

CLAUSEWITZ IN AMERICA TODAY¹

Christopher Bassford

“You say ‘to paraphrase Clausewitz.’ What is that? What is ‘Clausewitz?’”

“I apologize for the analogy, which is obscure. The book, I have to say, is impenetrable, and I think the only part of it that is—that anybody mostly has ever read is the one line that “war is the continuation of policy by other means.”²

Essay Structure:

- A Short History of Clausewitz in America
- American Clausewitz Studies c.2010
- Why Americans Struggle with Clausewitz

Since the 1890s, there has been considerable interest in Clausewitz in the United States on the part of various individuals, some of whom—e.g., Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, Albert Wedemeyer, Colin Powell—had some influence on official American policy and strategy. Unfortunately, it is normally quite impossible to credibly determine or demonstrate in any very clear way precisely how any individual’s reading of such a book translated into practical action. Especially in the decade or two after the Vietnam War, there was a great deal of official interest in *On War*, and discussions of Clausewitz figured very prominently in U.S. professional military education. Clausewitz’s name and some of his thoughts, in one form or another, came to appear in some key doctrinal or policy statements. While a very lively investigation of Clausewitz by a number of thoughtful American academics has continued since that era, however, it would be hard to say that Clausewitz’s writing has any notable direct impact today on American soldiers or policy makers. Among contemporary American military affairs writers there is a distinctly negative attitude towards his name. Accounting for the ups and downs in Clausewitz’s reputation and impact in America is inevitably a speculative venture. I will not shrink, however, from voicing my own personal views as to why even Americans who actually read Clausewitz’s writings (or, in many cases, who are *assigned* to read them) seem to get very little out of the exercise.

¹ Published as Christopher Bassford, “Clausewitz in America Today,” in Clausewitz Gesellschaft, Reiner Pommerin, ed., *Clausewitz Goes Global: Carl von Clausewitz in the 21st Century* [Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Clausewitz Society] (Berlin: Carola Hartmann Miles Verlag, 2011), pp.342-356. This is a slightly edited version, modified to Americanize its European editing and punctuation.

² House Appropriations Committee, Thursday, March 13, 1997. Exchange between Committee Chairman Congressman Herbert Leon ‘Sonny’ Callahan and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Walter B. Slocombe.

A Short History of Clausewitz in America

While there have been many attempts to project Clausewitz's impact on American thinking back into the 19th century—especially to ascribe a Clausewitzian inspiration to President Abraham Lincoln's and/or General Ulysses S. Grant's conduct of the American Civil War—these efforts are based on pure speculation. There is in fact no firm evidence of any American reading of *On War* before the 1890s. While the American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan expressed—late in his career—a very high opinion of Clausewitz, we have no good evidence for the reasoning behind that opinion or for any actual influence on Mahan's thinking. There is a distinctly American tradition of individual military scholars or practitioners commenting significantly on Clausewitz, starting with General John McAuley Palmer (1870-1955). Palmer was from a political family and was a believer in mass, popular armies. Following World War I, he inspired the passage of Congressional legislation—which proved futile in the face of resistance from the Army—to create a large Swiss-style mass reserve army system in the United States. Palmer found inspiration for his views in Clausewitz's equation of war and politics. He argued, essentially, that American organization for war should be a continuation of America's organization for politics. But Palmer's stunned reaction c.1892 to the notion that war is a political phenomenon is revealing of the broader American mindset:

In browsing through [*On War*] I found the striking statement that "war is not a separate thing in itself but is merely a special violent phase of human politics." This truth was so startlingly simple that I could not grasp it at first. But it gradually dawned upon me that here was a fundamental military concept which I had never heard about in my four years at West Point.³

A similar enthusiasm for Clausewitz ran through Harvard historian Robert M. Johnson (1867–1920, who was chief of the U.S. Army's Historical Section during World War I), the aristocratic Hoffman Nickerson (1888-1965, Palmer's opposite in terms of military policy—a believer in elite professional armies), political scientist Bernard Brodie, and commanders like Patton and General, later President, Eisenhower.⁴

Despite the intense interest of individual soldiers like Eisenhower and Patton, American military institutions overtly rejected the fundamental assumptions of *On War*. While the philosopher had insisted that war was "the expression of politics by other means," the traditional attitude of American soldiers was that "politics and strategy are radically and fundamentally things apart. Strategy begins where politics end. All that soldiers ask is that once the policy is settled, strategy and command shall be regarded as being in a sphere apart from politics."⁵ In the

³ I.B. Holley, Jr., *General John M. Palmer, Citizen Soldiers, and the Army of a Democracy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 66.

⁴ Asked in 1966 what book (other than the Bible) had had the greatest effect on his life, Eisenhower answered, "My immediate reaction is that I have had two definitely different lives, one military, the other political. From the military side, if I had to select one book, I think it would be ON WAR by Clausewitz." Letter, Dwight D. Eisenhower to Olive Ann Tambourelle, 2 March 1966. Eisenhower Post-presidential Papers, Special Name, Box 8. There is considerable evidence to back up Eisenhower's claim, but none of it points to Clausewitz's influence on any particular military or political decision he made.

⁵ Command and General Staff School, *Principles of Strategy for an Independent Corps or Army in a Theater of Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff School Press, 1936), 19.

wake of Vietnam, however, *On War* was adopted as a key text at the Naval War College in 1976, the Air War College in 1978, and the Army War College in 1981. Clausewitzian arguments are prominent in the two most authoritative American statements of the lessons of Vietnam: the 1984 Weinberger Doctrine and Army Colonel Harry Summers' seminal *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (first published in 1981).⁶ Colin Powell, a junior officer during the war in Vietnam and a beneficiary of the boom in Clausewitz studies during the 1970s and 1980s, made many favorable and seemingly well-informed references to Clausewitz. The U.S. Marine Corps' brilliant little philosophical field manual *FMFM 1: Warfighting* (1989) was essentially a distillation of *On War*, with strong dashes of Sun Tzu and an un-Clausewitz-like emphasis on maneuver. The later MCDP series of USMC publications was eclectic but thoroughly permeated with Clausewitzian concepts.⁷ It would be very difficult to understand the evolution and meaning of US service and joint doctrine since the 1970s without reference to Clausewitz's influence, however poorly his actual ideas may be reflected therein.

The sudden acceptability of Clausewitz in the wake of Vietnam is not difficult to account for, for among the major military theorists only Clausewitz seriously struggled with the sort of dilemma that American military leaders faced in the aftermath of their defeat. Clearly, in what had come to be called in scathing terms a "political war," the political and military components of the American war effort had come unstuck. It ran against the grain of America's military men to criticize elected civilian leaders, but it was just as difficult to take the blame upon themselves. Clausewitz's analysis could not have been more relevant. Many of America's soldiers found unacceptable any suggestion that they had failed on the battlefield, but they were willing to admit that policy had been badly made and that they had misunderstood their role in making it.

Unfortunately, while recognition of the debacle in Vietnam in many ways created an opening for fresh political-military thinking, and certainly led to a genuine American enthusiasm—some called it "a craze"—for Clausewitz, it also greatly distorted the way his ideas were received. Encouraged by some infelicities in the then-new Howard/Paret translation, Summers' treatment turned on a rigid interpretation of Clausewitz's trinity as a concrete set of social structures—people, army, and government. That interpretation had a powerful appeal at the time. In America's traumatic war in Vietnam, those social elements had come thoroughly unstuck from one another. Summers' interpretation of this trinity was a positive doctrine, highly prescriptive: A nation could not hope to achieve success in war unless these three elements were kept firmly in harness together.

The post-Vietnam fashion for Clausewitz was widely associated with the American military reform movement, which came to seem blasé in the wake of the *Desert Storm* victory of 1991. That is consistent with the historical pattern of military-institutional interest in Clausewitz. Established institutions tend to find the complexities of *On War* tempting only when spurred by the shock of severe military embarrassment—e.g., Prussia itself after 1806, then again after 1848; France after 1871; Great Britain after the inglorious Boer War. Military institutions basking in the glow

⁶ Prior to the American debacle in Vietnam, few thinkers writing in English had paid much serious attention to Clausewitz's trinity as a distinct concept. The term first achieved prominence in skewed form in Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), written in 1981 while Summers was a student at the U.S. Army War College).

⁷ I think I can safely say that, since I wrote a number of them.

of success are not inclined to wrestle with such challenging material. As early as 1995, then-Major (U.S. Army Intelligence) Ralph Peters noted that the US Army War College's bust of Carl von Clausewitz "has been moved from a prominent, shrine-like alcove to an off-center auditorium entrance, where it has a status somewhere between that of a Hummel figurine and a hat-rack."⁸

As a result of all these factors, the tremendous amount of attention paid to Clausewitz in professional military education and in military doctrine came to have a very limited payoff. To a great degree, Clausewitz's impact became limited to a small number of discrete concepts that have individually found their way, in severely dumbed-down form, into service or joint military doctrine: the "center of gravity" (the hunt for which became a quasi-theological quest in military classrooms and elsewhere during the 1980s),⁹ the "culminating point of the offensive," and Harry Summers's version of the "remarkable trinity." The connections between these concepts, their larger context, and even the meaning of Clausewitz's links between policy, politics, and war, were most frequently lost. Moreover, the difficulty of reading *On War* is so great, and so notorious, that students and faculty alike tend to await the mandatory classes on Clausewitz with mind-numbing dread. The content of those classes tends increasingly to be abbreviated and shallow. The task of presenting them is delegated to hapless junior faculty who, unable to pick up much of Clausewitz's actual argument on short notice, find the assignment unrewarding.

The wars in which the American military found itself engaged after 11 September 2001 did not seem to offer much application for the operational-level Clausewitzian concepts that had been shoe-horned onto U.S. military doctrine in the 1980s. There has been little effort to adapt other aspects of *On War* that are highly relevant to the current wars, most notably the arguments concerning the people in arms and the inherent strengths of the defense. These are almost completely ignored by contemporary American military thinkers. The famous counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24, makes no meaningful reference to Clausewitz other than to say that

Clausewitz thought that wars by an armed populace could only serve as a strategic defense; however, theorists after World War II realized that insurgency could be a decisive form of warfare. This era spawned the Maoist, Che Guevara-type focoist, and urban approaches to insurgency.¹⁰

Part of the problem is that Americans have a hard time conceding that the enemies they are fighting thousands of miles from American shores might in any sense be the "defenders." In any case, the writings of Martin van Creveld and John Keegan have created the illusion that

⁸ Ralph Peters, [review](#) of Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, in *Parameters*, Winter 1994-95.

⁹ Each of the American armed services (and, separately, the Joint Staff) evolved narrow, distinct, specialized, and usually quite incompatible doctrinal definitions of "center of gravity"—a phrase that, except for a small number of very specific but quite varied discussions, was essentially a verbal tic on Clausewitz's part. See Dr. Joe Strange, *Centers of Gravity & Critical Vulnerabilities: Building on the Clausewitzian Foundation So That We Can All Speak the Same Language* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, series "Perspectives on Warfighting" number four, 1996) for a hilarious but highly accurate discussion of this doctrinal train-wreck.

¹⁰ *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, December 2006, p.1-4. This seems to assume that insurgencies are a form of aggression, which is highly debatable. Are insurgencies against intervening U.S. forces or against a government imposed by outside powers, or against a repressive home-grown regime, acts of defense or of offense?

Clausewitz was blind to anything beyond conventional warfare and the uniformed, goose-stepping armies of mirror-image European states, and thus couldn't possibly have anything useful to say about insurgencies. A curious fact about smart insurgents, however, is that they tend to consider themselves to be the legitimate states of the societies they intend to rule. Thus the revolutionary Mao Zedong had no difficulty understanding the relevance of Clausewitz's ideas on popular warfare to his own situation.¹¹

Until recently, most serious American academic work on Clausewitz has been stimulated by German emigrés who made English translations or wrote specifically about Clausewitz, most notably Hans Rothfels, Hans Gatzke, Herbert Rosinski, O. J. Matthijs Jolles (a Schiller scholar), and Peter Paret. Others, like Alfred Vagts and Henry Kissinger, offered sophisticated insights on Clausewitz in the course of writing on other subjects.¹²

In any case, it has been the German emigrés who have contributed by far the larger part of what is available in English of Clausewitz's *Werke*. There have been three reasonably competent and complete translations of *Vom Kriege* into English. The first and only credible non-emigré translation, that published in 1873 by British Colonel [J.J. Graham](#), is honest but in ponderous, Victorian prose and badly distorted by the insertions of later editors. The most accurate translation is Jolles's, done in 1943 at the University of Chicago, but the copyright is held by Random House, which has largely failed to exploit it. The standard version today is that published through Princeton University Press by Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret in 1976, though it is coming under increasing criticism for missing many important subtleties and for having perhaps excessively "clarified" Clausewitz's thinking. Gatzke translated *Die wichtigsten Grundsätze des Kriegsführens zur Ergänzung meines Unterrichts bei Sr. Koniglichen Hoheit dem Kronprinzen* in 1942 as [Principles of War](#); before falling into obscurity it was widely misunderstood to be a summary of *Vom Kriege*. Other bits and pieces of Clausewitz's *Werke* have been translated into English, especially by Paret and his American student Daniel Moran, but these have had little impact on Clausewitz's reputation and none on American professional military education. Of Clausewitz's historical campaign studies, only two have been published in English in complete form. [The Campaign of 1812 in Russia](#) was translated anonymously by a member of the Duke of Wellington's circle in 1843 and has frequently been reprinted.¹³ In collaboration with two American colleagues, I myself recently published a translation of [The Campaign of 1815](#) in a book,¹⁴ intended for a popular audience, that included a great deal of material from Wellington and his circle and their views on Clausewitz. Books about Clausewitz—e.g., Paret's outstanding *Clausewitz and the State* (by far the best biography of Clausewitz available in English in 2010) and my own [Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America](#)

¹¹ See Christopher Daase, "Clausewitz and Small Wars," in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* [Proceedings of a March, 2005 conference at Oxford] (Oxford University Press, 2007). But Daase is a German working in Britain—very little is being done on this subject in America.

¹² Although a substantial part of Hans Delbrück's *corpus* has been translated into English, it seems to have had little direct influence on American military-historical writing.

¹³ A far better though only partial translation appeared in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, eds./trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Carl von Clausewitz and Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, *On Waterloo: Clausewitz, Wellington, and the Campaign of 1815*, ed./trans. Christopher Bassford, Daniel Moran, and Gregory W. Pedlow (CreateSpace.com, 2010). Another translation, by Peter Hofschroer, appeared almost simultaneously, with the odd title of *On Wellington: A Critique of Waterloo* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).

—have little impact on military educators, who focus solely on *On War*.¹⁵

There was, unfortunately, little love lost between these German emigré academics and their American counterparts. It is probably true that the German Clausewitz scholars were frustrated by their American students' cultural resistance to basic aspects of Clausewitz's world view (on which, more later), though there were also less creditable sources of friction. For instance, the World War II-era German expatriates reportedly regarded Brodie as “*dieser Auswurf des Chicagoer gettos*.”¹⁶ Rosinski, who lectured at both the Army and Navy War Colleges, lost his jobs there and descended into messianic paranoia. Rothfels and Gatzke made only very limited forays into publishing in English about Clausewitz. Jolles had very little interest in military affairs and made his excellent translation of *On War* largely to avoid active military service by supporting the University of Chicago's wartime military studies program. Paret's fundamental interests are in the history of aesthetics, not military history or theory. Consequently, his work on Clausewitz, beyond the translation of *On War*, is too aridly intellectual to appeal to the American military-affairs audience.

Clausewitz Studies in America c.2010

Currently, the two most active and influential American writers on Clausewitz are Antulio (Tony) Echevarria and Jon Tetsuro Sumida. They rarely see eye-to-eye, however. Echevarria, a former armored cavalry officer who, like Gen. David Petraeus, has a Princeton Ph.D., is sophisticated and well informed. As Director of Research at the U.S. Army's Strategic Studies Institute, he tends to write for a military or military-academic audience. He and I tend to be in substantial agreement on many practical matters so I will focus my comments on Sumida.¹⁷

Originally a naval historian, Sumida is a civilian professor of history at the University of Maryland who tends to write for other civilian military historians. His 2008 book *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* focuses on two vital aspects of *On War* that have heretofore largely been ignored in the English-speaking world. These are Clausewitz's argument that defense is inherently the stronger form of war and his ideas concerning the use of history as a tool for military education.¹⁸ These are very important arguments that relate both to policy and to education, and they deserve a great deal of attention. I find Sumida's explication to be provocative and engaging. His contention that these two aspects alone constitute the purpose and core of *On War*, however, is not convincing, and his tone has been taken by some as more than a bit self-aggrandizing. As Jennie Kiesling puts it (in a review that is ultimately quite positive),

¹⁵ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; reprinted 2007); Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). A complete list of Clausewitz's work available in English translation can be found at <http://www.clausewitz.com/bibl/CwzBiblEnglish.htm#Cwz>.

¹⁶ “This garbage from the Chicago ghetto.” Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, p.174.

¹⁷ See Echevarria, [Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing Our Warfighting Doctrine—Again!](#) (Strategic Studies Institute, September 2002); *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008). Reviews have been numerous and mixed. See especially West Point professor Eugenia Kiesling's lively [review](#) in *Army History*, Summer 2010, pp.46-48.

Almost everything in *On War* is very simple, but the simplest things are so difficult that no previous reader has comprehended Carl von Clausewitz. Or so Jon Sumida would have one believe. The fundamental thesis of *Decoding Clausewitz* is that, a great deal of “intelligent, rigorous, and productive” study notwithstanding, previous interpreters of Carl von Clausewitz’s masterwork have missed the point. Or rather, three points: that Clausewitz had virtually completed *On War* by the time of his death, that the superiority of defense to offense is the work’s dominant idea, and that Clausewitz sought to present not a comprehensive theory of war but a scientific method by which each individual can prepare himself to practice war knowledgeably. *On War* is a practical handbook for the peacetime education of wartime commanders, and the essence of that education is “the mental reenactment of historical case studies of command decision.”

It would be unfortunate if these stylistic issues were to inhibit a very desirable debate, which might have the potential for revolutionizing the American understanding of Clausewitz. While I myself disagree with Jon on a number of issues, I regard this as a brilliant and important work.

Despite the importance of Echevarria's and Sumida's work, however, what I personally regard as the most important piece published on Clausewitz since c.1980 is Alan Beyerchen's brilliant 1992 article, "[Chance and Complexity in the Real World: Clausewitz on the Nonlinear Nature of War](#)."¹⁹ Beyerchen teaches 19th- and 20th-century German history at Ohio State University. His primary focus is on the history of science. In this article, Beyerchen addressed what may be the fundamental source of resistance to Clausewitz in the English-speaking world— the unspoken source of the divide that separates those who think they "get" Clausewitz from those who find him opaque. To people with a world view engendered by linear math, an engineering mentality, a 19th-century "Newtonian" understanding of science (from which Newton himself did not suffer), or the artificialities of social science, Clausewitz’s seeming obsession with chance, unpredictability, and disproportionalities in the cause/effect relationship is baffling charlatany; it smacks of mysticism. Beyerchen, a historian with a rare understanding of mathematics, explains the implications of nonlinear math and the "new sciences" of Chaos and Complexity for our understanding of real-world phenomena like fluid dynamics, market booms and busts, "complex adaptive systems," and war. Chaos and Complexity are not the products of "new age" or mystical thinking. They derive from very, very "hard" science and mathematics. While these two particular terms now seem rather faddish, in fact the concepts they represent are fully emblematic of the direction that all modern science and mathematics took in the second half of the 20th century as computers began making it possible to study natural systems that the old tools simply couldn't handle. It is quite impossible to grasp the meaning of Clausewitz's trinity (which, in turn, is crucial to any attempt to tie together all of the many threads of *On War*) without grasping the scientific implications of his imagery of "theory floating among these three tendencies, as among three points of attraction." He was describing a classic example of "deterministic Chaos."

I have focused thus far on writers and actors with a positive view of Clausewitz. There has, of course, been a great deal of hostility to Clausewitz in the United States, much of it deriving from the work of earlier British writers. Anglo-American resentment towards Clausewitz largely originated in anti-German feelings deriving from World War I and was not ameliorated by the Nazi

¹⁹ Alan D. Beyerchen, "[Chance and Complexity in the Real World: Clausewitz on the Nonlinear Nature of War](#)," *International Security*, Winter 1992/1993, pp.59-90.

era. It was given coherent though highly disingenuous²⁰ form by British military historian B.H. Liddell Hart, whose private opinion of Clausewitz was far more positive than the views he normally chose to express in print. In the wake of the Korean War, Liddell Hart's consciously false portrayal of Clausewitz as the "Mahdi of Mass" and the "Apostle of Total War" was remedied for many American academics, especially political scientists, by Robert E. Osgood's widely-read 1957 book, *Limited War*, which provided the first truly important, historically grounded, and theoretical discussion of the concept that enlisted Clausewitz's authority.²¹ By 1979, Osgood was calling Clausewitz "the preeminent military and political strategist of limited war in modern times," a new image for the military philosopher radically different—if almost equally disputable—from the image that had previously held sway. But Liddell Hart's treatment was resurrected and amplified in 1968 by the editor of a popular abridgement of *On War*, American biologist and musician Anatol Rapoport, whose antagonisms were directed primarily towards Henry Kissinger and the Westphalian international system; Clausewitz (for whom Rapoport showed respect) was a secondary target at best. Rapoport nonetheless regarded Clausewitz's expressed belief in the superior power of the defense as essentially a sham, enabling him to save space by deleting all of Book VI ("Defense") as irrelevant.²²

This tradition has been given new life in the United States by Israeli historian Martin van Creveld and Britons John Keegan and Mary Kaldor, who have planted a powerful but almost entirely false image of Clausewitz in Western military literature. In particular, van Creveld and Keegan have sought to entomb Clausewitz's theories in a vanished—and largely ahistorical—world in which war was exclusively the province of all-powerful Weberian-style states engaged in purely conventional military struggles with one another. In Creveld's hostile and influential assault, Clausewitz's description of a dynamically interacting trinity of passion, chance, and reason in war becomes a rigid, formulaic prescription for a lumbering, incompetent, dinosaur-like caricature of the early-20th-century Western state.²³ As Paret's American student Daniel Moran puts it,

The most egregious misrepresentation of Clausewitz ... must be that of Martin van Creveld, who has declared Clausewitz to be an apostle of "Trinitarian War," by which he means, incomprehensibly, a war of "state against state and army against army," from which the influence of the people is entirely excluded.²⁴

²⁰ See John Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

²¹ Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957; *Limited War Revisited*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1979.

²² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and with an introduction by Anatol Rapoport (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968).

²³ Ironically, Creveld's anti-Clausewitzian interpretation of the trinity derives not from *On War* itself but from the very much pro-Clausewitz work of U.S. Army Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr.

²⁴ Daniel Moran, "[Clausewitz on Waterloo: Napoleon at Bay](#)," Clausewitz and Wellesley, *On Waterloo: Clausewitz, Wellington, and the Campaign of 1815*, p.242, referring to Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict Since Clausewitz* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 49.

These delusory treatments of Clausewitz have culminated in a recent string of anti-Clausewitzian articles and books.²⁵ The nature of these attacks is perhaps best characterized by Stephen Melton's *The Clausewitz Delusion: How the American Army Screwed Up the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*.²⁶ There is little point to analyzing Melton's views here, however, for his criticisms of "Clausewitz" and the "neo-Clausewitzians" make no reference to the historical Clausewitz or his actual writings. This "Clausewitz" is simply the personification of an obtuse style of purely conventional, technology-and-firepower-dependent, state-on-state warfare.

Why Americans Struggle with Clausewitz

In my experience, American military and governmental students get very little out of reading Clausewitz. I have nothing to do with designing the relevant course or teaching it here at the National War College (the vast majority of my energies over the last several years have been devoted to information technology crises and other administrivia). But I do conduct the preparatory workshops for instructors assigned to teach our core course on military history and theory (with two seminar sessions devoted exclusively to Clausewitz). Nonetheless, a good 80% of the students I interrogate in the subsequent oral examinations can speak of Clausewitz's theories only in terms of keeping the "Remarkable Trinity's" components of People, Army, and Government tightly bound together in lock-step pursuit of a policy of Total War. While students sometimes associate the notion of "limited war" with Clausewitz, the actual meaning of "limited objectives" seems poorly understood, e.g., "[Well, as you know, our objectives during the 2003 invasion of Iraq were quite limited.](#)" They seem to believe that the "limited" in "limited war" refers to means—consequently, even wars aimed at the most radical forms of "regime change" still qualify as limited so long as nuclear weapons are not employed.

Unfortunately, it would be completely unrealistic to suggest that our instructors and students should be able to handle Clausewitz with ease. While the trepidation and often outright terror that instructors sometimes telegraph to students is immensely counterproductive, the fact remains that *On War* is an extraordinarily difficult book. Fundamentally, this is true because the subject itself is inherently difficult. But brilliant, fascinating, and important as it is, *On War* is also very long and densely written in a style completely unfamiliar to American readers. Its dialectical approach, so essential to achieving its profundity, is intensely confusing to Anglo-American readers, who expect a book to contain a "thesis statement" supported by 2-300 pages of proof

²⁵ See the critique of this anti-Clausewitz literature in Bart Schuurman, "[Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars](#)," *Parameters*, Spring 2010, pp.89-100. For examples see Bruce Fleming [Professor of English at the U.S. Naval Academy], "[Can Reading Clausewitz Save Us from Future Mistakes?](#)" *Parameters*, Spring 2004, pp. 62-76; Tony Corn [U.S. Department of State], "[Clausewitz in Wonderland](#)," *Policy Review* (Web Exclusive), September 2006; Phillip S. Meilinger [Ph.D., Colonel, USAF, ret.], "[Busting the Icon: Restoring Balance to the Influence of Clausewitz](#)," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Fall, 2007), pp.116-145, and "[Clausewitz's Bad Advice](#)," *Armed Forces Journal*, August 2008. The primary target appears to be the arrogance of self-proclaimed Clausewitzians, since these critiques touch only tangentially (at best) on Clausewitz himself and his actual arguments. See also the responses by the pro-Clausewitz camp: Nik Gardner [Air War College], "[Resurrecting the 'Icon': The Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz's On War](#)," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Spring 2009, pp.119-133; responses to Fleming by [myself](#) and by [Tony Echevarria](#), and [Michael David Rohr](#) in *Parameters*, Summer 2004.

²⁶ Stephen L. Melton [US Army, ret.], *The Clausewitz Delusion: How the American Army Screwed Up the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (A Way Forward)* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009).

unsullied by contradictory evidence. It contains innumerable digressions of limited interest to most potential modern audiences. The existing book is based on an unfinished set of draft papers and incorporates ideas from different and sometimes contradictory stages of Clausewitz's intellectual evolution. While I personally believe that *On War* is internally more consistent and closer to completion than many commentators do, the book's frozen evolutionary features remain very problematic. Various translation problems muddy many of its broad concepts. Few Americans can place Clausewitz into any meaningful historical context, and *On War*'s profusion of historical examples, instructive to specialists on 18th and 19th-century Europe, is generally useless for readers to whom the phrase "That's history" is just another way to say "That's utterly irrelevant." These older, exclusively European examples leave many readers with a false impression that the ideas they illustrate are themselves obsolete, culturally circumscribed, exclusively oriented on the state, and thus irrelevant to the modern world. Its lack of reference to sea- and aerospace forces requires modern readers to use rather more imagination than is commonly required—or available—when seeking to grasp its modern implications. The Paret translation is particularly problematic in its unilluminating determination to translate *Politik* as "policy" whenever possible. Without devoting a great deal more effort to preparing American students to read *On War* effectively, and giving ourselves much more time for intensive discussion of its context, arguments, and implications, scholars should not expect to achieve much by assigning it to the mass of students. We would do better to absorb its crucial concepts and put our energies into conveying them in a form unburdened by the liabilities of Clausewitz's own, unfinished presentation. As it stands, however, American scholars remain so divided over the book's meaning (both broadly and in detail) that we are in no position to do that.

These problems with the existing text are so great that once, only half-joking, I floated a proposal to completely re-write it using modern examples, up-to-date scientific imagery, and an editorial meat-cleaver to reduce the book to digestible length. Those concepts that have proved most incomprehensible to American readers in their current presentation would be freely rewritten to address the sources of confusion and misapprehension. I actually received a number of offers to fund this project, but these invariably came with unacceptable strings attached—e.g., "The new work will demonstrate that Clausewitz supported the concept of NetCentric Warfare...."

At the root of American problems with Clausewitz, however, lie the seemingly ineradicable pathologies of American strategic culture. British writer Colin Gray penetratingly captured these in a list including indifference to history, the engineering style and dogged pursuit of the technical fix, impatience, blindness to cultural differences, indifference to strategy, and the evasion of politics.²⁷ I would add to that an essentially economic rationality and a perverse pseudo-Clausewitzian conviction that war is "merely the continuation of unilateral policy"—or, better yet, a convenient way to keep bad policy going a little bit longer through the admixture of "other means."

But American strategic culture is what it is, for a host of historical reasons. It seems unlikely that the study of Clausewitz is going to change it. And however annoying or pathological it often seems in the cold light of academic analysis, viewed over the long term the American approach

²⁷ Colin S. Gray, "History and Strategic Culture," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, Editors, *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.592-598. I have listed six characteristics out of Gray's eight.

to war and politics has been stupendously successful. As Churchill noted, after first trying everything else, the Americans do tend to do the right thing. At its best, America's strategic success reflects more than the failures of its adversaries—it represents the triumph of character over intellect.

Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder if the application of a little more intellect, of the Clausewitzian variety, might not help.



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