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"Absolute War will not occur."

THE ESSENTIAL CLAUSEWITZ

by

B.M. Simpson III

Clausewitz' major work, *On War*, is long, involved, murky, and overpowering. Nevertheless, it is the most thorough and comprehensive book on the phenomenon of war in world literature. While there are many fine analytical histories that describe wars, their causes and their effects, no one has published another book that explains in a philosophical and analytical manner the phenomenon of war as a whole.

On War is an unfinished work, published by Frau Clausewitz after her husband's death. Only Chapter 1 of Book I satisfied the author. It was written in a style common to the early 19th century, using the Hegelian method of first stating and developing a thesis and then an antithesis. Finally, the writer produces a synthesis. Unless the reader is aware of what Clausewitz is doing, it may seem that he is contradicting himself.

Clausewitz' theory of war was confirmed by the Napoleonic wars, not deduced from them. To read Clausewitz as an explanation of the European wars

that Clausewitz never intended, notably that he placed his emphasis on specific wars. On the contrary, he used specific wars to illustrate his thesis that concerned war as a whole. In short Clausewitz' work is not an adjunct to Napoleonic warfare.

Clausewitz attaches great importance to theory. The function of theory is a systematic elucidation or analysis. Indeed, this is the meaning of the Greek root *theoria*. The purpose of theory is to order knowledge and to provide a reference point, or philosophical sea buoy, from which additional investigation can take its departure.

He writes out no prescriptions: He does not attempt to tell us what plans will work and what will not. Rather, in descriptive fashion he presents his theory as an analytical investigation that leads to knowledge and to a thorough familiarity with the subject, military history.¹

Clausewitz establishes criteria that his descriptive theory must fulfill:²

1. Investigation of the subjects that constitute war.

2. Identification and separation of those elements that at first seem to be interwoven.

3. Explanation of the character or the properties of the means by which war is conducted, and their probable effects.

4. Identification of the object of war.

5. Application of critical investigation to the entire subject of war.

What is most important is that theory fulfill its descriptive function as a guide to the man who studies war, "... so that it lights up the whole road for him, facilitates his progress, educates his judgment, and shields him from error."³

Once this descriptive function of theory has been applied to a given subject or set of circumstances, anyone else may find the matter understandable without having to go through and organize the material himself. At this point, Clausewitz makes his famous statement about theory; that "It should educate the mind of the future leader in war, or rather guide him in his self-instruction, but not accompany him to the battlefield."⁴

Sir Julian Corbett makes the same point in the first few pages of *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.^{*} He uses the study of seamanship as an illustration. Certainly, someone who has read the authorities on ship handling cannot by that fact alone be considered a competent ship handler, but he will have an understanding of the forces affecting the ship. Clausewitz and Corbett agree that theory is indispensable to educate the mind so that it will be better able to deal with each situation on its merits as it arises.

His theory of Absolute War serves as Clausewitz' reference point. Yet he says war is a result of "possibilities, probabilities, good fortune and bad, in which rigorous logical deduction often gets

lost."⁵ Clausewitz is not contradicting himself.

Absolute War is pure war, untainted by the facts of life. The important thing about studying or examining specific wars is how and why they differ from the abstraction of Absolute War. By giving a reference point that is easily identifiable and that can be kept clearly in mind, a possibly bewildering kaleidoscopic series of events and facts can be reduced to some sort of order. They can be understood by reference to Absolute War, by a determination of how and why they differ from Absolute War. Thus, the theoretical abstraction, Absolute War, serves the function of theory by bringing some form of order out of what otherwise might be chaos.

In the opening passages of *On War* Clausewitz defines war as "an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfill our will."⁶ He disparages those who think that an opponent can be disarmed and overcome without causing great bloodshed. Clausewitz says this is an error that must be extirpated, because in such a dangerous thing as war, "the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst."⁷ It is absurd, he says, to introduce into the philosophy of war a principle of moderation: "War is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bonds."⁸ In war there is a dynamic effect that arises from the efforts of each side to increase the violence. This leads to extremes that Clausewitz calls reciprocal actions. There are three of them.⁹

The first arises from the spirit of escalation in which each side attempts to use a greater degree of violence or force than the other side.

The second reciprocal action arises from the fact that so long as we have not defeated the enemy, the possibility exists that he will defeat us. Therefore, he must be utterly defeated.

The third reciprocal action results from the efforts and expenditures of resources that each side applies to the war.

^{*}Sir Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1972).
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Even though Clausewitz has described war as an abstraction, these reciprocal actions produce a dynamic interaction between the combatants. The result logically leads to extremes, for when "reasoning in the abstract, the mind cannot stop short of an extreme, because it has to deal with an extreme, with a conflict of forces left to themselves, and obeying no other but their own inner laws."¹⁰

The abstraction, Absolute War, will take place only if the following conditions are met:¹¹

1. If war is an isolated act, which arises suddenly, and is in no way connected with the history of the combatant states.

2. If it is limited to a single solution.

3. If it contains within itself a perfect, final, categorical, unequivocal solution from which there is no appeal.

After setting forth these conditions necessary to Absolute War, conditions which do not occur, Clausewitz tells us that everything takes a different shape when we pass from abstractions to reality.¹²

The reason the conditions necessary to Absolute War do not occur in reality is that any given war has its origin in a very specific and particular political situation. The political object sought by the antagonists will determine the character of the war. Clausewitz puts it, ". . . 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."¹³ Thus, the political object—whatever it may be and however it may be defined—becomes the object of the war. The result is that as the political object diminishes or increases, the military action will also diminish or increase proportionately.

The political object removes war from the realm of abstraction and places it squarely in the real world of real people and real events. If the three

conditions for absolute war were met then, Clausewitz concludes, a given war would be a "perfect, unrestrained and absolute expression of force" and policy makers would step aside to let the war run its self-contained course.¹⁴ However, as these three conditions cannot be met, Absolute War will not occur and policy makers cannot stand aside. A purely military solution, whatever that may be, cannot be sought.

Because war has political origins and because it is fought for political purposes, politics, or policy, should predominate. "Policy, therefore, is interwoven with the whole action of War, and must exercise a continuous influence upon it, as far as the nature of the forces liberated by it will permit."¹⁵ Hence, military forces must be able to produce a desired and identifiable political effect. Otherwise, their creation would be pointless and their employment senseless.

Because war is the means to gain a political object, those who conduct it must always be aware of the object for which it is waged. They must conceive and plan war to achieve the object that policy makers have established.

By examining the political situations out of which wars have arisen, it is possible to explain why wars differ from each other and how each differs from Absolute War.

It is certainly reasonable to expect that under different circumstances with the antagonists having different motives, wars can be expected to differ significantly both from one another and from Absolute War. Clausewitz emphasizes this point: "Now, the first, the grandest and most decisive act of judgment which the Statesman and General exercises is rightly to understand in this respect the war in which he engages, not to take it for something or to wish to make of it something which by the nature of its relations it is impossible for it to be."¹⁶ The Statesman must constantly clarify the object of the war as it

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proceeds and the General must insist that the Statesman do so.

This is no idle chatter. For example, in the period 1963 to 1968 it would have made a significant difference in what we did in Vietnam if we had viewed the struggle in that country as a civil war, as outside aggression, or as containment of communism. Did we go to war in Vietnam to build a viable national state? To contain Red China? To pacify the countryside? To destroy North Vietnam? To preserve the power balance in Southeast Asia? Or to reassure our European allies? It is a matter of historical record that a large segment of the American public did not understand what we were trying to do, let alone what the problem was. As *The Pentagon Papers* show, neither did the Defense Department. One can also look at World War I, a classic example of military action getting out of hand and producing results extraordinarily disproportionate to the issues at hand.

When war breaks out, politics do not cease. Clausewitz puts it this way, "Does the cessation of diplomatic notes stop the political relations between different Nations and Governments? Is not war merely another kind of writing and language for political thoughts? It has certainly a grammar of its own, but its logic is not peculiar to itself."¹⁷

After establishing the primacy of policy, Clausewitz adds some qualifications. The first is that the Statesman must know what the General can accomplish on the battlefield. The Statesman must also know what will be the result or effect of the General's "victory" on the battlefield. The second qualification is a negative form of the first: the Statesman must not make demands on war that war cannot fulfill. The role of the military advisor is to tell his civilian bosses what war can and cannot achieve. This is a very difficult determination to make, but it is of crucial importance. Obviously, if those who form policy know the instrument they have chosen

to use (that is, war), then they will not make demands on it that it cannot fulfill. After all, "... the Art of War in its highest point of view is policy, but, no doubt, a policy which fights battles instead of writing notes."¹⁸

Herbert Rosinski described the relationship between policy and war as being neither simple nor capable of exact formulation.

"The right of the political point of view and political leadership to predominate is unquestionable. This unquestionable predominance is itself qualified only by the purely military requirements and capabilities. The problem is thus not that of the simple subordination of military action to political direction, but of a reciprocal relationship between policy and war. This reciprocal relationship between policy and war, political and military leadership and political considerations and military rationale is, however, unequal. The two sides of it, although mutually interacting upon each other, do not, so to speak, stand on the same plane. The superior position of the political leadership is unquestionable. It is not put into doubt by any qualifications by military requirements in any concrete case. The relationship between policy and war might thus be compared with the equally unequal reciprocal relationship between the parent and his child. There is one factor which makes the significance of war with respect to policy greater than that of the child vis-a-vis his parent. War is a matter of life and death for the community engaged in it. The calculations with respect to military capabilities and strategic decisions are, therefore, liable to lead to incomparably graver consequences than in almost any other field. Even if errors are discovered, they are not generally capable of being corrected in time. Thus, the claims of the military leadership in this fundamentally unequal relationship should be heard. They should be taken seriously and should not be over-riden

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by the predominant political leadership, except for absolutely compelling reasons."¹⁹

Confusion can arise when we think about Clausewitz' declaration that the framers of policy use war to achieve their political goals or objectives. Surely politics seeks goals other than simply subjecting the enemy to our own will. So what is the object of war?

As we have seen, when dealing with the concept of Absolute War, Clausewitz shows the outcome of war in pure black and white terms. One side wins. The other side loses completely. Because war is an act of violence carried to an extreme, the losing side naturally has its military forces destroyed.

However, when he leaves the realm of abstraction and enters into the real world, Clausewitz points out that frequently, if not usually, peace has come without either side being destroyed: destruction of the enemy forces is "rarely attained in practice and is not a condition necessary to peace."²⁰

It is true that causing the enemy to submit to our will, that is, disarming him, can lead, and may very well lead directly, to the attainment of the political objective. Though the two are not equivalent or synonymous, attainment of the political objective may be possible only by first disarming the enemy.

Though the immediate military objective is "destruction of the enemy's military power," Clausewitz explains that this means the foe must be "reduced to such a state as not to be able to prosecute the war."²¹ Being unable to prosecute the war is a much broader category than simply having military forces destroyed, as we saw in Vietnam.

There can be many reasons a state might not be able to prosecute a war, even though its military organization is still intact. For example, there may be a lack of will to fight; the civilian base may be threatened or severely damaged; or a blockade may have starved the homefront into surrender. These were

some of the conditions prevailing in Germany in 1918.

There are three reasons that destruction of the enemy's force is not necessary and seldom happens.

Acceptability. The discrepancy between the object of war in the abstract and the return of peace in reality is explained in terms of the value of the political object to the antagonists. This value determines "the measure of sacrifices by which it is to be purchased."²² Clausewitz observes that "As soon as the required outlay becomes so great that the political object is no longer equal in value, the object must be given up and peace will be the result."²³ For anyone familiar with the Military Staff Study, this is a classic statement of the test of Acceptability: what is the object worth to me?

Probabilities. In considering the dynamics of war, Clausewitz cautions us that we must always free ourselves from the "strict law of logical necessity and seek aid from the calculation of probabilities."²⁴ A combatant's original political views and objectives may change substantially, "just because they are determined by results and probable events,"²⁵ as we have seen. The Korean war is a classic example of how political objectives can change from repelling the aggression, to reuniting the entire peninsula, to accepting a cease-fire roughly at the 38th parallel.

Resolve. In some situations the object can be achieved without any fighting, providing a sufficient resolve to fight is demonstrated. Clausewitz offers this as the explanation of how a whole campaign can be carried out energetically without the battle playing a notable part in it.²⁶ This, of course, is what we frequently find in 18th-century warfare. The reasons for this kind of war lie in the realms of politics, psychology, and will; in the criterion of acceptability (rulers simply were not willing to pay a higher price); and, possibly, in Clausewitz' own terms for the equivalent of

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the destruction of the enemy's forces reducing them to such a state as to be unable to prosecute the war.

With these points Clausewitz explains or justifies why in reality wars usually end without the loser being utterly destroyed.

Though Clausewitz lacks a capstone to his otherwise elegant, insightful and perceptive analysis, we should remember that the cholera germ deprived him of the opportunity to complete his work.

As we have seen, the nub of the problem is construing the phrase that Clausewitz uses for the object in war. That phrase is "reducing (the enemy) to such a state as not to be able to prosecute the war." This states a negative condition.

The problem can be solved fairly easily if, instead, we use the concept of control. In other words, the object of war is to exercise control over the enemy. This is a positive concept. What is to be controlled, and the degree and form of control, decisions that will have to be resolved by both the Statesman and the General within the framework of the relationship between policy and war.

Obviously, control must have a purpose. And whatever that may be, inevitably there will be an effect produced on the enemy and in the political relationships of the two warring states. In short, control must be instituted to achieve a specific effect.

Here is the very essence of strategic thinking. A strategic concept is a verbal statement resulting from an analysis of what constitutes control, what must be controlled, the nature of the control, how much is necessary, when it is to start, how long it is to last, and its natural and probable consequences.

The makers of policy must identify and specify what effects are desired. They then must determine which instrument to use to achieve these effects.

economic activities ate others. But whatever the means selected, it is obviously capable of achieving some effects and unable to achieve others. The selection of which means to use to achieve which effects is an extraordinarily serious and difficult question. This is why, in the relationship between the Statesman and the General, the considerations of policy must predominate, but it is also the reason why the claim of the military must be taken seriously. If the makers of policy desire a certain effect, they must make sure that by war they can establish control over some area or situation, and that such control will produce the desired effect, that is, achieve the ultimate object of the war. Such a determination must be made before military forces are employed.

There is one other important aspect to Clausewitz' theory of war: the identification of the component parts or, branches, of war.

If fighting consisted of only a single act, there would be no need for analysis. But fighting consists of a number of acts, which are battles. Thus, fighting gives rise to two essentially different activities. The first is the conduct of each battle. The second is the combination of these individual battles in such a manner that the object of the war is pursued.²⁷ Clausewitz labels the first activity tactics and the second strategy. He clearly distinguishes the one from the other.

Tactics is "the theory of the use of military forces in battle." Strategy is "the theory of the use of battles for the objects of war."

But fighting is not the only activity connected with the conduct of war. Fighting forces must be created and maintained. Under this function Clausewitz specifically includes subsistence, care of the sick, the supply and repair of arms and equipment:²⁸ in short, that which today we call logistics. Having identified the three major branches of the art of war: strategy, tactics, and

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logistics, he alludes to their interrelationship, but he does not pursue the point.*

This trinity of strategy, tactics, and logistics is justified on the basis of descriptive theory, the purpose of which is "to clear up conceptions and ideas, which have been jumbled together, and, we may say, entangled and confused."²⁹ Semantic clarity requires these concepts be used precisely and accurately. That is, everyone must know what everyone else is talking about in order to communicate.

Clausewitz warns skeptics and doubters: "He to whom all this is nothing, must either repudiate all theoretical consideration, or his understanding has not as yet been pained by the confused and perplexing ideas resting on no fixed point of view, leading to no satisfactory result, sometimes dull, sometimes fantastic, sometimes floating in vague generalities, which we are often obliged to hear and read on the conduct of War, owing to the spirit of scientific investigation having hitherto been little directed to these subjects."³⁰

It is obvious that Clausewitz saw war as anything but sterile or abstract. Rather, he makes the point that the moral forces are "amongst the most important subject in war."³¹

Human beings supply the spirit that animates war and makes it a dynamic, living phenomenon. Today we refer to these moral forces as morale. Good morale can mean the difference between success or failure on the battlefield.

There are three chief moral powers: the Talents of the Commander, the Military Virtue of the Army, and National Feeling.³²

Of all the human qualities that can affect the conduct of a war, perhaps the rarest one is a good general, a person whose qualities include energy, firmness, staunchness, strength of mind, and character. When these qualities are melded into a harmonious association they are called military genius. The ability to inspire the troops and to rouse them into action by the sole means of the will of the Commander is the characteristic that makes him stand above the masses and continue to be their master.³³

In addition to these qualities of leadership, the General must have "an intimate knowledge of State policy in its higher relations."³⁴

Certainly these are not ordinary qualities. "What is here required from the higher powers of the mind is a sense of unity, and a judgement raised to such a compass as to give the mind an extraordinary faculty of vision which in its range allays and sets aside a thousand dim notions which an ordinary understanding could only bring to light with great effort, and over which it would exhaust itself."³⁵ With standards and criteria such as these, it is a wonder that we have ever had any first-rate generals.

Clausewitz advises us to look for "searching, rather than inventive minds, comprehensive rather than such as have a special bent, cool rather than fiery heads." Men with these qualifications are those in whom we should repose our trust and confidence in time of war.³⁶

Clausewitz has given us the tools to raise such questions about any war, past, present, or conceivable, as:

What are the political situations that would give rise to the war?

What would be the character of the war?

What would be the objectives of the belligerents?

Are their war plans designed to achieve those objectives?

*See Henry E. Eccles, *Military Concepts and Philosophy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965) for the best discussion in English of the interrelationship of strategy, tactics, and logistics. No military education can be complete without a familiarity with this remarkable work.

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In the course of the war are the objectives of the belligerents likely to change? If so, how?

In their prosecution of the war, in what areas and situations will the belligerents seek to control? What means will they use?

Would success in achieving such control result in attainment of their objectives?

Is there a harmonious relationship among strategy, tactics, and logistics?

If not, what is likely to go wrong?

Only by asking the right questions about war can we hope to learn anything about it. We must have a descriptive theory of war before we can ask the right questions. Clausewitz has given us such a theory.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

B.M. Simpson III, who taught Clausewitz when he was on the Naval War College faculty, practises law in Newport. He is a former editor of this journal.

NOTES

The text used as the basis for this essay is Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Anatol Rapoport, Editor (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971). It is based on F.N. Maude's revision of J.J. Graham's translation. The present translation first appeared in 1908.

1. Book II, chap. II, pp. 190-191.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 191
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Book VIII, chap. II, p. 370.
6. Book I, chap. I, p. 101.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 103.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-105.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 106
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
17. Book VIII, chap. VI(B), p. 402.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 406
19. Herbert Rosinski, "The Structure of Military Strategy," Unpublished MS, c. 1955, pp. 9-10.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
21. Book I, chap. II, p. 123.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
27. Book II, chap. I, p. 172.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Book III, chap. III, p. 251.
32. Book III, chap. IV, p. 253.
33. Book I, chap. III, p. 145.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

