

Can Reading Clausewitz Save Us from Future Mistakes?

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Answering the question: No, though to read the commentators, we'd never know it.

An Author for All Seasons

Some works are so broad in scope, so inclusive, even of contradictions internal to themselves, that they can be used to justify almost anything. One such book is that patchwork written over many centuries and by many hands that we call the Bible. For the Renaissance, it was Virgil's *Aeneid*, opened at random to provide divination (Sortes Virgilinae). For the Victorian era, it was the works of Shakespeare, a mine of quotable quotes removed from their contexts. For theorists of war in the last several decades, it has been Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*.

The Weinberger Doctrine of 1984, for example, considered by many strategists the template of the first Gulf War, is both drawn from and cites Clausewitz.¹ Widely held to have summarized the lessons of the Vietnam War, former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's six points for committing troops called for broad public support before engagement and a clear definition of objectives, things that were presumably lacking in the case of Vietnam. Weinberger invoked Clausewitz to justify the necessity of defining objectives clearly: "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."

Clausewitz's most celebrated assertion, however, as almost all commentators point out, is that "war is a continuation of policy [or politics: the

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German is *Politik*] by other means.” This is linked to his equally famous “trinity” of violence, chance, and subordination, which is commonly represented as the people, the military, and the government. In recent years this trinity has typically been invoked to justify the necessity of achieving the backing of the people. Weinberger refers to this in the fifth of his points. And his final point, that “the commitment of US forces to combat should be a last resort,” seems a reasonable conclusion from Clausewitz’s insistence that war is not separate from politics, but a continuation of it.

In the Second Gulf War as in the first, the (second) Bush Administration was clearly acting with an eye to this reading of Clausewitz. After all, the Administration achieved widespread domestic if not international support precisely by defining its reasons for war. To be sure, these have changed over time. Initially the Administration beat a largely one-note drum of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to justify the invasion. More recently, absent any such weapons found to date, the justifications given have been those of removing a dictator and establishing a democracy in Iraq.²

Much post-Vietnam theory is like Weinberger’s in invoking Clausewitz as the patron philosopher of decisive, well-supported, and purposeful action. Usually it tries to show us in hindsight what went wrong, and how paying attention to Clausewitz could have steered us right from the start. The problem is that what counts as decisive action for one viewer may count as a colossal misreading of the situation for another. Those who disagreed with the Administration invoked Clausewitz as well. Randolph T. Holhut quotes Clausewitz’s most famous phrase and then goes on to propose that the real reason the Administration went to war was because Iraq was a “test case for using bombs to accelerate the privatization of a nation’s economy.”³

Administration critic William S. Lind, in an article titled “A Warning from Clausewitz,” quotes Clausewitz to warn that statesmen and commanders must be clear about what sort of war they are fighting.⁴ The Administration might with justification have responded that they were very clear about this. According to Lind, the Administration was trying to fight a “second generation” (nation against nation) war, when in fact what it should have been embarked upon was the much less well defined “fourth generation” war involving irregular forces, fifth column fighters, and guerilla actions.

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Perhaps because of his usefulness as a source of quotes with which to belabor opponents, Clausewitz continues to be the foundation document in war theory at the nation's war colleges and command and staff schools. Besides, he's just so much more interesting than the competition. Mackubin Thomas Owens, a professor at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, notes the ubiquity of Clausewitz in strategy courses in his defense of Clausewitz's relevance to events in Iraq (the subtitle of his article is, "We could all use a little Clausewitz lesson").⁵ Indeed, my own most extended consideration of Clausewitz took place in the Strategy and Policy course of the US Naval War College.

Owens's particular opponents, those he's using Clausewitz to beat, happen to be those who think that war is predictable. Owens's reading of Clausewitz is that, according to Clausewitz, "war takes place in the realm of chance and uncertainty." Owens therefore opposes the campaign of "shock and awe" that marked the Second Gulf War as presupposing effects that could not be presupposed. Indeed, according to Owens's reading of Clausewitz, not much can be presupposed. According to Owens, summarizing Clausewitz, "any view of war that ignores" the fact that "war involves intangibles that cannot be quantified" is "fraught with peril." Still, Owens defends precisely this as Clausewitz's relevance, painting Clausewitz as an anti-theoretician of war. Owens also has it that "Clausewitz developed a theory of war, the elements of which appear to be universal and timeless." Owens suggests that Clausewitz permits individuals "to predict what will happen in the future by extrapolating from the present" and offers "a guide for action."

Here we have two distinct views of Clausewitz in one article: as offering valid-for-all-time theories, and as pointing out that theories almost always bite the dust of "human nature." Of course, the valid-for-all-time theory might be precisely that theories always bite the dust: Wittgenstein, almost a century later, became famous for proposing a similarly self-destructive philosophy. But self-destructive philosophies, while fun to watch while they self-implode, aren't good for much in the practical world. They can't tell us how to do it right, or indeed how to do it at all.

This makes reading Owens confusing. In a later article, Owens develops the more doctrinaire vein of Clausewitz.⁶ Like so many others, Owens starts this with Clausewitz's most famous pronouncement, that "war is the continuation of politics (or policy) by other means." Owens rejects what he holds to be a misreading of this pronouncement. This is what for him is the erroneous reading of Clausewitz that civilian authorities should set the goals, then step out of the way to let the military determine the strategy. Instead, he holds that Clausewitz was recommending a more subtle "interaction" of political goals and military means. At the time Owens was writing he approved of the Bush Administration's execution of the war, concluding that it showed "the proper Clausewitzian view of war." Clausewitz is good for something after all. He can tell us how to do it right.

Is Clausewitz a theoretician? Or does he reject theory? Owens is justified in saying that both are the case. Clausewitz does at some points in *On War* seem to be offering a "universal" and "timeless" theory of war. Probably, indeed, he would have said that's what he wanted to do: it sounds so important, so laudable a goal. At the same time he is one of the greatest anti-theoretical theorists in any discipline, insisting on the ultimate uselessness of theory in his famous "fog of war," what Owens calls the "complexities of human behavior."

This is the reason why evoking Clausewitz at every turn is both so satisfying and ultimately so pointless. When war turns out according to his "timeless theories," Clausewitz told us to expect it. When it turns out otherwise, Clausewitz told us to expect that too.

Brodie and Summers

Perhaps most important among the recent commentators seeing *On War* as a book that, read properly, would have saved us from many mistakes was Bernard Brodie, the "dean of American civilian strategists"—as he is called in the jacket copy for his magisterial *War and Politics*. Almost as influential has been Colonel Harry F. Summers, Jr., author of *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*.

Brodie takes Clausewitz's most famous assertion as central for *War and Politics*. Its cover gives a visual equivalent of the title, as well as of Brodie's understanding of Clausewitz's famous assertion. The cover shows a soldier's combat helmet side-by-side with a diplomat's silken top hat. Brodie's summary of Clausewitz's concept is that "war takes place within a political milieu from which it derives all its purposes."⁷ Brodie comments: "This understanding has never fully got across to the great majority of those people who think or write about war, and even less to those who fight it."⁸ Brodie recom-

mends, as a result, civilian control of the military—more specifically, control by civilians who know something about the capabilities of the military and who themselves have taken to heart Clausewitz’s central perception, what Brodie calls “genuine civilian control.”

In arriving at this last notion, Brodie evokes and rejects what he considers the simplistic and wrongheaded view of a relation between civilian control and the military:

... a simple “stop-go” approach, so that the actual outbreak of war was the occasion for instituting completely new sets of values and objectives, especially the objective of winning the war for the sake simply of winning. . . . The disposition towards this attitude is especially a mark of the military profession. . . . All the more reason for genuine civilian control.⁹

Many other commentators have reached the same bottom line with respect to Clausewitz. They hold that the most important thing we can take away is an insistence on civilian control of the military. Eliot A. Cohen, writing about Winston Churchill’s coalition politics in World War II, refers to the great Prime Minister as “a natural Clausewitzian” who “asserted the primacy of politics, and particularly the politics of coalition, in the conduct of that war”—as opposed, we are to understand, to a primarily military-run war. And Cohen quotes Churchill on the subject: “At the summit true politics and strategy are one.”¹⁰ Politics, which is the business of civilians, determines the strategy of the military.

Nor is it merely Western democracies that subscribe to what so many commentators think is the Clausewitzian notion of civilian control of the military. The current US National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, writing in the same volume as Cohen, points out that Stalin held to a similar doctrine. Rice poses some of the “classical questions of grand strategy: How can war be avoided? If it cannot, what peace is desired at the end of the war?” And she comments that, “agreeing with Clausewitz, the Soviets assign these questions to politicians.” Which leaves what for the military? Rice answers: “Questions of how to fight—by what means—are the prerogative of the military profession.”¹¹

Most of these thinkers are referring here to Clausewitz’s notion of his famous “trinity,” broadly construed as the people, the political leaders, and the military. But nowhere in *On War* does Clausewitz say what proportion these elements should be in with respect to each other, whether for example one element can be reduced to close to zero. Indeed, it seems a gross anachronism to read Clausewitz, a Prussian officer during the Napoleonic wars, as the spokesman for a specific way of waging wars in democracies. It can at least be argued that Clausewitz’s troubling use of the theological term “trinity”

(*Dreifaltigkeit*) is designed precisely to preclude any clarity regarding the interrelation of the elements, which may not even be distinct, as mainstream commentators of the Christian Trinity hold that God is both Three and One. Don't try to figure it out.

Brodie is more confident in his reading of Clausewitz. According to him, Clausewitz is offering a statement in the form of "should" rather than "is." War should be the continuation of policy, but all too often is not. All we have to do is pay attention to Clausewitz to save ourselves a lot of trouble.

Brodie quotes from the final chapter of *On War*: "The subordination of the political point of view to the military would be unreasonable, for policy has created the war. . . . The subordination of the military point of view to the political is, therefore, the only thing which is possible."¹² Indeed, Brodie's excoriating analysis of the disaster of Vietnam (a great deal of his book is devoted to a chapter entitled "Vietnam: Why We Failed") pins blame on the lack of any clear and workable policy in Vietnam. This is precisely what Weinberger takes as necessary in his doctrine. (Principle #3: "We should have clearly defined political and military objectives. And we should know precisely how our forces can accomplish these objectives.") In Brodie's view, a careful reading of Clausewitz can explain our failures in the past; at the same time there is hope that taking our principles to heart can prevent such debacles in the future.

Harry G. Summers, Jr., is even clearer about his belief that Clausewitz can be used as a how-to guide, not only to explain the past, but to shape the future. At times echoing Brodie, at times going beyond Brodie's liberalism into a more bellicose position, Summers repeatedly cited Clausewitz to buttress his views of what the US military did not do in Vietnam. Speaking of alterations through time to the War Department Training Regulations 10-5, Summers noted:

During the course of the Vietnam war there were changes in both the strategic and tactical definitions of [the section of the regulations entitled] The Objective. What had been a clear relationship between military strategy and political objectives was lost in an abstruse discussion of national objectives, rejection of aggression, deterrence, and the whole concept of a spectrum of war. The new definition obscured the Clausewitzian dictum that "the political object—the original motive for the war—will determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires."¹³

Clausewitz, Summers goes on, "emphasized that war was not waged for its own sake but was waged to obtain a particular aim—what [he] called the political object of war. . . . Even so astute a military professional as General of the Army Douglas MacArthur" failed to understand this; his utter-

ances “reflected the rejection of the Clausewitzian belief that ‘it is clear that war should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy.’” And Summers comments: “The truth of this dictum was brought home with a vengeance during the Vietnam war and its aftermath.”¹⁴

Some commentators are more modest in their claims for the salutary effects of reading Clausewitz. Antulio Echevarria argued in 1995 that the so-called “Revolution in Military Affairs” had not rendered Clausewitz outdated, that new technology changed only “the grammar of war, not its logic.”¹⁵ As a result, for Clausewitz, war’s “essential nature remains constant—violent, unpredictable, and prone to escalation.” Thus those who argue that “the core of Clausewitz’s philosophy of war—that states wage wars using armies in pursuit of political objectives—will disappear” are wrong.¹⁶

According to Echevarria, Clausewitz remains relevant: it is only the “grammar” of war that has changed, not its “logic.” Even if we agree we need a framework for considering wars, all wars, Echevarria does not consider Clausewitz’s advantages with respect to any contenders. Clausewitz is useful, and, he implies, necessary. Why this is so isn’t addressed.

Pay attention to me, Clausewitz seems to be saying in the readings of Brodie, Summers, Echevarria, and perhaps also Weinberger. Indeed, Clausewitz himself seems to be claiming that he can save people trouble if only we heed him. But the fact is that, as Brodie also points out, a lot of what *On War* offers is a matter of metaphysics rather than polemics. Metaphysics describes the way things always are; it doesn’t vote for one way of prosecuting a war over others, and so can’t be used to defend one way over another. (Perhaps this is what Echevarria meant by saying that Clausewitz spoke to the “logic” of war.) If the metaphysician has got his or her metaphysics correct, any particular thing people do must conform to it. Its practical use is nil. Brodie emphasizes the metaphysical aspect of Clausewitz’s ambition:

Clausewitz is using word-images made fashionable by the great German philosophers of his day, especially Kant and Hegel. . . . In the language of this school [idealism], war is simply another form of being that, like any other form of being, derives from an essential pattern or “idea” in which it has its true reality. To understand war properly, one must first see it in its “absolute” or “ideal” form, which Clausewitz calls the “pure concept of war.”¹⁷

This concept, Brodie continues, echoes Kant’s famous phrase *das Ding an sich* (“the thing in itself”). “Fortunately,” Brodie notes, “Clausewitz was of much too pragmatic a fiber to lose himself either deeply or for long in this brand of idealism.”

We should therefore ask, When Clausewitz offers as a dictum “war is the continuation of policy by other means,” should we understand this as a

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definition valid for all time? Or is it a goal to aim for? Perhaps, as a third alternative, a generalization about most situations? Is it an expression of his Kantian side, or his pragmatic one? And this means that we must ask the larger question: What is the relation between theory and practice in this work as a whole?

Theory vs. Practice in Clausewitz

The fact is that *On War* is a deeply ambivalent work as regards the relation it proposes between theory and practice. This in turn is related to a deep ambivalence in the work between the view that Clausewitz sometimes defends regarding the predictability of war, and his equally strong acknowledgment of the unpredictable factors, what he called friction and chance.

Owens is right: sometimes Clausewitz writes as if war is a quasi-scientific endeavor, with rules that, once discovered (say, from a reading of his book), can be applied to all situations. At other times he simply throws up his hands and portrays war as nothing but a crapshoot, a disorganized melee where, to quote the English poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, turning his metaphor in “Dover Beach” back into something like literal description, “ignorant armies clash by night.”

The text itself is a theoretical mess. The contradiction we sense in Clausewitz isn’t in (say) a coherent view he offers of *contradiction*; instead, the views he offers are many, and contradict. We could say, to excuse him, that after all he was a practical man, a soldier, not an abstract thinker—only that he so clearly wanted to be both. For this reason, commentators should go slowly in claiming that dipping into *On War* helps to “prove” their particular position. It can be used just as easily to “prove” the opposite.

Brodie’s invocation of Kant makes clear some of the pitfalls of any author with one foot in the ideal and one foot in the real, and shows us the difference between an author, Kant, who consciously set up two disparate realms, and another, Clausewitz, who alternated between them and never was able to relate them.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously differentiated the noumenal, or ideal, realm from the phenomenal or lived world. Morality, he concluded, could be deduced on the basis of reason alone, but this meant that its place was in the noumenal realm, where of course we humans do not live. We, instead, are forced to carry out our existence here on earth, among the dirt and the worms. This seems to imply that we cannot ever be moral. Kant insisted that the split between these realms wasn't absolute, but it certainly seemed so to the generation following Kant, that of the Romantics. Indeed, a consciousness of this split that Kant had made so clear led more than one of them to despair. Among these was the English poet Coleridge, author of the famous "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," who wrote heart-breaking poetry about the plight of the individual left to wander without guideposts save only his own subjective feelings.

To see that Clausewitz is following in a distinguished line of thinkers trying to relate the theoretical with the real, both in his aspirations and his problems, we need only remind ourselves that Plato spoke of a realm of Ideas (archetypes of which actual things are merely instantiations) that was accessible only to the most developed minds of any given society, the Rulers of his *Republic*. Yet what he meant by "contemplating the Ideas," say of Beauty or Truth, in order to apply this understanding to the practice of governing, remained unclear. It seems likely that this was no mere oversight on his part, but in fact a logical impossibility. One cannot nail down the ineffable.

One of the sources of Clausewitz's interest is that he himself is alive to the tension between real and ideal. (This is not the same as resolving it: it's like being aware that you have an incurable disease and being able to write about it.) On one hand, we have the Clausewitz of the grand theoretical pronouncements, statements that are offered as being ineluctably true. He offers his theoretical definition of war in terms of absolutes, and in terms of extremes: "War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force. Each side . . . compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory, to extremes." This is followed by such absolute-sounding pronouncements (each of which provides the title for a brief section of Book I) as "The Aim [of Warfare] is to Disarm the Enemy" and "The Maximum Exertion of Strength."¹⁸

Yet almost immediately, the section that follows seems to acknowledge just how empty these assertions of extremes are. Because it is so startling after the assertively theoretical opening, it deserves lengthy quotation. The terms used are very Kantian, and the conclusions reached are so as well. According to Clausewitz, truths may be absolute for the noumenal realm (Clausewitz uses the term "abstract thought") but reality (Clausewitz says "practice") is quite different. This means that though x, y, and z may be true of

war in theory, the fact that war is fought not in theory but in reality means that the theory may not end up having much application at all to the reality.

In one breath, therefore, Clausewitz tells us that war is so and so. His theory is that war is an extreme, maximum, all-out enterprise. Yet in the next breath he admits that this is not reality. Why, we might ask in annoyance, doesn't he start from the other direction, and tell us what war really is?

Section 6, titled "Modifications in Practice," opens as follows:

Thus in the field of abstract thought the inquiring mind can never rest until it reaches the extreme, for here it is dealing with an extreme: a clash of forces freely operating and obedient to no law but their own. From a pure concept of war you might try to deduce absolute terms for the objective you should aim at and for the means of achieving it; but if you did so the continuous interaction would land you in extremes. . . . If we were to think purely in absolute terms, we could avoid every difficulty by a stroke of the pen and proclaim within flexible logic that, since the extreme must always be the goal, the greatest effort must always be exerted. Any such pronouncement would be an abstraction and would leave the real world quite unaffected.¹⁹

In other words, abstract thought by definition leads us astray, and in any case the real world has the last laugh. I have quoted this opening at such length because it indicates how clearly Clausewitz saw the problems of his undertaking. What is puzzling, however, is that he continued despite them. For one reading of this admission would push him to abandon his whole enterprise. Why write a philosophical treatise on war at all rather than a history, perhaps with some speculative sections regarding what war might become or, under the influence of Napoleon, usually cited as Clausewitz's model, had already become?

If the theory gets laid aside when we reenter the realm we can breathe in, why do we need the theory at all, given that we have to breathe? Why, moreover, propose one theory rather than the other? Why not propose the opposite theory, saying that all war in reality is long and drawn out and seeks to apply the minimum force—and then admit that, in reality, this is sometimes not so? The end effect would, it seems, be the same.

This opening theoretical position is one that Clausewitz continues to chip away at and revise throughout his book through the concepts of friction and the importance of chance. The concepts of friction and the importance of chance are, in turn, related to Clausewitz's notion of "genius."

In Clausewitz's view, genius is something the good commander-in-chief must possess. This is so because "war is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty." And again: "War is the realm of chance."

This means the following: “Since all information and assumptions are open to doubt, and with chance at work everywhere, the commander continually finds that things are not as he expected. . . . During an operation decisions have usually to be made at once: there may be no time to review the situation or even think it through.”²⁰

The ability to make decisions based on what Clausewitz calls the “glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth” is, in the author’s term, the “*coup d’oeil*.” Literally translated, this means “the glance,” and indicates the ability to size things up in an instant. This is at the heart of the genius necessary, in Clausewitz’s view, for the commander-in-chief. Furthermore, this person must possess “determination,” the willingness and ability to put his perceptions into reality. Elsewhere Clausewitz admits that the man at the top of the pyramid, the military genius, has no need of theories such as those Clausewitz himself is writing: it is those lower down who may profit by them.

Theories about the absolute nature of war are meaningless to the genius, who in any case must act with what may be a total dearth of information. Reality has its own rules, or rather is characterized by a lack of them. Planning for friction, uncertainty, and chance thus seems an utter impossibility: they must be accepted as part of reality, and the only person to see through the cloud of reality will be the genius. We should keep this in mind when we read commentators who purport to find in Clausewitz rules for war that should be heeded by top military officers.

Clausewitz then goes on to elaborate the notion of friction. His description of the realities of war on this topic continue the apparent rejection of his confident Kantian opening, as if parts of the book were written by an imaginary interlocutor, the scoffing rebuttal of the theorist by the man who had actually been in war. Chapter Seven of Book One, entitled “Friction in War,” opens as follows:

If one has never personally experienced war, one cannot understand in what the difficulties constantly mentioned really consist. . . . Everything looks simple . . . once war has actually been seen the difficulties become clear. . . . Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. . . . Friction is the only concept that more or less corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper.²¹

Clausewitz waxes almost poetic on the subject of friction, showering the reader with metaphors for the reality of war, something the reader may well never have experienced. The more Clausewitz poeticizes, the more convinced the reader is that friction is in fact paramount in war, theory nothing. Clausewitz in this vein almost seems like a plea for Murphy’s Law: If something can go wrong, it will. Where is his crystalline theory now? One reading

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would say it is in the stratospheres of abstraction, where the author himself correctly situated it—that is to say, useless. So why, the reader wonders, should he have bothered to articulate it?

One metaphor he offers is this: “Action in war is like movement in a resistant element. Just as the simplest and most natural of movements, walking, cannot easily be performed in water, so in war it is difficult for normal efforts to achieve even moderate results.”²²

Despite what Clausewitz says in the opening of the work, his subsequent concessions, themselves part of the work, undermine his theoretical certainty to such a great degree that we are left with a vision of war that is entirely different from the crystalline abstraction with which he began. In fact, we are left with its opposite: a view of war as chaotic, unpredictable, amenable to no rules but only the inspired “glance” of the single genius who alone understands the pattern and may, in his memoirs, explain to the hundreds of thousands of uncomprehending bodies that took part in his battles what it was they were actually doing. A theoretician of ideas would see Clausewitz as caught between two worlds, the neo-Classical with its belief in eternal verities, and the Romantic, with its insistence on human passion and the power of the individual. The combination does not make for coherent thought.

Despite the power of these sections on friction and chance, it is clear that Clausewitz was as wedded to the theory, his need to see war as predictable, as he was to his admissions that it was not. The interest of the work is precisely the tension between the two: the way that the theory gives him a point of departure that his caveats, concessions, and bows to reality modify.

A Middle Way?

Can we postulate something in the middle? Conveniently enough, this too is proposed by the author, who really seems to want to have things not just both ways, but all three ways. The third view is that while theory is modified by reality, it is not modified to the point of unusability. Reality conforms at least to a certain degree to theory, even after the revisions of friction,

chance, and genius. The outline of the theory may be blurred, but it is still visible. Not, perhaps, for the genius (who doesn't need it) nor for the footsoldier (who couldn't understand it), but for the rest of us, the people in the middle.

This way of wanting both extremes and the middle, as Brodie suggests, is Hegelian: the thesis, here the Olympian metaphysical pronouncements, and the antithesis, the pragmatic concessions, combine to produce the synthesis. Yet again, we must keep in mind that the synthesis does not cause the tension between the thesis and antithesis to disappear. The analogy of the swimmer continues, in fact, as follows: "A genuine theorist is like a swimming teacher, who makes his pupils practice motions on land that are meant to be performed in water. To those who are not thinking of swimming the motions will appear grotesque and exaggerated."²³ In other words, there is a point to theory, though it may not be clear to someone who does not also have an investment in the reality.

This same suggestion is echoed in the earlier analogy of the traveler, one of Clausewitz's best passages:

Imagine a traveler who late in the day decides to cover two more stages before nightfall. Only four or five hours more, on a paved highway with relays of horses: it should be an easy trip. But at the next station he finds no fresh horses, or only poor ones; the country grows hilly, the road bad, night falls, and finally after many difficulties he is only too glad to reach a resting place with any kind of primitive accommodation. It is much the same in war. Countless minor incidents—the kind you can never really foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls short of the intended goal.²⁴

Clausewitz goes on: "Iron will-power can overcome this friction; it pulverizes every obstacle, but of course it wears down the machine as well." In other words, the goal is not unreachable, and even the most harried traveler makes progress toward it. (Here the "goal" should be understood as analogically similar to the abstract ideal of war.) It is therefore not true, despite the so-convincing evocations of friction and chance, that war follows no patterns at all. We need not be aware of them, but they are there. The genius senses them, the rest of us can puzzle our way to them in works such as the one we are reading.

The famous assertion that "war is the continuation of policy by other means," however, occurs in the first chapter, the most Kantian/metaphysical of the book: war is this, war is that. It is only later that Clausewitz seems to admit that, well, actually it isn't. What sense does it make to assume that it is already completely antithesis, a "should," or perhaps a pragmatic synthesis? It makes far more sense to see Clausewitz as giving a metaphysical definition at this point. Not that this is the way war should be, and rarely is. But instead,

that this is the way it is, even if subsequently he admits that no definitions can end up being much use on the battlefield, either for the commander or for the footsoldiers. And this means, all wars by definition conform to this dictum.

There is no point in appealing to Clausewitz's famous assertion as if, were we to put it over the mirrors of all the officers in the US armed forces, it could prevent future failures. What for one man is a policy, even a good one, is for another a complete and utter lack of one. Summers writes as if the Vietnam War simply lacked a policy, a direction. Certainly it did not seem so to the people running it from Washington, who (as Summers admits) had many justifications (he counts 22) for US intervention.²⁵ Those who engineered the war were not bereft of a policy. It is only that given the way things turned out, it is clear that something went wrong. What was that? Well, if it is true that war must be the extension of policy, then clearly this war was not the extension of policy. (The circularity of this thinking should be obvious.) Too many policies are clearly, given the outcome, as bad as none at all.

Had the war succeeded, Clausewitz would presumably have been used to show that it was, by definition, the extension of a policy—or perhaps that the friction of the battlefield had worked to its advantage, despite lacking a policy. Clausewitz can't be used to distinguish between good and bad, for nobody would ever admit, or believe, that he was waging war without any purpose whatsoever—which in essence is the thrust of those commentators who see Clausewitz as “explaining” (say) failure in Vietnam. Perhaps there is a reason for the clearly metaphysical form this pronouncement takes after all.

Perhaps Clausewitz means to emphasize with “policy” the goals of a legitimate state, however we define “legitimate”—in other words policy in the sense of international law rather than, say, the desires of an armed mob. In that case it would be clear that Clausewitz is offering not a definition, but merely showing his distaste for “irregular” wars, by his definition failing to be wars at all: guerilla bands—in Peru, Colombia, or Chiapas, to name three recent examples—or terrorist attacks, not usually qualifying for this term of “war.” If this is our understanding of Clausewitz, the definition becomes once again circular: all “wars,” which is to say real wars, wars Clausewitz recognizes as such, are so-and-so. Fine. So be it.

Perhaps Clausewitz's emphasis in his definition is on “continuation,” that is on the idea that war should never be the first step a country takes against another, but rather a subsequent one. Indeed, this understanding of Clausewitz is suggested in Weinberger's Principle #6, “The commitment of US forces to combat should be a last resort.” First, states should try the pacific way, then and only then the bellicose one. Here the problem becomes in saying just how many resorts should precede the war. By definition war is always the last resort.

In the End

The range of possible interpretations of Clausewitz's messy *chef d'oeuvre* may well be the reason for its ongoing fascination: to a large degree, it is a mirror of the person reading it. And the problems intrinsic to Clausewitz are those of all moralists. Be the rules never so clear, to the person in the moment, his or her own situation trumps them. "It seemed like a good idea at the time" is the epitaph of human actions.

I propose that *On War* be taught as poetry, even in the staff colleges, an expression of the intrinsic contradictions of the human condition—our desire to nail down the future in theory and our necessary concession that reality always has the last word. It's a great work. But it's great because of its contradictions. Which means that we can't use it as a stick to beat anyone with—unless we are prepared to have it used on us in turn.

NOTES

1. "The Uses of Military Power," remarks by Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 28 November 1984, <http://www.pbs.org/gwbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/force/weinberger.html>.
2. Chronicled, among many other articles, in Benjamin R. Barber, "Our War's Mistaken Premise," *The Washington Post*, 14 September 2003, p. 7(B).
3. Randolph T. Holhut, "Iraq For Sale," *Monitor*, 26 April 2003, <http://www.monitor.net/monitor/0304a/iraqforsale.html>.
4. William S. Lind, "A Warning from Clausewitz," *CounterPunch*, 8 March 2003, <http://www.counterpunch.org/lind03082003.html>.
5. Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Keep Thinking 'Main Thing': We Could All Use a Little Clausewitz Lesson," *National Review Online*, 28 March 2003.
6. Mackubin Thomas Owens, "A Clausewitzian Read: The Proper Balance," *National Review Online*, 23 March 2003, <http://nationalreview.com/owens/owens032303.asp>.
7. Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 4. Owens rejects this as well, and here we may well say "thank goodness" that it is people like Owens teaching at the Naval War College—I just don't think he can use Clausewitz to justify this attractive viewpoint over its opponents.
10. Eliot A. Cohen, "Churchill and Coalition Strategy in World War II," in *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, ed. Paul Kennedy (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1991), p. 44.
11. Condoleezza Rice, "The Evolution of Soviet Grand Strategy," in Kennedy, p. 147.
12. Bernard Brodie, "A Guide to the Reading of *On War*," in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 641-711.
13. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984), p. 135.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
15. Antulio J. Echevarria II, "War, Politics, and RMA—The Legacy of Clausewitz," *JFQ*, No. 10 (Winter 1995-96), p. 78.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
17. Brodie, "Guide," p. 643.
18. Clausewitz, p. 75.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
25. Summers, p. 140.