Over the last few years practitioners and students of war alike have debated the nature and impact of the revolution in military affairs (RMA) on future war, especially with its emphasis on speed, precision, and intelligence rather than the mass production and target saturation so characteristic of industrial-age warfare. Moreover, analysts have pondered the impact of RMA on the structure and philosophy of the Army of the 21st century, conflicts short of war, and information warfare. All of these observers agree that even though older forms of war will continue to co-exist with newer ones, RMA, when complete, will mean that future war will differ fundamentally from wars of the past. It will include more intelligent warriors, knowledge-oriented weaponry, a five-dimensional battlefield (namely, breadth, depth, height, space, and time—the ability and subsequent need to act within an enemy’s decision cycle), global envelopment, capabilities to attack simultaneously and precisely on the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, and an explicit “civilianization of war” in terms of increased direct and indirect public participation. In addition, RMA will likely challenge statecraft as diplomats adapt to the flow of real-time data, its
effect on public opinion, and the uncertain political capabilities and limits of future war.

Given the extent of such change, does the thought of Carl von Clausewitz, developed one hundred and seventy years ago, offer anything to warfighters of the future? Indeed, some say that Clausewitz’s funeral rites are overdue: “[Future] war will be fought not to pursue national interests, but to kill enemy leaders, to convert opponents. . . . Thus the core of Clausewitz’s philosophy of war—that states wage wars using armies in pursuit of political and military leaders render greater compartmentalization among political and military leaders render obsolete the Clausewitzian definition of war as an act of policy and his tripartite concept of war. Moreover, the perception of war as an act of policy and his tripartite concept of war as a cultural phenomenon: it not only fails to explain why wars occur, it views war from the perspective of the Western nation-state paradigm. However, such arguments fundamentally misunderstood what Clausewitz meant by politics. In fact, despite technological changes introduced by RMA—as well as those brought about by nuclear weapons—his conception of war remains valid.

**In Search of Politik**

Clausewitz’s description of war as a “continuation of politics (Politik) by other means” is well known but unfortunately is often interpreted to mean that war is merely an act of state policy aimed at achieving political aims. Part of this confusion stems from the ambiguity of the term Politik, which means both policy and politics. But Clausewitz also deserves some blame for neglecting to define in simple language how this multivalent term was to be understood. German scholars and soldiers alike have puzzled over that since the last century. Eberhard Kessel argued, for example, that for Clausewitz Politik consisted of subjective and objective elements. The former related to choices by political leaders about the type of war to wage and the specific aims to pursue. The latter involved dominant ideas, emotions, and political interrelationships unique to a given time and place. In fact, Clausewitz’s varied use of Politik and the context in which he wrote indicate that he signified three things with the term. First, it meant policy, the extension of the will of the state, the decision to pursue goals, political or otherwise. Second, it meant politics as an external state of affairs—strengths and weaknesses imposed by geopolitical position, resources, treaty, etc.—and as a process of internal interaction between key decisionmaking institutions and the personalitites of policymakers. Last, it meant an act of politics, providing an explanatory framework for examining war’s various manifestations over time.

The first definition appears principally in the first chapter of *On War* which discusses the nature of war. A prefatory note indicates that Clausewitz considered only this chapter to be in final form. But one must resist the temptation to read no further, for while it might appear that the essence of Clausewitz’s message can be grasped in 15 pages rather than 600, this is not the case. As one authority observes, strong though circumstantial evidence suggests that the note was written when On War was closer to completion than generally believed. Thus, individuals seeking a “genuine understanding of Clausewitz cannot escape the task of actually reading On War.” Indeed, one should read his other works as well. For example, his notes on history and politics and the essay on “Agitation” (Umtriebe) reveal that his ideas were continually evolving. The hefty tome *On War* constitutes barely a third of them. Clausewitz is often clearer when read in German, but the prerequisites for understanding this great theorist are really patience and a will to reflect.

**Political Forces**

The final three books of *On War*—on defense, attack, and war plans—contain the majority of Clausewitz’s mature ideas pertaining to the influence of politics on war. They also disprove that his military thought was becoming increasingly historicist. He sought to interpret historical epochs on their own terms and understood that those who lived and fought in past wars were governed by institutions, values, and beliefs unique to a specific time and place. In the The Scale of the Military Objective and of the Effort To Be Made,* Clausewitz broadens his concept of Politik to encompass the first and second definitions mentioned above. He refers to policymaking, for example, as more than a mere act of intelligence or product of pure reason: It is “an art in the broadest meaning of the term—the faculty of using judgment to detect the most important and decisive elements in the vast array of facts and situations.” This judgment, in turn, was highly subjective, affected by qualities of mind and character of the men making the decision—of the rulers, statesmen, and commanders, whether these roles are united in a single individual or not. States or societies were not limited in form to monarchical (constitutions or absolute) and semi-rigid social hierarchies.
characteristic of his day, but “deter-
mined by their times and prevailing
conditions.” A state, for instance, can
be a united, sovereign entity, a “person-
ified” intelligence acting according to
simple and logical rules,” or merely “an
agglomeration of loosely associated
forces.” Hence, the definition applies
equally to feudal rulers, drug cartels, or
terrorist groups. Even numerous Euro-
pean military institutions (for instance,
armies and command structures) have
“differed in the various periods.” In
fact, in his later books Clausewitz uses
the term military to mean all institu-
tions, procedures, philosophies, and
values of the military as a community.
Clausewitz employed several his-
torical examples to show how policy
and political forces have shaped war
from antiquity to the modern age. His
chapter “The Scale of the Objective”
includes vastly different yet pro-
foundly similar wars of conquest and
plunder carried out by semi-nomadic
Tartars and those of expansion prose-
cuted by Napoleon’s armies. Selecting
the Tartars as an example of politics di-
recting war is significant, for some
would claim that their “tribal soci-
eties” fall outside the Western nation-
state paradigm.9 Tartar tribes origi-
nated in Central Asia along with other
Turkic peoples. In the 12th and 13th
centuries they were overtaken by Mon-
gols and mixed with them. They par-
ticipated in Mongol invasions of east-
ern Europe and the Middle East.10 They
eventually converted to Islam and
joined in Ottoman jihad (holy wars of
conversion) against the West. Tartar
bands even raided Prussia in 1656–57,
converting 23,000, and enslaving 34,000.11
They thus fought for booty, to convert in-
denial—violent, unpredictable, and
prone to escalation.

Technology, in fact, resides in all
elements of the trinity without altering
their inter-relationship. Military tech-
ology, for example, might be defined
as any technology used by a nation’s
forces for military purposes. While
items such as missiles fall in the mili-
tary corner of the trinity, their compo-
nent technologies (such as microchips)
usually originate in the private sector.
Indeed, technologies related to com-
 munications and transportation have
broad application in all branches of
the trinity, thereby defying pat labels.
The point is that the interdependency
of various components of the trinity
will remain unchanged despite technol-
ogical advances. The evolving infor-
mation and communication technolo-
gies of RMA will simply expand the
immediacy—by shortening response
times and heightening sensitivity—for
each component in its interaction with
the others.14

Information technology will cer-
tainly demand increases in the intelli-
gence levels of military personnel and
civilians alike, or at least oblige them
to process more information in less time.
But it will not change the fact that rul-
ing bodies—legitimate governments,
revolutionary cells, terrorist gangs, or
drug cartels—will make decisions on

While the Tartar system of formu-
lating policy appears less sophisticated
than that of Frederick the Great or
Napoleon Bonaparte, it proved no less
decisive in developing strategies and
directing military force in pursuit of
political objectives. As seen in this ex-
ample, Clausewitz’s use of Politik af-
ords both a transhistorical and tran-
scultural perspective on war, one that
at the same time respects historical
and cultural uniqueness. Thus the ele-
ments that shape policy are both situa-
tional and cultural, objective and sub-
jective (or rational, nonrational, and
irrational according to political-scien-
tific models).12 The aims a belligerent
adopts, and the resources he employs,
will be governed by the particular
characteristics of his own [geopolitical]
position, but they will also conform to
the spirit of the age and to its general
caracter.”

**Technology and the Trinity**

With a more complete understand-
ing of what Clausewitz meant by Politik,
we can examine his tripartite concep-
tion of war in some detail. This “remark-
able or paradoxical trinity,” as it has
been called, is Clausewitz’s framework,
or model, for understanding the change-
able and diverse nature of war. The
forces that comprise it—blind emotion,
chance, and politics—function like
“three different codes of law, deeply
rooted in their subject and yet variable
in their relationship to one another.”13
They, in turn, correspond to three repre-
sentative bodies—the character and dis-
position of the populace, skill and
prospects of the military, and wisdom and
intelligence of the government.

Despite revolutionary advances in
technology, this trinity remains rele-
vant to future war. Technology does
not require adding a fourth component
to the trinity, squaring the triangle, as
has been suggested.15 Technological ad-
vances will not alter the framework of
war since they affect the grammar of
war, not its logic. In other words, new
technologies change only war’s form,
not its nature. War is multidimensional
and chameleonic-like, composed of sub-
jective as well as objective natures. The
former consist of war’s means. Since
they vary over time and place, Clause-
witz dubbed them subjective. The lat-
ter, on the other hand, embrace ele-
ments of violence, uncertainty, chance,
and friction; and while embodying many
varieties and intensities, they re-
main a constant part of war despite
time and place. Moreover, because war
is not an autonomous activity but a so-
cial and human event, it has two ten-

dencies, escalation and reciprocation.

Absent the moderating influence
of policy and debilitating force of
friction, these tendencies push
warfighting toward a violent ex-
treme. Thus, for Clausewitz war
might change color like a chameleon,
but its essential nature remains con-
stant—violent, unpredictable, and
demanding of violence, uncertainty, chance,
and friction; and while embodying many
varieties and intensities, they re-
main a constant part of war despite
time and place. Moreover, because war
is not an autonomous activity but a so-
cial and human event, it has two ten-

dencies, escalation and reciprocation.
when, where, how, and why to apply force. Their decisions will be influenced by political forces such as power relationships linked to alliances and treaties (either perceived or real), the effectiveness of key institutions involved in decision-making, and general assumptions, beliefs, and expectations held by decision-makers. Events surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis and October 1973 War reveal that even in the modern age misperceptions continue to create and/or exacerbate crises. Technology will speed the transmission of information (already approaching real time), even provide it in new forms (such as satellite imagery), and may, depending on the scenario, reduce or expand the time for making decisions. But decision-makers will continue to receive a vast quantity of information through subjective filters; thus, their decisions will remain largely a matter of judgment, and that judgment will be shaped by political forces.

Paradoxically, new technology increases and decreases violence, chance, uncertainty, and friction in unforeseen and uneven ways. New weapons systems enable both sides to observe and strike simultaneously throughout the depth of a battlefield, thus eliminating safe areas. The five-dimensional battlefield means that operational commanders must consider defeating either an attack or a counterattack from various directions at any time. A general “lack of immunity” will prevail as units at all echelons of command and control endure greater risk. Precision-guided weapons and munitions do increase the certainty of a hit or kill, but the weak link will be supplying reliable and timely target data. Enemies will take measures and countermeasures against this, and tactics will change as a result. Thus new technology alone will not prove decisive in future war; it will require a harness of sorts—a flexible, comprehensive doctrine that integrates the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. The objective nature of Clausewitz’s concept of war will remain relevant.

### The Nuclear Factor

Even the development of nuclear arms, the so-called absolute weapon, has not meant the death of Clausewitz, as some claim. His dictum that “war is the continuation of Politics by other means” is as valid in a nuclear conflict as in conventional war. The evolution of nuclear strategy from massive retaliation in the 1950s to flexible response in the early 1960s, for instance, shows how Politics affects war even in the nuclear age. Since 1945 policymakers have duly responded to changing situations, growing strike and counter-strike capabilities, and the will of the populace by determining that, because of attendant risks, nuclear war did not suit national objectives; hence, other more conventional forms of war received more attention while nuclear weapons assumed a deterrent role. Policy and politics have patiently conspired to force the avoidance of nuclear war.

The destructive power of nuclear weapons, prospect of runaway escalation, and concept of superconductivity—the elimination of friction by reducing the chain of events between the decision to launch and the actual launch of a strike—will reduce or negate the influence of policymakers on nuclear war should it occur. Obviously, until the technology is developed to harmlessly disarm nuclear weapons in flight, the possibility of aborting or down-scaling nuclear war after a launch is minimal. But such realities are merely products of the times and constitute what Clausewitz, in his historicist approach, would have considered the subjective elements of war—means selected for its prosecution—that distinguish nuclear war from other forms of conflict in the nuclear age. It might be an exaggeration to claim that such means are the ultimate expression of the remarkable trinity in terms of absolute war, but not by much. Again, Clausewitz’s mature thought does not insist that warfare serves a purely rational aim. The objective nature of Clausewitz’s concept of war will remain relevant.
group can launch suicide bombings that it considers completely rational. Indeed, the current world order advances the possibility of a limited nuclear exchange between states or groups which have relatively small arsenals. Far from restricting the influence of Politik over war, such a climate is likely to increase it, while admittedly reducing the time policymakers have to react to a strike.

Nuclear weaponry does not render irrelevant the intelligence of the government, skill of the military, and emotive force of the populace as some believe. Rather, the advent of such weapons and attendant strategies reveals that each component of the trinity changes over time. Diplomacy is now more aware that military action of any sort might generate unintended consequences and runaway escalation, and it has developed systemic checks and precautions to prevent that. The military has gradually altered its warrior ethos to prize rather than eschew intelligence and technical expertise. The public has also changed, becoming more educated and politicized, and growing more sensitive to the fact that the future rests in the hands of a few chosen officials. Such developments do not invalidate Clausewitz’s trinity but speak instead to its lasting durability and intrinsic dynamism.

Of course, not all of Clausewitz’s military thinking remains relevant. His vision of war did not include the economic, air, sea, and space dimensions, for example. But his conception of war, his remarkable trinity, and his grasp of the relationship between Politik and war will endure as long as states, drug cartels, warrior clans, and terrorist groups have a mind to wage war.

NOTES
3 In its polemics with Hans Delbrück, the German general staff argued that war was indeed subordinate to politics, but that political forces had changed since Clausewitz’s day. They saw politics as a social-Darwinistic struggle for national existence that demanded war be waged to the utmost.
6 These and other essays are found in Carl von Clausewitz, Historical and Political Writings, edited and translated by Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
14 See Bassford’s discussion in Clausewitz, pp. 22–24, and “John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashig Clausewitz: A Polemic.”
21 Jerome Raban, Nuclear Threats from Small States (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1994).