

NWC
ESSAY
91-37

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3 October 1990
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THROUGH THE TIME TUNNEL-
CLAUSEWITZ ON NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

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Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE 1991		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Through the Time Tunnel - Clausewitz on Nuclear Deterrence				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 8	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

"It is not that the generals and admirals are incompetent, but that (the selection of weapons and strategies) has passed beyond their competence. Their limitations are not due to a congenital stupidity. . . but to the growth of science, which has upset the foundations of their technique."

-B.H. Liddell Hart

"I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious to leave to the politicians."

-Charles de Gaulle

The airplane, the automobile, the computer, and space travel were all once considered fantasy. But science has a way of making reality out of that which we can only imagine. Is a time tunnel possible? A vehicle through which we could transport persons, places or things from the past or the future to now? In this paper we have a time tunnel. Through this medium we have delivered Carl von Clausewitz to the stage in Arnold Auditorium, where he will deliver a lecture to the National War College Class of 1991. As part of the block of instruction on Military Thought and National Security Strategy, he has been asked to comment on the article by Bernard Brodie, On Nuclear Weapons: Utility in Nonuse. General Carl E. Vuono has appointed Mr. Brodie the dean of the early American school of nuclear deterrence.¹ The wonder of science has also allowed Clausewitz to do all of the necessary background reading to prepare for his lecture. The Class of 1991 would accept nothing less.

The following is a transcript of Clausewitz's lecture.

"It is truly an honor to be here with you today, especially in light of the task at hand. I welcome the opportunity to comment on Mr. Brodie's work, because he is a man who took the time to comment upon mine. As you may know, he wrote one of the introductory essays to the eighth printing of the Princeton Press edition of *On War*. In that most gracious essay, he called my book 'the only truly great book on war' - lofty praise indeed for someone who set out only to write a book on war! Mr. Brodie went on to say that my book was 'probably as pertinent to our times as most of the literature specifically written about nuclear war.' Since he is one of the foremost authors on the subject, one can

only conclude that he counts his own work among that literature. Perhaps by the end of this lecture you will be able to judge for yourself whether or not that statement is accurate.

"Enough about the relevance of my work, and on to the relevance of his. He makes four major points in his article, under the umbrella of one major thesis. I will address each of these points, as well as the thesis, and conclude with a comment concerning the utility of On War to today's strategist.

"Mr. Brodie's first point is that nuclear weapons deter war between the great powers simply because they exist. Clearly this is the punchline of those who speak in favor of nuclear weapons and their role in national security strategy. While I agree with Mr. Brodie, his rationale is flawed. Using his process, one could also conclude that autumn deters war between the great powers, since it is now fall and no war between the great powers has occurred. One must look beyond such means and ends confusion to support his statement. The key is that the great powers, and here I succumb to Mr. Brodie's blatant European bias and define the great powers as the United States and the Soviet Union, subscribe to two specific points which I make in my book: first, that the best strategy is always to be very strong, and second, that the decisive importance of relative strength increases the closer we approach a state of balance in all factors. Both sides are very strong in that they possess stockpiles of nuclear weapons sufficient to destroy each other many times over. If that were to occur, the other measures of overall strength, such as economy and technology, would be irrelevant. Thus, the relative strength

of the two nations is essentially balanced. Each side hesitates to attack the other despite many political reasons to do so, and deterrence is achieved.

"A word about deterrence is in order here. I obviously knew nothing of nuclear weapons in my time. Is deterrence the same as defense? I believe that it is. Reduced to its most basic elements, defense is the awaiting of the enemy's blow combined with the preparation to parry it. This is no different than the nuclear deterrence posture presented by either the United States or the Soviet Union. I have written that the purpose of defense is preservation. Mr. Brodie has written that the purpose of nuclear deterrence is to avoid war in order to preserve both the United States and the rest of the world. Though I did not know nuclear weapons, I knew deterrence.

"Mr. Brodie's second argument is that if war between the great powers is to occur, nuclear weapons make it far more likely that this war will be a limited war and not, as I have called it, an absolute war. This is so, he claims, because each side is so fearful of unleashing the nuclear arsenal of the other that they avoid even approaching the parameters for the initiation of thermonuclear war. He cites the Cuban Missile Crisis as a perfect example of this fact. I must admit that although I did write that 'war is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force,' I later wrote that 'war is the realm of uncertainty dominated by the power of the intellect.' The latter phrase not only aligns my thoughts with Brodie's, but also describes the course of world events in recent years. The

record of history in Korea, Vietnam, and perhaps even Afghanistan would lead one to believe that the intellect of those in charge at the time resulted in a decision to avoid direct confrontation with the other great power. Without sufficient intellect, miscalculation is possible. One cannot always understand the fact that two plus two equals four unless one comprehends the function of addition. I wrote that 'war most closely resembles a game of cards.' John E. Shephard, Jr. writes that if this is so, miscalculation could have the most dire consequences in that 'any nuclear exchange could quickly resemble fifty-two pick-up.'² Limited war is certainly a more attractive option.

"The next argument which Mr. Brodie makes is that military men are incapable of making objective decisions regarding the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategy. They are professionally conditioned to feel a minimum of horror of nuclear weapons, he says. He insists that their special training has insensitized them to some of the more profound issues involved. I believe that Mr. Brodie has lost sight of the importance of the triad consisting of the government, the armed services, and the people. All three are indispensable. To ignore any part of the triad is to operate outside the scope of reality and within the world of theory. I wrote that 'strength of character can degenerate into obstinacy. The line between them is hard to find in practice, easy to find in theory.' Perhaps this is why Mr. Brodie is so quick to infer that the military is at the center of disagreement regarding the role and use of nuclear weapons. I do not claim that major military developments should be a matter for

purely military opinion. On the contrary, policymakers and military officials should maintain counsel with each other.

"Why? Because war is a continuation of policy by other means. This fact is central to Mr. Brodie's fourth point - that the use of nuclear weapons is a political issue, not a military issue. Without a political end, war becomes pointless, because policy, unlike war, continues into the peace that follows the war. Since nuclear weapons are instruments of war, and war is a continuation of policy by other means, Mr. Brodie's point is valid. I must caution you against completely adopting his argument, however. While Mr. Brodie counsels against reliance on the military point of view, I wrote about politicians who made erroneous military decisions because they lacked a solid grounding in military means. Thus, his point is only valid when viewed in light of my triad, a fact which he unfortunately dismisses through his refusal to consider the military opinion in the formulation of policy.

"Having discussed these four points, let us now turn to the Mr. Brodie's reason for writing the specific chapter of the book which is the subject of this lecture. His purpose was, in my opinion, to argue that by their very existence in sufficient numbers, nuclear weapons make the need for large conventional forces obsolete. Clearly the expense of maintaining these forces is an issue which is both valid and critical. Beyond this, however, I believe that his thesis is invalid in the real world. This is a critical point. His argument passes muster in light of a great power confrontation, referring again to Mr. Brodie's

European bias. His argument assumes that the great powers are willing to 'push the button'— to make what I have called an extreme effort. But as I state in my book, the extreme effort is contrary to human nature. It is a fantasy, and the human mind is unlikely to consent to being ruled by such a fantasy.

"Mr. Brodie's argument also passes muster if we have seen the end of mid- to large-scale confrontation in the rest of the world. I ask you rhetorically if your country could do what it is currently doing in the Persian Gulf without a substantial conventional capability? Plato wrote that 'only the dead have seen the end of war.' If we believe this, then we must logically believe that there are other Persian Gulfs, Panamas, and Iran-Iraq wars on the historical horizon. If the United States is conventionally incompetent, and cannot, because of human nature, 'push the button,' how does it perform as the leader of the free world? I submit that it cannot.

"Let me conclude by commenting on a popular topic: the relevance of my book in today's world. Clearly, my opinion that the tendency of war to moderate instead of escalate to an absolute level must be tempered in light of the existence of the nuclear arsenal. But as an author recently wrote: '. . . as today's East-West detente broadens and the nuclear genie is lured part way back into the bottle, then the Clausewitzian model begins somewhat to reassert its relevance.'³ In that regard, let me leave you with two key points. First, never fail to consider all three aspects of the triad, because war is not an act of senseless passion. Instead, it is controlled by political

objectives. Second, although technology will continue to change many of the aspects of war, the human aspect will remain the most important. As a result, war's creative nature, emphasizing the creative, comprehensive mind, will always dominate its imitative nature.. It will also continue to resist any reduction to formulas and recipes.

"It has been a great honor to be with you today. Good luck - you might say that luck is another term for the fog of war - to all of you."

¹ General Carl E. Vuono, "The Strategic Value of Conventional Forces," *Parameters*, Vol. XX No. 3 (September 1990), 2.

² John E. Shephard, Jr., *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.