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Eric Alterman

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The Uses and Abuses of Clausewitz

ERIC ALTERMAN

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Of-quoted, but little read" is a tag line fittingly applied to Clausewitz's *On War*. Indeed, while Clausewitzian dictums roll smoothly off the tongue of nearly every self-styled military analyst or "expert," the influence of Clausewitz has vastly exceeded his readership. Bernard Brodie observed in his preface to the translation of *On War* by Michael Howard and Peter Paret that the book has gone "unread by all but a minute proportion of literate people, including the great majority of those who have not hesitated to cite or quote him."¹

The esteem in which Clausewitz is held is certainly unmatched in the history of military scholarship. What is so ironic about his status as the patron saint of all post-Napoleonic military philosophers is how little historical agreement has existed on what, exactly, Clausewitz was trying to say. Thus he has been invoked by Nazis, communists, liberal humanists, nuclear pacifists, and nearly everyone else who has found himself in a strategic debate and in need of an impressive pronouncement to shore up his argument. The fact remains, however, that no work, no matter how long or how confused in its presentation, should be able to appeal both to an Adolph Hitler and to a Raymond Aron. Yet Clausewitz has, in the century and a half since his death, managed to impress Engels, Lenin, Marx, and the elder Moltke, not to mention Bernard Brodie, Michael Howard, and Harry Summers. Merely by virtue of his place in the history of strategic thought, Clausewitz is almost by definition among the most misunderstood philosophers of his century.

The intention of this essay is not to examine what it was that Clausewitz actually said (which, given Michael Howard's superb and concise essay in the Oxford University Press Great Masters series, would be superfluous), but what has been ascribed to him. In other words, I am interested not so much in a textual analysis of *On War*, as in a historical examination of the genesis of its place and status in the history of military and strategic thought. The endeavor is not intended to be comprehensive, but to take account of some of the more serious and influential attempts to enlist Clausewitz in a particular doctrinal or strategic cause.

On War, it is absolutely crucial to remember, is an unfinished work. As Liddell Hart was so fond of pointing out, the work was discovered following Clausewitz's death in 1831 in a sealed envelope with an attached note that read "should this work be interrupted by my death, then what is to be found can only be called a mass of formless conceptions: open to endless misconceptions."² This would take on perhaps less significance were it not for the fact that the author was in the process of a full-scale revision of the work when he died; as a result, Books Two through Seven do not accurately reflect the most important theoretical construct, the duality of the nature of war. Throughout Book One, the only completed section of the manuscript, Clausewitz elaborates on limited wars, which do not conform to his theories of "absolute" or "total" warfare. This distinction is elsewhere absent from the book, as the author was unable to revise the subsequent sections before he succumbed to cholera in 1831. The result of this and other ambiguities in the text has most certainly been a "mass of endless misconceptions," many of which continue unsolved through the present day.

On War was written on the threshold of a revolutionary development in the course of modern history, the mass army. The French Revolution and the Bonapartist counterrevolution had unleashed, in the early 19th century, a force for death and destruction unimagined by the warriors of merely a quarter-century earlier. Clausewitz was the personal victim of the Napoleonic invasion, both as a prisoner of war in France and as a voluntary exile in the Russian army when his king signed what Clausewitz saw to be a dishonorable peace. Thus, *On War* cannot be read intelligently without the knowledge that Clausewitz was writing in a period when the energies of the state unleashed seemed untamable, and when he personally had suffered the consequences of their domination over the European continent.

Eric Alterman is Washington Fellow of the World Policy Institute in New York. He is a graduate of Cornell University and holds an M.A. in international relations and national security studies from Yale University. He has written widely on a variety of political and strategic issues for numerous periodicals including *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *The Washington Quarterly*.

As a writer, Clausewitz was fond of bold, often somewhat inflammatory overstatements which grab the reader's attention, only to be qualified later. It may have been his intention to edit these more carefully before publishing the treatise. Furthermore, because the work tends toward pithy, self-contained epigrams rather than the greater amplitude of pyramidal logic, writers have found it irresistibly tempting to strip Clausewitz's words out of their context, leaving them bare and unqualified, despite contraindications elsewhere in the text. This tendency is even more pronounced when the Clausewitzian epigram suits the particular political or military purpose of a given argument. Of course, Clausewitz has himself to blame for a writing style which encourages reading in snippets and seems halfhearted in its qualification of bold generalizations. On the other hand, it is not Clausewitz's fault that, despite his warnings, the world has gone ahead and stolen his private notes from his desk and held him accountable for the ends to which they were employed—ends he could not have imagined and in many cases would not have condoned. Nevertheless, it is those ends which provide the subject of the remainder of this essay.

The Prussian Legacy: Stranger in a Strange Land

The immediate reception of *On War* following publication in 1832 was less than thunderous. It took over 20 years for the first printing of 1500 copies to sell out. Yet Clausewitz's eventual influence over the course of the Prussian military tradition would be quite difficult to overestimate. Max Jahns writes, "There is something strange about Clausewitz's influence, it is almost mystical in nature; his writings, never completed and published after his death, have actually been read far less widely than one would suppose and yet his opinions have spread throughout the German army and have proved immeasurably fruitful."³

No doubt the most influential purveyor of Clausewitzian doctrine in the Prussian military was Helmuth Karl Moltke, the former Danish cadet from Macklenberg who, more than anyone, was responsible for reforming and shaping the Prussian army. He spent more than 60 years on the General Staff, during which time he presided over the Prussian forces' transformation to the world's most disciplined and efficient fighting machine. Moltke cited *On War* along with Homer and the Bible as the works which had most influenced his thinking. The army he built was, in fact, a Clausewitzian force as interpreted by Moltke.

It was to be found, however, that even in Clausewitz's native German, his work lost much in the reading (indeed, in an 1850 edition of *On War*, the publisher deliberately obscured the author's notions of the importance of civilian control over the military in times of war). Fresh from the victories of 1866 and planning for those of 1870, the elder Moltke wrote, "The operations for the offensive against France consist solely in seeking

out the main enemy force and attacking it however it is found. The difficulty lies only in the execution of this simple plan with very large masses.”⁴ Moltke’s interpretation of his acknowledged master was certainly based on Clausewitz’s deification of the “battle,” whereby the side with superior moral (and therefore physical) force would seek out and destroy its enemy (with the help of meticulous peacetime planning and superior rail communications). Moltke’s most famous dictum was pure Clausewitz: “In war, it is often less important what one does than how one does it. Strong determination and perseverance in carrying through a simple idea are the surest routes to one’s objective.”⁵

But as Michael Howard points out, what is missing from Moltke’s writings, as well as from those of the vast majority of Clausewitz’s 19th-century interpreters, is any consideration of the author’s insistence on the need for military means to be subordinated to political ends. For Moltke, Howard writes, “war was not so much an instrument of policy as an inevitable fate of mankind.”⁶ Moltke emphasized, particularly in disputes with his Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, that the military needed at all times to maintain its independence of action from the political leadership, whose indecision often left the military no alternative but to “strike for the highest goal attainable with the means given.” This view, writes Gerhard Ritter, fixes solely on “what Clausewitz would have called the ‘absolute configuration’ (*Gestalt*) of the war. It is not up to him to consider the political repercussion of his triumphs or failures . . . the propriety” of whose consideration, of course, was “within the sole discretion of the military leadership.”⁷ This attitude may have been completely contradictory to Clausewitz’s own views, but it became the dominant view in Imperial Germany in the latter half of the 19th century and it did so imprinted with the name of Carl von Clausewitz.

It has long been a point of contention just how influential the dogmas associated with *On War*, whether correctly or incorrectly interpreted, were in creating the conditions in Wilhelm’s Germany that led to the decision to implement the Schlieffen plan under Moltke the younger in 1914. (The 1880 edition of *On War* contained an introduction which compared Clausewitz to Goethe and Shakespeare—penned by the soon-to-be Chief of Staff Alfred von Schlieffen.) This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections, but it is worth noting here that Schlieffen himself showed a more sophisticated reading of *On War* than did his heirs who executed the plan. The plan, which was actually far more Jominian than Clausewitzian in its overvaluation of the purely technical aspects of military planning, was in its original form at least graced with Schlieffen’s warning that if it did not succeed in achieving “total” victory at the outset, then the military should defer to the political leadership and sue for peace. These words, like so many of Clausewitz’s admonitions regarding

the centrality of political objectives over military means, went virtually ignored by those who claimed to be his loyal disciples.

The French humiliation of 1870 did much for Clausewitz's reputation in the land of his nemesis. *On War* appeared in French in the 1840s, but it was not until the year 1885 that the first lectures on Clausewitz were given by Cardot at the *Ecole de Guerre*. A young officer by the name of Ferdinand Foch entered the school during the same year. Nine years later he was a professor there.⁸ When he began to teach, Foch later recalled, "I asked myself, 'What are the elements of war?' I read Clausewitz." By 1900 there was in the French army what Michael Howard describes as a "veritable craze" for Clausewitz.⁹

As much as the elder Moltke was responsible for the author's near-sacred status in Prussia, so Foch was the prophet of the god of war in France. For in Foch's interpretation, Clausewitz emerges as every bit as clumsy in his deification of battle and bloodshed as he did in Moltke's interpretation across the Rhine. As in Prussia, it is difficult to assess where exactly the author's stylistic infelicities leave off and where the inventions of his interpreters begin. There is ample support in *On War* for Foch's glorification of the offensive, although an opponent of the "advance at all costs" mentality would find equally powerful ammunition in support of the defensive (recall, for example, Clausewitz's famous dictum in Book Six that "the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offensive"). Thus, in France as in Prussia, the treatise served as a sort of abstract expressionist painting upon which society at large could cast its own dogma and prejudice.

Foch viewed his 1903 manuscript *Principles of War* as a virtual abstract of parts of *On War*, but Liddell Hart called Foch an "amplifier of Clausewitz's most extreme notes."¹⁰ This was one of the least hysterical comments he made about Clausewitz and one of the most responsible. Foch did indeed take Clausewitz to heights which the author could not himself have imagined. From Clausewitz's stress on the importance of "the battle," he leapt to an apotheosis of the offensive and the decisiveness of "moral force" in the course of warfare.

Unlike most of his Prussian counterparts, Foch shared Clausewitz's taste for metaphysical musing intertwined with deceptively simple declarations. His notions of "the absolute concept of war," and his stress on "the will to conquer" and "the moral superiority of the victors," made him an attractive leader of men to battle but a foolish and naive strategist once committed. He confessed that "at the beginning of the war we believed that morale alone counted, which is an infantile notion."¹¹ Yet it was one which could easily be gleaned from an unsubtle and spiritually intoxicated reading of *On War*. He passed along his confused reading of Clausewitz to his prize student and successor, Grandmaison, who

enunciated Foch's principles in their purest form: "The French army no longer know any other law than the offensive All attacks are to be pushed to the extreme."¹²

In England, Prewar Indifference and Postwar Damnation

Clausewitzian interpretation before World War I was not the cottage industry across the English Channel that it was on the Continent. If Clausewitz was read at all in Britain, it was most often to discern what might lay in store if the Anglo-German antagonism were to manifest itself on the battlefield. There were at least two reasons for this relative aloofness. First, the translations of *On War* available in English before World War I were of a decidedly murky quality, leading to even worse distortions of his ideas than were prevalent in Wilhelm's Germany. Second, the subject of Britain's pre-1914 national defense policy was extremely confused and confusing. The battle over the impending "continental commitment" raged in the Committee of Imperial Defense, while the Royal Navy and British army planned in splendid isolation from one another. To the navalists, quite unsurprisingly, the American Alfred Thayer Mahan provided considerably more relevant advice for an island nation with Britain's geostrategic good fortune. For the army, all this talk of a great decisive battle and "absolute" war was foreign to its traditions of limited and often indirect approaches. The question in Britain was whether a land war would be fought at all; exactly how it might be fought remained a secondary consideration—right through the moment that Asquith's cabinet, upon hearing that Belgian neutrality had been violated, opted for war.

In the postwar environment in Britain, Clausewitz was reviled as the patron saint of the untamable German militarism which had precipitated the war's senseless carnage and slaughter. As in the increasingly moralistic American government, the liberal British establishment found the singularly popular sentence from *On War*—that war is merely the continuation of politics by other means—to betray a degree of cynicism about politics and war that lay at the root of Germany's criminally arrogant quest for hegemony on the Continent. No one in England did more to see that the name of Clausewitz would be permanently reviled than Captain Basil Henry Liddell Hart.

In the years between the wars, Liddell Hart was involved in several doctrinal arguments. On the level of tactics, Liddell Hart sought to revamp the role of the mechanized infantry in the British army, proposing what then would have been a revolutionary emphasis on the offensive role of tanks. On a higher level, however, these tactics fit into a grand strategy of what Liddell Hart perceived to have been Britain's historic way of warfare, which had perfectly suited the island nation until its politicians mistakenly attempted to grasp the "glittering sword of continental manufacture" with

horrendously costly and indecisive battles in the war with Germany. To Liddell Hart, Britain's best strategy was based on what he viewed as an indirect method of warfighting, which concentrated on attacking the enemy's "vulnerable extremities" such as colonies and suppliers, and denying him trade via Britain's traditional command of the sea. The general's task, in Liddell Hart's view, was to apply economic pressure and peripheral strategies with a minimum of cost in men and materiel in order to achieve an effect completely out of proportion to its costs.¹³ It therefore comes as no surprise that Liddell Hart was antagonized by Clausewitz's celebration of culminating battles and his insistence on the necessity of slaughter and bloodshed as the only legitimate way to win a war.

But even allowing for such a violent intellectual disagreement as this one and knowing of the inferior translation of *On War* available to Liddell Hart, one is nevertheless taken aback by the strident calumny he heaps on Clausewitz and the emotionalism with which he makes his case. If one did not know the subject of the author's polemics, he might reasonably guess that it was Hitler about whom Liddell Hart was writing rather than the mere self-effacing Prussian intellectual.

Liddell Hart saw Clausewitz as the philosophical heir to the mantle of his (and England's) traditional enemy, Napoleon:

The theory of human mass has dominated the military mind from Waterloo to the World War. This monster was the child of the French Revolution by Napoleon. The midwife who brought it into the modern world was the Prussian philosopher of war, Clausewitz.¹⁴

Seven years earlier, Liddell Hart delivered a series of lectures at Yale University in which he ascribed to Clausewitz the integration of General Bonaparte's theory and the Emperor Napoleon's practice into a system that "brought down three empires in collapse."¹⁵

Liddell Hart's indictment of Clausewitz's crimes against Europe and the existing order was as curious as it was specious. He blames Clausewitz because "his 'formless conceptions' were translated into formulas which became fixed in the mind of Europe, proclaimed by soldiers everywhere."¹⁶ Despite Clausewitz's express avowal that the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger, Liddell Hart blames this "Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre" for somehow inspiring Von der Goltz a century later to write that "the idea of the greater strength of the defense is . . . a mere delusion."¹⁷ In still another instance, Liddell Hart blames the deification of the offensive in the war on "a century-old doctrine of Clausewitz—or rather the adulterated abstract of Clausewitz."¹⁸

What exactly was the Prussian philosopher's heinous crime which caused Liddell Hart to assert that "the philosophy of Clausewitz helped to

bring about the World War,” and that “not merely stalemate but massed suicide—more truly homicide—was the penalty of Clausewitz’s theory of mass”?’¹⁹ The crime was, quite seriously, Clausewitz’s messy and unfinished prose. On numerous occasions throughout his attacks, Liddell Hart acknowledges that Clausewitz did not really share these criminally inspirational ideas, but that “his qualifications came on later pages, and were conveyed in a philosophical language that befogged the plain soldier, essentially concrete-minded”; therefore, “not one reader in one hundred was likely to follow the subtlety of his logic, or to preserve a true balance amid such philosophical jugglery. But everyone could catch such ringing phrases as ‘we have only one means in war—the battle.’ ”²⁰

In other words, Liddell Hart admitted not only that Clausewitz did not really say many of the things which Liddell Hart himself had accused Clausewitz of saying, but also pointed out that Clausewitz had warned explicitly against just such misinterpretations of his disorganized, uncoded notes; still, Liddell Hart appears with a hangman’s noose at Clausewitz’s doorstep, ready to send him into posterity’s everlasting hellfire and damnation for the mistakes and crimes committed in his expropriated name. The convoluted logic of this process is presented as follows: “In justice to Clausewitz, one must draw attention to his qualifications, but for



Courtesy U.S.A.M.H.I

After World War I, Liddell Hart asserted that “not merely stalemate but massed suicide . . . was the penalty of Clausewitz’s theory of mass.” Here, Canadian troops go over the top into the teeth of German fire.

true history one must concentrate attention on his abstract generalizations, because it was the effect of these that influenced the course of European history.”²¹ Just what is “true history” if not what Clausewitz actually said and wrote? It is a wonder that Liddell Hart’s revered name has survived this bit of intellectual thuggery and mindful—even admitted—slander of Clausewitz.

Perhaps Liddell Hart’s saving grace in the matter is his respect for human life, particularly in warfare. It was, after all, his revulsion at the senseless slaughter he witnessed in France (not to mention his own gassing at the Somme) which led to his emotionally clouded judgments regarding the responsibility of Clausewitz for the mass slaughter of the Great War. But massed suicide? Homicide? Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre? He would, to understate the case badly, have finer hours.

Communist Clausewitz, Nazi Clausewitz

It is difficult to say exactly where Clausewitz fits in the iconography of Soviet history given the lack of archival data. The Russians are often noted to be good Clausewitzians, particularly in subordinating military means to their proper political ends. Even as early as the 1917 revolution, it would have been possible to foresee that Clausewitz would be given an honored place in Soviet military texts, based on his favorable reception by communism’s founding fathers.

On 25 September 1857 Engels wrote Marx: “Among other things, I am now reading Clausewitz’s *On War*. A strange way of philosophizing but very good on his subject . . . Fighting is to war what cash payment is to trade: for however rarely it may be necessary for it actually to occur, everything is directed towards it and eventually it must take place all the same and must be decisive.”²² This was indeed a less-confused reading of one of Clausewitz’s main points than anyone in Prussia at the time seemed able to glean.

Of the Marxist revolutionaries who made the revolution, Lenin was perhaps the most Clausewitzian. His interpretation of the famous dictum showed also an understanding of the dichotomy which Clausewitz tried to impart in his rewriting of Book One to distinguish between types of wars. “The reaction of peoples to war,” wrote Lenin, “must be noted by the kind of war in question and the purpose for which the war is being waged. All such matters are intimately related to the idea of Clausewitz that war is simply an instrument of policy.” He then went on to pay the Prussian writer his ultimate compliment: “The Marxists have always considered this axiom as the theoretical foundation for the meaning of war.” Lenin’s lieutenant, Leon Trotsky, Commander of the Red Army, also displayed a flair for some of the forgotten tenets of Clausewitzian reasoning. In his memoirs, written in exile in Mexico, Trotsky recalled that his “approach to these questions

was by nature political rather than military The important thing was war as the continuation of policy and the army as the instrument of the latter.”²³

Meanwhile, in Weimar and later Nazi Germany, Clausewitz’s popularity was increasing despite interpretations of his work which strayed even further from the text than they had in the Wilhelm period. Erich Ludendorff’s tribute to Clausewitz was, in Hans Speir’s phrase, “a critique of Clausewitz from an inferior mind.” To try to enhance his own power after the humiliation of Versailles, Ludendorff was just as promiscuous in his abuse of Clausewitz as he had been while helping in the preparations that caused Versailles. He demanded the complete authority of the supreme military leader in all political matters and tried to shore up this anti-Clausewitzian ambition by invoking that misunderstood dictum and standing it on its head: “I can now hear how the politicians will get excited about such an opinion as they will about the idea that politics is to serve the conduct of war, as though Clausewitz had not taught that politics is to serve the conduct of war.”²⁴

Clausewitz’s stock continued to rise after the ascendancy of the Nazis to power, as his name was again invoked in behalf of propitious misunderstandings of his text. One quotation, though not related to *On War* or even military matters, however, could not have helped comforting Hitler’s henchmen if indeed they discovered it. On a trip to Poland, the young Clausewitz sent a letter to his wife dated 15 May 1812; in part, it read: “Dirty German Jews, swarming like vermin in the dirt and misery, are the patricians of the land [I]f only fire would destroy this whole anthill so that this unending filth were changed by *clean flame into clean ashes*”²⁵ (italics supplied). No obfuscation of the author’s word or intent was necessary for the Nazis in this case. When it came to the genocidal murder of European Jewry, Clausewitz was, at least in spirit, one of them.

The Enduring Legacy

Michael Howard thinks of the Second World War as far more Clausewitzian than the First. In every nation save Japan, he notes, there was political control over strategic decisionmaking. Howard believes that Clausewitz would have approved of Hitler’s early use of the German military machine to secure political goals, but would later have been horrified at the open-ended character of those goals as they revealed themselves. Howard also points out that Allied problems relating to the demands of a democratic populace as well as their strategists’ difficulties in finding the enemy’s center of gravity also would have interested Clausewitz. Air power, in Howard’s view, particularly lends itself to Clausewitzian analysis.²⁶

Until recently, at least, Clausewitz has never really received either the notoriety or reverence in the American military tradition that he did in Europe. There may be many good reasons for this—the lack of a good English translation, the Old World character of his prose, the lack of a readily identifiable military tradition itself, the 19th-century American Army's affinity for French military texts. All seem equally plausible. Thus it is particularly interesting that the most influential book on military strategy to be written by an American military officer in many a generation was a strict Clausewitzian analysis of America's military conduct in a humiliating defeat. In this sense the situation is perhaps comparable to that in France after 1870, except that Colonel Harry Summers' *On Strategy* provides a far more faithful rendering of the principles of Clausewitzian warmaking than did Foch or his contemporaries.

Summers, using the landmark 1976 Paret-Howard translation of *On War*, employs the text as a foil to the strategy pursued by the US military in Vietnam from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s. Summers' Clausewitz is the Clausewitz of political supremacy guiding the moral and psychological forces of its instrument of policy, the military. He finds the American government's performance in comparison to the Clausewitzian ideal sadly lacking.

Summers chides the civilian and military strategists for their attempts to "defeat the enemy without too much bloodshed." He quotes Clausewitz on the "fallacy" of trying to win a war in this manner.²⁷ Most of Summers' intellectual energy, however, is devoted to what he views as the US military's refusal to heed the central Clausewitzian admonition that military policy must be directed by a political goal. He laments that "150 years ago Clausewitz had said that military victory is only an end when it leads to peace—i.e. the political objective of war. Ironically, our tactical success did not prevent our strategic failure."²⁸ Summers also invokes Clausewitzian doctrine to lambaste the complex system of mathematical modeling—the planning, programming, and budgeting system (PPBS) which Robert McNamara's Pentagon employed as its primary determinant of military strategy in the conduct of the war. Summers recalls that "Clausewitz had observed (and Vietnam was to prove) the economic approach to military strategy 'stood in about the same relationship to combat as the craft of the swordsmith to the art of fencing.'"²⁹

One of Colonel Summers' most innovative uses of the text of *On War* was his attack on the Johnson Administration for the "legal vacuum" it created when it fought the war as a "police action" rather than a declared war, and for its failure to try to mobilize the "national will" on behalf of the war effort. This was dangerous both to the Army and to the Republic, writes Summers, because it deprived the United States of what Clausewitz called "the strength of the passions of a people mobilized for war."³⁰ In

Summers' eminently sensible view, if President Johnson did not have the requisite support to ask Congress for a declaration of war, he should not have committed the Army to fighting one.

While the many uses Summers manages to employ for the 150-year-old text are fascinating, what is more important is the legitimacy with which Clausewitzian doctrine is viewed in a country which, until quite recently, had not shown much interest in him. On the central strategic dilemma of our day, that of nuclear deterrence, Summers, Howard, Raymond Aron, Bernard Brodie, Stanley Hoffmann, and others all look to Clausewitz as a legitimizing figure for the doctrines which deny the use of a nuclear weapon for any military purpose because the relationship of military means to political ends would be so anti-Clausewitzian.

One of the more fascinating developments in the strange political legacy of the author of *On War* has been the Prussian conservative's adoption by the liberal humanist elements of contemporary Western political discourse. Michael Howard calls Clausewitz's reasoning "as flawless as his passion is understandable" in quoting the author's harsh admonition that "we are not interested in generals who win wars without bloodshed. The fact that slaughter is a horrifying spectacle . . . must not provide an excuse for blunting our swords."³¹ Like Summers, Howard stresses Clausewitz's belief in the primacy of politics and looks to the text for opposition to nuclear warfighting strategies. He finds them in Clausewitz's theory of the importance of calculating "unfought engagements," which, in the nuclear realm, would set upon victory an "unacceptably high cost."³²

Raymond Aron shared Howard's sympathy for Clausewitz, admitting that some of his passages, particularly the one in which the author refers to Bonaparte as "just as grasping as a Jew and just as cynical," to be "irritating." But Aron's massive and impressive investigation into Clausewitzian thought seems designed specifically to rescue Clausewitz from the historical fate which Liddell Hart and his "unfaithful followers" had left him as the apostle of total warfare. He finds in Clausewitz a convincing case for the use of nuclear weapons solely as a deterrent against their use by another power and support for their control via an arms control treaty regime. He sees the Soviets as superior Clausewitzians to the West, which failed to employ proper Clausewitzian analysis in evolving its goals in Algeria and Indochina.

Peter Paret's work deals less specifically with *On War* than with Clausewitz's earlier writings and the role of the state in his philosophy. Still, it is interesting to note that Paret shares the same benign view of his subject as Howard, Aron, et al. Paret's Clausewitz wished to "rid society of restrictions and injustice." This concern derived "not only from compassion for the individual; it was also linked to his concern for the ethical

rectitude of the state.”³³ Paret makes this declaration despite the fact that some 345 pages later he quotes Clausewitz as saying, “Moral force has no existence save as expressed in the State and the law”; and Paret notes that “in *On War* [Clausewitz] openly disavowed competence to resolve ethical issues raised by organized violence.”³⁴

Is there no contradiction between the admirable sentiments Paret ascribes to Clausewitz and the latter’s refusal to recognize any moral force save that of the state—no matter how unjust its employment of violence might be? What, then, would have been Clausewitz’s response to the 20th-century phenomenon of totalitarianism? Surely it cannot be demonstrated that he would have stood against the state with the victims of Hitler’s genocide, of Stalin’s tyranny, and of the Argentinian junta’s “dirty” war. While I would agree with much of what Messrs. Summers, Aron, Paret, etc. have written about their subject and admire Michael Howard and Stanley Hoffmann³⁵ tremendously as two of the most enlightened and enlightening voices currently heard in the Western strategic debate, I find myself unable to condone the implications of their approving employment of Clausewitz as an appropriate witness and educator for the dangers and problems we currently face.

Even ignoring, for the moment, Clausewitz’s reprehensible rhetoric about Jewish “vermin” as non-germane to the issues raised in *On War*, there are, I would contend, two powerful reasons for rejecting the Prussian philosopher as a legitimate authority for those seeking to think clearly and humanely about current strategic problems. My first objection stems from Clausewitz’s glorification of the role of war in the life of society. While it may be unfair to lift him from a society and culture whose values are quite different from our own, I nevertheless find Clausewitz’s rhetoric on the subject sufficiently inflammatory (compared with some of the more progressive thinkers of the day) to assert that this man did not sufficiently value the human lives lost and destroyed in warfare relative to those values he did profess.

“War,” Clausewitz wrote, “is the surest means of wrenching a nation from miserable weakness, replacing cold cunning with consuming fire Great ends are the soul of war Peace is the covering of winter snow War is the summer that brings these forces to fruition.” Then, Clausewitz bares his innermost feelings:

A wide area for the deployment of forcible means opens up in wartime, and, if I were to open the innermost secrets of my soul, I would say that I favor means of the utmost forcefulness. I would lash this lazy brute into bursting the chains its cowardice and pusillanimity have allowed to fetter it. I would let a spirit abroad in Germany that would serve as a powerful antidote to extirpate the plague from which the whole spirit of the nation threatens to wither and die.³⁶

The second and perhaps more subtle objection to Clausewitzian philosophy I find convincing was raised by the German military historian Gerhard Ritter. While modern-day strategists quote approvingly the formerly misunderstood passages of *On War* which do, without a doubt, support the supremacy of the statesman over the general, they do not, I believe, pay sufficiently close attention to the operative model of politics Clausewitz employs. In Clausewitz's view, "a quarrel between military and political interests . . . can only arise when statesmen are insufficiently familiar with the military instrumentalities they seek to employ and make impossible demands upon them."³⁷ Clausewitz's prescription for this unfortunate state of affairs is simply to grace the councils of state with sufficient military advice so that these conflicts are prevented.

Without any particular expertise on the affairs of the Prussian state in the early decades of the 19th century, I cannot imagine that the behavior of Prussian statesmen was sufficiently selfless to inspire the confidence in their wisdom and morality upon which Clausewitzian models of civil-military behavior are based. Governments, be they autocracies or democracies, are not run by philosopher kings. They are not, despite what Clausewitz might have liked to believe, motivated solely by values of honor, heroism, and freedom. Where are the statesman's political ambitions in Clausewitzian theory? Where are his class interests? What of petty intrigue, corruption, and capriciousness? And from what true-life experience did Clausewitz derive his model of a military motivated by selfless, unquestioning service to the state? Clausewitz regarded politics as "only the representative of society as a whole" with "no independent interests."³⁸

Any theory which attempts to negate the existence of power interests within the ruling bodies is worse than useless—it is dangerous for its exploitative potential. For many of the world's most repressive regimes carry with them some of its most attractive rhetoric. What is missing is an accounting for power. For all of *On War's* bluster about the necessity of bloodshed and the foolishness and naivete of restraint, I find Clausewitz's own foolishness and naivete to be of such weight that it sinks the wealth of his brilliant observations and provocative ruminations in a sea of political irrelevance.

What we are left with is just what the treatise has historically been employed for, a wealth of clever, isolated statements relating to the nature of war—open to endless exploitation for numerous contradictory positions and prejudices. *On War* obligingly reflects back the intellectual predispositions of whoever looks into it.

NOTES

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1. Bernard Brodie, "The Continuing Relevance of *On War*," in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 45.
2. B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Defense of Britain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p. 47.
3. Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 24.
4. Jay Luvaas, "European Military Thought and Doctrine," in Michael Howard, *The Theory and Practice of War* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 72.
5. Michael Howard, "The Influence of Clausewitz," in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 30.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
7. Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, Vol. I, *The Prussian Tradition, 1740-1890* (Coral Gables, Fla.: Univ. of Miami Press, 1969), p. 195.
8. Stefan T. Possony and Etienne Mantoux, "Du Picq and Foch: The French School," in Edward Mead Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1943), p. 218.
9. Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 61.
10. B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1940), p. 133.
11. Possony and Mantoux, p. 228.
12. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon*, p. 135.
13. This strategy is put forth in full detail in B. H. Liddell Hart, *When Britain Goes to War* (London: Faber and Faber, n.d.).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
15. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon*, p. 102.
16. Liddell Hart, *When Britain Goes to War*, p. 28.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
19. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon*, pp. 129, 144.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
22. Edward Mead Earle, "Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin: Soviet Concepts of War," in Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, p. 153.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
24. Hans Speir, "Ludendorff: The German Concept of Total War," in Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, p. 307.
25. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 213.
26. Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 69.
27. Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1982), p. 35.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
31. Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 46.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
33. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 7.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
35. See Stanley Hoffmann, "The Sword and the Pen," a review of *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, by Raymond Aron, trans. Christine Booker and Norman Stone, in *The New Republic*, 4 November 1985, pp. 38-41.
36. Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter*, I, 50.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 69.