

Clausewitz's Theory: *On War* and Its Application Today

COL LARRY D. NEW, USAF



CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, the renowned theorist of war, stated that “a certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of general policy.”¹ Recognizing the reality of government leaders not being military experts, he went on to say, “The only sound expedient is to make the commander-in-chief a member of the cabinet.”² Many governments, including that of the United States, are so organized that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is by law the top military advisor to the president. Our record of military success in this century indicates Clausewitz was right. The stronger the relationship between the nation’s senior military commanders and the government, the more effective we have been at using the military instrument of foreign policy to achieve national political objectives. The strength of that relationship depends on the commander’s ability to communicate and the statesman’s ability to grasp the inherent linkage between the nature of war, the purpose of war, and the conduct of war. Clausewitz called this linkage a paradoxical trinity with three aspects: the people, the commander and his army, and the government.³ The people have to do with the nature of war, the military with the conduct of war, and the government with the purpose of war. This paper addresses how Clausewitzian theory applies to America’s recent history and how the theory that holds true may be applied to future situations in which the military instrument is considered or used in foreign policy.

Definitions

Before embarking on a discussion of the nature, purpose, and conduct of war, we must first establish a point of reference for each of these terms. This paper addresses these three terms in reference to Clausewitz, who spent a great deal of effort theorizing about these three elements and their relationship with war. The purpose and conduct of war are fairly straightforward. The purpose of war is to achieve an end state different and hopefully better than the beginning state—the reason for fighting. The conduct of war refers to the tactics, operations, and strategies of the war—the how of fighting. The more nebulous term is the *nature of war*. This term is made even more vague in Clausewitz’s writing for a few reasons. First, the reference for this writing is a translation of Clausewitz from his native German to English. Second, the reference uses a few different terms such as *nature*, *kind*, and *character* apparently synonymously. Third, Clausewitz starts his writings on war by defining it as absolute in nature. Then, over a span of 12 years and eight books, he recognizes most wars are not fought absolutely but with limited means defined by the political objective.⁴ The absolute nature of war refers to its horror. War is about people and property being destroyed, damaged, and captured. That is the primary reason why the decision to use the military instrument of foreign policy should not be made without considering all its implications. The discussion in this paper uses Clausewitz’s latter idea and de-

scribes the nature of a war to be what means a state is willing to dedicate to fighting a particular war versus the nature of war in general. Thus, this paper uses the purpose as the ends, the nature as the means, and the conduct as the techniques applied in war.

The Nature of War

Clausewitz stated, "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking."⁵ The nature of US wars since World War II has been primarily asymmetric. With the advent of nuclear weapons and sophisticated biological and chemical weapons, or weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the United States has relied on these weapons as a deterrent to those with similar capabilities. At the same time, we have withheld their use, viewing them as a last-resort measure to be employed only when our survival is at stake. Therefore, with one possible exception, we have fought wars with limited means. The exception is the cold war. It could be argued that from the resources dedicated to the cold war arms race in terms of quantity, quality, and share of gross domestic product, the United States dedicated all means available—an unlimited war—to the cold war. On the other hand, notwithstanding the cold war exception applied to the Soviet Union, our adversaries in large-scale wars such as Korea and Vietnam have not had weapons of mass destruction. However, they did use all means at their disposal to fight the wars, making them unlimited wars from their perspective. Asymmetric wars result when their nature is limited for one side and unlimited for the other. The failure to recognize the asymmetric nature of these wars contributed to their dubious results. In the case of Vietnam, there was an apparent assumption that our superiority at the point of contact would lead to victory. Though we did not lose battles in the field, we lost the war to a patient enemy willing to dedicate unrestricted time and resources to their cause. In both wars, the

means we were willing to commit did not achieve a victory. They ended with a cessation of hostilities under conditions far short of our idea of a desirable end state.

There are two points to consider about the concept of limited versus unlimited wars. First, they are not mutually exclusive types but exist on a continuum. The term *limited* only has meaning in its relation to the unlimited means a country has available. The unlimited means define one end of the continuum while the limited end has no absolute value; it can approach but not reach zero or war would not exist. This will have a bearing in the ensuing section on future wars. The second point is that limited and unlimited are ideas also used in reference to war's objectives. War's objectives will be addressed in the section on the purpose of war rather than in the nature of war.

The stronger the relationship between the nation's senior military commanders and the government, the more effective we have been at using the military instrument of foreign policy to achieve national political objectives.

Our last large-scale war, the Persian Gulf War, gave a hint of what future wars may portend. With both sides possessing WMD, the nature of war may have two faces. The primary face reflects the weapons directly brought to bear, and the shadow face reflects those weapons not used but that exist as a deterrent to each other. The primary face of the Gulf War's nature was asymmetric in that the coalition fought with limited means while Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein, called on his nation to fight a jihad, or holy war. (In retrospect, Hussein's jihad was more a strategy of intimidation than of execution. The air war placed Hussein's army in a state of isolation and decimation, and they either surrendered or retreated, virtually en masse, when engaged by coalition ground forces.) Iraq called for all

means and dedicated many more of their assets than did the coalition in terms of a portion of their gross domestic product. Yet, the shadow face of the war's nature was symmetric in that both sides possessed but withheld using WMD. Presumably, Iraq was deterred from introducing WMD as a result of the warning from Secretary of State Jim Baker that the US would retaliate in kind.⁶ If so, Baker may have set a precedent by deterring Iraq's chemical and biological weapons with US nuclear weapons. This precedent could reinforce common treatment of these weapons as the generic term *weapons of mass destruction* implies. Treating the nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons in a generic WMD category is in the US interest. We have taken the approach of destroying our arsenal of biological and chemical weapons to set an arms-control example for the rest of the world. Our only deterrent in the WMD category is our nuclear capability.

The Nature of Future Wars

With the US emerging from the cold war as the world's only superpower, the nature of future wars seems to have acquired two characteristics similar to the Gulf War. First, our most likely conflicts appear to be against enemies that are fighting a total war from their perspective. The ethnic, religious, and ideological conflicts that seem most predominant for the near future are historically fought by zealous people with unlimited means. Second, with the current proliferation of WMD, the likelihood of future belligerents possessing and directly using them increases. Both of these points should impact our national security strategy.

As we look around the globe, our potential adversaries are ones whose militaries are inferior to ours. Hence, it would seem they would only provoke a conflict with us if they miscalculate our reaction, or believe their total means will prevail over our limited means. This was true for the Gulf War and Somalia, and will likely be true for future wars in that region. It would also seem true for the war in the former Yugoslavia, a war we are

about to increase our involvement in, and North Korea, one that certainly has potential.

Weapons of mass destruction can not only lead the US to the moral dilemma of whether to directly use our own WMD, or what means we are willing to commit, but they also necessarily drive our grand strategy in three ways. First, we must continue to possess a sufficient deterrent to WMD by having credible like-weapons of our own. Deterrence has a successful track record à la the cold war and the Gulf War, and, as such, constitutes a prudent investment. For deterrence to work, it must present such a credible and convincing threat to an adversary that he does not want to risk suffering their consequences. Second, we must consider the possibility of attack on us with WMD any time we contemplate using the military instrument of foreign policy against an adversary who possesses them. Third, once we have decided to take the risk of facing an adversary who may use WMD, we must be prepared for the change in the nature of the conflict if deterrence fails and the weapons are directly employed against us. Our decision to retaliate with nuclear weapons would change the nature of the war to one of symmetry. Both sides would be fighting with means approaching, if not on, the unlimited end of the continuum previously addressed. These factors require a reevaluation of the purpose and conduct of the war, as well as its nature. The paradoxical trinity of nature, purpose, and conduct, and the enemy's ability to escalate would determine how far we are willing to escalate. An escalation decision without considering the paradoxical trinity leads to an end state different and probably less desirable than the original. Another factor in the escalation decision needs to be the credibility of deterrence for future conflicts once deterrence has failed in the current conflict.

Recognizing these changes in the nature of current and future war also provides insight into the technology development and acquisition we need to fight future wars. As mentioned above, we need to continue to develop and stockpile nuclear weapons within the constraints of non-proliferation and other international treaties, and within the levels assessed as being required for deterrence. This military approach should be



A Peacekeeper missile launch. Our only deterrent in the WMD category is our nuclear capability.

accompanied by continuous economic and diplomatic efforts towards increased arms control and arms reductions. The high demand for WMD and their availability on the international market make the chances of their elimination slim. While we may be able to reduce our nuclear arms, it would not be prudent to eliminate them while a threat exists which they may deter. We should push technology towards producing means of deterrence that will convince adversaries they cannot afford to suffer the consequences of employing such weapons against the US or our allies. Finally, with the drawdown of forces after the cold war, we need to optimize our investments on conventional capa-

bility to sustain superiority over adversaries who may dedicate all their means to achieving their objectives.

The nature of war is changing. Wars in the future may be asymmetric in terms of the primary face of their nature, but there may be a deterred symmetric face representing WMD possessed by both sides. Before deciding to enter wars, we need to recognize the inherent dangers of fighting wars of asymmetry, the deterrence that may be involved in a shadow face of the war, and the risk of deterrence failing. We must also arm ourselves to conduct and win not only a war of asymmetry, but also to present a credible deterrence and a suitable retaliation if deterrence fails.

The Conduct of War

The conduct of US wars is bringing a few trends of note to the surface. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the US has not had a stomach for major commitments overseas. Even the popularity of the Gulf War came only after the outstanding results of the first few days of the air battle became apparent. America expects quick and decisive victories. America also expects few losses. The "Dover factor," the image of flag-draped coffins being unloaded off C-5s or C-141s at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, can be a strong negative in American sentiment about war. In addition, the "CNN factor," among other things, drives the US to minimize collateral damage. As was the case in the Gulf War, collateral damage results in an immediately transmitted global image inciting strong negative sentiment. These trends will affect the conduct of future wars and must, therefore, be considered for strategy and weapons acquisition.

A few points are apparent when trying to minimize the Dover factor. First, as the quantity of forces decreases and the technological abilities of the world's militaries increase, the quality of our forces needs to increase to offset the net reduction in relative effectiveness. Second, US surface forces have not suffered attacks from hostile aircraft since the Korean War, which has led

many to assume that air superiority was an automatic American prerogative. We must not forget that air superiority is not free or automatic. Guaranteeing air superiority requires an investment in the right aircraft capabilities in adequate numbers and the proper training. We have been able to achieve this so far by the Air Force making air superiority its number one priority for acquisition via the F-22 program. However, budgets to sustain air superiority have come under attack in recent years. Reducing or delaying the national investment in air superiority undermines America's expectations about the conduct of war.

Minimizing the Dover factor also requires a strategy that attacks the enemy's center of gravity, taking away his will to fight, while minimizing risk to our forces. The Gulf War showed that this can be accomplished decisively by cohesive employment across the enemy's spectrum of warfare, from tactical to strategic. Iraq's will to fight, from its foot soldiers to its national command authorities, was all but eliminated by the air war. Air forces of all the coalition services, employed under centralized control, prevailed while our surface forces suffered very few losses (total Americans killed in combat were 147⁷). The ensuing ground action was essentially an unexpected mop-up operation against a fielded military that started at a strength of 44 army divisions!⁸ The prewar estimates using traditional thinking (direct confrontation on the ground) were that Americans would suffer as high as 45,000 casualties, 10,000 of which would be fatalities.⁹ Gen H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the coalition forces commander, vindicated this necessary change in strategy when commenting on the conduct of future wars by saying, "I am quite confident that in the foreseeable future armed conflict will not take the form of huge land armies facing each other across extended battle lines, as they did in World War I and World War II or, for that matter, as they would have if NATO had faced the Warsaw Pact on the field of battle."¹⁰ An effective, casualty-conscious strategy and a commitment to air superiority will help minimize the Dover factor and the accompanying detrimental loss of will in future conflicts.

To minimize collateral damage and its accom-

panying negative repercussions requires precision weapons. Precision guided munitions also allow us to kill more targets with less exposure to enemy defenses, again minimizing the Dover factor. The Department of Defense has already recognized this and is making significant investments in acquiring precision guided munitions, and retrofitting and building systems to deliver them. This trend must continue to meet the expectations of America in fighting future wars.

Winning a quick victory in war requires both the possession of the means with the ability to employ them and a strategy that recognizes the nature and the purpose of war are married to its conduct. As in the above discussion, we have seen that asymmetric-nature wars tend to be protracted. This is especially true when extending the duration of war to influence the will of the opponent is a strategy of the side fighting the unlimited war. The participant with limited objectives should design strategy to draw a decisive and quick conclusion and employ the means necessary to do so. This becomes an ironic dichotomy since limiting the means of war inherently tends to protract the war as well. Therefore, the limitations applied to the means of war must be balanced with a thorough assessment of the time required for victory. Time will be a function of not only our means but also their relation to the opposition's means and the rate at which they are anticipated to be encountered. Noncoherent limitations on the means of war can be a recipe for disaster, especially in asymmetric war.

The side pursuing a limited war must also consider the possibility that if the adversary is successful in protracting the war, the result will be loss of the former's popular support. This could be the case in the current US decision to increase involvement in the war in the former Yugoslavia by sending a significant number of ground troops to the theater. This could well turn out to be an asymmetric war with any of the three main belligerents protracting hostilities, especially since we have announced a one-year time limit for our involvement. We could be setting ourselves up for another dubious end state. We have to recognize the country's expectations about the conduct of war. Maintaining popular support

calls for quick, decisive wars, avoiding both the detrimental aspects of the Dover factor and the negative impact of collateral damage. Therefore, the decision to enter the war must tie the conduct to the nature and also the purpose if we are to succeed.

The Purpose of War

The purpose of war is a principle we have had problems with since the end of World War II. At that time, our entire nation understood and supported the national reaction and goals after a direct and deliberate attack on America. We seem to have an aversion to articulating the desired end state when making the decision to use the military as an instrument of national policy. Initial air-war planners for the Gulf War assumed political objectives from pieced-together speeches and statements made by President George Bush. These gained legitimacy and were adopted in toto as they were briefed up the chain of command ultimately to the president.¹¹ Rearticulating the desired end state is also problematic when conditions change during the conduct of war.

This trend is likely caused by the politics of decision making. Politics in a democratic society tend toward ambiguity in policy. They may be pushed toward, but seldom achieve perfect clarity. For the president of the United States to avoid failure in using the military instrument, he or she has to balance the politics with the clarity needed in policy. Such clarity will enable subordinate military objectives to achieve the desired end state. This becomes even more important in today's world in which a new term has been coined out of necessity to describe the nontraditional uses of the military. Military operations other than war (MOOTW) describes the nation-building, humanitarian, peacekeeping, transnational, and other types of military employment that have recently emerged. The trend evidenced in the current debate about deployment of forces to the former Yugoslavia is towards a bottom-up approach versus directing a top-down approach. To wit, military options are requested

without directing what the desired end state or political objectives will be. Clausewitz's warning on this point was "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."¹² The former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Colin Powell, voiced his feelings on this issue saying, "Whenever the military had a clear set of objectives, . . . as in Panama, the Philippine coup, and Desert Storm—the result had been murky or nonexistent—the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, creating a Marine 'presence' in Lebanon—the result had been disaster."¹³

Another danger is that the purpose of war can become detached from the conduct of war when the purpose changes without a corresponding reevaluation and adjustment in the conduct. This led to failure in Somalia in 1992. We were successful in our original purpose of ensuring that food reached the starving masses. The failure occurred when an additional aim of getting rid of the tribal warlord, Mohammed Farah Aidid, was not matched with an appropriate change in the means or overall military strategy. The likelihood of war's purpose changing increases with MOOTW, as it does with asymmetric war that becomes protracted. It follows that our decision to enter future wars must provide for anticipating changes in the purpose of the war and consider the required corresponding changes to the war's conduct.

Another issue raised in considering the purpose of wars is the selectivity required by today's demands for American involvement. Our 1992 military bottom-up review with a two-major-regional-conflict baseline set the military posture the Clinton administration submitted to Congress for funding. This posture is showing signs of being overtasked. Field commanders are flagging the problem by warning of nonmission-ready status. Unacceptable stress on personnel is indicated by increased problems with substance abuse, spouse and child abuse, suicide, and so forth. In the current budget environment, increasing our force structure seems unlikely. The alternative is to be more selective in tasking the military. Fortunately, politics drives policy to a



The "Highway of Death" has come to symbolize how Iraq's will to fight was all but eliminated by the air war.

certain amount of selectivity. For example, in 1991 the military response in Somalia, the limited to no response in the former Yugoslavia, and no meaningful response to the Kurdish situation in the ethnic Kurdistan region were all driven by politics more than by military capabilities. However, as the list of situations in which a military response is desired grows, we are driven to selectivity based on military capability. That selectivity requires establishing clear criteria for how much of our military we are willing to have engaged in what types of conflicts. This would set and maintain a consistent US policy that will not confuse other nations or the American public. Excellent criteria were introduced by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger after the Beirut, Lebanon, disaster in 1983. There, 241 Marines were killed in one suicide attack during their 14-month peacekeeping mission. Weinberger's criteria said

1. Commit only if our or our allies' vital interests are at stake.
2. If we commit, do so with all the resources necessary to win.
3. Go in only with clear political and military objectives.
4. Be ready to change the commitment if the objectives change, since wars rarely stand still.
5. Only take on commitments that can gain the support of the American people and the Congress.
6. Commit US forces only as a last resort.¹⁴

There is a problem in our democratic system with applying rule 1. Regardless of how clearly "vital interest" is defined, in practice, it normally turns out to be what the president says it is without suffering too much political backlash from the public or the Congress. To wit, the current debate between the executive and legislative branches about

whether the US has vital interests in the former Yugoslavia. The virtue is that the problem is being addressed by the debate taking place. This same process needs to occur for future situations. Rule 5 about popular support is inherently tied to rule 1 in determining vital interests. Weinberger's rules encapsulate many of the points in this paper. With our down-sized military, in addition to the political and policy aspects, military capability in terms of aggregate military tasking should be a consideration in decisions to enter conflicts with the military instrument.

“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.”

One of the most critical steps a policymaker must take is to define the purpose or desired end state of the conflict. The first step to deal with ambiguity in purpose is to recognize that it is inherent in our system. We must work toward clear political objectives to establish a guiding framework for the military planner to work from. The subsequent steps are for the military and political leadership to iterate the means and ends until a clear set of political and military objectives is reached. This requires institutionalized teamwork between the military and political leadership. Hand in hand with establishing the purpose is contemplating the changes to the pur-

pose that are possible and acceptable. Without establishing a purpose for war, one will never know how to fight or when he is finished fighting.

Conclusion

The strength of Clausewitzian theory is that much of it has withstood the test of time and is still applicable even now. If reincarnated today, he would probably be working on a twentieth-century edition of *On War*. With any sense of humor, he could follow the lead of Rush Limbaugh and title it *See, I Told You So!* He could point out, as this paper attempts to do, the importance of his paradoxical trinity in terms of the nature, the purpose, and the conduct of war. He could pat himself on the back for the success he had in his endeavor to “develop a theory that maintains a balance among these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.”¹⁵ He could reiterate how critical it is for the political leader to understand this trinity and how necessary it is for the military commander to help in that understanding. We should take heed to his theory where it proves true. To use the military successfully, we need to understand the limits of how and why we make war. There is a declining military experience in the legislative and executive branches of government. Our nation is best served when commanders are not only familiar with the enduring verities of war, but also are able to communicate them effectively to those formulating national policy that involves the use of the military as its instrument. □

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 608.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 89.
4. *Ibid.*, 81.
5. *Ibid.*, 88.
6. James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of*

- Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 359.
7. Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 527.
8. Edward C. Mann III, *Thunder and Lightning: Desert Storm and the Airpower Debates* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1995), 11.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.

10. H. Norman Schwarzkopf with Peter Petre, *General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the Autobiography: It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 502.

11. Richard T. Reynolds, *Heart of the Storm: The Genesis of the Air Campaign against Iraq* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1995), 29, 53, 95.

12. Clausewitz, 579.

13. Powell, 559.

14. *Ibid.*, 303.

15. Clausewitz, 89.

Personally, I'm always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.

—Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill (1874–1965)