

# Finesse:

## A Short Theory of War

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**A**CCORDING TO the Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz, “War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”<sup>1</sup> This definition remains relevant today, but it needs a caveat for conflicts that include terrorist organizations, transnational crime groups, or drug cartels.

I define war as an act of force by a nation-state, crime organization, terror group, drug cartel, revolutionary group, or coalition of states to compel an enemy to do one’s will, accept a specific ideology, or prevent or allow unfettered criminal activity. The causes of war might include failures of diplomacy, communications, economic policies, or inadequate internal security. Wars should result in improved security for an affected nation’s citizens, but often result in degraded or deteriorated social conditions.

Many factors influence war. From the time of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, governments have established the rules of when and where to make war according to national interests. Today, state dominance of war is eroding.<sup>2</sup> Organizations with widely disparate beliefs have become major actors in war. Such groups use organized violence to achieve a political purpose, to force acceptance of an ideology, or to satisfy greed.

Two more nebulous forces—friction and chance—also greatly affect the conduct and outcome of war. When all actors join the fight, considerable friction builds. Every act in war produces friction that inhibits the act’s seamless execution. Chance is one aspect of friction.

Clausewitz compared war to a game of cards.<sup>3</sup> Despite the best planning, preparation, training, and execution, the unexpected can intervene to change the intended or expected outcome of a conflict. Probably the best example of this is the weather, which can change the course of any military operation. Chance makes war unpredictable and gives the most sanguine commander ulcers.

Three other factors that affect war are technology, doctrine, and genius. Technology provides the tools with which armies, paramilitaries, or other groups force their opponents to a decision. Technology is in a constant state of change, and actors must continually press to find or produce better tools to provide a winning edge on the battlefield. Yet, with all the advantage that technology might provide, ideas are the real advantage in war.

Ideas, as military doctrine, state how a force conducts operations under ideal conditions. According to historian Michael Howard, no military has its doctrine entirely correct at the outbreak of hostilities.<sup>4</sup> Victory goes to the force that adapts its doctrine to existing circumstances faster than its adversary.

Genius, which might come in the form of a brilliant politician, commander, or group leader, is an important factor in war, but genius is extremely rare. Clausewitz noted that the lack of genius can be compensated for by training leaders in a regimen of theoretical and historical study combined with practical experience.<sup>5</sup> The well-trained leader can synthesize doctrine and technology to produce military forces capable of victory. Such leaders are the key factors that fuse all others to produce coherence.

War encompasses insurrection, terrorist acts, and criminal acts. With certain exceptions, such as political demonstrations, random criminal acts, and some assassinations, war is any violent act aimed at producing a change in the sociopolitical status quo.

War begins as a result of an unacceptable political or social situation. To resolve conflicts, state politicians, revolutionaries, dissidents, criminals, or terrorists might decide they are not satisfied with regional, international, or internal circumstances, such as diplomacy, information operations, economic pressure, or military force. In other cases, leaders will attempt to use all measures short of military force



Vehicles of the 3d Infantry Division moving through western Baghdad, 10 April 2003.

to attain their goals. When such measures fail, they might resort to military action.

The 20th century saw many kinds of armed conflict. The various types of war are called the spectrum of conflict and range from low-intensity conflicts such as guerrilla wars to full-scale major theater wars and nuclear war.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. military must maintain the ability to operate across this spectrum, which requires a cultural mindset rather than reliance on technological initiatives.

According to historian Russell F. Weigley, the war of annihilation has been America's way of war for almost its entire existence.<sup>7</sup> U.S. Armed Forces enter wars with the aim of destroying the enemy, leaving him prostrate before overwhelming power, enabling the United States to dictate the terms that end the war. As global geopolitical circumstances, internal dynamics, and emerging nonstate actors change, however, a strategy of annihilation is rarely acceptable. I believe the Nation's usual manner of waging war requires modification in response to the changes in the world situation. I recommend a new way of war called "finesse."<sup>8</sup>

### "Finesse"

I define finesse as achieving victory in war by the most cost-effective means, using the appropriate level of force capable of producing the desired outcome. In finesse, the focus of military operations must not necessarily be on the use of force. In many conflicts, force might actually play an ancillary role. For example, information operations or a civil-

military effort could take precedence over military force. The upshot is that the United States must approach war by choosing the best from an array of options, whether direct or indirect, lethal or non-lethal, conventional or unconventional.

Finesse has 10 tenets that establish a foundation for action. The first seven directly concern warfare. The last three cross the line from conducting war to preventing war. The 10 tenets are—

- Disruption.
- Simultaneity.
- Tempo.
- Politico-military interoperability.
- Various ways and means.
- Common center.
- Elasticity of mind.
- Preemption.
- Deterrence.
- Information.<sup>9</sup>

Finesse is a way of war that can break an enemy's complex adaptive system in the way a highly skilled basketball team scores baskets. The traditional American way of war, with its unbridled hacking and slashing, is similar to the way a hockey team scores goals. The essence of finesse is to disrupt the enemy's decisionmaking process to impose one's own will. Simultaneity is the manner in which a force executes operations across the depth and breadth of the enemy's system to cause simultaneous pressure, thus disrupting and collapsing the enemy's system. A necessary ingredient of simultaneity is an overpowering tempo that retains the initiative and

ensures that operations disrupt the entire system.

Political leaders (with the advice of military leaders) set the goals of any war or what is desired from it. In finesse, politicians do not withdraw to a parlor while the military conducts operations. On the contrary, politicians must implement a campaign to soften the enemy's political and public resolve while the military campaigns to soften the enemy's military resolve. This unified strategy can use various means to create effects that can lead to the enemy's decision. Thus, finesse does not limit politico-military operations to the use of force only. A politico-military marriage combines lethal and nonlethal force to convince an enemy to accede to the victor's will.

Before embarking on a war, one must know what makes the enemy tick and focus the means either directly or indirectly to collapse his true center of gravity. Military forces mix conventional and unconventional operations to produce desired effects and outcomes. The lead agent might be lethal or nonlethal, conventional or unconventional, but agents aim toward a common goal. The concept of the center of gravity remains valid, although it is not always possible to determine what it is in every situation. The center of gravity is not always the same thing, as Clausewitz asserts.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the center shifts, depending on the enemy's system. Leaders must gain a thorough understanding of the enemy's culture, politics, society, and military.

The key to finesse is elasticity of mind. A political or military leader who focuses only on one form of making war will likely fail in the real world. Rigidity is unacceptable. A revolution of the mind is prerequisite for the success of finesse. Actors will use any means available to prosecute a war successfully in the least costly, most efficient manner—that is, with finesse.

Any theory of war should concern itself with war's prevention. Preventive measures include deterrence and preemption. Deterrence, a centerpiece of Cold War diplomacy, encompasses maintaining credible forces and showing the flag at appropriate locations to deter an enemy's aggression. Preemption can prevent wider hostilities. Although preemption could actually result in a war, its objective is to keep conflicts at manageable levels.

Information is a powerful agent in war, and in the prevention of war, because everything in politics and war is an effort to convince the adversary to do one's will. The clever use of information can provide the upper hand.

## The Future Force

Should U.S. Armed Forces build a capabilities-based or a threat-based force? Logical arguments exist for both approaches to force design. The cen-

tral issue is whether America should have a force capable of dealing with any threat or one based on countering likely and future threats.

A capabilities-based force would seem to provide insurance against any contingency, but can the Nation afford a force that can defeat any threat and train for all possible missions? If senior political and military leaders conduct a reasonable analysis, they might narrow the threats to three or four, and the Nation could build a threat-based force to combat regional (conventional) or nonstate (unconventional) threats or to conduct peacekeeping (conventional or unconventional threats) elsewhere, which would focus military efforts and be more cost-effective. However, an unexpected threat outside the anticipated capability could unhinge the military, unless leaders possess mental elasticity. A threat-based force could focus organizational, doctrinal, and technological development if it incorporated hedges against the unexpected.

The U.S. military will have great warfighting success if it wages war with finesse in the most cost-effective and efficient manner and with appropriate force. Force should be understood as encompassing all available means—nonlethal and unconventional methods as well as lethal and conventional—to convince the enemy to accept the Nation's will. Sun Tzu's indirect approach to prosecuting war is much like the finesse philosophy of war.<sup>11</sup> The key to bringing the military around to this way of thinking is to articulate the concept of finesse through doctrine, embed it in military education, and foster its operational implementation by rewarding innovative thinkers in the force.<sup>12</sup> **MR**

## NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, 1993), 83.
2. Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 192.
3. Clausewitz, 590.
4. Michael Howard, "Military Science in an Age of Peace," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies* (March 1973): 5.
5. Clausewitz, 115-31.
6. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 1-14 through 1-17.
7. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), xxii.
8. Roger Spiller, *Sharp Corners: Urban Operations at Century's End* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2001), 125-26.
9. Much of my thinking along these lines was quite nebulous until reading Richard E. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Inc., 1985), and Douglas E. Pike, *Dau Tranh* (Publisher unknown).
10. Clausewitz, 720-21. According to Clausewitz, the center of gravity was always the enemy's fielded forces and represented the focus of all friendly operations.
11. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 77-84.
12. Allan R. Millet, "Patterns of Military Innovation in the Interwar Period," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, eds. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 349.

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