightfully earned a place in history for their contribution to the success of Desert Storm. (See *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1992, "Set and Drift.") But their role was no greater than that of the ground forces that swept into Kuwait and Iraq, or that of the amphibious forces that sat offshore

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fixing Iraqi ground forces in Eastern Kuwait. In "An Operational Analysis of the Persian Gulf War," Colonel D.W. Craft, of the Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, states, "Instead of concentrating on which arm contributed the most to the success of the campaign, emphasis should be placed on understanding the balance and synchronization among the complementing forces. It is a well documented fact that air supremacy in a desert tactical environment is a vital factor for success. . . . Air supremacy in Iraq and Kuwait permitted total freedom of action to destroy Iraqi forces while reducing exposure of ground forces to sustained combat. This resulted in markedly fewer casualties and dramatically underscored the totality of the military victory. However, the limits on air power decisiveness were demonstrated when it became necessary to secure or deny great expanses of territory to enemy ground forces and when destruction in detail of the key enemy force—the Republican Guard Force Corps—was demanded. . . . As one Iraqi tank battalion commander confirmed upon interrogation: 'When the air operations started I had 39 tanks. After 38 days of the air battle I had 32 tanks. After 20 minutes against the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, I had 0 tanks.' "

As a member of the War Gaming Department at the Naval War College, I've had the opportunity to observe numerous war games. Regardless of simulation methods, scenarios or orders of battle used in games, I am continually drawn to the conclusion that the synergistic effect of joint or combined forces will be the decisive factor in achieving operational success. Any commander that puts all his eggs in the air supremacy basket is leading with his chin, particularly in a non-desert theater like Korea.

Douhet was enamored with the potential applications of air power, and rightfully so. But as the trench warfare of his days has evolved into modern combat technologies, our thinking regarding application of today's forces must also evolve. We need to think like joint warfighters, not be PR men for our individual services.

D.G. Howard
Commander, U.S. Navy

Naval Doctrine

Sir,

I was appalled to read Major Stephen D. Schmidt's "A Call for an Official Naval Doctrine" (Winter 1993) while updating the bibliography for an elective course I teach on military lesson learning at the U.S. Army War College. It is a masterpiece of misinformation and faulty logic.

I certainly do not mindlessly defend whatever bears a Navy label. My 24 years of active and reserve naval service have often sent me to the brink of despair; I

fully grasp the meaning of *SNAFU*. Repeatedly I have been put on the spot by members of other services to explain some outlandish episode involving sailors or some bizarre official statement. Even so, I can scarcely imagine anyone who has looked at the definition of the word *doctrine* and done any research asserting, as does Major Schmidt, that the Navy has no official doctrine. One can rightly say that the Navy's official doctrine does not parallel the Army's. One can equally rightly say that Navy doctrine does not describe the environment of warfare, as does FM 100-5, the new JCS Pub 1, or the new AFM 1-1. One can claim that the Navy needs to infuse more "Jointness" into its doctrine. One can even rightly say that Navy doctrine is mainly procedural and, as stated in NWP 1, blatantly Mahanian. I would even give the benefit of the doubt to someone who said he simply thinks Navy doctrine is stupid and stinks. But to say the Navy *has* no official doctrine is nonsense! To compare statements of the Maritime Strategy to FM 100-5 is to compare NWP-1 to an article in *Military Review*—discussion of apples and oranges.

Having rechecked to be sure this was not a belated April Fool's issue, I'm guessing that your publishing this article must be a ruse to stir up your most torpid readers. If so, you may succeed, with no great harm done. If that's not your intent, I question the wisdom of publishing an article that so badly garbles basic terms and concepts, such as *strategy* and *doctrine*, and misleads on facts. Publishing this statement by an Air Force officer certainly misrepresents the knowledge or sophistication of the officers of that service. If this is an attempt to educate the Navy officer corps about doctrine, it seems likely to backfire by leading to farcical debates starting from faulty premises and misstatements of basic terms. In sum, I think you owe your readers some explanation of why [it] appeared in your journal.

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The editor replies:

Major Schmidt's article was published for the same reason as was Dr./Captain Williams's letter.

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