

Clausewitz's Theory of War and Information Operations

By WILLIAM M. DARLEY

Press briefing on Exercise *Combined Endeavor 2005*, world's largest communications and information exercise



52nd Communications Squadron (Stacy Moless)

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. . . . This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.¹

—Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

The debate over information operations (IO) grows more confused because IO continues to be wrongly understood in its relationship to the so-called kinetic elements of military operations. Contrary to entrenched perceptions, IO is not merely a family of related skill sets or capabilities that in all cases augment “kinetic operations.” Collectively, they are properly understood as a *specific purpose and emphasis* within

an overall plan of action that under some circumstances might be the main effort. The most essential factor for employing IO is therefore the commander’s intent with regard to the political objective of a given operation. Viewing IO in any other way precludes recognition of the relationship the “IO purpose” inherently has with other activities of war within the universe of political conflict, and consequently distorts thinking with regard to full incorporation and appropriate

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Handing out *Baghdad Now*, distributed by 4th Psychological Operations Group to inform Iraqi citizens of current events

Combat Camera Group Pacific (Edward G. Martens)

*his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls.*²

In developing his theory, Clausewitz describes war within the context of political conflict, which is broadly dominated by two factors: violence and “moral” (psychological) factors. The relationship these two factors share appears to be the same one that modern doctrine writers and military operators are struggling less successfully to describe with the terms *kinetic operations* and *information operations*.

The power of his IO theory results from analyzing the relationship of two basic factors that Clausewitz asserts undergird it: political policy and military force expressed in violence.³ Political policy is derived from his famous dictum: “War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will . . . not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”⁴

The first key extrapolation is that IO—as a subcategory of war operations—is a political activity. This may appear to belabor the obvious; however, this deceptively simple observation highlights the essential and intensely political character of IO as it relates

Clausewitz’s theory of war offers surprising predictive insight into the dynamics of information operations within the multidomain universe of political conflict

to political conflict in general. It also points out how intertwined IO is with the purely political machinery of what Clausewitz called “policy”—the political process he considered the third basic element of war.

Though IO and kinetic operations share the mutual purpose of achieving political objectives, unless the political nature of IO is clearly established, the dominant military culture tends to regard rhetorical activities associated with persuasion and influence as mere sideshow techniques adopted from civilian life into military operations with limited importance, rather than as intrinsic elements of political

employment of all tools that might generate a desired information effect. Thus, operational planning that regards IO as mere augmentation to operations by application of five narrowly defined “pillars,” currently revised and identified as operations security, psychological operations (PSYOP), deception, computer network operations, and electronic warfare, is fatally flawed.

Information operations, unlike other battlefield effects, focus on influencing perceptions or attitudes as opposed to destroying things or seizing terrain. During Operation *Desert Storm*, one of the most powerful IO instruments against Iraqi forces consisted of pre-announced B-52 strikes that followed leaflet drops detailing procedures for surrender, the key IO element being the B-52 itself. Similarly, the purpose for employing a weapon may be either to destroy a specific target or send threats to influence personnel targets, or both. Understood in this way, it is apparent that almost any weapon, tool, or element at the commander’s disposal apart from the five pillars may have potential for achieving a specific IO objective.

Part of the difficulty in distinguishing information operations from kinetic operations has resulted from failure to understand IO within any kind of general theory on the relationship of the dynamics of war, such as between a joint direct attack munition and PSYOP. Consequently, the lack of intellectual discipline imposed by such a paradigm confuses the roles and relationships of the

elements of combat operations and the circumstances in which they are appropriately applied. Application of a theory is thus essential to highlight the distinguishing qualities of IO and their relationship to kinetic operations. This article examines IO in the context of Clausewitzian theory and proposes a model that shows the role of IO across the spectrum of conflict.

A Political Instrument

The usefulness of a theory depends on how well it can explain the relationship of elements not formally understood, and predict the unknown and as yet unobserved. Clausewitz’s theory of war offers surprising predictive insight into the dynamics of IO within the multidomain universe of political conflict and a clearer understanding of the dynamics that dictate the role and situational employment of elements of power to achieve IO objectives.

As a reminder, *On War* was an effort to develop a genuine theory of war that described both the characteristics and relationship of various dynamics within armed conflict:

Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems fused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show their probable effects, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view. . . . Theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light

conflict itself. So what ultimately defines IO as opposed to nonpolitical informational activities—such as advertising or personal engagement with key personalities—is the purpose of application and not the instrument used. In contrast, defining the tools for kinetic operations, such as tanks or combat aircraft, is relatively easy because these have no role in civilian society and are almost never assembled for any other end except coercive political purposes such as war.

The second factor that Clausewitz asserted distinguished mere political contention from war is violence. Moreover, in his theoretical sense, the more purely violent a political contention becomes, the more closely it approximates the abstract concept of an “ideal” state of “total war.”⁵ This is seen as Clausewitz equates the Platonic abstraction of “ideal war” with “pure violence.”

*The thesis, then, must be repeated: war is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force . . . This is the first case of interaction and the first ‘extreme’ we meet with.*⁶

*War, therefore, is an act of policy. Were it a complete, untrammelled, absolute manifestation of violence (as the pure concept would require), war would of its own independent will usurp the place of policy. . . .*⁷

*This conception would be ineluctable even if war were total war, the pure element of enmity unleashed.*⁸

In contrast, the less violent a political conflict is, the less reflective it is of a condition that would define it as war:

*The more powerful and inspiring the motives for war . . . the closer will war approach its abstract concept [pure violence], the more important will be the destruction of the enemy, the more closely will the military aims and the political objects of war coincide, and the more military and less political will war appear to be. On the other hand, the less intense the motives, the less will the military element’s natural tendency to violence coincide with political directives. As a result, war will be driven further from its natural course, the political object will be more and more at variance with the aim of ideal war, and the conflict will seem increasingly political in character.*⁹

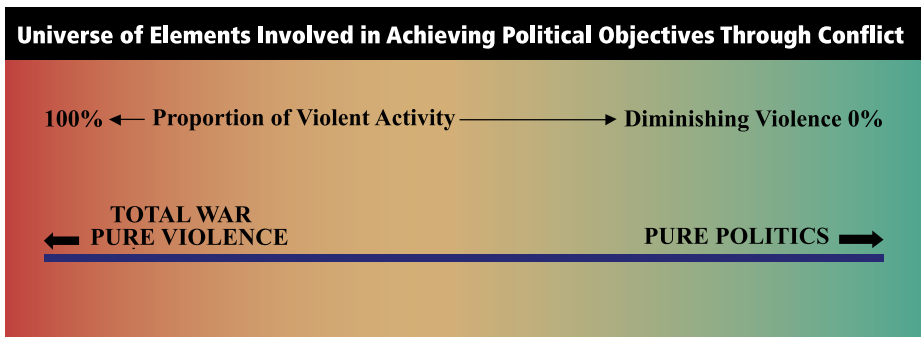


Figure 1: A Continuum of Violence in the Universe of Political Conflict

In depicting graphically the relationship of violence to political objectives at the heart of Clausewitz’s theory, a continuum emerges (see figure 1). It is the political nature of war as reflected along this continuum, which graduates in intensity of violence from one extreme to another depending on political objectives, that makes Clausewitz’s theory valuable for understanding the nature of information operations and their relationship to kinetic operations.

The end of the spectrum approaching total war would mean a condition so violent and frantic that it reaches the point of chaos and surpasses the ability of policymakers to control it. Clausewitz described this condition:

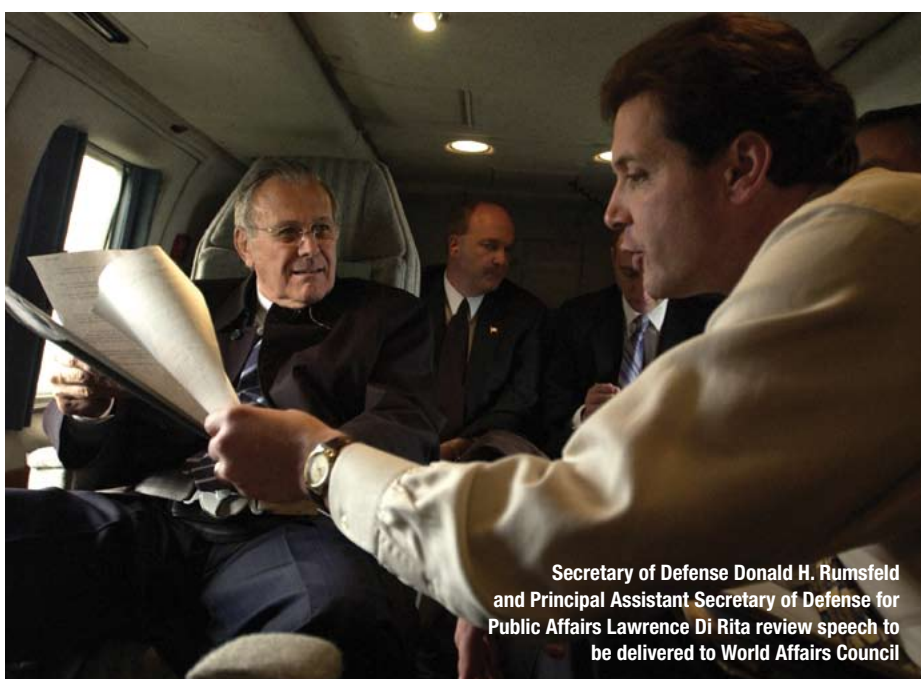
When whole communities go to war—whole peoples, and especially civilized peoples—the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object. . . . [Were pure violence to usurp the

*place of policy] it would then drive policy out of office and rule by the laws of its own nature.*¹⁰

Levels of Violence

If taken to the extreme that the theory predicts, a war of pure violence would be characterized by such unbridled use of kinetic instruments that other instruments of political conflict would be reduced to virtual irrelevance—a level of violence and singleness of purpose with no other object but the total destruction of the adversary and his civilization.

In finding a real-world example, some would argue that wars approaching this level of violence have actually been fought. Some posit World War II with its policies of “genocidal lebensraum” on the one side and “unconditional surrender” on the other.¹¹ Also, Bernard Brodie asserts that nuclear war approaches Clausewitz’s notion of pure enmity and absolute violence.¹²



Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Principal Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Lawrence Di Rita review speech to be delivered to World Affairs Council

LTC René Puzio, USA, USSOCOM

1st Combat Camera Group (Cherie A. Thurby)



LTC Renee Puzo, USA, USSOCOM

Figure 2: The Universe of Political Conflict

What would be the role of IO in such a conflict? At the extreme end of the spectrum, information operations—if they existed at all—might include activities associated with computer attack, signals intelligence, deception, or PSYOP measures. However, there would be little concern for cultivating through political rhetoric (PSYOP or public diplomacy) some grounds for hope of political reconciliation or postconflict cooperation, as the political objective would be total destruction of the enemy—a war of annihilation (see figure 2).

In contrast, what does the theoretical model of political violence predict at the opposite end of the continuum? In the abstract, the theory predicts a political conflict that would be contested in a manner completely devoid of violence.

Such a conflict would be characterized as totally ideological, a political clash decided exclusively by ideas, words, and symbols—in other words, a contest between pure information operation campaigns.

Clausewitz’s theory appears to specifically predict contests settled mainly by political rhetoric without violence. He obliquely refers to them while observing that when a graduated recession of military force and violence accompanies a change in commitment to political objectives, the conflict decreasingly displays the characteristics of war and becomes primarily political:

[the political object of the war] *has been rather overshadowed by the law of extremes, the will to overcome the enemy and make him powerless [by military force and violence]. But as this law begins to lose its force and as this determination wanes, the political aim will reassert itself. . . . Situations can thus exist in which the political object will almost be the sole determinant.*¹³

Are there real-world examples of purely political conflicts devoid of violence, as the theory predicts? Practical examples in our own time include elections in stable democratic societies. A 19th-century senator from Kansas provides insight into such bloodless struggles:

*The purification of politics is an iridescent dream. Government is force. Politics is a battle for supremacy. Parties are the armies. The decalogue and the golden rule have no place in a political campaign. The object is success. To defeat the antagonist and expel the party in power is the purpose. The Republicans and Democrats are as irreconcilably opposed to each other as were Grant and Lee in the Wilderness. They use ballots instead of guns, but the struggle is as unrelenting and desperate, and the result sought for the same.*¹⁴

Understanding elections as a form of war as deduced from Clausewitz’s theory helps explain why elections held in countries

without the benefit of mature democratic institutions and a tradition of peaceful hand-over of power are often accompanied by some measure of violence.

The extremes on the continuum predict something that looks like thermonuclear war at one end (where the persuasive elements associated with IO would have little influence or role) and something like democratic political elections on the other (where IO wholly dominates political conflict).

What the above suggests may initially be somewhat surprising: in contrast to total war, which is characterized by pure violence, an information operations conflict without violence should be viewed as “pure politics.” In fact, Clausewitz appears to have anticipated a need for a nuanced second definition of politics and has provided a somewhat unflattering description to explain the difference between politics as a broad activity within which war operates, as opposed to specific characteristics of politics as the business of diplomatic wrangling and chicanery:

*while policy is apparently effaced in the one kind of war [conflicts tending toward extreme force and violence] and yet is strongly evident in the other, both kinds are equally political. If the state is thought of as a person, and policy as the product of its brain, then among the contingencies for which the state must be prepared is a war in which every element calls for policy to be eclipsed by violence. Only if politics is regarded not as resulting from a just appreciation of affairs, but—as it conventionally is—as cautious, devious, even dishonest, shying away from force, could the second type of war appear to be more “political” than the first.*¹⁵



Seamen aboard USS *Thomas S. Gates* plot helicopter operations course during anti-submarine training, Exercise *Unitas 46-05*

Fleet Combat Camera Group Atlantic (Michael Sandberg)

Politics as a negotiating activity that characteristically is “cautious, devious, even dishonest, shying away from force” describes the basic nature of information operations fairly accurately. This supports the conclusion that IO in its most extreme form would be a manifestation of “pure politics.” Such an observation has far-reaching implications that lead to another surprising conclusion supported by the theory: IO is not only the outward communication of information impacting policy, but also a participant in policy formation itself, shaping the overall political character of the conflict. Information operations are involved in the policy formation process along the entire spectrum of conflict, with an increasingly significant role as conflict approaches the “devoid of violence” extreme. The graduated progression away from violence leads to a situation in which the development and formation of policy and the public expression of policy increasingly become one and the same. The emphasis on daily press briefings by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in the early stages of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, where policy adjustments seemed to be made from the dais in response to news reporting, illustrates this predicted theoretical tendency.

The two polar extremes established, the next step in developing this theory is to insert types of conflicts along the continuum, categorized by the relative similarity each bears to one extreme or the other. The order reflects a logical sequencing of conflicts according to estimates of the proportional dominance of two factors within each: intensity of violence relative to clarity and strength, and duration of political objective.

A Vaguely Defined Threshold

Conflicts characterized by high levels of focused violence over lengthy periods, and having broad political purposes, occur near the polar extreme of total war, as for example, the First and Second World Wars, due to the amount of extreme violence each generated relative to the expansiveness and clarity of their political objectives and comparatively long duration (see figure 3). In contrast, shorter conflicts involving less violence, and having either less focus or more limited political objectives, tend to occur nearer the center of the continuum and include such conflicts as Operation *Just Cause* and the Kosovo bombing campaign. Similarly, events with important regional



political objectives but with less actual violence and potential for violence, such as elections in Indonesia or the occupation of Bosnia, have been inserted near the devoid-of-violence extreme. A graduated scale of conflicts based on content of violence in relation to political objective appears to be specifically what Clausewitz had in mind as he developed his theory:

a military objective that matches the political object in scale will, if the latter is

total war would mean a condition so violent that it surpasses the ability of policymakers to control it

reduced, be reduced in proportion; this will be all the more so as the political object increases its predominance. Thus it follows that without any inconsistency wars can have all degrees of importance and intensity, ranging from a war of extermination down to simple armed observation.¹⁶

Admittedly this is a subjective process, but with a range of conflicts inserted in a more or less logical order along the continuum, the pattern that emerges confirms that IO-related factors are infused throughout the universe of political conflict and along the entire spectrum of violence associated with it. On further inspection of the pattern emerging, the conflicts that populate the area nearer the total war extreme are characterized by achieving political objectives through

actions to control geography—for example, decisively destroying military formations or infrastructure for the ultimate purpose of seizing terrain.

In contrast, the conflicts that populate the devoid-of-violence area focus on obtaining political objectives by influencing the opinions and behavior of specific people or population groups. This suggests that a working definition for kinetic operations is accomplishing political objectives through seizing terrain, while information operations amount to achieving political objectives by influencing people. This further suggests that what we understand today as the specialties and disciplines of IO are in orientation and principle what Clausewitz may have had in mind when prescribing measures to deal with the “moral” dimension of war:

the moral elements are among the most important in war. They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force. . . . The effects of physical and psychological factors form an organic whole, which, unlike a metal alloy, is inseparable by chemical processes. In formulating any rule concerning physical factors, the theorist must bear in mind the part that moral factors may play in it. . . . Hence most of the matters dealt with in this book are composed in equal parts of physical and of moral causes and effects. One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.¹⁷

Additionally, further consideration of the pattern reveals a curious phenomenon. Conflicts grouped nearer the total war extreme are uniformly kinetic operations clearly claiming the dominant/supported role in relation to IO. However, conflicts grouped toward the devoid-of-violence extreme appear to have an equally legitimate claim on being the dominant/supported activity according to the internal logic of their own particular circumstances and place on the continuum of political conflict. This predicts the existence of a vaguely defined threshold somewhere in the middle of the continuum, the crossing of which signals a seminal change in the relationship between information operations and kinetic operations—a line separating areas on the continuum in which either IO or kinetic operations dominate according to their similarity to the characteristics of the nearest “ideal” conflict at the polar extremes

This dichotomy would predict the need for not only different leadership and management skills, but also units and personnel with different skill sets, training, and equipment for different types of conflicts depending on where they fell on the continuum.

Operations grouped nearer the pure violence extreme in figure 3 would reflect a requirement for leadership, skill sets, training, and equipment of the kind traditionally associated with operations characterized by great violence and destructive activity for the purpose of seizing terrain. As positioned on the spectrum, IO stand in a supporting role.

As conflicts approach the other end of the spectrum, however, the model predicts

IO is not only the outward communication of information impacting policy, but also a participant in policy formation itself

an increasing requirement for significantly different kinds of leadership training and experience, different skill set requirements from the units involved, and different equipment and training. Moreover, as one considers the environment within which political conflicts aimed at influencing rather than destroying are likely to take place, the theory

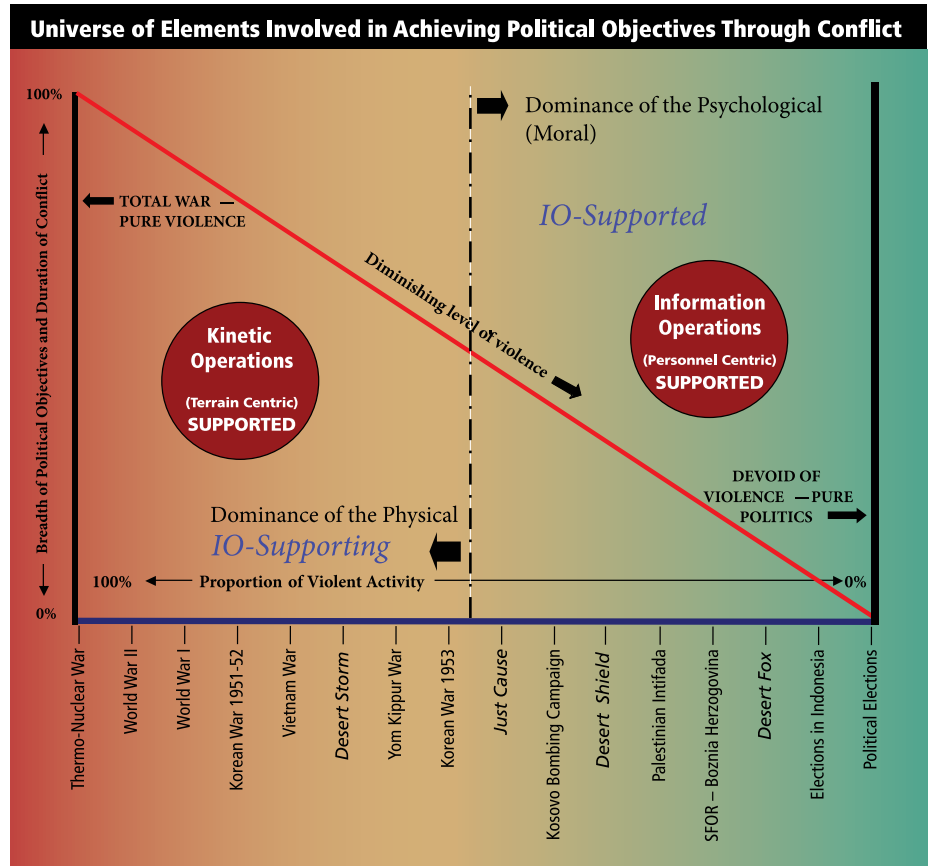


Figure 3: A Line of Demarcation between Kinetic- and IO-dominated Factors

obliquely implies an increasing need for cultural and human intelligence as opposed to technical intelligence for operations to achieve political objectives through persuasion and influence of people and populations rather than violence. In addition, the pattern suggests that conflicts along this sector of the continuum would properly be conducted as IO supported by kinetic operations rather than the reverse.

Practical Utility of the Theoretical Model

What has been missing in the IO debate—and the root of confusion—is recognition that information operations are not artifices of military culture, but comprise necessary answers to natural dynamics of war that exist in some proportion side by side with the dynamics of violence that are generated by political violence. Policymakers and military operators must understand this because, all too often, the dominant influence of kinetic thinking creates a tendency to dismiss the relevance of information operations even where the circumstances of conflict might make IO not only essential but also predominant.

The long-term effects of this attitude have been under resourcing IO core capabilities and inculcating a tendency into the military culture that invariably causes it to underestimate the depth, resilience, and ferocity of the moral dimension of conflicts that would prudently be regarded as predominantly IO conflicts by nature, especially in unconventional or constabulary environments. Under such circumstances, policymakers and military operators who lack this understanding or appreciation can be counted on to make the wrong decisions at the wrong times in ways that actually undermine the political objectives they are failing to achieve.

The model in figure 3, extrapolated from Clausewitz’s theory, provides an intellectual framework in which the military community can consider an appropriate mix of kinetic operations and IO tools for contemplated military campaigns as envisioned along the spectrum of political violence. It demonstrates that IO are intrinsic elements of political policy formulation that will permeate the environment in which conflict is occurring—at times becoming more dominant in influence than kinetic operations, which are better understood as primarily

tools of destruction directed by policy. It further suggests that IO and kinetic operations are inseparably linked, like strands of a DNA molecule in a gene, and in the same way have a dominant/recessive relationship (for example, one exercising dominance over the other depending on where the conflict falls on the continuum relative to the polar extremes). Thus, among the important issues it highlights, the theory shows the absolute need to refine both the specific political objectives of a campaign as well as their nature in order to determine whether the campaign is predominantly kinetic or informational. This suggests that neglecting consideration of the role of IO and its integration with kinetic operations imperils the entire campaign plan.

Consequently, information operations cannot be prudently conceived as merely added value to an operation, but rather as essential activities that address specific needs associated with the nature of political conflict itself. Perhaps most importantly, the theory points out the potential for defining IO as the main effort of a campaign, suggesting the absolute imperative of a refined commander's intent that identifies from the outset the main effort of the operation as either kinetic or IO, as well as describing how one should support and complement the other. This may urge, for example, introducing such previously inconceivable measures as subsuming the functions of a J-3/C-3 entirely beneath an IO-oriented staff element headed by a general officer uniquely trained and experienced with IO, or the establishment of linguistically capable and culturally experienced staff elements of political advisers at much lower levels of command than has previously been regarded as appropriate—perhaps to brigade or even battalion level. It also highlights a theoretical basis for increasing reliance on policing skills as opposed to maneuver combat skills the closer one approaches the devoid-of-violence end of the spectrum.

Additionally, the model implies that the political dimension of conflict is so essential that commanders must be prepared to

the model demonstrates that IO are intrinsic elements of political policy formulation that will permeate the environment in which conflict is occurring

establish their own local operational or even tactical political objectives in the absence of specific policy guidance for which information operations may be the key instrument. Clausewitz appears to allude to these predicted needs:

*Political considerations do not determine the posting of guards or the employment of patrols. But they are the more influential in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle. . . . The only question, therefore, is whether, when war is being planned, the political point of view should give way to the purely military . . . or should the political point of view remain dominant and the military [military force and violence] be subordinated to it?*¹⁸

The political nature of war as reflected along a continuum which graduates in

intensity of violence from one extreme to another depending on political objectives, makes Clausewitz's theory valuable for understanding information operations and their relationship to kinetic operations. What would the role of IO be at various points? The pattern that emerges confirms that IO-related factors are infused throughout the universe of political conflict and along the entire spectrum of violence associated with it. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

² *Ibid.*, 141.

³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75, 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 86–88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 605.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86–87.

¹¹ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1982), 8.

¹² Clausewitz, 645.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80–81.

¹⁴ O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism, Ideas, and Men* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969), 57.

¹⁵ Clausewitz, 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184–185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 606–607.



Soldiers fire 155mm M198 howitzer while training in Afghanistan

3rd Marine Division (James L. Yarbore)