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Clausewitz and Strategy Today

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by

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A key element in modern military thought in this country has been a return to study and analysis of a work over a century-and-a-half old—Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, published posthumously by his widow in 1832.

The reason for this return to the classic work on war is that Vietnam era perceptions of the nature of war suffered from the same deficiencies described by Clausewitz in the early nineteenth century. Then, as now, the public's "intelligence [had] been insulted by the confused and confusing welter of ideas . . . on the subject of the conduct of war [which had] no fixed point of view; . . . [led] to no satisfactory conclusion; [and were] sometimes banal, sometimes absurd, sometimes simply adrift in a sea of vague generalization . . . . " This similarity was rooted in the same causes. Clausewitz observed that in the eighteenth century war had "become solely the concern of the government to the extent that governments parted company with their peoples and behaved as if they were themselves the state." In contrast, modern warfare consisted of a "remarkable trinity"—the people, the army, and the government. "A theory that ignores any one of them," he wrote, " . . . would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless."

As the United States assumed global responsibilities after World War II, Clausewitz's warning was ignored, and in the name of more rapid response to threats to our national security, the nation unwittingly began moving toward a neo-eighteenth century approach to war. Evidently without realizing the full implications of what they were doing, the post-World War II academic theorists on limited war deliberately excluded the American people from their strategic equations. Presaging our Vietnam involvement, the military was committed to combat in Korea without a declaration of war, a move that weakened the linkage between the American people and their Army. When the same fundamental error was repeated in Vietnam, the already weakened link snapped completely and instead of America's war, the war in Vietnam became "Johnson's war," "Nixon's war" and "the Army's war."

Vietnam proved that Clausewitz was a more accurate guide to the nature of war than were the theoreticians of the mid-twentieth century. Elaborating

on what was to become a particularly controversial aspect of his theory (that "war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means"), Clausewitz emphasized that, "The only source of war is politics—*the intercourse of governments and peoples*." This Clausewitzian dictum ought to have been particularly obvious to Americans because it had manifested itself during the American Revolution and was incorporated into the very foundations of our Republic. Alexander Hamilton highlighted it in *The Federalist* when he wrote, "The whole power of raising armies [is] lodged in the *Legislature* . . . a popular body, consisting of representatives of the people, periodically elected . . . . The power of the President would be inferior to that of the Monarch . . . . That of the British King extends to the *Declaring* of War and to the *Raising* and *Regulating* of fleets and armies; all of which by the Constitution . . . would appertain to the Legislature."

Paradoxically, although Hamilton's concept had been incorporated into our Constitution (i.e., Article I, Section 8), both the American people and their military traditionally tended to ignore this fundamental principle in their thinking about war and, as Clausewitz put it, make the erroneous assumption "that war suspends that intercourse [between government and the people] and replaces it by a wholly new and different condition, ruled by no law but its own." Within the American military, these views were articulated by Brevet Major General Emory Upton in the latter part of the nineteenth century and incorporated into Army doctrinal manuals. "Politics and strategy are radically and fundamentally things apart," a 1936 manual stated. "Strategy begins where politics end. All that soldiers ask is that once the policy is settled, strategy and command shall be regarded as being in a sphere apart from politics."

This was more than just a statement of doctrine, it represented the mindset of the Army's senior leadership. This was illustrated in the testimony of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur before the Senate in 1951. "The general definition which for many decades has been accepted," MacArthur said, "was that . . . when all the political means failed, we then go to force." General MacArthur's relief by President Truman over the very issue of the primacy of politics destroyed this fallacy within the military. The opening chapter of the Army's present-day basic doctrinal manual emphasizes that "The Constitution firmly establishes the fundamental principle of maintaining civilian control over the Armed Forces of the United States so as to insure that the Armed Forces remain focused on, and responsive to, the needs and desires of the American people as expressed by their elected representatives." The manual goes on to say that "Since war is, among other things, a political act for political ends, the conduct of a war, in terms of strategy and constraints, is defined primarily by its political objectives." Army doctrine has thus accepted Clausewitz's view that "subordinating the political point of view to the military would be absurd, for it is policy that

creates war. Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. No other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political."

"No conflict need arise any longer," Clausewitz said, "between political and military interests . . . . It might be thought that policy could make demands on war which war could not fulfill; but that hypothesis would challenge the natural and unavoidable assumption *that policy knows the instrument it means to use.* If policy reads the course of military events correctly, it is wholly and exclusively entitled to decide which events and trends are best for the objectives of the war . . . . Only if [policy looks] to certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature do political decisions influence operations for the worse." The key to America's problems in Vietnam was that a conflict *did* arise between political and military interests, and one of the reasons for this conflict was that "policy" (i.e., the American people and their elected representatives) did not "know the instrument it meant to use."

· Part of this lack of knowledge came from the people themselves who persisted in the fallacy that war was a phenomenon unto itself, one exclusively the province of the military. But part of it was caused by the post-World War II limited war theorists. Although Clausewitz had warned about those who would "exclude all moral factors from strategic theory and . . . reduce everything to a few mathematical formulas," the theorists had reduced war to an academic model where the horror, the bloodshed and the destruction of the battlefield were remarkably absent. The Army added to this trend when, through fear of reinforcing the basic antimilitarism of the American people, battlefield realities were downplayed and euphemisms were used to dilute the horrors of war. The Army, no longer the *War* Department but part of the *Defense* Department, did not kill the enemy, it "inflicted casualties," it no longer destroyed things, it "neutralized targets." These evasions allowed the notion to grow that we could apply military force in a sanitary and surgical manner.

By deemphasizing the realities of war, the military encouraged the idealistic side of the American nature to believe that we could resist communism, promote social change, and build a democracy in South Vietnam without anyone getting hurt. Clausewitz could have told us the result. "Kindhearted people," he wrote, "might . . . think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst . . . . It would be futile—even wrong—to try and shut one's eyes to what war really is from sheer distress at its brutality." But "shutting our eyes to what war really is" is exactly what had happened, and when idealists found they had blood on their

hands, they recoiled in disgust and revulsion at what they had wrought and became some of the most passionate and outspoken critics of the war.

In retrospect it was obvious that the Army had been remiss in not informing the Armerican people of what war is all about. In a discussion with Army officers in 1976, then Army Chief of Staff General Fred C. Weyland addressed the inherent conflict between the battlefield and the idealism of the American people. "We must counsel our political leaders and alert the American public that there is no such thing as a 'splendid little war,'" he wrote, "there is no such thing as a war fought on the cheap. War is death and destruction. The American way of war is particularly violent, deadly and dreadful [because] we believe in using 'things'—artillery, bombs, massive firepower—in order to conserve our soldiers' lives . . . . We should have made the realities of war obvious to the American people before they witnessed it on their television screens. The Army must make the price of involvement clear *before* we get involved . . . . "

As the intense emotions of Vietnam begin to fade, there is a growing awareness that the very news media that many in the Army complained about so bitterly during the Vietnam war for their vivid portrayals of the realities of the battlefield are precisely the instruments that can make "the price of involvement clear." To its own surprise, the Army is becoming aware that television portrayal of battlefield realities is an asset, not a liability. The scenes of death and destruction in Vietnam (and, more recently in Lebanon) brought into every home by television, horrible as they were, have the effect of giving the American people a better understanding of the nature of military force. In any future conflict, they should know full well "the instrument they mean to use."

But there are those who argue that American public awareness of the realities of war has been a dangerous development that may serve to make us unwilling to bear the cost of maintaining our freedom and independence in today's precarious and increasingly unstable world. They argue that if television cameras had recorded the slaughter at Antietam or Gettysburg during the Civil War, the American people would have abandoned the struggle and we would be a divided nation today. They argue that if television cameras had been at the Normandy beachhead or in the Ardennes or at Tarawa during World War II, the American people would have been so horrified with the carnage they would have demanded an immediate end of the war and Fascist dictatorships would now control Europe and Asia.

But while there may be some truth in their concerns, there is a very large fallacy involved in using our Vietnam war experience as a basis for concluding that the American people are losing their will. The fallacy lies in examining the *cost* of war as revealed by the dispatches—verbal and visual— of the war correspondents in isolation from the *value* of war (what Clausewitz called "the political aim") in the eyes of the participants. Critics of

battlefield television reporting are, in effect, repeating the misconceptions of the early proponents of air power who believed that terror bombing of civilian population centers would evoke so much horror that immediate surrender would be assured. But we know from experience that such terror bombing during World War II only strengthened national resolve. It is apparent that the costs of war only have meaning in relationship to the value of the war.

In answering the question "What is War?" Clausewitz stated that "war is . . . an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will [and thus] . . . the emotions cannot fail to be involved. War may not spring from them, but they will still affect it to some degree, and the extent to which they do so will depend not on the level of civilization but on how important the conflicting interests are and how long their conflict lasts." Discussing the nature of war, Clausewitz notes that "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."

The so-called "erosion" of an American will that supported World War II in the face of over a million casualties but palled at less than a quarter that number in Vietnam had little to do with the fact that television brought the horrors of war into the living room. The difference was rooted in the reasons war was being waged. "Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object," Clausewitz wrote over one hundred fifty years ago, "the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration* . . . ."

In words that explain this difference between our reaction to World War II and our reaction toward the war in Vietnam, Clausewitz wrote, "Bear in mind how wide a range of political interests can lead to war, or think for a moment of the gulf that separates . . . a struggle for political existence from a war reluctantly declared in consequence of political pressure or of an alliance that no longer seems to reflect the state's true interests." He goes on to emphasize that "the more modest your own political aim, the less importance you attach to it and the less reluctantly you will abandon it if you must . . . . The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires."

In World War II we were fighting for our survival and our political and military objectives were synonymous—the total destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his unconditional surrender. In the Korean war political and military objectives underwent several changes (a not unusual occurrence in wartime where, as Clausewitz put it "The original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and may finally change entirely since they are influenced by events and their probable consequences.") At first, the political and military objectives were restoration of the status quo

ante, then, after the Inchon invasion, they were the total destruction of the North Korean armed forces and the reunification of Korea. After the Chinese intervention, the political goal again became the restoration of the status quo ante and, when General MacArthur could not accept that change, he was replaced by a military commander who could. In Vietnam researchers have found that the United States was pursuing some twenty-one overlapping and sometimes contradictory objectives, a hodgepodge that resulted, as Professor Douglas Kinnard found, in "almost seventy percent of the Army generals who managed the war [being] uncertain of its objectives." Kinnard went on to say that this "mirrors a deep-seated strategic failure: the inability of policymakers to frame tangible, obtainable goals."

The answer to avoiding another Vietnam debacle is not, as some would have it, the banning of television from the battlefield (and note the trend in this direction by the British in the Falklands and the Israelis, albeit unsuccessfully, in Lebanon) but to insure that our elected representatives heed Clausewitz's warning that "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."

It might appear that in a perfect world a better solution would be to banish war entirely. But a look around the world today—where the British and Argentines have just concluded a war in the Flaklands, the Israelis and PLO have (one hopes) concluded a war in Lebanon, the Iranis and the Iraqis, the Ethiopians and the Somalians, the Soviets and the Afghanis, are still killing each other in pursuit of (in their eyes) crucial political objectives—this eventuality would, sad to say, seem both as attractive and as remote as the coming of the Millenium.

As General Weyand once put it, "Americans have a long and proud tradition of irreverence toward and distrust of their military." Even before our Constitution was adopted, there were those who objected to maintaining armed forces in peacetime. In *The Federalist*, James Madison answered such critics with an argument that has become more relevant in our age of intercontinental missiles than it was in his age of sailing ships. "With what color of propriety could the force necessary for defense be limited by those who cannot limit the force of offense?" he asked. "How could a readiness for war in time of peace be safety prohibited unless we could prohibit, in like manner, the preparations and establishments of every hostile nation?" "The means of security can only be regulated by the means and the danger of attack," he emphasized. "They will, in fact, be ever determined by these rules, and by no others. If one nation maintains constantly a disciplined army, ready for the service of ambition or revenge, it obliges the most pacific nations who may be within the reach of its enterprises to take corresponding precautions."

If we are to continue to take these "corresponding precautions," we need to rid ourselves of one of the most dangerous fallacies of Vietnam—that war is the exclusive province of the military. One quote captures the essence of this misconception. Talking with a *Newsweek* reporter in 1971, my namesake, Colonel Wallen Summers, then an economics professor at the United States Military Academy, said, "I don't choose the wars I fight in. When people ask me why I went to Vietnam, I say, 'I thought you knew. *You sent me!*'"

That the question would even have been asked was an indication that something was seriously wrong, and the outraged reaction of too many of our fellow citizens to Colonel Wallen Summers' answer was even greater evidence of our failure to comprehend and apply the fundamentals of modern warfare. If as a result of our Vietnam retrospective we fully understand that war is indeed, as Clausewitz discovered (and as our Constitution confirms), a remarkable trinity of the people, their government and their army, then the question asked of Colonel Wallen Summers will never again need to be raised, for the answer will have become self-evident.

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Misconceptions of Law and Misguided Policy

by Alfred P. Rubin

The latter correctly reads: "The Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act of 1976, 28 US Code Secs. 1330, 1602 sq., provides that a foreign state shall not be immune from the jurisdiction of courts of the United States in any case in which the action is based on 'an act outside the territory of the United States in connection with a commercial activity of the foreign state elsewhere and that act causes a direct effect in the United States' (Sec. 1605 (a) (2))."