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All too often the writings of important thinkers are broadly and superficially accepted in a capsulized form. Such intellectual shortcuts do little to enhance understanding or encourage further serious thought on great ideas. The writings of Clausewitz are a case in point inasmuch as there is widespread familiarity with phrases like "War is the continuation of policy by different means," but little popular attention is paid to the reasoning underlying them. While there may be no single correct answer to the questions Clausewitz's writings raise, it is essential that professional military men address themselves to the issues involved.

WAR AS A COLLAPSE OF POLICY: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF CLAUSEWITZ

A research paper

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Introduction. While a great deal of time has elapsed since Clausewitz conceived his unfinished symphony *On War* and while the nature of war and the weapons for waging it have evolved drastically, the basic theory and teaching of many of our military strategists have changed very little since 1865. The explanation generally advanced for this atrophy is that Clausewitz developed a fundamental philosophy of war, the basic theoretical precepts of which transcend time and are applicable to all wars regardless of when they are waged. To a student of philosophy, however, Clausewitz seems seriously deficient in both methodology and concept. To the student of history, he seems to have drawn upon too limited a sampling of historical events. And to a pure pragmatist, Clausewitz's theories on the broader issues just do not seem to work.

This paper attempts to place Clausewitz's teaching in historical perspective, takes a critical look at the philosophical basis of his doctrines, and examines the validity of their application to the war of 1870. Viewed in this light, blind acceptance of Clausewitz's teaching would appear to lead to questionable judgments in modern strategic thinking. History, particularly the war of 1870, has demonstrated the fallacy of his dictum on the instrumentality of war.

Much of the confusion in strategic thought today is traceable to the failure to distinguish strategy from policy, and this in turn springs from too ready an acceptance of the Clausewitzian principle that war is the continuation of policy. It is presumptuous to expect that the few thoughts expressed in this paper would convince anyone to reject Clausewitz. In fact, this would not be

desirable for there is still much in Clausewitz that can promote a better understanding of the nature of war—particularly his views on the psychological factors in warfare. This paper, then, will have achieved its purpose if it leads a single reader to reexamine his ideas on the validity of Clausewitz's teaching and if it encourages him to question rather than simply accept. Let it not be said of us, as Liddell Hart said of an earlier generation of students of war, that Clausewitz's "formless conceptions . . . proclaimed as indisputable truths, were submissively accepted by a generation of statesmen dangerously ignorant of war. The consequences, the threefold consequences, were: to make war more difficult to avoid, more difficult to conduct successfully, and more difficult to terminate . . ."¹

Clausewitz: an Anachronism? It comes as somewhat of a shock to a civilian entering one of the war colleges today to discover that the bible of contemporary military strategists is a rambling work which its author described as "a shapeless mass" and which was written some 150 years ago. With the vast evolution of military thought and technology since the mid-19th century, it is difficult to avoid considering Clausewitz as anything but a quaint anachronism. Surely there is some validity to Alfred Vagts' complaint that Clausewitz has been "read and expounded by those whom no historical sense warned that writing on the philosophy of war is . . . time conditioned."²

Lest Vagts be considered anti-Clausewitzian, for he is not, one need merely turn to Clausewitz himself for a similar warning that his maxims are neither eternal nor immutable. In another era, when the industrial revolution was still in embryo, Clausewitz observed that each age has its own peculiar forms of war, its own restrictive conditions, and its own prejudices. It therefore follows that each would develop its respective

theory of war, and the inclination would be to work it out on philosophical principles. The events in each age must, therefore, be judged with due regard to the peculiarities of the time.³ Clausewitz himself sounds the warning here. Failure to heed it will lead to erroneous theories concerning the nature and origins of war; particular causes springing from particular social structures have again and again been universalized.

Virtually every commentator on Clausewitz begins his commentary with an admission that much of what Clausewitz wrote is no longer relevant to our own times. This is quite obvious for, after all, he wrote at a time when war, while it had ceased to be the mere geometric maneuvering of armies practiced during the 18th century, was still basically a military operation. Wars were still fought by armies clashing on the battlefield. The wholesale slaughter of civilian noncombatants as a function of war was as foreign to Clausewitz as it had been to Henry Evans Lloyd or Dietrich von Bulow. Even as late as 1870 the idea of shelling Paris, with its concomitant killing of civilians, was the subject of a great deal of handwringing among the Prussians themselves.

How times have changed! A recent tongue-in-cheek study—which is nonetheless not completely invalid in describing trends—has revealed some amazing statistics. In World War I 13 percent of those killed were civilians; in World War II about 70 percent; in the Korean war the figure rose to 84 percent; while in Vietnam, when the final statistics are gathered, civilian casualties may run as high as 90 percent. We are reaching the statistical absurdity when the next war could result in 100 percent civilian deaths to 0 percent military deaths! Without giving full credence to such statistical extrapolation, it is clear that Clausewitz's concepts of war—based on the clash of troops on the battlefield—must necessarily be out-

dated in an age when the total destruction of cities by conventional ordnance and of countries by nuclear holocaust lies within man's capabilities.

The advent of the nuclear age has necessitated drastic revisions in strategic thinking. Nonetheless, the teachings of Clausewitz seem to have remained remarkably unaffected. Yet the possibility of nuclear war challenges some of the fundamental concepts he propounded. His ideal of absolute war, supposedly never to be encountered in reality, now seems epitomized in a total nuclear clash. As for another of his most frequently quoted maxims, that war is the continuation of policy, one may reasonably ask, what type of policy could possibly be *continued* in an all-out nuclear war?

Logically, then, the concept of war as a continuation of policy does not seem to apply to a nuclear holocaust, where political intercourse during and after the war would be manifestly impossible. Still, many argue that the concept is still quite valid in anything less than total nuclear war. Yet anyone who has seen the landscape in Vietnam after a B-52 raid may well wonder whether a nuclear attack could have been any more devastating, aside from considerations of fallout and genetic impairment. Superimpose this devastation on the major population centers of an imagined enemy and the question again arises, what sort of political intercourse can go on during and after such a war?

Perhaps then, Clausewitz's maxim is only applicable in a very limited conflict, where the adversaries use only moderate force. However, this is exactly the point at issue. If Clausewitz's principles apply only to very limited, specific cases, they then cease to be philosophical principles transcending time and "applicable to every stage of military history and practice," as Rothfels and others maintain.⁴ Then the central issue revolves around the question of whether Clausewitz's teachings, par-

ticularly his aphorism that war is a continuation of policy, are timeworn ideas of little practical value today or whether they are valid philosophical concepts based on sound metaphysics and applicable to any age. Was Clausewitz a philosopher dabbling in strategy or a strategist dabbling in philosophy?

Clausewitz as a Philosopher. Apologists of Clausewitz are fond of making the point that his work is not a history of war but a philosophy of war. This writer will not delve into the all too common confusion of philosophy with ideology, but to a student of philosophy—who considers the discipline as a rational, systematic study of the nature of the universe—it is difficult to accept the rambling, self-contradictory notes of Clausewitz as philosophy. This malaise is shared by no less an admirer of Clausewitz than Roger Ashley Leonard, who admits that Clausewitz "confined his researches to too narrow an historical spectrum, and made only limited use of the comparative methods,"⁵ and again, "unfortunately in his discussion on 'absolute war' he contradicts [his other] assertions."⁶

Perhaps the problem is that Clausewitz attempted to approach philosophically a subject (war) that is essentially unphilosophical. Most people agree that war, like all acts of violence, is essentially irrational. How then can one rationally justify the irrational? What is required, in accepting Clausewitz, is not so much an act of reason as an act of faith. It might be more appropriate to consider Clausewitz not as a philosopher, but as a theologian, and *On War* is his bible.

The teachings of Clausewitz are subject to as many varying interpretations as the Bible itself, and each interpreter considers himself a better spokesman than his neighbor. Indeed, Clausewitz is all things to all men, and he can be quoted to support almost any position one wishes to take, only to be rebutted

by the familiar words, "What Clausewitz really meant was . . ." When Clausewitz is appealed to as the source of contradictory views, the answer given is that his teaching was misunderstood. However, as Leonard notes, "Though Clausewitz was misunderstood . . . the fault did not lie entirely with his disciples."⁷

Like all theologians, Clausewitz demands a good deal of faith from his followers. In return, he presents them with an ethic, a justification for thinking the unthinkable. War becomes not a senseless act of violence but merely a continuation of policy or a rational instrument of policy. This may be good theology, but it is not very good philosophy.

Clausewitz and Kant. It has become almost a truism to consider Clausewitz as a Kantian philosopher. However, beyond Clausewitz's rather sophomoric borrowing of the Kantian theory of ideals against which reality is to be measured, there is very little in *On War* that resembles Kant's systematic philosophical reasoning. Liddell Hart was not far from the mark when he said that Clausewitz "acquired a philosophical mode of expression without developing a truly philosophical mind."⁸

If Clausewitz was a Kantian, he was a very limited one. There is certainly nothing in his writings to indicate that he ever read or heard of Kant's famous, though unfortunately not very influential, *On Perpetual Peace*, with its logical and eloquent appeal to international government as the only hope to end war among nations. Nor does Clausewitz give us any reason to believe that he was ever exposed to Kant's idea of war as "a lawless state of savagery" or of the European balance of power as "a mere chimera . . . like Swift's house, which, having been perfectly erected by a master builder according to all the laws of equilibrium, collapsed as soon as a sparrow came to rest on it."⁹ In fact, Kant considered the command "there

shall not be war" as a corollary of the categorical imperative.¹⁰ This is the antithesis of Clausewitzian teaching and should be argument enough that Clausewitz's exposure to Kant was either very limited or largely ignored.

The Irrationality of War. No discussion of Clausewitz as a philosopher would be complete without a critical study of the logical coherence of his teachings. As stated earlier, Clausewitz was faced with the predicament of rationally defending the irrational. Nowhere is his quandary more obvious than in his attempt to define war as the continuation of policy. Let us examine the validity of this statement on purely metaphysical grounds.

At the outset, we can grant the premise that foreign policy is generally a rational plan of activity governing the interaction among nations. If policy is itself irrational, then obviously any war considered as the continuation of that policy will be equally irrational, *quod erat demonstrandum*.

If policy is rational and if war is but a continuation of policy, then it must follow that war, too, is rational. But it can be argued that exactly the opposite is true. War is an activity incompatible with rational practice. In his excellent treatise "Can War Be Rationally Justified?"¹¹ A.C. Genova, Professor of Philosophy at Wichita State University, discusses in depth the metaphysical view of war as an irrational and rationally unjustifiable activity, arguing from the very nature of coherent activity. To treat the problem as profoundly as he does would be beyond the purview of this paper, but let us touch upon the surface of his thought. Like all activity, war can be analyzed in terms of:

- The context to which it applies
- The end or goal to which it is directed
- The intelligible norms or rules that regulate the actions that achieve the relevant end

In other words, activities are situational, purposive, and rule directed. Now, for an activity to be rational, the regulative norms or rules must be compatible with each other, applicable to the appropriate context, and relevant to the purpose of the activity. Seen in this light, war is irrational because its activity is irrelevant as a means to the political end to be achieved. For an activity to be rational, its regulative norms or rules must be essentially relevant to and derive from the nature of the goal to be achieved. Inasmuch as rules governing the conduct of war are ill suited to the lasting resolution of the typical problems that engender wars—problems such as those concerning geographical borders, political differences, and economic conflicts, warfare becomes an irrational course for nations to pursue.

No doubt the patience of some readers has by now been sorely taxed by our failure to consider wars fought purely in self-defense for national survival. In a way, such wars can be seen as rational and serving the policy ends of self-preservation, but to consider survival as a policy is like considering living as a career. Essentially, a "war of self-defense" implies a contradiction in terms. The defensive action is always limited by the conditions of overt aggression. It is justified only to the extent that it is necessary for the very existence of the defender. In this context the aggressor is analogous to a physical object following a line of force that must be diverted if destruction is to be avoided. The agents of self-defense are not motivated toward aggression or warfare; they merely act in accordance with norms that regulate preventive measures that will deter warfare. Strictly speaking, then, despite the fact that the term "war" is applied to both aggressive activity and the activity of self-defense, an analysis of the respective activities will reveal that the two are contrary in most respects.

Unfortunately, this rather obvious distinction becomes clouded in practice because the parties engaged in war almost inevitably claim self-defense as their justification. One is reminded of the story of Hitler weeping over a devastated Warsaw and exclaiming, "How wicked these people must have been to make me do this to them."¹²

More might be said on this subject, but we are digressing from our discussion of Clausewitz's teachings. When the Prussian theorist proclaims war as a continuation of policy, he is not limiting himself to a purely self-defensive activity aimed at the sole policy of survival. He is speaking in terms of the type of war later waged by Bismarck—a war designed to achieve political goals. And this type of war does not meet the criteria for rationality that we have postulated above. As Robert Ginsberg put it, "In one manifestation or another, the basic cause of war is the irrationality of man. Armed with reason man ought to be able to master himself." He also ought to be able to master Clausewitz.

War and Policy. As the reader has no doubt already surmised, the thrust of this paper is aimed at Clausewitz's famous dictum that war is nothing but the continuation of policy by other means. The idea has no doubt great appeal, for it seems to give war a certain innocence, to clothe it in the garb of acceptability. After all, we must have policy; as long as nations exist they will interact on one another. If war is but a continuation of that interaction, it becomes a natural thing, an ineluctable course of national activity. War and peace are no longer the issues, but war and policy.

There is a great deal of reluctance to consider war as something in itself. Even Clausewitz, while granting that war has its own grammar, would not further admit that it develops its own logic. Yet a close scrutiny of almost any war—the

war of 1870, for example—reveals a clear pattern. As the war progresses, it inevitably develops its own rationale, its own logic, its own aims, its own being.

While this is precisely what Clausewitz warned against and argued against when he said that the political goals of war must always take precedence over the military aims, saying it does not make it so. I am reminded of a long line of scholastic philosophers and teachers who, when all other arguments failed, would pound the desk (or the typewriter keys) and appeal to the final argument: *Ex periculo scepticismi!* Unless you accept this, there is nothing left but philosophical skepticism. Clausewitz is very close to this type of reasoning when he argues that “under all circumstances War is to be regarded not as an independent thing, but as a political instrument; and it is only by taking this point of view that we can avoid finding ourselves in opposition to all military history.”¹³ *Ex periculo negandi historiae!* Unless you accept this, you are negating military history.

Despite the lipservice Clausewitz pays to the primacy of political over military goals, he is quite firm in insisting that the general should be independent of political decisions and that, in fact, he should be in a position to influence them:

The political end is . . . no despotic legislator. It must be adapted to the nature of the means and consequently may often be totally changed . . . Strategy in general and the commander in chief in particular may demand that the political tendencies and aims shall not conflict with the peculiar nature of military means, and this demand is by no means a slight one . . .¹⁴

In an effort to explain this hard-line stance of Clausewitz, Rothfels opines that the military theorist “may have been thinking of the political whims of courtiers or of deliberating bodies

which, so often in the 18th century, interfered with military operations.”¹⁵ Interpreting what Clausewitz “may have been thinking” is a favorite pastime of his apologists, but it is not a very rewarding one. Rothfels’ attempt to justify his hero forces him to the conclusion that “even democracies have faced and will face situations in which military exigencies are bound to overrule political considerations.”¹⁶

In all fairness to Clausewitz, however, it must be pointed out that the preponderant trend of his thought is more in the direction of establishing the supremacy of political over military objectives. Nevertheless, the inherent contradictions in his writings remain. Try as he might to make war respectable by viewing it as merely an extension of policy, the realities of war, with its aroused passions, devastation, and “military exigencies,” negated his theory. The concept of war as a situation where political motives are always kept clearly in perspective, where the military are fully cognizant of political factors and keep them uppermost in their military planning, is the most naive pie-in-the-sky dream imaginable. Did we need MacArthur, My Lai, or General Lavelle to prove it? Clausewitz’s teachings concern war as it should be—if indeed it should be—but certainly not as it is. If pacifists seem naive in many of their views, Clausewitz seems no less so.

To say that war is the continuation of policy by other means is like saying that a duel is a continuation of a debate by other means. The analogy is not inappropriate, for Clausewitz himself compares war to a duel on an extensive scale. Strikingly analogous also is the view held as recently as a couple of centuries ago that dueling was a natural tendency in man. It was the final resolution of interpersonal conflict, a sort of *ultima ratio personarum*, and was believed to have existed since man’s earliest days. The profession of duelist was the second oldest profession in the

world. However barbarous it might seem, people argued, and however strongly it might be condemned by reasonable men, dueling would almost inevitably be resorted to in the solution of conflict or the defense of one's honor.

If we reread the analogy and substitute "war" for "duel" we arrive at a remarkable similarity with the view of war held by most people today. The only difference is that today dueling is everywhere condemned in civilized society and its practice has vanished. It seems that people finally came to realize that there was a fundamental irrationality in the act itself and that it was certainly irrelevant to the issue at stake. The winner of a duel over a question of honor emerged no more honorable than the loser—in fact, frequently less so. A duel, then, is no more a continuation or resolution of a debate than war is a continuation or resolution of policy differences.

Today we have difficulty in considering war as something in itself, distinguishable from policy. Clausewitz argued that the two must not, could not be distinguished, and this led him to some preposterous statements, such as the claim that war is but the expression of policy, but a policy "which fights battles instead of writing notes."¹⁷ To use the modern jargon, this has got to be the biggest put-on in history! If one could conceive of Clausewitz as having a sense of humor, this would be his best joke, but the Sage of Slaughter is so conspicuously lacking in humor that one must conclude he was in earnest. If one can see no essential difference between fighting battles and writing notes, then all distinction between war and peace, friends and enemies, or debates and duels is obliterated.

Those who see no distinction between writing a note to someone or firing a bullet at him probably argue that it is merely a question of degree, since both are fundamentally types of

human contact. They might reason that the difference is merely a question of moral judgment. And, as Anatol Rapoport says so lucidly, "The strategic thinker cannot be reached with moral arguments. The sincere and competent strategic thinker, however, can be reached with 'rational' arguments because he is involved in what he believes to be rational procedures."¹⁸

Therefore, eschewing further consideration of questions of morality, let us turn now to strategic thinkers who view war not as the continuation but as the collapse of policy.

War as the Collapse of Policy. Clausewitz's adage that war is nothing but the continuation of policy by other means rests on his contention that political intercourse between the warring nations continues during the war itself and is not changed into something totally different. This seems difficult to accept when one considers the hatred, violence, and chaos that inevitably accompany any war. True, some political contact may continue during hostilities, but it is usually the type where one party is demanding the surrender of the other, conditionally or unconditionally. The quality of the debate has undergone substantial change. In fact, it would seem far more defensible to argue that war almost always represents a complete collapse of policy.

For a nation seeking to overturn existing power relationships, war may indeed be a continuation of its policies, for its policy will frequently be to seize a chunk of this nation or subjugate that one or exterminate a third. For nations ideologically committed to a peaceful course of foreign relations, however, how can war be considered a continuation of policy? Such a peaceful nation has no war policy to be "continued." War will necessarily mean a complete change in policy and the development of a totally new one—in other words,

exactly what Clausewitz says does not occur in war.

In his book *Military Strategy: a General Theory of Power Control* Adm. J.C. Wylie argues along the same lines, but far more eloquently. Since he is both a military leader and a strategist, his words merit quotation here:

But is it really a good idea, this notion that policy continues on after the outbreak of war? Is war in fact a continuation of policy?

For us, I think not. War for a nonaggressor nation is actually a nearly complete collapse of policy. Once war comes, then nearly all prewar policy is utterly invalid because the setting in which it was designed to function no longer corresponds with the fact of reality. When war comes, we at once move into a radically different world. Even looking past a war, a postwar world really has very little resemblance to any prewar situation; and the more comprehensive the war, the more valid is this assertion. It is fairly safe to bet that no participant, even Russia, in World War II had any clear idea before the war started what the world would really look like after it was over. . . .

It might perhaps be safe to generalize by saying that for an aggressor, the one who starts a war on purpose, there may be a sizeable element of continuity between the prewar policy and the war policy. . . . For the conservator, the one who is attacked, the coming of war is in most cases a dismal collapse of policy.¹⁹

In an address to the Naval War College Class of 1973, Professor Russell Weigley of Temple University echoed these sentiments, pointing out that whereas Clausewitz's teachings are geared to the hope of keeping war under control, in reality wars develop a

momentum of their own, with the result that war essentially destroys policy, reshapes it, creates new policy.

Professor Carl J. Friedrich of Harvard supports the view that war is essentially the collapse of policy when he states:

Clausewitz's own most famous proposition, namely, that war is the continuation of politics by different means, is itself false or, at least, easily subject to misunderstanding. In a very real sense, war is not the continuation of politics but rather its abandonment in favor of violence. . . . It is when men despair of finding political solutions that they take to arms.²⁰

This is certainly the more traditional view of the role of the policymaker and practitioner of diplomacy as opposed to that of the warmaker or practitioner of arms, a view reflected in the oft-told story of the German Ambassador to Moscow who, on handing the Russians the note declaring war in 1914, burst into tears. He was not weeping because German policy was to be continued by other means, but because policy and diplomacy had failed.

In conclusion, then, we might all heed Admiral Wylie's admonition that in considering war as policy, "it would be prudent to apply far more critical examination than has been customary. Blind acceptance can lead us up some strange and dark alleys if we are not careful."²¹

War as an Instrument. Another of Clausewitz's concepts that seems difficult to accept at face value is the notion that war is an effective instrument of policy. The distinction between war as a continuation of policy and war as an instrument of policy is a subtle one and really not very significant. It is used here merely to permit a slightly different perspective in our evaluation. Viewed as a continuation of policy, war becomes part of policy; viewed as an

instrument of policy, it is one of the means or tools the policymaker has at his disposal, distinct from it but obviously related to policy.

The danger of considering war as an instrument of policy is that the policymaker will come to view it as too readily available for his policy ends, will be tempted to use it simply because it is there, and will fail to give sufficient consideration to the fact that war can be the instrument not of achieving policy but of destroying it.

In his introduction to the compilation of philosophical essays entitled *Critique of War*, Robert Ginsberg poses the very pertinent question, "Has any war been 'successful' in promoting the ends its intellectual defenders proclaimed it was seeking? All that success seems to mean in war is that the opponent has been stopped, not that any ideals have been preserved."²²

The question is one which any serious political or military thinker must ask himself, and the answer should at least give him pause for serious reflection. It is one of the great failings of Clausewitz that he seems never to have asked himself such a question. Hence his work *On War* remains largely an undemonstrated theory. As Leonard points out in his introduction to Clausewitz's work, the Prussian theorist was suspicious of history and historians,²³ believing that they manipulated history to provide factual support for their own theories. Clausewitz's own procedures are hardly better—he ignores much of history lest it provide factual contradiction to his theories. There is one particular idea which Clausewitz seems to have neglected in drawing up his theory of war as an effective instrument of policy. It is best expressed in an old proverb: He who is convinced against his will is of the same opinion still. Hence the imposition of one nation's will upon another by war does not mean that the political aim has been achieved but simply that one country has proven

militarily superior to the other. In the long run, war engenders resentment, bitterness, and hatred that, far from achieving policy goals, may merely lead to another war.

Robert Osgood expressed the idea more expansively when he wrote:

War is not a delicate instrument for achieving political ends . . .

The violence and destruction of war set off a chain of consequences that can be neither perfectly controlled nor perfectly anticipated, and that may therefore contravene the best laid plans for achieving specific configurations of power and particular political relations among nations.²⁴

Anatol Rapoport put it more bluntly when he commented that war is less the surgeon's scalpel than the butcher's cleaver. The point is that policy, with its servant diplomacy, is essentially the art of persuasion and compromise, while war is the antithesis of these. This is a factor that must not be lost sight of in examining the nature of instruments and probing history to determine whether war has proven to be an effective instrument.

An instrument, to be effective, must be so designed and constructed as to achieve a set purpose. To be an effective instrument of policy, therefore, war would have to be so designed as to achieve the purpose of policy. If one searches history assiduously, one may find a few, a very few, cases where war did seem to be an effective tool of policy implementation, but in each of those cases a very valid argument could be made that the political ends were achieved in spite of, not because of war. Simply because a policy objective was achieved after a war, it need not follow that the war was a proper instrument to achieve that policy. There is simply no relevance between the instrument and the purpose for which it is being used. Since war is an instrument designed for

force and violence, it is not a proper instrument for policy, the art of persuasion and compromise.

Americans are generally pragmatic and empirical in their approach to problems. The most persuasive arguments, to them, lie not in the realm of ontological or epistemological reasoning, but in the very practical sphere of: Does it work? Applying this yardstick to Clausewitz's teachings, the question becomes: Has war proven to be an effective instrument of policy? To answer the question with any degree of validity, it would be necessary to survey the history of many wars and to examine the policies of the belligerents before, during, and immediately after the war, as well as after the lapse of several years. While such an endeavor is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, a brief survey of wars would tend to confirm that the only wars which seemed to make political sense were precisely those wars of intricate geometric maneuvering in the 17th century which Clausewitz so disdainfully condemns. Because these wars were fought without mass slaughter, without the wholesale destruction of populations or economic bases, they did seem better designed for use as instruments of policy. Nevertheless, the nagging doubt remains as to the relevance of military maneuvering to the issues at stake.

For the most part, however, war is seldom, if ever, an effective instrument of policy. The reason is that war is seldom, if ever, fought over a purely political matter. Since few men are willing to risk their lives over, say, a few hundred thousand acres of land, higher values, greater ideals are appealed to as the reasons for war. The logic of war insists that the enemy is always evil and our side is always good. It demands that the enemy be destroyed and that we achieve not a policy aim, but victory. War gives rise to a whole new caste, the military, with its own set of values, its own system of advancement, its own ideas of glory. Wars are forever fought

for freedom, democracy, and righteousness, rarely for a clear-cut political issue. Little wonder, then, that war has proven so ineffective as an instrument of policy.

The Franco-Prussian War: a Case Study. In any discussion of the relationship between war and policy, one name stands out preeminently: Otto von Bismarck. It is one of the great ironies of history that Bismarck, who is generally considered the personification of Clausewitzian teachings, confesses that he never read Clausewitz.²⁵ Yet the impression persists that Bismarck, if no one else, used war effectively to achieve his political ends. Ignored is the vital question of whether those political ends could have been achieved without war. A very credible case can be made that they could. In fact, it requires no mental *tour de force* to see in the underlying causes of World War I and its sequel II much of the handiwork of the Iron Chancellor.

Bismarck's wars were not the neat little packages that many history books portray. The war of 1870, in particular, was very bitter and very bloody. As R.H. Lord states in his book *The Origins of the War of 1870*,

Among all the wars that took place in Europe from the downfall of the first Napoleon to the world conflict of our day, the Franco-German War of 1870 was the most bitterly contested, the most sanguinary . . . and the most fateful in its consequences for the peace of the world.²⁶

In a very real sense, the war of 1870 got out of hand. Political objectives were forgotten or ignored, the military developed their own essential goals, and the war engendered its own dynamic, its own logic. By 1870 Bismarck should have been able to foresee that the military, under Moltke, would not readily submit to being a purely political instrument. Still fresh in his mind

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was the fierce struggle he had had with the military in 1864 when attempting to persuade them that his political aims of agreement with Austria and avoidance of foreign intervention were more important than military expediency. This same resentment on the part of the military again flared into open hostility in 1866, and only Bismarck's threat to resign kept them in line. Now, in 1870, he should have realized that with the added kindling of national hatred and ideological appeals, the war would generate its own being and vitiate his long-term political aims even if, by chance, his immediate goals were attained.

Pflanze comments that "the conflict between Moltke and Bismarck is a classic example of the uneasy relationship between political and military leadership in wartime."²⁷ It is also a classic example of the naivete of Clausewitz's doctrine of war as a servant of policy, devoid of its own logic.

The contradictions in Bismarck's approach were not entirely the fault of Moltke and the military. Bismarck himself realized that men do not willingly shed their blood for limited political goals. He had to raise the war to the level of a national crusade, and, caught in its vortex, policy objectives were transformed into religion, ruthlessness, and racism.

A divine providence has ordained this German nation to do something good and great . . . France is a nation of ciphers—a mere herd . . . We will shoot down every male inhabitant . . . It is simply a disadvantage to us now to make prisoners . . . There should have been no question of making prisoners of these blacks . . . If I had my way, every soldier who made a black man prisoner should be placed under arrest. They are beasts of prey and should be shot down . . . War is war . . .

The words are all Bismarck's.²⁸ Is this

the language of policy? Or reason?

Far from the cool, calculating politician portrayed by most history books, Bismarck can be seen, perhaps more realistically, as a man who had never read his Clausewitz, who was ignorant of the nature of war, and, having unleashed its fury, was at great pains to find a means of controlling it. In his attempts to use war as an instrument of policy, he seems more like a pursuer of the fast buck who leads his company to bankruptcy. The sight of a divided Germany today provides a haunting epitaph to Bismarck's dream of war as a means of German unification.

Since foreign policy, like war, is a complex matter, it is difficult to single out only one policy objective at any time, but certainly the main issue between Germany and France in 1870 was the question of German unification under Prussian hegemony—an end desired by Bismarck and resisted by France. Other points of contention, such as the Hohenzollern Candidature and the infamous Ems telegram were merely smokescreens behind which lay the central issue of German unification.

There was very little France could do to prevent German unification. The integration of the German military under Prussian leadership was already an accomplished fact. The Nationalverein was a further factor pointing to eventual unification. For France, war was simply not the answer. It was not the instrument to accomplish French policy aims. In fact, no great clairvoyance was required to see that war would have just the opposite effect—it would strengthen German unification. "Hatred of a foreign foe, rather than spontaneous devotion to Germany, had proved to be the forces most capable of defeating the sentiment of separatism."²⁹ The words are Bismarck's. Would that they had been Napoleon's!

There is evidence that the more rational thinkers in France realized that war was no answer to French policy,

hopes. As Lord points out:

It is true, on the other hand, that in 1870 this opposition [to German unification] was apparently weakening; that the French cabinet then in power seems to have been pledged not to intervene in case the South Germans voluntarily sought union with the North; and that, if peace could have been preserved for a few years longer, the French people would probably have made up their minds to accept the inevitable.³⁰

How differently history might have read had such reasoning prevailed—on both sides.

For the French, certainly, the war was a catastrophic reversal of policy. The crushing defeat at Sedan, in which Napoleon III was taken prisoner, resulted in the collapse of his government and the shattering of his policy. Even Bismarck could not have wished this, for there was now no one to negotiate a quick peace treaty.

The French should have learned their lesson, but they did not. No longer was the question of German unification relevant. Even after it was accomplished and the Kaiser proclaimed Emperor at Versailles, the war continued, not for the pursuit of any policy but in a heedless chase of that ephemeral being: The Honor of France.

The pathetic figure of Gambetta, escaping from Paris by balloon to raise a national army without, as Foch points out, knowing how to wage a national war,³¹ is a tragic example of the irrationality of war and its uselessness as a political instrument. His efforts to salvage the honor of France would result in the humiliating cession of Alsace and Lorraine. With policy ignored or forgotten, the real goals achieved by the war were the glorification of German military might and the sublimation of French revanchism. The two were to

clash would be labeled "continuation of policy." The next time the roles would be reversed and would include many other nations who went to war to continue policies that never existed or, if they did, would be junked in favor of military expediency.

Looking back upon the debacle that occurred in France, with the Parisians reduced to eating rats, with the orgy of hatred that spread throughout the nation, it is difficult to agree with the late Gen. J.F.C. Fuller that the war of 1870 was a "purely political conflict, in no way influenced by economics or ideologies, which always awaken the beast in man."³² More compelling is Pflanze's view that the war "continued far beyond the expectations of Bismarck and the Prussian generals . . . A war for the destruction of armies became a conflict for the exhaustion and dismemberment of a nation."³³ It was not, obviously, an effective instrument of French policy.

It may be argued that to the defeated nation war will naturally entail a collapse of policy, but to the victor, war will see policy aims eminently achieved. For Germany, then, the war of 1870 did realize the political goal of unification.

Such an argument begs the question of whether the war was at all essential to or causal in reaching unification. Evidence has already been cited that French opposition to it was weakening. Had unification been accomplished peacefully, it might have taken somewhat longer, but chances are it would have been far more permanent.

Even if we grant the questionable premise in the preceding argument, however a study of the war shows no logical progression from cause to effect. If war is to be considered an effective instrument of policy, there must be some continuity of objectives before, during, and after the war. German policy in 1870-71 shows no such continuum. What began as a struggle to permit unification soon developed into

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Moltke's war of extermination. "Peace is inadmissible," he said, "until the enemy is completely crushed."³⁴ The annihilation of France, never a political goal, became a "military necessity." Policy objectives everywhere gave way to military expediency, best exemplified in the peace terms "requiring" the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine. No other issue proved to be such a stumbling block, as Pflanze indicates, and it actually prolonged the war.³⁵ So powerful were these war-generated, self-serving military aims that even Bismarck was forced to capitulate to them. Their long-range results are too well documented to permit any other conclusion than that war, for the German winners as well as for the French losers, was not an effective instrument of policy.

The most fitting epilog to Germany's hopes of pursuing policy by means of war can be found in Howard's book. After 456 pages of scholarly and objective analysis, he is forced, in his last sentence, to the following conclusion: "Germany's magnificent and well-deserved victory was, in a profound and unforeseeable sense, a disaster: for herself, and for the entire world."³⁶

Conclusions. Focusing, as this paper does, on a specific concept of Clausewitz's teachings, there is great danger of overstating the case. If there is an overstatement, it is in part the result of or reaction to the conspicuous understatement of the problem in the bulk of strategic thinking, writing, and teaching today. Relatively few voices are raised to question Clausewitz and fewer still to disagree with him. The result can be a dangerous unawareness among far too many military strategists of the widespread evolution of thinking on war and peace that is going on in American society today. The morality, rationality, and instrumentality of war and of the military who wage war are being questioned and even rejected as never before in our history. Whether one agrees or

disagrees with the resulting turmoil and rhetoric, it is clear that if military strategists are to present a believable and acceptable case in their defense, they will have to do more than simply quote Clausewitz.

The purpose of this paper has not been to engage in a mental contest with Clausewitz, but rather to encourage the reader to examine more critically even the most generally accepted maxims of the "philosopher of war." Many of his more contradictory or outdated principles could have been criticized far more easily than those chosen in this paper. But such an exercise would have been rather pointless. Everyone agrees that a good deal of Clausewitz is outdated or irrelevant. By the same token, much of what he has written is still very meaningful. More than most strategists, Clausewitz understood the importance of psychological factors in war. Had he lived to complete his work, the aspect of the human element in warfare would no doubt have been given even greater emphasis. Hence the continued study of Clausewitz may be very relevant to today's world situation, particularly if one searches rather than merely accepts.

This paper was not meant to prove

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Mr. Edward A. Thibault did undergraduate work at Eymard Seminary (French), at St. Joseph's Seminary (philosophy), and at Portland State College (education). He has also done graduate work at Portland

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Clausewitz wrong or right. Its reasoning is not unassailable and its viewpoint not all-encompassing. Its conclusions can only be stated as: there is a possibility that Clausewitz may be outdated, that he may have been seriously limited as a philosopher, that war is neither a continuation nor an effective instrument of policy, and that the war of 1870 impugns these board theories of Clausewitz.

The problem with Clausewitz today is the same as that which students of Clausewitz had from the beginning. His work is vitiated by a serious blind spot.

This was best expressed by General Fuller, himself an ardent admirer of Clausewitz:

But of all Clausewitz's blind shots, [sic] the blindest was that he never grasped that the true aim of war is peace and not victory; therefore that peace should be the ruling idea of policy, and victory only the means toward its achievement. Nowhere does he consider the influence of violence on eventual peace; actually the word "peace" barely occurs half a dozen times in *On War*.³⁷

FOOTNOTES

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4. H. Rothfels, "Clausewitz," Edward M. Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 93.
5. Roger A. Leonard, ed., *A Short Guide to Clausewitz: On War* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1968), p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: the Indirect Approach* (New York: Praeger, 1954), p. 352.
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10. Carl J. Friedrich, "War as a Problem of Government," Robert Ginsberg, ed., *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations* (Chicago: Regnery, 1969), p. 168.
11. A.C. Genova, "Can War Be Rationally Justified?" Robert Ginsberg, ed., *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations* (Chicago: Regnery, 1969), p. 198-221.
12. Thomas Merton, "War and the Crisis of Language," Robert Ginsberg, ed., *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations* (Chicago: Regnery, 1969), p. 107.
13. Leonard, p. 58.
14. Rothfels, p. 105.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Leonard, p. 14.
18. Anatol Rapoport, *Strategy and Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. xxiii.
19. J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: a General Theory of Power Control* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1967), p. 80-81.
20. Friedrich, p. 165-166.
21. Wylie, p. 81.
22. Warren E. Steinkraus, "War and the Philosopher's Duty," Robert Ginsberg, ed., *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations* (Chicago: Regnery, 1969), p. 19.
23. Leonard, p. 15.
24. Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: the Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 22.
25. Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 458.

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26. Robert H. Lord, *The Origins of the War of 1870*, reissued ed. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p. 3.
27. Pflanze, p. 467.
28. Quoted in Pflanze, p. 470-473.
29. Quoted in Pflanze, p. 437.
30. Lord, p. 3.
31. F. Foch, *De la Conduite de la Guerre: La Manoeuvre pour la Bataille* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1915), p. 17.
32. J.F.C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War: 1789-1961* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961), p. 117.
33. Pflanze, p. 469.
34. Quoted in Pflanze, p. 465.
35. See Pflanze, p. 473.
36. Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 456.
37. Fuller, p. 76.



A doctrine which began by defining war as only a continuation of state policy by other means led to the contradictory end of making policy the slave of strategy.

B.H. Liddell Hart: Strategy, 1954 (of Clausewitz)