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CLAUSEWITZ CONDENSED

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## CLAUSEWITZ CONDENSED

### INTRODUCTION

Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) was a Prussian soldier and scholar during and after the Napoleonic wars, an age in which Clausewitz said, "War itself...had been lecturing."1/ Despite the fact that his writings remained unfinished at the time of his death, his study On War is "the first" to grapple with "the fundamentals of its subject, and the first to evolve a pattern of thought adaptable to every stage of military history and practice."2/ The extent to which Clausewitz endures today, in an era of nuclear weaponry and "Star Wars" defense projects, attests to the success of his systematic attempt to describe war's universal dynamics. Indeed, erican strategist Bernard Brodie, like many other military authorities, believes that On War "is not simply the greatest but the only truly great book on war."3/

What explains the durability of Clausewitzian thought? The key lies in the fundamentally persistent nature of war, for it is the fundamentally timeless aspect of war that most strikes the modern reader of On War. Clausewitz views war more as an art than a science. One can no more establish a rigid manual for combat, Clausewitz thinks, than one can define strict principles for great painting. War, like art, is essentially

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1/ Quoted by H. Rothfels, "Clausewitz," in Makers of Modern Strategy, edited by Edward Earl Meade (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 96.

2/ Ibid., p. 93.

3/ Bernard Brodie, "The Continuing Relevance of On War," in Clausewitz, Carl von, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 53.

creative, not imitative. A sound theory of war, therefore, has to accommodate change and flexibility. This Clausewitz attempts to do by distilling basic elements and broad patterns of war from the record of great Napoleonic battles and commanders in ways that will be applicable, despite future changes in the political, economic, social, legal, and technological landscape.

The purpose of this paper is to extract from On War the principal thoughts of Clausewitz still relevant to contemporary strategists, present them with minimal editorial comment, then list a few caveats concerning interpretation.<sup>1/</sup>

#### 1. WAR CONTINUES POLICY BY VIOLENT MEANS

Clausewitz defines war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will." (75) One salient point emerging from On War is the political purpose of fighting. Armed combat, Clausewitz argues, is only the means to a political end, without which war becomes "pointless and devoid of sense." (605) Clausewitz repeatedly states that "war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means." (69) Therefore, war should not be removed from its political context:

...[W]e also want to make it clear that war in itself does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different. In essentials that intercourse continues, irrespective of the means it employs. The main lines along which military events progress, and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue throughout war into the subsequent peace. How could it be otherwise? Do political relations between peoples and between their govern-

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<sup>1/</sup> Quotations for this paper are followed by the page number(s) of the Howard and Paret translation of On War.

ments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is not war just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic. (605)

## 2. TRIAD OF GOVERNMENT, ARMED SERVICES, AND PEOPLE

The close interplay between politics and military affairs suggests a second conclusion reached by Clausewitz, namely that war is waged by a "remarkable trinity" of the government, armed services, and people. "A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless." (89) The government establishes the political purpose; the military provides the means for achieving the political end; and the people provide the will, the "engines war." All three are indispensable legs of Clausewitz' strategic triad.

Clausewitz takes special note of the symbiotic relationship between strategy and statecraft. Not only must military leaders prosecute the war, they must also remember the political end for which it is being waged, the difference between ends and means and between tactics and strategy:

If we do not learn to regard war, and the separate campaigns of which it is composed, as a chain of linked engagements each leading to the next, but instead succumb to the idea that the capture of certain geographical points or the seizure of undefended provinces are of value in themselves, we are liable to regard them as windfall profits. In so doing, and in ignoring the fact that they are links in a continuous chain of events, we also ignore the possibility that their possession may later lead to definite disadvantages. This mistake is illustrated again and again in military history. (182)

Hence, at the summit of power, the distinction between strategy and statesmanship can no longer be discerned. Ultimately, what the strategist has wrought must be judged on political, not military, terms. The telling

criterion of his work, however, is how effectively he has used available means to accomplish desired ends: "A prince or a general can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his resources, doing neither too much nor too little." (177)

### 3. ROLE OF POLITICAL LEADERS

#### A. Policymakers Shape Military Strategy

Clausewitz illustrates how political leaders and their policies can have a profound impact on the operational conduct of a war. He sums up the process as follows:

No one starts a war--or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so--without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective. This is the governing principle which will set its course, prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required, and make its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail. (579)

#### B. Policymakers Should Grasp Military Affairs

Given the impact of policy on strategy, political leaders must combine statesmanship with strategy, just as military leaders need to possess an understanding of national policy. Yet history is replete with examples, Clausewitz shows us, of politicians making erroneous military decisions, primarily because they lacked a solid grounding in the military means at their disposal:

Only if statesmen look to certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature do political decisions influence operations for the worse. In the same way as a man who has not fully mastered a foreign language sometimes fails to express himself correctly, so statesmen often issue orders that defeat the purpose they are meant to serve. Time and again that has happened, which

demonstrates that a certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of general policy. (608)

Among other things, Clausewitz suggests policymakers maintain diligent consultation with chief military officials.

#### 4. ROLE OF MILITARY LEADERS

##### A. Political Leaders are Paramount

Because "policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument," Clausewitz argues that no "other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political." (607)

...[T]he assertion that a major military development, or the plan for one, should be a matter for purely military opinion is unacceptable and can be damaging. Nor indeed is it sensible to summon soldiers, as many governments do when they are planning a war, and ask them for purely military advice." (607)

In fact, Clausewitz writes, "No major proposal required for war can be worked out in ignorance of political factors...." (608) Moreover, the political purpose, and hence the political leadership, must determine the intensity and length of any conflict:

Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this purpose must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow. (92)

##### B. Military Leaders Should Help Shape Policy

While the thrust of On War is directed primarily at the primacy of policy, Clausewitz nonetheless contends that military leaders should not be subject to the capriciousness of some government policies:

If we keep in mind that war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it. That, however, does not imply that the political aim is a tyrant. It must adapt itself to its chosen means, a process which can radically change it; yet the political aim remains the first consideration. (87)

Hence, while the statesman must retain authority over the general or admiral, the latter should, in Clausewitz' mind, be in a position to influence the former.

## 5. CONDUCT OF WAR

### A. Theory is a Guide

In the theory of war, Clausewitz says, there can be no "prescriptive formulation universal enough to deserve the name of law." (152) He cites three reasons why a theory of war cannot be subjected to rigid scientific principles: (1) information is subjective and not fixed in war; (2) moral and psychological forces are intertwined with physical forces; and (3) war consists not of unilateral but reciprocal action, and thus one can never be sure of what the enemy will do.

Moreover, most theorists usually are guilty of at least one of the following three flaws, according to Clausewitz: (1) An "impermissible use of certain narrow systems as formal bodies of law." This pseudo-scientific approach often attempts to "use elaborate scientific guidelines as if they were a kind of truth machine," (168) despite the fact that chance cannot be quantified. (2) Overuse of jargon, technicalities, and metaphors, where at times the analyst "no longer knows just what he is thinking and soothes himself with obscure ideas which would not satisfy him if expressed in plain speech." (169) (3) Misuse and abuse of historical examples. Here



he analyst drags in analogies from remote times and places just to show off his erudition, perhaps without recognizing the dissimilarities. The effect is to "distract and confuse one's judgment without proving anything." (169)

In sum, theory should confine itself to simple terms and straightforward observations of the conduct of war; it must avoid spurious claims and pseudo-scientific formulae and historical compendia; and it must above all never forget the human element, the moral forces, of war. "Pity the theory, writes Clausewitz, "that conflicts with reason!" (136)

#### B. Friction of War

"Everything in war is very simple," Clausewitz notes, "but the simplest thing is difficult." (119) "In war more than anywhere else things do not turn out as we expect. Nearby they do not appear as they did from a distance." (193) Moreover, "...every fault and exaggeration of [a] theory is instantly exposed in war." Clausewitz terms "friction" the "only concept that more or less corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper." (119)

Friction is caused mainly by the danger of war, by war's demanding physical efforts, and by the presence of unclear information or the fog of war. First, the intrinsically dangerous nature of war means that in an atmosphere of blood, bullets, and bombs, "the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different from that which is normal in academic speculation." (113) Only the exceptional soldier keeps his incisive judgment intact during the heat of battle.

Second, physical effort in war also produces friction: "If no one had the right to give his views on military operations except when he is frozen,

or faint from heat and thirst, or depressed from privation and fatigue, objective and accurate views would be even rarer than they are." (115) Clausewitz hence reminds strategists not to forget the immense effect of physical effort upon the soldiers engaging in combat.

Ambiguous information in war is yet a third element which Clausewitz says distinguishes real war from war in theory. Although strategists should gauge plans by probabilities, it is sometimes impossible to do so during war, when most intelligence is indeterminate:

...[A] general in time of war is constantly bombarded by reports both true and false; by errors arising from fear or negligence or hastiness; by disobedience born of right or wrong interpretations, of ill will, of a proper or mistaken sense of duty, of laziness, or of exhaustion; and by accidents that nobody could have foreseen. In short, he is exposed to countless impressions, most of them disturbing, few of them encouraging.... (193)

To offset the friction of war which results inevitably from human frailty, Clausewitz advocates pushing ahead with all one's might:

Perseverance in the chosen course is the essential counterweight, provided that no compelling reasons intervene to the contrary. Moreover, there is hardly a worthwhile enterprise in war whose execution does not call for infinite effort, trouble, and privation; and as man under pressure tends to give in to physical and intellectual weakness, only great strength of will can lead to the objective. It is steadfastness that will earn the admiration of the world and of posterity. (193)

### C. Proper Focus for Armed Force

There "is no higher and simpler law of strategy," (204) Clausewitz says, than to concentrate force on the enemy's weak link, his strategic "center of gravity":

...[O]ne must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed. (595-596)

Thus, the task is to locate the adversary's center of gravity, which might be his capital, his key ally, or his armed forces.

#### D. Economy of Force

Closely connected to the idea of concentration of force is the concept of economy of force. Clausewitz underlines the need to ensure that "no part of the whole [military] force is idle." (213) Some writers have misinterpreted his use of the word "economy" to mean economizing rather than effective use of force. Clausewitz makes it clear, however, that emphasis should be placed on the effective use of armed force, and that ultimately force should continuously adhere and contribute to the political purpose: "Any unnecessary expenditure of time, every unnecessary detour, is a waste of strength and thus abhorrent to strategic thought." (624)

#### E. Defense

Defense is a stronger form of warfare than offense, Clausewitz argues, because it is "easier to hold ground than take it. It follows that defense is easier than attack, assuming both sides have equal means." (357) In other words, "...defense has a passive purpose: preservation; and attack a positive one: conquest. The latter increases one's own capacity to wage war; the former does not. So...we must say that the the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offensive." (358) Clausewitz pictures defense not merely as passive, but as consisting of two parts: the first, waiting for the attack, and the

second, parrying it, the counterattack. "So the defensive form of war is not a simple shield, but a shield made up of well-directed blows." (357)

"Even when the only point of the war is to maintain the status quo, the fact remains that merely parrying a blow goes against the essential nature of war, which certainly does not consist merely in enduring."(370)

Defense nevertheless remains negative, for it is not the end for which war is to be fought:

If defense is the stronger form of war, yet has a negative object, it follows that it should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive object. When one has used defensive measures successfully, a more favorable balance of strength is usually created; thus, the natural course in war is to begin defensively and end by attacking. It would therefore contradict the very idea of war to regard defense as its final purpose.... (358)

Moreover, although the defense has the advantage of its object to preserve, it suffers from a serious psychological side effect, namely that a defensive retreat or loss of territory can cripple domestic and military morale. The armed services and population cannot be expected to "tell the difference between a planned retreat and a backward stumble." (471) Psychological factors impede defense as well as offense.

In addition, perhaps the criteria for the advantage of defense over offense have altered since Clausewitz' day. Although his arguments still seem valid in the context of conventional warfare, they appear less credible with regard to nuclear weapons, for which no country currently has an effective defense. Thus, Clausewitzian defensive doctrine probably needs to be reassessed in light of nuclear arsenals.

## F. Offense

"Once the defender has gained an important advantage," Clausewitz writes, "defense as such has done its work." (370) Now it is time for a "sudden powerful transition to the offensive--the flashing sword of vengeance." (370) This is the culminating point of battle. Unless an offensive results in the defender's collapse, there will be a pivotal point at which the attack is about to lose effective superiority. To push beyond this threshold without a good chance of victory is dangerous. In fact, "every attack which does not lead to peace must necessarily end up as a defense." (572)

In addition to the culminating point of battle, Clausewitz raises two vital questions concerning offense: "Destruction of the enemy's forces the means to the end. What does this mean? At what price?" (529) It is formidable enough to develop a strategy that will achieve specific political ends; it is even more so unless decisionmakers know precisely what they are trying to destroy by combat and how much they are willing to commit to that effort. Regarding offensive maneuver, Clausewitz notes that it has the virtue of being able to create something "out of nothing" by seizing upon the adversary's mistakes. He concludes, however, that it is fruitless to attempt to devise systematic rules for maneuver, and that, in any event, maneuver remains dependent upon the superior application of force:

...no rules of any kind exist for maneuver, and no method or general principle can determine the value of the action; rather, superior application, precision, order, discipline, and fear will find the means to achieve palpable advantage in the most singular and minute circumstances." (542)

## G. Numerical Superiority

"The best strategy," writes Clausewitz, "is always to be very

strong; first in general, and then at the decisive point." (204) Like other succinct principles, however, Clausewitz carefully qualifies this one, for "to reduce the whole secret of the art of war to the formula of numerical superiority at a certain time in a certain place [is] an oversimplification that [will not stand up] for a moment against the realities of life." (135) Indeed:

...superiority of numbers in a given engagement is only one of the factors that determines victory. Superior numbers, far from contributing everything, or even a substantial part, to victory, may actually be contributing very little, depending on the circumstances. (194)

"But superiority varies in degrees." (194) Thus, "a significant superiority in numbers...will suffice to assure victory, however adverse the other circumstances." (195) In sum, quantitative superiority "must be regarded as fundamental--to be achieved in every case and to the fullest possible extent... But it would be seriously misunderstanding our argument, to consider numerical superiority as indispensable to victory...." (197)

#### H. Surprise

Clausewitz contends that surprise is of more use to tactics than strategy. "It is still more important to remember that almost the only advantage of the attack rests on its initial surprise. Speed and impetus are its strongest elements and are usually indispensable if we are to defeat the enemy." (624) While surprise, "is more or less basic to all operations," it is also somewhat overrated, if only because it is difficult to achieve in practice:

But while the wish to achieve surprise is common and, indeed, indispensable, and while it is true that it will never be completely ineffective, it is equally true that by its very

nature surprise can rarely be outstandingly successful. It would be a mistake, therefore, to regard surprise as a key element of success in war. The principle is highly attractive in theory, but in practice it is often held up by the friction of the whole machine. (198)

## I. Morale and Will

For Clausewitz, war is an inseparable marriage of physical and immaterial or "moral" forces such as will, but for him the moral forces are more fundamental to war. In his words, "Fighting...is a trial of moral and physical forces through the medium of the latter...." (127) The physical factors "seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade." (185) Furthermore, if "moral forces" are the ultimate determinant of war, it then follows that the destruction of the enemy's will to resist should be the primary target in any conflict. "Battle is the bloodiest solution," observes Clausewitz, but it should be considered an act aimed at "killing ...the enemy's spirit [rather] than...his men." (259)

### (1) Importance of Military Morale

Clausewitz stresses the importance of morale and will for both the soldier and the commander. The soldier's first requirement is moral and physical courage, both the acceptance of responsibility and the suppression of fear. In order to survive the horror of combat he must have an invincible martial spirit, which can be attained only through military victory and hardship. The soldier has but one purpose: "The end for which a soldier is recruited, clothed, armed and trained, the whole object of his sleeping, eating, drinking, and marching is simply that he should fight the right place and the right time." (95)

In order to penetrate the "psychological fog" of war, the commander foremost requires sound judgment, which Clausewitz describes as an intuition rooted in experience and sober calculation, and determination, so that he not waver from his decisions:

In the dreadful presence of suffering and danger, emotion can easily overwhelm intellectual conviction, and in this psychological fog it is so hard to form clear and complete insights that changes of view become more understandable and excusable. Action can never be based on anything firmer than instinct, a sensing of truth. (108)

To be sure, the commander also needs to be bold, but: "The higher up the chain of command, the greater the need for boldness to be supported by a reflective mind, so that boldness does not degenerate into purposeless bursts of blind passion." (190) These attributes form "military genius," which is "the inquiring rather than the creative mind, the comprehensive rather than the specialized approach, the calm rather than the excitable head to which in war we would choose to entrust the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honor of our country." (112)

## (2) Importance of Political Will

Will also plays a key political role in Clausewitz' calculus of war. As the armed services provide the means for war, those means must not be diverted from their prescribed political purpose:

Once it has been determined, from the political conditions, what a war is meant to achieve and what it can achieve, it is easy to chart the course. But great strength of character, as well as great lucidity and firmness of mind, is required in order to follow through steadily, to carry out the plan, and not to be thrown off course by thousands of diversions. (178)

The complete execution of armed force for political ends is far more



arduous than the mere establishment of those political goals in the abstract. Clausewitz thus admonishes those with muddled political goals:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive. (88-89)

## 6. CAUTIONARY NOTES

Clausewitz, perhaps to a greater degree than any other writer, captures the unchanging elements of war. His accomplishments notwithstanding, there nonetheless are many reasons to take care interpreting Clausewitz. First, his observations are incomplete and, at times, ambiguous and contradictory. Second, his writing tends toward the metaphysical and is steeped in early 19th-century German philosophy. Third, some of On War has been overtaken by events, such as the rise of air power and the advent of nuclear weapons, and parts are therefore outdated. It also ignores relationships between land and sea power. Finally, some professed disciples of Clausewitz, such as Lenin, Trotsky, and the Prussian General Staff, have tainted On War with sinister connotations.

Despite these problems, however, so much of On War seems as timely today as when it was first written. The challenge is to use his ideas as a guide, not a blueprint, so as to constantly strive for the versatile, efficient, and effective armed forces that can win their assigned battles, without losing sight of the political purpose for which they are being waged.

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