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SEHR GEEHRTE GROSSVATER

THE VALLEY CAMPAIGN LETTER OF CLAUSEWITZ THE YOUNGER

Core Course 2 Essay

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Foreword

What you are about to read is opinion in a fictional setting. The fiction is on two levels: a fictional letter and a fictional commentator writing about the letter. The premise is that Carl von Clausewitz is still alive in 1862 and that his work On War has not been published and is still undergoing revision. Details of the fiction are developed within the text. The information on the Civil War is not part of the fiction and is based on the works appearing in the bibliography. The representation of Clausewitz's work is this author's interpretation based on the core course study of which this paper is a part and the course materials cited in the bibliography. The footnotes found herein are written in the voice of the commentator and represent the opinions of this author or elements of the fictional setting.

Letters written by participants in the American Civil War have come to be the intellectual treasure of historians writing on the event and the conscience of Americans remembering it. Therefore, creation of a fictional letter supposedly written during that war seems to be a singularly appropriate approach to applying some of the war's lessons to the writings of Clausewitz. The author hopes that this somewhat unorthodox approach to military commentary reflects some of the creativity and complexity that is characteristic of Clausewitz's own writing.

Introduction

The classic work by Carl von Clausewitz On War was greatly influenced by the letters of his grandson and namesake, Carl von Clausewitz the younger, a Prussian General Staff Colonel who from March 1862 to May 1863 was an observer assigned to Stonewall Jackson's command of the Army of the Confederate States of America. The letters themselves were assumed to have been lost but are known through the frequent references made to them by the elder Clausewitz in his work, which was finally published after his death in 1869. The general tone of the letters seems to have been that, while the fundamental nature of war and many of the elder Clausewitz's original descriptions of warfare based on military history through the Napoleonic Wars were fundamentally accurate, the younger Clausewitz saw indications in the war between the American states that the conduct of warfare was changing.

To the delight of military historians, one of the original letters was found among papers in the General Staff archives that have been in the possession of East Germany since World War II. That letter has been translated and is presented below with a few notes of commentary. Keep in mind while reading the letter that the younger Clausewitz was commenting on a manuscript that had been drafted as early as 1831.

The Valley Campaign Letter

En route to Richmond, 24 June 1862

Sehr geehrte Grossvater,

Having had no opportunity to correspond since my arrival in the Confederate States of America, I begin this missive with an apology for so belatedly undertaking the task with which you charged me upon my departure, that is, reviewing in the context of a modern war your as yet unfinished manuscript. Although my General Staff assignment as observer to this conflict seemed propitious for the task, I was greatly disheartened when the Confederacy High Command detailed me to General Jackson, who had been assigned the inglorious task of forcing the Union to maintain significant forces in a western river valley (the Shenandoah) and thereby denying them to the Union offensive from the east against the Confederate capital. My disappointment was unfounded, however, for since joining Jackson's command on 21 March, I have witnessed a brilliant campaign of maneuver that surely must have exceeded Jackson's superiors' highest expectations. This letter then, as my first commentary on your manuscript, will focus on diversion and maneuver.¹

As we have discussed on numerous occasions, I urge you to draw clearer distinctions among your various uses of the word "attack," particularly in the realm of

¹ There is some disappointment in the academic community that the recovered letter has what some have described as less than central issues as its main theme. The "diversion and maneuver" theme does, however, have elements that are particularly relevant to modern warfare. Readers will also find that the younger Clausewitz strays from his central thesis and places pointers toward many areas that he evidently addressed in later letters. These notes will comment on some of those markers.

diversions.² “Credible threat” might even subsume “attack” in defining diversion, attack being only the most obvious and direct credible threat. It also serves well in the case where the credibility is created by the fears of the defender rather than the intensity of the actual threat. Jackson’s just-concluded campaign makes a good case-in-point. The Union’s great concern for the safety of its capital, whose proximity to the Confederacy lends credence to that concern, prevents it from accepting the presence of an effective Confederate force in the Shenandoah Valley, a base of attack on Washington feasible both for its logistical potential and propinquity.³

Before my arrival, Jackson had been left exposed when Confederate forces on his eastern flank were withdrawn to lines better suited to the defense of Richmond, so he was withdrawing south, up the Shenandoah when he learned that the Union was moving the bulk of its force behind him to positions that would support the Union advance on Richmond. Countermarching 36 miles in a day and one half, Jackson’s 3,500 Confederates attacked the remaining division, which outnumbered them almost 3 to 1. As might be expected, Jackson’s troops were soundly defeated, but in the process prompted the Union commander to reason that the attack against vastly superior forces would have been made only with the expectation of support or reinforcements. Through intelligence gained since that 23 March battle, we have learned that the threat created by that attack and later activities in the valley caused the diversion of nearly 60,000 men that could have

² The younger Clausewitz’s concern seems to focus on the restrictive definition of diversion as *an attack on enemy territory*. Note the measured tone of the wording. Throughout the letter the young colonel is deferential, raising nearly every point with caution.

³ Here the letter echoes the strategic thinking of Lee and Jackson, whose judgment regarding northern paranoia over the capital would be proven accurate many times over during the war.

participated in the opening phases of the Union campaign against Richmond.⁴ The threat was credible only in the minds of the Union leaders

As a final point on diversion, I would like to stimulate your thinking regarding diversions as a defensive mechanism. Your work as it stands seems to limit diversions to supporting offensive operations, but in view of Jackson's successes I would suggest that diversions can also have the effect of strengthening one's defense by weakening the opponent's offense, particularly where a small commitment of your forces significantly impairs your opponent's ability to concentrate his forces against your center of gravity. Indeed, once Jackson's initial attack was made, his mere presence may well have deterred the enemy from taking the undesired action. To carry the logic to an extreme, deterrence by diversion or perceived diversion could limit the opponent's options within a range you would find acceptable.⁵

After his battle on 23 March, however, Jackson assumed that only continued actions would nurture the Union commitment of forces to oppose him, and being painfully aware of the numerical advantage represented by the separate Union commands he faced on three different axes, he embarked on a bold gamble to engage them separately. In a series of forced marches he feinted as if to leave the valley, but embarked his troops on trains, taking them back across the upper reaches of the valley and four days later on 8 May striking the southern most outpost of the Union threat to valley operations from the

⁴ The intelligence was not quite as accurate as it might have been. Two strategic Union moves were disrupted rather than one. In addition to those troops lost to the offensive against Richmond, the Union force to the west was diverted from a planned campaign in east Tennessee.

⁵ It may be something of a stretch to place this thinking in the context of the modern use of deterrence based on weapons of mass destruction but the logic has a ring of modern truth. Later letters apparently continued this theme as the elder Clausewitz's published work expanded upon the concept of deterrence, which was present in his earlier draft primarily in the form of out-maneuvering an opponent.

west. A brief pursuit was quickly followed by a move to the north where on 24 May he overwhelmed the main body of the northern-most opponent and literally chased him from the valley, gaining the enemy's abandoned supplies in the process. By 29 May Jackson had learned that the Union force west of the valley and that east of the valley were moving to isolate and engage him with their superior joint force before he could return up the valley to the south. He raced these armies to the southern exits from the valley, winning the race while fighting a continuous rear guard action against one Union force and protecting his flank from the other. Only a brief rest of two days prepared the troops for Jackson's final stroke in the campaign as he turned and faced his pursuers before they could join. On 8 June the Confederates repulsed the advance of the nearest enemy force, and on the following day attacked and defeated advance elements of the second opponent. When Jackson's tattered troops left the valley that night, effectively ending the campaign, they had marched 350 miles in five weeks and won five battles, tying up three separate Union forces that could have been used elsewhere.

Confirming your reasoning that a skilled commander engenders a marked superiority in his army, Jackson's demands and expectations created an esprit that strengthened his troops' resolve and endurance and brought them to a level of excellence the Union forces could not match. In addition to the intuitive vision of a great commander who sees his whole arena and its terrain and the interplay of forces in his mind's eye, Jackson never loses sight of the details of command. Specifically, unlike the Napoleonic practice of a rest stop of several hours in a lengthy march, Jackson introduced the practice of marching 50 minutes and resting 10, insisting that his men lie down during that

rest break.⁶ During the valley campaign the endurance of his troops, who have come to be called Jackson's "foot cavalry," attests to the success of his method. A myriad of such innovative methods may combine to define the great commanders of the future, and those skills of innovation should be sought as much as those of intuition, wherever they may be found.⁷

Your distinction between marches and maneuver when the former was the primary and usually only means to accomplish the second seemed appropriate, but as I sit here in a train that is transporting elements of Jackson's command many miles to join the defense of Richmond, I wonder if modern transportation will soon require that you completely review the concept of maneuver. I may have mistaken your meaning in making the distinction, but I ask you to consider that the ability to move forces at speeds unattainable on foot or horseback may create a new fluidity in a strategic arena, allowing a commander to disperse freely or concentrate forces as he parries his opponent or thrusts at him.

Although I am suggesting your highest principle of strategy which calls for the concentration of forces might bear revision as mobility improves, I hasten to add that the same mobility will undoubtedly increase the role of chance, which you present convincingly. Consider for example the increased odds of chance engagements when units of varying sizes are moving about quickly over wide areas, and indeed the difficulty of purposely bringing about a decisive battle between main armies. And what of the

⁶ The younger Clausewitz here questions a specific methodology present in the unedited manuscript.

⁷ Dangerous ground for a young colonel. He seems to be making an indirect attack here on the arrogance of rank. Parts of the early manuscript touted the value of experience to the apparent denigration of the lower, less experienced ranks. The elder Clausewitz values creativity where it is found, however, and speaks at length of "genius." We see no evidence that the younger Clausewitz's argument influenced his grandfather in this respect.

reliability of the new mechanical method of movement? The complexity of the machines guarantees that they will not always work. The pessimist might suggest that they will undoubtedly fail to operate at the worst possible moment.⁸ At any rate, I suggest that additional mobility will require a systematic review of many aspects of the conduct of war, from such general perspectives as dealing with the element of chance to more specific issues as disrupting the opponent's lines of communication. Special forces that can undertake action against an opponent's ability to maneuver may come into being, forces that might even require a redefinition of internal and external lines. With additional experience in the use of the railroads as this conflict progresses, I hope to provide the General Staff with insightful observations on the benefits to be gained therefrom and the dangers to avoid.⁹

I have taken to the habit of making daily notes on my observations of the campaigning here, including some roughly sketched maps, and I plan to continue the practice so that I can provide greater detail to you when I return. In the meantime I shall always remain,

Your Loving Grandson,

Carl

⁸ I doubt that young Clausewitz was the original Murphy of Murphy's law fame, but I emphasize here that he has struck upon a central theme in modern warfare that has brought logistics and its supply and repair functions out of the secondary role to which they were relegated in even the final manuscript. Many would argue I among them that logistics do not merely affect outcomes of battles in a peripheral sense but in modern war are an integral part of them and even frequently their primary objective.

⁹ There is no evidence that young Clausewitz's observations on railroad use influenced the General Staff's use of railroads in the 1870-71 war with France.

Concluding Commentary

In an intriguing turnabout of the inevitable missing piece from the laboriously assembled giant puzzle, the letter of the younger Clausewitz provides us a single piece of a giant puzzle that will likely never be completed. Here I shall only make two brief points in opening what is likely to be an interminable discussion on the content of the letter and its influence on the great military theorist.

The letter contains implicit references to an element of frustration in young Clausewitz's effort to carry out the review of what his grandfather had written. His problem with the word "attack" may well come from over definition rather than its specific use in relation to diversionary actions, as he ignores and even divorces his comments from the fact that an entire book of the original manuscript is devoted to analyzing the complexity of "attack." In addition, the reference to discussions on "numerous occasions" immediately preceding his raising the issue of clarity and the less than subtle reference to the possibility of mistaking his grandfather's meaning in the distinction between marches and maneuver intimates opacity in the manuscript.

The letter makes recommendations of both a specific and general nature with regard to maneuver. The specific contrasts a successful modern method to one from the past while the general urges a review of the entire concept of maneuver in light of a new mobility. It is not too much of a leap to suggest that the colonel, who consistently supports the fundamental tenets of the manuscript is sounding a cautionary note about dated methodological examples setting a prescriptive tone and limiting the range of general concepts.

The untimely death of Colonel Carl von Clausewitz in 1871 at the hands of French guerrillas in the waning days of the Franco-Prussian War deprived him of the opportunity to organize his papers into a work of his own and leaves a great void in the study of his grandfather's classic work. The annotated version of On War and the concordance for it he might have produced would have precluded much misinterpretation of that great treatise. With the discovery of the Valley Campaign letter, historians and military theorists can measure to some small extent the contribution of this later generation Clausewitz

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