

Clausewitz in Afghanistan

Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Anatol Rapoport, New York: Penguin, 1968 [1832].

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We are at war, so I read Clausewitz. It was not obvious that the Prussian military theorist would have insights to offer into our current preoccupations. When he wrote, terror still meant “La Terreur,” the Middle East had yet to be colonized and de-colonized by the West, and anthrax was a disease of cattle (although, oddly enough, the French diplomatist Talleyrand was to die of it a few years later in 1838). War was still fought mostly by men on horses and marching ranks of infantry with muskets, notwithstanding the recent innovations of a brilliant, Corsican usurper.

Nevertheless, Clausewitz is reputed to have looked into the heart of War and glimpsed some of its essential features. He remains a source of inspiration in the military academies. Colin Powell read *On War* at the National War College. In his autobiography, he recalls that the book struck him “like a beam of light from the past, illuminating present-day military quandaries.”

So I turned to my disheveled, second-hand Pelican Classics edition of *On War*, with several quandaries of my own. The Bush Administration decided early on to label the attacks on New York and Washington an act of “war”. Since then, we have responded with familiar military tactics—airial bombardment and commando raids. Yet our enemy is not so much a state as a concept, and a war against terrorism—like one against drugs or forest fires—can only be

metaphorical. Would Clausewitz recognize this struggle as a war at all? Are his principles of strategy shaping the way we are fighting?

The Nature of War

A Clausewitzian war is one without limits—“an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds.” It is “the shock of two opposing forces in collision with each other, from which it follows as a matter of course that the stronger not only destroys the other, but carries it forward with it in its movement.” No room here for sentimentality or the delicate battlefield ballet of the pre-Napoleonic great powers. The key to victory is to use overwhelming force, for “he who uses force unsparingly, without reference to the bloodshed involved, must obtain a superiority if his adversary uses less vigour in its application.” As a result, “[t]he best Strategy is *always to be very strong*, first generally then at the decisive point.” Generals should “keep the forces concentrated in an overpowering mass,” rather than dividing them up into separate armies and strategic reserves. Furthermore, force should be concentrated in time: there is nothing to be gained by stretching conflicts out rather than betting everything on a single engagement.

Second, war is instrumental. It is “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will.” Or, in Clausewitz’s most famous dictum, war is “a mere continuation of policy by other means.” Two points follow from this. First, political goals must govern the military decisions, and one must continually evaluate whether the two remain consistent. Military tactics can undermine the goals for which force is used. Second, military goals and tactics must enjoy domestic political support.

These features of Clausewitzian war hint at a rationalistic, almost deterministic, conception. War is fought by rational leaders who reconcile ends and means, and the outcome is determined by the balance of forces. But Clausewitz’s goes on to undermine this simplistic image in what is the book’s greatest contribution—an inspired description of the uncertainty in which wars are fought and the elements of military genius that such uncertainty brings to the fore. Here

we truly see Clausewitz the philosopher-scientist, who, as Anatol Rapaport puts it in his introduction “sought simplicity and... distrusted it.”

War is a game, but—game theorists, take note—a game of roulette rather than chess. “[F]rom the outset there is a play of possibilities, probabilities, good and bad luck, which spreads about with all the coarse and fine threads of its web, and makes War of all branches of human activity the most like a gambling game.” He mocks those who turn to a treatise on war expecting to find geometry or proofs. Mathematical theorems are about as much use here as a physics that does not recognize the effects of friction. Danger, the physical exhaustion of the troops, inaccurate information, weather, and an “infinity of petty circumstances” combine to complicate the implementation of simple plans, and render the actual fighting of war akin to walking underwater. The “correct theorists” are like those who try to teach swimming by demonstrating the necessary movements on dry land. Not only must soldiers march underwater, the lack of accurate information means that their generals must command them in the dark. In war, “all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently—like the effect of a fog or moonshine—gives to things exaggerated dimensions and an unnatural appearance.”

As a result: “Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult.” Military victories are determined as much by the genius—or lack thereof—of the generals as by the balance of forces. He describes with vivid precision the mental qualities that make up such genius—*coup d’oeil* (the ability to rapidly discover a truth “which to the ordinary mind is either not visible at all or only becomes so after long examination and reflection”), resolution, and presence of mind, among others.¹ From the arithmetic of force and the instrumentalities of war, we are drawn into a portrait of the psychology of greatness, built up, one senses, from observation

¹ Clausewitz’s distinction between resolution—“courage in the face of moral danger”—and boldness is particularly nice: “If a young man to show his skill in horsemanship leaps across a deep cleft, then he is bold; if he makes the same leap pursued by a troop of head-chopping Janissaries he is only resolute.” Boldness is incompatible with necessity.

of the master general to whom Clausewitz had himself devoted such long examination and reflection.

Fighting Terror

So what light can Clausewitz shed on our current military struggle? He warns us to expect friction and bad luck as well as good, and perhaps to reserve judgment on various aspects of the campaign until after the “fog and moonshine” recede. He reminds us to keep our political aims in view at all times.

The main reason Clausewitz makes interesting reading now, though, is because of his evident influence on some of those shaping our strategy. He remains popular in at least one camp within the US foreign policy establishment. Colin Powell’s contribution to strategic thinking—the so-called Powell Doctrine, which requires that the US only go to war in pursuit of clear goals with strong political support and that it use overwhelming force—comes straight out of *On War*. Caspar Weinberger, Powell’s former boss, articulated a similarly Clausewitzian doctrine in the early 1980s.

Are we following such an approach? It is hard to see how. Strong political support exists, but it seems secondary at this point for *what*. The stated mission—to destroy terrorist organizations “with global reach” and the governments that assist them—is vague and elastic. No one seems to know exactly which states will end up on the outlaw list, and just what constitutes “global reach”. Our apparent readiness to expand objectives when things go well (to spread military action to Iraq or elsewhere) might well strike Clausewitz as reminiscent of Napoleon’s fatal blunder of invading Russia. As for using overwhelming force, there is a Clausewitzian echo in the use of “daisy-cutter” bombs to demoralize the Taliban. But when the enemy hides behind civilians or underground, the principle is harder to apply. The aerial force we have employed, while overwhelming to a poorly equipped, Third World army, represents a small fraction of the

military resources the US could muster. We appear not so much to be using extreme force as using force against the extremely weak.

For neo-Clausewitzians in Washington, it must be frustrating how poorly the strategist's insights seem to fit the current struggle against terror. This is not accidental. In fact, it could be argued that modern terrorism evolved precisely to target the chinks in the Clausewitzian armor.

Clausewitzian war—the use of overwhelming force to impose one's will on an adversary—is an instrument of the strong. Modern terror is a mutant strain of resistance by the weak. How to withstand the application of overwhelming force, concentrated in time and place? Deny the enemy a target. Disperse your soldiers in global networks. Strike at his weak points. Spread out attacks over time, exploiting moments of absent-mindedness when the powerful sleep. How to defeat a military leader who seeks to impose his will, who fights to achieve concrete political goals, who relies on civilian support? Strengthen your own will with religious or ideological fervor, lure the adversary into military tactics that undermine his goals, kill civilians. How to defeat the eagle who strikes from above? Become a snake who burrows in caves. Then, to instil fear, strike at the eagle's nest high up in its towering sanctuary.

Different soldiers learned different Clausewitzian lessons from the US failure in Vietnam. General Westmoreland learned that force must be overwhelming and that military strategy is sometimes shaped by political expediency. Colin Powell learned that it is futile to fight wars the American public will not support and that every use of force should have a clear goal. But the most useful lesson from that war may have been another: that the weak were developing instruments of their own—guerrilla warfare, terrorism—that exploited the weaknesses of the strong. To appreciate the significance of this—and adapt strategy accordingly—would have required real *coup d'oeil*.