

COMMENTARY

THE CLAUSEWITZ PROBLEM

BY JON T. SUMIDA

On War by Carl von Clausewitz is widely believed to be the greatest study of armed conflict ever written. In the United States Army, this book is therefore assigned at all levels of officer education. Recognition of *On War* as an authoritative text, however, is not supported by agreement about what it means. For historians and political scientists, *On War* has provided fertile ground for multiple and conflicting interpretations. While scholarly study and debate has improved the understanding of Clausewitz's difficult writing, the lack of consensus about *On War* has placed the American military educational establishment in the uncomfortable position of requiring officers to read a book in spite of a very high degree of uncertainty about the identity and nature of its main arguments. Acceptance of this pedagogically unsatisfactory state of affairs has been rationalized in two ways: first, by the attitude that confusion over Clausewitz—as in the case of the poor—will always be with us, and second, the belief that reading Clausewitz—like eating spinach—is good for you whether you like it or not. Neither proposition, however, is helpful or convincing to most officers, for whom *On War* remains either a mystery or no more than an anthology of platitudes. Insofar as the professional military education requirements of the U.S. Army are concerned, the “Clausewitz problem” is thus defined by two questions: First, does *On War* contain a comprehensible general theory of war? Second, is it productively applicable to



Bust of Carl von Clausewitz at the National War College, Fort McNair, D.C.

present conditions and as such a worthy component of officer professional development?

I addressed these issues in *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War*, which was published by the University Press of Kansas in the summer of 2008. In the present article, I use the findings of this monograph as the basis of a condensed explanation of the

major characteristics of Clausewitzian thought. I also offer some reflections on the U.S. Army's use of history and theory in officer education and on its approach to strategy.

Three propositions have conditioned the attitude of most readers to *On War*. First, the book is an unfinished draft that Clausewitz would have heavily revised had he lived and thus constitutes a highly imperfect representation of the author's views on armed conflict. Second, Clausewitz's masterpiece is a phenomenology of war—that is to say, that its purpose is to provide a description of the essential nature of armed conflict. And third, Clausewitz favored offensive action. All three statements are either misleading or false. Azar Gat has persuasively challenged the supposition that *On War* was far from complete at the time of Clausewitz's death in 1831.¹ Clausewitz did not believe that any set of general statements about war could encompass this subject's difficult, complex, and contingent nature, and for this reason he rejected the phenomenological approach as incapable of representing the nature of war accurately. And Clausewitz insisted in no uncertain terms that the defense is a stronger form of war than the offense. Three alternative arguments thus serve as points of departure for analysis. First, the text of *On War* is sufficiently complete (and the standard English translation of that German text sufficiently accurate) to reveal Clausewitz's considered major concepts. Second, Clausewitzian theory is about learning how to do something—namely, how to exercise

Washington after the Battle of Princeton by Charles Willson Peale, 1780. Washington recognized the advantages of the defense over the offense during the Revolutionary War and chose his open-field engagements carefully to avoid the risk of a catastrophic defeat.

supreme command in war—rather than a representation of war as such. And third, the concept that the defense is superior to the offense must be, given the enormous amount of space Clausewitz devoted to the subject, a matter of critical theoretical significance.

Clausewitz's major arguments in *On War* were prompted by his extensive military and political experience during the Napoleonic Wars, his scholarly study of and reflection on the history of this event, and his desire to use his findings to address problems arising out of Prussia's difficult strategic circumstances in the postwar era. In 1806 the strategic and operational blunders made by inexperienced Prussian military leaders had resulted in catastrophic defeat at the hands of Napoleonic France, the effects of which were exacerbated by weak political direction. On the other hand, the more successful resistance of Spain and Russia to French occupation, which set the stage for the destruction of Napoleon's empire, demonstrated that protracting hostilities could enable a defender to foil the intentions of a much more powerful attacker. After the Napoleonic Wars, Clausewitz believed that Prussia faced the prospect of a revival of French expansionism, which again might have to be met by an inexperienced military leadership. To deal with these dangers, he developed two lines of thought. First, he formulated a radically innovative method of officer education, which he believed could significantly improve the ability of inexperienced senior officers to exercise supreme command. And second, Clausewitz argued that, because the defense was a stronger form of war than the attack, a defender could preserve its existence even when militarily much inferior to the attacker; he maintained, furthermore, that this could be the case even after the complete defeat of the defender's army through resort to the



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protraction of hostilities by means of guerrilla war.

Clausewitz developed his approach to officer education in reaction to existing methods, which called for the study of historical narratives based on verifiable facts and for obedience either to rules or to guidance from less binding but still prescriptive principles. His rejection of these approaches was based on his conviction that effective command performance in war—and especially at the level of strategic decision—is the product of genius. *Genius*, defined as the command capability of the commander in chief, consists of a combination of rational intelligence and subrational intellectual and emotional faculties that make up intuition. *Intuition*, in particular, becomes the agent of decision in the face of difficult circumstances such as inadequate information, great complex-

ity, high levels of contingency, and severe negative consequences in the event of failure. Clausewitz had observed that during the Napoleonic Wars, intuition had been improved by experience. He thus reached two conclusions. First, the primary objective of officer education should be the enhancement of intelligent intuition. And second, the only effective means of doing so during peace is to have officers replicate the experience of decision making by a commander in chief through historical reenactment of command decisions and reflect on that replicated experience. Replication, moreover, had to be based on actual events in the past because Clausewitz was convinced that resort to hypothetical case studies increased the possibility of setting up unrealistic governing conditions. Clausewitz recognized, however, that the historical record does not include many of the factors that affected the performance of commanders in chief of the past. That is to say, the domain of verifiable historical fact is critically incomplete, and thus an insufficient basis for productive historical reenactment. In order to remedy this deficiency, Clausewitz specified that verifiable historical fact had to be augmented by surmise about factors that are supposed to have been important. The basis of this surmise is a body of theory about those forces that affect decision making in war.

This body of theory has six salient characteristics. First, theory directs attention to the factors that promote self-doubt in the commander, including danger, complexity, contingency, and the unreliability of information about what is going on, and to the emotional resources needed to counter them. Second, it supports conjecture about the factors that inform the commander's judgment, which encompasses his knowledge of policy and politics, assessments of people and issues, and comprehension of the quality of the forces commanded. Third, theory provides the basis for the consideration of the multitude of operational facts and the motives for action of many individuals that were never known or, if known, were either never recorded or were intentionally obscured. Fourth, it permits one to take proper account of the nature

of the relationship between cause and effect in war (including such factors as the relative strength of the defense and the attack, about which there will be more later), especially with respect to the play of unintended consequences and complexity. Fifth, theory mandates consideration of alternative courses of action as an essential part of the process of replicating command dilemmas. And sixth, it recommends use of knowledge of outcomes (that is, the success or failure of the operation) to influence surmise about the roles of the unknowable variables just described and their complex interactions when evaluating the character of decision making.

Clausewitz called the combination of historical reenactment and reflection on reenactment “critical analysis.” These processes can be represented instructively as shown in the following equations and diagram in the *Figure*.

Verifiable Historical Fact (VHF) + Theory-Based Historical Surmise (THS) = Synthetic Experience (SE)

Synthetic Experience (SE) + Reflection on Synthetic Experience (RSE) = Improved Intuition, or what can be called Improved Capacity for Judgment (ICJ)

Clausewitz’s second major theoretical construction, which was intended to stiffen Prussian strategic resolve in the face of the threat posed by a militarily superior France, is his contention that the defense is the stronger form of war. For Clausewitz, successful resistance to invasion is possible even when the attacker is much stronger than the

defender. He supported this general contention with two main subordinate propositions—that the conduct of war is shaped by political, or policy, considerations at all times, and that politics, or policy, affects the attacker more than the defender. Although Clausewitz formulated these ideas with the strategic relationship of France as the attacker and Prussia as the defender in mind, he believed them to be valid for any situation. His positions do not prescribe action; rather they describe certain governing dynamics—what we shall henceforward call “the nature of things”—that are supposed to be taken into account when reenacting command decisions. Indeed, Clausewitz regarded the greater strength of the defense over the offense as the main reason for the suspension of action in war. The defensive advantage was, for this reason, a major source of strategic dilemma.

Clausewitz maintained that his several arguments work in combination as follows. In war, the political, or policy, motive of the attacker—to compel the defender to act against its interests—is opposed to the political, or policy, motive of the defender—to discourage the attacker. In addition, the policy motives of both sides are conditioned by internal political considerations involving the extent of agreement or disagreement within governing circles or between governors and governed. As a general rule, the energy required to sustain an offensive is greater than that required to maintain a defense. This is especially true when topography favors defensive fighting or when expansive territory allows the defender to retreat to buy

time. All else being equal, an attacker will likely reach critical thresholds of internal political difficulty over the escalating costs and risks of war before a defender does. And the disproportionality of the costs of the attack compared to those of the defense is so substantial that this holds true even when the attacker is considerably stronger than the defender. In either case, the ultimate effect of political crisis is to reduce the attacker’s aspirations and thereby bring hostilities to a close.

In a war in which the objective of the attacker is the destruction of the defender’s sovereignty, the difficulties for the attacker are increased by the inherently greater strength of the defender’s political, or policy, motive. This is because the moral stakes for the defender are about existence, which is essential, whereas the attacker is concerned simply with gain, which is discretionary. Moreover, the resources available to the defense for military action can overmatch those of the attacker if the defender government’s will to resist enjoys broad internal political support. Under these circumstances, the regular forces of the defender can be augmented by the armed action of an aroused citizenry—that is, by guerrilla war—while the attacker cannot count on counterbalancing involvement from its own civilian population. A defender that has demonstrated a determination to resist even a greatly superior attacker can also expect the assistance of other powers, which are likely to recognize that their own independence is threatened by the offensive success of a state with aggrandizing or even hegemonic





Afghan insurgents harassed better-equipped Soviet forces in Afghanistan from shortly after the Soviets' arrival in 1979 until their final departure in 1989, demonstrating how protracting hostilities could overcome conventional military superiority. Here, Afghan fighters celebrate atop a downed Soviet helicopter in Kunar Province, 18 January 1980.

intentions. In short, effective defense against attack is not just about military action, but the interplay between military performance and a variety of internal and external political dynamics. This is probably what Clausewitz had foremost in mind when he stated that “war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.”²

Clausewitz's views on defense challenge the universal applicability of Jomini's cardinal principle of war: concentration of force. Clausewitz recognized that concentration of force is desirable, if not essential, to winning battles, but he did not believe that victory in battles determines the outcome of all wars. In cases of conflicts in which the sovereignty of the defender is at stake, Clausewitz maintained that even when the concentration of greatly superior forces results in the destruction of the defender's army, this success will not suffice to end hostilities if the defender possesses the will to continue fighting by all available means, including guerrilla war. Concentration of force on the part of the defender is required to achieve decisive victory through counterattack, a course Clausewitz favored whenever circumstances permit. He insisted, however, that a defender that is too weak to launch an offensive can still obtain favorable terms by discouraging

the attacker through the protraction of hostilities. Thus, given the defender's will to resist at all costs, decisive battle is unobtainable for an attacker, and strategic victory highly unlikely or even impossible. This is not to say that the offense will inevitably fail, but rather that the balance of military force is not the critical strategic variable. Instead, what matters is the relative strengths of attacker and defender determination.

Clausewitz did not believe that any theoretical formulation, including his own theoretical statements on the relative strengths of the defense and attack, can prescribe the actual conduct of war. But this does not rule out the use of theoretical propositions to set the terms of thinking about a strategic problem. Theory accomplishes this by identifying the nature of things in war. By so doing, it pushes deliberation in directions in which it might otherwise not have gone, raising questions rather than providing answers. The purpose of such a process is to prevent bad intellectual habits, such as maintaining belief in the decisive strategic significance of concentration of force, from determining strategic courses of action. In the specific case of attack and defense, the value for a potential attacker of contemplating the superiority of the defense over the offense is not to learn to reject offensive action, but to be able to consider the strategic

implications of fighting a defender that possesses the will to protract the war. Conversely, from the defender's point of view, such an exercise provides an opportunity to consider protraction of hostilities as a practicable alternative to surrender in cases of catastrophic military defeat and occupation. Or, to put it in more general terms, Clausewitz's dictum is supposed to counteract any predilection on the part of either the attacker or the defender to believe that a very great military success at the outset of hostilities is ipso facto tantamount to a political decision.

The eight books that constitute *On War* can be divided into four groups. Books I and II present the case for Clausewitz's theory of reenactment as an alternative to a conventional phenomenology and introduce his views on the relative strengths of defense and attack; Books III through V describe the kind of theoretical propositions required to augment verifiable historical facts in order to reenact past decision making; Books VI and VII explain the author's views on the defense as a superior form of war to the offense; and Book VIII brings his exposition to a close by integrating and clarifying the earlier analysis. *On War* should be read in its entirety by those who wish

The collapse of the Iraqi Army and the capture of Saddam Hussein in 2003 did not end attacks on Coalition forces, as Iraqi insurgents continued to fight. Here, two well-armed men walk past a blazing vehicle that had been transporting supplies to U.S. forces through the Baghdad suburb of Abu Ghraib, 8 April 2004.



to come to terms with the full range and depth of Clausewitz's remarkable general theory of armed conflict. For those without the time to follow counsels of perfection, intelligent abridgement may be the preferred course. A minimally adequate comprehension of Clausewitz's two main arguments described in this article can be achieved through attentive reading of Books I and II, along with chapters 1 through 8 and chapters 25 and 26 of Book VI, and chapters 1 through 6 of Book VIII. Understanding the analysis presented in *Decoding Clausewitz*, which has been summarized here, does not make *On War* an easy read. What it does do is transform the task of coming to terms with its meaning from one that is virtually impossible for most readers into one that is merely extremely difficult.

Clausewitz's concepts of reenacting command decision and the superiority of the defense over the offense challenge existing standard approaches to the study of war and conventional attitudes about strategy. U.S. Army professional education still bases instruction about strategy on a combination of conventional historical narratives and more or less prescriptive theory, which are studied largely in order to consider the rightness or wrongness of past decision making. The adoption of Clausewitz's method of instruction would involve

the augmentation, if not replacement, of such activity by the reenactment of historical cases of supreme command using both verifiable historical facts and theory-based surmise to come to an understanding of why decisions were difficult rather than whether they were good or bad. U.S. Army professional education has also, until recently, focused on the development of the capacity to defeat conventional forces quickly through offensive action. Clausewitz's contention that the defense is a stronger form of war than the offense and his associated views on the efficacy of guerrilla warfare offer a powerful theoretical counterweight to the propensity to assume that the destruction of the enemy army is the equivalent of strategic victory. Clausewitzian thought can thus be used to improve on-going discussion of the strategic dimensions of insurgencies and terrorism and to deepen reflection on the nature of the relationship between conventional and so-called unconventional warfare. And finally, it is worth noting that Clausewitz argued that a properly constituted military education has to address the nature of man as a maker of important decisions under difficult conditions. He was convinced that this could only be accomplished by a program of learning informed by a mix of historical narrative, philosophical rigor, political understanding,

and psychological insight. Or to put it another way, for Clausewitz the foundations of a sound military education are to be found in the liberal arts.



NOTES

1. Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 257–65.
2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 605.

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