WHO IS AFRAID OF CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ?

A GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED

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Clausewitz's seminal work, *On War*, may not be easy to read, but it is also not as difficult as many assume at first glance. The interested reader must, however, be willing to invest considerable time in the study of this text. This is not a book that can or must be understood upon a first reading; some passages or sections of the book are obscure and susceptible to more than one interpretation, while others require concentration, repeated reading (particularly Book 1, Chapter 1), and classroom analysis. Indeed, part of the professional military value of reading *On War* is that it forces the reader to ponder Clausewitz's ideas. By engaging in this rewarding process, the reader develops his own concepts and emerges with more profound insights into the various aspects of warfare.

*On War* should not, however, be treated as though its classic nature has rendered it virtually immune to criticism. Like all works of such stature, it will always be a source of many eternally relevant, original thoughts on warfare—but at the same time, it includes some ideas that were debatable from the beginning, and still others that became obsolete as a result of subsequent technological and political developments.

Apparent contradictions in the text should not cause the reader undue concern. In the first place, war's intrinsically human underpinnings mean that it is indeed fraught with unavoidable, genuine contradictions such as that between the principle of continuity and the concept of the culminating point of victory (or the attack). The former principle suggests the need to exploit a victory to the utmost by continuing the offensive advance without interruption, while the latter states that continuing beyond a certain point in the offensive is counterproductive and brings defeat. (See M. Handel, *Masters of War*, 2nd rev. and expanded edition, Chapter 11, pp. 99-120.) This type of contradiction between two concepts in war can only be addressed by examining the specific circumstances in each case.

Other contradictions are only apparent and can be explained, for example, by the different levels of analysis in question. (See Handel, *Masters of War*, Appendix A, "Contradiction and Paradox in the Theory of War," pp. 181-183.) Thus, Clausewitz frequently states that most
intelligence is unreliable while elsewhere, he observes that it can sometimes be reliable. This is not a genuine contradiction because most of his comments on intelligence refer to the lower tactical and operational levels where the heat of battle and pressure of time often render intelligence unreliable even today. His positive remarks on this subject, however, refer to the strategic level, where there is more time to verify movement and other types of information.

Since war is not an exact science, Clausewitz is also careful to note exceptions when he makes an observation or recommendation. Therefore, the identification of such so-called flaws in On War actually enhances one's understanding of war as a human and social phenomenon. Furthermore, any theoretical work of this type that is devoid of apparent or real contradictions could never represent a realistic analysis of the real world of war.

The reader must also remember that this guide addresses On War as it stands and is not therefore concerned with the intellectual process, the so-called "transformation of ideas," through which Clausewitz arrived at the final text.

**BOOK 2: ON THE THEORY OF WAR**

My first recommendation is that the reader begin On War NOT with Book 1 Chapter 1, but with Book 2 Chapter 2, "On the Theory of War," in particular pp. 136-141 and pp. 146-147. In this very "modern" chapter (still relevant to anyone studying the social sciences), Clausewitz lays the methodological foundation for the entire book. He argues that given human nature, war cannot be studied as though it is an exact science (what he calls a "positive doctrine"). In fact, he concludes that war is neither an art nor a science but "an act of human intercourse" or what we would call today a social science (pp 148-149). Therefore, the student of war and military affairs should not expect to receive specific guidance for action from books such as On War. On War is not an instruction manual, nor can there be such a book for the highest levels of studying war (i.e., policy,
strategy, or even the operational level). Although war can be studied systematically, it is ultimately an art that requires creative (not dogmatic) solutions reflecting specific or unique situations.

Next the student should read Chapters 5 and 6 of Book 2 ("Critical Analysis" and "On Historical Examples"). These chapters further expand some of the ideas developed in Chapter 2 and discuss the very methods used to teach in the Department of Strategy and Policy of the Naval War College, namely the extensive use of the critical analysis of historical case studies.

Finally, remember that it is not necessary to understand all of the finer details of Clausewitz's argument, but rather to think critically about the lessons taught by military history. Why is there no substitute for the detailed examination of past wars? How is past experience relevant and what are its limitations? (Each historical case has many unique aspects which will never be repeated in precisely the same way.) What, for example, is the impact of technological change on the value of the historical case study method?

**BOOK 1: ON THE NATURE OF WAR**

Now you are ready to begin reading Chapter 1 of Book 1, which is the **most important chapter of the entire book**. First of all, it contains the essence of most of Clausewitz's original ideas and establishes the framework for the entire book. Second, it is the only chapter he edited in final form before his death. Unfortunately this also happens to be the most difficult chapter in the book! Ideally, this chapter should be **read more than once**, for it cannot be fully understood in a single reading. Each reading of this chapter, which is infinitely rich with ideas, gives the student a new "layer" of understanding. Indeed, had Clausewitz written only this chapter and nothing else, his place as the most important theorist of war would still remain unchallenged. (Refer to the folded chart at the end of this booklet for a "flow chart" of Clausewitz' ideas and discussion in Chapter 1.)
Here are a number of specific suggestions:

Clausewitz's opening statement of Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 1 of *On War*, makes it clear right from the start why war cannot be studied as an exact science. "...In war," he states, "more than in any other subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together," (i.e. unlike in the natural sciences, different variables or factors cannot be isolated and studied independently.) The parts can only be studied in the context of the whole, as a "gestalt." (or synergism) (He refers to war as a gestalt also among others on pp. 61, 63, 77; 137; 158; 183). [Mao Tse-Tung in his military writings include an extensive discussion of war as a gestalt]

Chapter 1, Section 2, p. 75: Think about his brief definition of war. Why is it so important, and what does it tell us about the purpose of all wars?

Note that the definition of war implies the survival rather than the total destruction of the enemy. Also note that what distinguishes war from any other activity is the use of force and bloodshed. This definition must be read along with another definition of war presented in Book 2, Chapter 3: "War is a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed—that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts" (p. 149). Elsewhere, Clausewitz offers yet another definition: "Essentially, war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war" (p.127).

Acknowledging the general tendency to disregard international law and custom, Clausewitz not only sees war as inevitable but also as a common and legitimate instrument states must sometimes use to protect or enhance their vital interests.

Chapter 1, Sections 3-5, pp. 75-77: Here Clausewitz discusses war not as it is in reality, but as it is in theory, in the "abstract." He refers to war in the abstract or what war should logically be as "absolute war," "war in theory," "war in pure theory," "the natural
tendency of war," "play of imagination," or "the strict law of inherent necessity." Here he uses a well-known technique from the social sciences called the **ideal-type method** in which the writer distills the essential characteristics of a social phenomenon from its "messier" reality.

Most of the value derived from the ideal-type method, though, comes from **comparing the ideal version with reality and then asking how and why the two differ**. Clausewitz engages in these "modifications in practice," as he calls them, for the rest of the chapter (i.e., Sections 6-23). (See chart on p.3). (Also note that in the folded flow chart, the sections of Chapter 1 discussing war in the abstract or the ideal type are marked in black).

By asking why war in practice differs from war in theory (from what it logically **ought to be**) Clausewitz develops his most important ideas about war! (This is very similar to the Newtonian method of first discussing the laws of physics in a simplified, **frictionless world** and later adjusting the theory to a world of friction, or to the economists' reference to a **perfectly free market**). As a careful reading will show, this method leads Clausewitz to develop such concepts as friction and uncertainty in war; the rational (i.e., political) direction of war; and the differences (or asymmetry) between the offense and defense, total and limited war, and so on.

As you read this chapter (and the rest of the book), it is important not to confuse the ideal-type of war (i.e., war in the abstract, war in theory, a pure concept of war, etc.) with real war (or war in practice). In most instances Clausewitz tells the reader what type of war he is discussing, but not always.

Another caveat is in order. The reader must always ask himself at each point what is the level of analysis that Clausewitz is addressing. For example, Chapter 6 of Book 1 on Intelligence in War (pp. 177-118) provides truly outstanding insight into the problems of tactical and lower level value and use of intelligence in war. Clausewitz’s conclusions are pessimistic. Most intelligence on the battlefield he believes is contradictory and unreliable. Insofar as tactical/operational intelligence was concerned at his time, before the
age of real time communications became available, his observations were accurate and sensible. The same cannot be said, however, on Intelligence on the strategic level. Thus we can observe that whenever elsewhere in the book Clausewitz discusses problems related to strategic intelligence he argues that it is much more reliable. There is of course no contradiction here. What is true on the tactical or the operational level is not true on the strategic level. The problem is (a) that Clausewitz never explicitly states what level he is addressing and (b) that he moves from one level of analysis to another without warning (i.e. he begins the discussion in Chapter 6 of Book 1 on intelligence by providing a definition of intelligence on the strategic level, and then goes on to the next paragraph and continues the rest of the discussion on the lower tactical level!) and finally (c) the reader must remember that on most of the occasions that Clausewitz uses the word strategy he actually is talking of what we today would consider the operational level of war.

THE THREE LEVELS OF WAR

- STRATEGY
- OPERATIONS
- TACTICS

Another example would further classify the problem. Clausewitz as can be seen as a great admirer of military commanders that are ready to take high risks. He believes that by taking high risks commanders can dictate the pace of battle confuse the enemy and so on (see Chapter 6 of Book 3 Boldness pp. 190-193). What is true and commendable on the operational may be a great mistake on the strategic level. No doubt Clausewitz would insist that the political or military leader ought to be much more careful on the strategic level.
While a mistake on the battlefield can be retrieved--a strategic mistake may be irreversible.

Let me begin with Clausewitz's description of war in theory. In Sections 3 to 5, Clausewitz identifies three inherent types of interaction in war that in theory (and sometimes in practice) lead to an escalation to the extreme. These are:

1. **The Maximum Use of Force.** (Physical force) In order to be assured of victory, the opponents will theoretically employ all available force against each other. This first case of interaction is directly related to other principles developed later in *On War* such as the maximum concentration of forces in space and time, and the importance of achieving numerical superiority in battle (see Book 3, Chapters 8, 11, 12, and 14, and Book 5, Chapter 12). This is a good example of how Clausewitz's concepts and description of the ideal-type of war in theory are, later in the book, applied to war in reality.

2. **The Aim Is To Disarm The Enemy.** (The objective of war; or war as a zero-sum game) The second case of interaction is closely connected to the first. It states that each side will continue fighting until its enemy has been disarmed and is no longer a threat. In theory only one side can win and war is fought uninterruptedly as a zero-sum game. (The second case of interaction is also closely related to the principle of continuity, see p. 7. Clausewitz returns to this theme in Chapter 2 of Book 1, see p. 91 and also in Book 8, Chapter 2, p.579.)

3. **The Maximum Exertion of Strength.** (Intangible factors; or non-material force multipliers, or what he refers to as "moral forces") The third case of interaction suggests that in addition to mobilizing and using all possible physical/material force, the opponents simultaneously marshall all of the moral and spiritual forces available (e.g., motivation, dedication, and spirit of sacrifice). In contrast to the physical forces, which are relatively easy to estimate, the equally important moral forces are more difficult to gauge. When one side has reached the limits of its material strength, it can always add to its military efforts by mobilizing all possible moral strength. Moral forces thus act as a force multiplier, (or force divider), making estimates and net
assessment far more complex. The balance of power must therefore be estimated (in Clausewitz’s own words) as follows:

THE TOTAL POWER TO WAGE WAR
(OF THE TWO OPPONENTS)

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Throughout On War, Clausewitz returns to the discussion of moral forces (e.g., will, motivation, creative genius, intuition, patriotism and all other non-tangible factors that affect the course of a war). (See, for example, Book 1, Chapter 3, pp. 136-138); Book 2, Chapter 2, pp. 136-137 Book 3, Chapters 3 and 4, pp. 184-186).

For the remainder of the chapter Clausewitz explains why the extreme nature of war in theory is moderated in reality by factors such as political (rational) calculations; the inability to use all forces at once; the difference in strength between the offense and defense; insufficient or inaccurate intelligence on the relative strength of the opponent; and aversion to risk or other psychological considerations. (See discussion below.) [For a detailed explanation see also Masters of War Appendix C pp.205-215]

In Chapter 1, Clausewitz tacitly introduces a comprehensive framework for the study of war. (Section 5, p.77) Here he argues that war always includes rational and non-rational elements, physical (or material) and moral (or spiritual, non-material) factors, planning, and control, as well as uncertainty, friction, and chance. Such a framework
is eternal because all of these complementary and at times seemingly contradictory elements deal with every dimension of warfare.

This framework is succinctly and elegantly summarized in his famous "trinity" (Chapter 1, Book 1, Section 28, p. 89) in which the passions, (people); probability and chance, (military); and objectives, and rational calculations, (government) can form countless unique combinations reflecting the character of each war.

Note that Clausewitz's framework for the study of war and his analysis throughout the book fully recognizes the importance of non-rational (as well as rational) factors such as the charisma, creativity, and coup d'oeil of the military leader; the morale and motivation of the people; the influence of danger and battle on the ability to make rational calculations under pressure; and the effect of uncertainty, friction, chance, and insufficient information/intelligence on the ability to make rational calculations. I mention this because John Keegan, in his most recent book A History of Warfare (New York: Knopf, 1993), erroneously states that Clausewitz's approach to war is entirely or primarily based on rational calculations. This is plainly wrong. (For an explicit statement on the impossibility of conducting war as a purely rational activity, see Book 8, Chapter 2, p.579.)
When reading Chapter 1 of Book 1 also consider: How or why does politics modify war in theory by emphasizing the rational (instrumental) purpose of war (as already indicated in his definition of war)? (Remember that in war in theory the maximum use of force is not based on rational calculations but on the inherent dynamic nature of interaction.) Devote some time to thinking about Section 27 (p. 88), the second paragraph, where he stresses the importance of understanding the nature of the war a nation is about to get involved in. (See discussion below pp.11-12.) How does the question of the kind of war (Section 27) relate to the following section (Section 28), the trinity (or triad) and the observation that war is "like a chameleon?" (Note that Clausewitz's comparison of the mercurial nature of war to a chameleon is analogous to Sun Tzu's comparison of war to water." "And as water has no constant form, there are in war no constant conditions." (Sun Tzu The Art of War, Chapter 6, p.101.) We will return to this question throughout the course. Section 27 (on the importance of understanding the diverse nature of war) and Section 28 in which Clausewitz develops his "Trinitarian analysis" are closely related, as the "Trinitarian analysis" establishes the most important elements in defining or describing the diverse nature of each war. (See p.10 below.)

How does Clausewitz move from war in theory to war in practice? How does he show that in reality, war rarely follows the dialectics of the extreme? (In Book 7, Chapter 1, Clausewitz explains the dialectical method as he sees it: "...Where two ideas form a true logical antithesis, each complementary to the other, then fundamentally each is implied in the other. If the limitations of our mind do not allow us to comprehend both simultaneously, and discover by antithesis the whole of one in the whole of the other, each will nevertheless shed enough light on the other to clarify many of its details." ) (p. 523). (This is similar to the idea of yin and yang.)

In Section 6, Clausewitz begins by discussing the necessity of a correct transition from the theoretical world to the real world. In Section 7, he observes that since the enemy is not a total unknown in most cases, a state does not have to use all of its forces (as noted in the first case of interaction) but only the amount needed to do the job.
Next he reasons that even if one could use all of the forces at his disposal, such forces could never realistically be concentrated in one place at one time (Section 8).

Section 9 is one of the shortest -- and most important in the book. It states that even if one side achieves a military victory, such a victory is rarely final. This is because the defeated enemy who does not accept the result will simply wait for a better time to fight again. Consequently, the maximum use of military force is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for final victory; diplomacy and political wisdom are the "missing ingredients" needed to consolidate the results achieved in battle. In reality, therefore, it is wiser to rely on the combination of adequate strength and diplomacy. Through the modifications of war in theory as outlined in Sections 7, 8, and 9, the reader is able to follow Clausewitz's transition from a war of absolutes to his analysis of war in reality in Section 10.

In Section 11, Clausewitz reintroduces the political objective in war: If the absolute war is confined to the realm of theory, what actually determines the use of force in war? The political authorities and not the inherent dynamics of war, determine what the objectives are, and what achieving a given objective is worth in terms of the military resources to be invested. This, in turn, determines how much counterforce the enemy will have to employ. Accordingly, war is not just one uncontrolled clash of all forces available as the three cases of interaction imply; instead, it is a calculated political decision that can range from the extreme use of force to minor engagements. The analysis of war in reality (or in practice) in Chapter 1 thus clearly implies the existence and logic of limited war. (Clausewitz again defines the role of politics in war in Section 23, 24, 25 and 26. See also Book 8 in particular Chapters 6A and 6B where he further develops the same ideas.)

At this point, Clausewitz introduces another ideal-type concept - the principle of continuity. According to the principle of continuity (Sections 12-14), war in theory is fought without interruption until one of the sides is victorious. The reasoning is as follows: If one side has achieved an advantage he must or should exploit it until he wins (i.e.,
disarms the enemy (Section 4) and compels the enemy to do his will (Section 2). In Sections 13 and 14, Clausewitz -- in one of the most complicated discussions in On War -- explains why war is frequently interrupted despite the logic of the principle of continuity. This leads him to an analysis of the differences in nature and strength between the offense and defense (Sections 15-17), and a discussion of how war is interrupted because of poor intelligence and the commander's tendency to make worst-case assumptions (Section 17). The asymmetry or inherent differences between the offense and defense combined with poor intelligence thus explain why the principle of continuity is ignored in reality. (For a detailed discussion, see Chapter 11 of the second revised edition of Masters of War by Handel.)

Inaction in war, which is common in practice but makes no sense in theory, thus further removes war from its absolute, theoretical form. Later in On War, Clausewitz expands on the practical consequences of inaction in war. (See Book 3, Chapter 16, pp. 216-219; and the second paragraph of Book 3, Chapter 2, p. 579.)

In Section 19 Clausewitz repeats his argument that war is a probabilistic affair. This, in turn, means that it always involves taking chances (Section 20) and therefore, is also always a gamble that requires courage (Section 21), an environment in which many military leaders feel more comfortable (Section 22). (He returns to this subject in Chapter 2 of Book 1, see p. 91.)

In Sections 23, 24, 25, and 26, Clausewitz introduces the political/policy factor for the second time. This is the most important factor in modifying the absolute nature of war; that is inherent theoretical tendency to escalate to the extreme as discussed in Sections 3, 4, and 5. Politics and policy determine the objectives of war--that is, the degree to which the state or group is ready to invest in achieving these ends. Political calculations introduce the rational calculation of ends and means, costs and benefits. (See also Book 1, Chapter 2, pp. 90-92. Clausewitz adds to his discussion of politics and policy in Book 8, particularly in Chapters 6, parts A and B (On War, pp. 603-610). These must be read in conjunction with Section 23-26 of Book 1, Chapter 1, pp. 86-88.) (Clausewitz in the tradition of raison d'etat assumes that the leaders of the state pursue a policy
of enhancing the vital interests of the state (i.e. of its power vis-à-vis other states). He does not discuss the possibility that some leaders (e.g., Napoleon or Hitler) can pursue either personal or non rational goals. (But see his comments on the formation of policy in Book 8, Chapter 6B, pp. 606-607.)

In Section 25, Clausewitz argues that the higher the stakes in war and the more important the political stakes - the more violent war will tend to become; therefore it will also tend to approximate absolute war. (In Chapter 2 of Book 8 he in fact suggests that war in his time has come close to resembling the absolute war in theory, "...one might wonder "he says" whether there is any truth at all in our concept of the absolute character of war were it not for the fact that with our own eyes we have seen warfare achieve this state of absolute perfection," p.580.) (See also pp 593, 603 and 610.) Conversely the more moderate or limited the political goals, the more war is removed from the ideal type of absolute war. The more violent a war becomes, the greater the chances that the political leaders will lose control over the course of the war as the passions of the belligerents and the war's own momentum take over. (As the ideal type of absolute war suggests.) This may create the impression that the more violent wars are less political than limited wars, but this is not really the case (i.e. all wars, whether unlimited (total) or limited, are equally political.)

Clausewitz rounds out the already rich and varied discussion in Chapter 1 with the introduction of two additional interrelated concepts. The first, introduced in Section 27, is the need to understand the nature of war before embarking upon it; and the second, in Section 28, is his famous "Trinitarian analysis." The first simply suggests that no two wars are ever the same: the participants, their respective morals, motivations, strategies, military doctrines, and weapons technologies change from one war to another and even in the course of a single war. The statesman and strategist must therefore attempt to understand the unique character of each war. Is it to be short or long, conventional or low-intensity, hi-tech or low tech? How will the enemy react to his contemplated strategy? Such in-depth analysis is not an easy requirement since the interaction of two opponents in war is not a "linear" or predictable process. Note that there is substantial tension
between Clausewitz's advice that one should attempt to grasp the nature of a future war on the one hand, and his emphasis on the problems of forecasting in a world rife with friction, uncertainty, chance, and lack of intelligence on the other. Rapid technological changes in modern weapon technology have made understanding the nature of war even more difficult than in Clausewitz's time. The process of trying to understand the nature of a war must begin before its outbreak and continue throughout its duration. Indeed, initial expectations about the nature of the imminent war provide the basis for preparations such as the procurement of suitable weapons, the best possible training, strategic planning, and the mobilization of the people – but these original assessments cannot remain static as the reciprocal action inherent in war takes over. Every interaction in war creates unexpected developments and friction that require political and military leaders to continuously reassess the nature of the war: upon finding that conditions have changed, such leaders may then have to change their military doctrine; modify plans; redouble their efforts to garner and maintain public support; rely less or more on technological means; or change their alliances. Understanding the nature of a war is thus a dynamic, ongoing process – not a static, one-time evaluation.

Since no belligerent ever precisely identifies the nature of the war in advance, the side that is more capable of learning from experience and less wedded to particular plans or doctrines will enjoy greater success. The advantage afforded by flexibility was recognized more explicitly by Mao Tse-tung than by Clausewitz:

The process of knowing a situation goes on not only before the formulation of a military plan but also after. In carrying out the plan from the moment it is put into effect to the end of the operation, there is another process of knowing the situation, namely, the process of practice. In the course of this process, it is necessary to examine anew whether the plan worked out in the preceding process corresponds with reality. If it does not correspond with reality, or if it does not fully do so, then in light of our knowledge, it becomes necessary to form new judgments, make new decisions and change the original plans so as to meet the new situation.... Mao Tse-tung, “Strategy in China’s
Revolutionary War,” *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung*, pp. 86-87.

Given the dynamic and ever changing nature of war it is not surprising to see that Clausewitz compares war to a chameleon that keeps on changing and adapting its colors to a constantly changing environment. It is interesting to note that Sun Tzu two millennia earlier made the same observation by comparing the changing nature of war to water which also continuously adapts itself to the changing nature of the terrain.

In the last section (28) of Chapter 1, Clausewitz introduces a conceptual framework that makes it easier to understand the nature of each war. Clausewitz argues that the behavior of each nation and its capacity to wage war depend on three groups of factors (tendencies as Clausewitz calls them): the people, the military, and the government. When considering the people, one must examine, for example, their motivation, dedication, and support of their government. Of the military, one should ask how good their leaders are, whether they obey government orders, and whether they develop suitable doctrines and are well organized. And as for the government, it is wise to investigate how rational or realistic its policies are, and how effective it would be in mobilizing the people’s support for a prolonged war. The three elements of the trinity - the people, the military, and the government - represent, or are an abbreviated code for, the tendencies underlined above. It must also be emphasized that these tendencies are not exclusive only to the people, the military, and the government and may in certain circumstances be better represented by other elements (e.g., at times the military or the "people" may be more rational and calculating than the political leadership or the political leader may be more passionate or full of hate than the people).

While Clausewitz states that "...the political aims are the business of the government alone" (p.89). This clearly is not the case in a democracy where the people should and do have a great deal of influence on determining the aims of war.
The interrelationship of these three factors or "three aspects" of war will determine the way in which each country wages war. Think, for example, of the Vietnam War: Did the U.S. government define clear objectives for the war? Did it effectively mobilize the support of the American people? Did the U.S. military develop a suitable doctrine? Was the doctrine effectively adapted to changing circumstances on the battlefield? Was the government given the best possible advice by the military? Was the U.S. population united in its support of the government and for how long?

Comparing these three main factors for each participant in a war allows the strategist to make a more reliable forecast. For instance, in the Vietnam War, which population was more dedicated and ready to act? Which military was more adaptable and responsive to developments on the battlefield? The relationship among the three components of "the trinity" is dynamic and different in various types of war (i.e., the role of the people is relatively more important in guerrilla warfare than in conventional, hi-tech war).

"The trinity" includes only "non-material" or non-tangible factors, such as policy, organization, and motivation--and ignores war's material, technological, and economic dimensions. Clausewitz might have concluded that the material dimensions were not necessary for understanding the nature of war, or that they were a roughly comparable "given" for each belligerent. In any case, it is possible to criticize Clausewitz's approach with the observation that he does not pay enough attention to the material aspects of war. (On this, see Michael Handel, "Clausewitz in the Age of Technology," in Michael Handel, ed., Clausewitz and Modern Strategy (London: Cass: 1986), pp. 51-94.)

It must be noted that Clausewitz believed that the most important changes in war at this time were all political not material. "...These changes were caused by the new political conditions which the French Revolution created both in France and Europe as a whole, conditions that set in motion new means and new forces...the transformation of the art of war resulted from the transformation of politics" (p.610; also p.593).
THE TRINITARIAN ANALYSIS AND THE NATURE OF WAR
It is the interaction between all the "trinities of the belligerents that
defines the particular nature of each war.

Try not to become discouraged if you do not understand
everything in Chapter 1. Finish reading the rest of the assigned
chapters and then come back to Chapter 1 and read it again (and again
if necessary). This chapter will be discussed in detail in the seminar
later on.

Before finishing your work on Chapter 1, read Section 9 ("In War
the Result is Never Final," p. 80) one more time. What is the
importance of this statement? How does this fact influence the need
to consider the question of war termination throughout the war? What
does it suggest about the correct relationship between the political and
military authorities?

Finally it must be suggested that although Clausewitz clearly
states that the political authorities, the government must always direct
and control the war effort he does not discuss and is not interested in
the moral positions of the government or whether its aims in war are
moral or immoral just or unjust. In other words this is not a problem
that the soldier should concern himself with. In this sense, much like
Machiavelli's work--Clausewitz's position is not moral or immoral but
amoral--i.e. objective, neutral, detached.

Once you leave Chapter 1, you are on the open road. The rest of
the chapters in the book are much easier!

Chapter 2 of Book 1 (pp. 90-99) is devoted to a number of
important issues, the first of which is the problem of war termination.
According to Clausewitz, wars are brought to an end for three possible
reasons: (1) the inability to carry on the struggle (i.e. defeat); (2) the
improbability of victory; and (3) unacceptable cost. Here he introduces
what I call the rational calculus of war termination: "Since war is not
an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the
value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in
magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of effort
exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow" (p.92).

CLAUSEWITZ'S "RATIONAL CALCULUS" OF WAR

"ONCE THE EXPENDITURE OF EFFORTS EXCEEDS THE VALUE OF THE POLITICAL OBJECTIVE, THE OBJECT MUST BE RENOUNCED AND PEACE MUST FOLLOW"

OW, 1.2, P.92

Perhaps Clausewitz's most direct recommendation that war should be waged as rationally as possible appears in Chapter 2 of Book 8: "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." (On War, p. 579) (In Thucydides "The History of the Peloponnesian War", the Athenian envoys make a similar comment to the Spartans: "It is a common mistake in going to war to begin at the wrong end and wait for disaster to discuss the matter", Book 1, Section 78, p.44. Machiavelli puts it in this way "Everyone may begin a war at his pleasure, but cannot so finish it. A prince, therefore, before engaging in any enterprise should well measure his strength and govern himself accordingly; and he must be very careful not to deceive himself in the estimate of his strength..." Marchiavelli "The Discourses", Book 2, Chapter 10.)

Again, we must note that Clausewitz, more than any of the classical theorists of war, emphasizes the critically important role of non-rational factors in war. (In fact, part of any rational conduct of war is to recognize and take systematically into account the role of

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non-rational and irrational factors in waging war.) As we have seen in
the preceding discussion, he is fully cognizant of the limits of rational
analysis and conduct in war. The roles of friction, chance, luck,
uncertainty, reciprocal interaction, action under pressure, passion and
hatred, creative leadership and intuition, and the characters and
pathologies of different leaders always undermine the prospect of
waging war as a "purely rational activity." Clausewitz analyzes these
and many other factors that undermine the course of action envisioned
by rational decision making in his discussion of "moral factors." (See in
particular, Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 5; Book 1, Chapter 3; Book 2,
Chapter 2, pp. 136-140; Book 3, Chapter 3, 4 and 14; and Book 8,
Chapters 1 and 2.) A few quotations will elucidate Clausewitz's
position on the impossibility of conducting war as a "purely rational
activity":

...Moral elements are among the most important in war....
Unfortunately they will not yield to academic wisdom. They
cannot be classified or counted. They have to be seen or felt....
Even the most uninspired theories have to stray into the area of
intangibles. For instance, one cannot explain the effects of a
victory without taking psychological reactions into account.
Hence, most of the matters dealt with in this book are composed
in equal parts of physical and of moral causes and effects. (OW,
pp. 184-185)

Military activity is never directed against material force alone; it is
always aimed simultaneously at the moral forces which give it
life, and the two cannot be separated. But moral values can only
be perceived by the inner [i.e., intuition]. (OW, p. 137)

Logic comes to a stop in this labyrinth [i.e., war]. (OW, p. 579)

Note that while such rational calculations make sense in theory -- they
are very different to implement in reality. Why is this invariably the
case? Clausewitz's emphasis on the need to wage war as rationally as
possible must be viewed as a normative recommendation - not as a
description of reality. As we have seen in the above discussion, he is
fully aware of the limits of rational analysis in war. He knows that the
hatreds, passions, emotions, and costs incurred in the process of
waging war may at times render a rational decision making process extremely difficult if not impossible.

The discussion of the rational calculus of war termination is immediately followed by an "equilibrium analysis" considering the motivation of each of the belligerents to initiate negotiations for war termination (p.92).

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**THE RELATIVE STRENGTH OF THE BELLIGERENTS AND THEIR INCENTIVE TO MAKE PEACE**

The desire for peace will rise and fall with the probability of further successes. If such incentives were of equal strength on both sides, the two would resolve their political disputes by meeting half way. If the incentive grows on one side, it should diminish on the other...”

OW, 1.2, P.92

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The final pages of Chapter 2 (pp. 96-97) begin by introducing the principle of destruction which suggests that all other things being equal "The destruction of the enemy forces is always the superior, more effective means, with which others cannot compete." It must, however, be made clear that the destruction of the enemy forces is not necessarily physical but can be moral or psychological. "When we speak of destroying the enemy's forces we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces: the moral element must also be considered" (p.92). Furthermore even the actual
destruction of the enemy's forces is not always required. "Combats'. . . . aim is to destroy the enemy's forces as a means to a further end. That holds true even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting the enemy would be destroyed" (p.97, also, p.181). These statements are very much in agreement with Sun Tzu's approach to the art of war. Yet the final pages of the chapter (pp. 97-99) include a truly outstanding argument (which so far has received very little attention!) against Sun Tzu's idea that the best way to win a war is without fighting. That which is the ideal achievement and epitome of success in war for Sun Tzu - is an exception for Clausewitz. (See Michael Handel, Masters of War, Chapter 9). (On the destruction of the enemy forces, see also Chapters 3, 4 and 11 of Book 4.)

Chapter 3 of Book 1 is one of the longest in the book. Since war is not a science, but an art, and therefore requires innate talent and genius, Clausewitz now discusses the necessary characteristics of the military genius (the military commander as an artist, if you wish). Note however that most of the qualities he considers are those required for battle on the operational not the strategic level (but see his comments on the need to understand strategy and policy on p. 111).

The qualities that Clausewitz admires in the military genius are above all self- confidence, trust in his experience and intuition (his coup d'oeil), the ability even in the heat of battle to stick confidently to his original goal (the "imperative principle," p.108). While he must "stand like a rock" (p.117) amidst the turmoil of battle, his maintenance of aim should not deteriorate into obstinacy. Above all, Clausewitz identifies great military leadership with the readiness to take risks. (See also Chapter 6 of Book 3).

The remaining chapters in Book 1 are important but require no particular explanation.

**BOOK 3: ON STRATEGY IN GENERAL**

When Clausewitz talks about strategy, he is actually discussing what we would now consider to be the operational level. (See Chapter
1 of Book 3 for his definition of strategy.) Note that the first section on p. 181 on possible engagements brings him closer to some of Sun Tzu's arguments.

Chapters 3, 4 and 8 of Book 3 addresses the role of moral factors in war. (Compare it with Book 2, Chapter 2, pp. 136-137.) (On the importance of "Moral Factors" in war, see also Book 2 Chapter 2, pp. 136-138.)

Chapter 8 of Book 3 discusses the importance of numerical superiority and should be read together with Chapter 3 of Book 5, pp. 282-284.

Chapters 9 and 10 of Book 3 are on surprise and deception. This is where Clausewitz differs the most from Sun Tzu. (See Handel, Masters of War, Chapter 11.)

Chapter 11 of Book 3 on "the concentration of forces in space" is short but notable as one of the few general "principles of war" offered by Clausewitz. (See also Book 3 Chapter 8.)

Chapter 16 of Book 3, "The Suspension of Action in War," should be compared and read together with Sections 14, 16, and 17 of Book 1, Chapter 1.

Chapter 17 of Book 3 is important as a reference to the new character of war in Clausewitz's own time which influenced his theory of war. (See also Chapter 16, pp. 218-219.)

**BOOK 4: THE ENGAGEMENT**

Chapters 2 and 4 of Book 4 are also dedicated to the study of the new character of war as established by the wars of the French Revolution. The chapters discussing the nature of modern war therefore provide the general background/context for his observations on war. Chapters 4 and 11 also provide ideas for a possible comparison with Sun Tzu.
The greatly increased intensity of warfare since the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon brought war in reality much closer to Clausewitz's description of war in theory (the absolute war). (See also, Book 8, Chapter 2, p.580). Chapters 3 and 4 of Book 4 discuss the definition of victory and the need under most circumstances to destroy the enemy's forces in order to achieve victory. In Chapter 4, Clausewitz discusses the connection between physical and moral factors in victory (or defeat). Chapter 11 of Book 4 must be read with Sun Tzu in mind. Here Clausewitz argues that winning without fighting is "nonsense." Is he right? Was he right for his own time? How does this relate to some of his other statements? Is he consistent?

BOOK 5: MILITARY FORCES

Book 5, on military forces, is of much less interest to the strategist as it is primarily concerned with tactical and operational questions. But read Chapter 3 on relative strength. Compare it with Chapter 8 of Book 3.

BOOK 6: DEFENSE

In Book 6, read Chapter 1 for a general statement on the nature of the defense. Read Chapter 5 and Chapter 23 entitled, "The Key to the Country," and compare them with the discussion in Chapter 27, on the concept of the center of gravity. (Chapter 27 is entitled "Defense of a Theater of War.") The same question is also discussed in Chapter 4 of Book 8. (See also Handel, Masters of War, Chapter 5). Read also Chapter 25 "Retreat to the Interior of the Country" which is based on Clausewitz's observation of Napoleon's invasion of Russia and discusses the concept of the culminating point of the attack as related to the offensive and defense. Perhaps the most critical, and certainly one of the most interesting chapters in Book 6 is Chapter 26, "The People in Arms," which is an excellent summary of the unique character of guerrilla warfare. Most of the insights and principles of guerrilla warfare (people's war) later developed at great length by Mao Tse Tung, can be found in essence in Chapter 26 of Book 6 a century
before. (Chapter 25 also merits a careful comparison with Mao Tse-Tung's work. See Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung, pp.109-121)

**BOOK 7: THE ATTACK**

Book 7 is dedicated to the attack. Begin by reading Chapter 2 which, among other issues, discusses the concept of the **culminating point of the attack** (namely, that every offensive ultimately exhausts itself and cannot go on indefinitely). The attacker must know when to move over to the defense and consolidate his gains while he has the advantage. This theme also dominates Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 22.

While this concept is of great interest analytically, it does not provide the strategist or field commander with any concrete advice. Like most of the other concepts Clausewitz develops, it makes the reader think and ask further questions, but does not give him any "practical" answers. Consider the concept of the center of gravity in the same way. How useful is such a "mechanical" concept? What is the value of this concept? (For a detailed discussion see Chapter 11 of the second revised edition of Handel's *Masters of War.*)

**BOOK 8: WAR PLANS**

In Book 8, Clausewitz returns once again to his discussion of the highest political and strategic levels of war (and to many of the concepts introduced in Chapter 1). Above all, pay attention throughout Book 8 to the tension between the desire to wage war as rationally as possible--to see war as a carefully calculated affair--and the need to consider the limits on rational calculations. Also note the tension between the inherent trends in war toward the extreme (toward the absolute war) and the moderating influence of rational political calculations on limiting war. Chapter 3B includes an interesting discussion of the evolution of war in historical perspective in different societies (see pp. 586-594). The most important statement on the political nature and the political control of war is to be found in Chapter 6B, "War as an Instrument of Policy." This is perhaps the most crucial
chapter in the book. Read the rest of Book 8. Chapter 6 of Book 8 includes an elegant definition of policy: "It can be taken as agreed that the aim of policy is to unify and reconcile all aspects of internal administration as well as of spiritual values, and whatever else the moral philosopher may care to add. Policy, of course, is nothing in itself; it is simply the trustee for all these interests against other states. That it can err, subserve the ambition, private interests, and vanity of those in power, is neither here nor there. In no sense can the art of war ever be regarded as the preceptor of policy, and here we can only treat policy as representative of all interests of the community (pp. 606-607).

When Clausewitz started his work on On War he saw the absolute war with its tendency to escalate and search for definite clear-cut results as the only possible way to wage war. At a later stage (1827) he came to recognize that not all wars are or will be waged in that way, and that the political nature of war introduces a moderating influence that makes limited wars not only possible but likely. After recognizing this "dual nature of war," he decided to write Book 8 and rewrite the entire book (we know for certain that he rewrote Chapter 1 of Book 1 and possibly Chapter 2 of Book 1). Chapters 5, 7 and 8 of Book 8 are dedicated to an important discussion of the nature and goals of limited wars. In this context read also the first three paragraphs of the two notes left by Clausewitz describing his intention to revise his arguments in On War by taking into account his latest distinction between wars of limited aim and the total defeat of the enemy (p.69).

According to Clausewitz, wars are limited primarily as a result of two considerations: the first is insufficient or limited resources; the second, and more important for his theory of limited war, is the set of limitations that the political leadership imposes on the wartime objectives as defined by the national interests. In Chapter 6 of Book 8, Clausewitz discusses the subject of limited interventions (or expeditionary forces) which is of particular interest to naval strategists. (This concept and related issues of limited war are further developed by Sir Julian Corbett in Some Principles of Maritime Strategy (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988), in particular Chapters 3,4,5 and 6, pp. 41-87.)
If we ignore this transformation of Clausewitz's ideas and read *On War as it now stands*, it is clear that he fully recognized the dual nature of war in Book 1 as well as Book 8 and also Book 7, chapter 16.

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Recently, some critics have pronounced Clausewitz's *On War* irrelevant for pre-modern and modern warfare. But while *On War* should be read critically and while it does contain some dimensions that are obsolete - most of his ideas, analytical concepts, and discussions on war are valid and useful. Friction, chance, uncertainty, or moral factors will always influence war and conflict; the "Trinitarian analysis" is relevant for all types of war in every era; and his emphasis on the *political* nature of war is critical as both a *factual* and *normative* statement.

Clausewitz warns the reader "war is no pastime...it is a serious means to a serious end...*(On War, Book 1, Section 23, p.86). In *The Transformation of War* by Martin Van Creveld, one encounters a curious statement discounting the political nature of war; namely, "war is the continuation of sport by other means." Such assertions cannot be taken seriously anywhere--and certainly not in a democracy.

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Clausewitz's *On War* is a challenge to all professional military officers, military experts, and strategists. Once you have "deciphered" Chapter 1 of Book 1, it is much easier going. Like all challenges, this one requires a considerable effort but in the end is well worth the investment. Although considered a "theoretical" work, *On War* is in fact of immense practical value for policy makers, strategists and military commanders at the higher operational level. Although it does not give the reader concrete, manual-like answers, it offers him insights that no other book can match into the problems of waging war on all levels.
The following works can help the reader to deepen his understanding of *On War*:


Interested students will benefit greatly from reading Mao Tse-Tung’s “Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War” and “On Protracted War” in *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press 1967). His essays are more “Clausewitzian” than “Sun Tzuian” and amplify many of Clausewitz’s thoughts. For the influence of Clausewitz’s *On War* or Corbett and his expansion of Clausewitz’s theory of limited war see: Julian Corbett *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 1988).
Napoleon's Russian Campaign (1812)

Clausswitz's Culminating Point of Victory / Attack

The French Engineer Charles Joseph Minard (1781-1870) drew this combination data map and time series (1861) to describe Napoleon's invasion of and retreat from Russia in 1812. This map diagram exemplifies Clauswitz's argument that the defense is inherently stronger than the offense. The offense paradoxically grows weaker as it succumbs. What he called the culminating point of victory and the culminating point of attack must be considered. Clauswitz argues that "...there is no growth of intensity in an attack comparable to that of the various types of defense." He speaks of the gradually diminishing force of the attack, which is not surprising since he perceives that "it is easier to hold ground than to take it," and adds that "time which is allowed to pass unused accumulates to the credit of the defense. He reaps what he did not sow." "The defender is better placed to spring surprises by the strength and direction of his own attacks." The attacker, on the other hand, suffers from many disadvantages. As it advances, the attacking army cuts itself off from its own theater of operations, and suffers by having to leave its fortresses and depots behind. The larger the area of operations that it must traverse, the more it is weakened by the effect of marches and by the detachment of garrisons." In addition, "the danger threatening the defender will bring allies to his aid...and the defender, being in real danger, makes the greater effort, whereas, the efforts of the victor slacken off. The longer these flanks become as the attacker advances, the more...the risks that they represent will progressively increase. Not only are they hard to cover, but the very length of the unprotected lines of communication tends to challenge the enemy's spirit of enterprise, and the consequences their loss can have in the event of a retreat are very grave indeed. Since all of this places new burdens on an advancing army with every step it takes, such an army - unless it started out with exceptional superiority - will be crippled by its dwindling freedom of action and progressively reduced offensive power." "There are very few 'strategic attacks' that have led to peace...most of them lead up to the point where the remaining strength is just enough to maintain a defense and wait for peace. Beyond that point the scale turns and the reaction [of the defense] follows with a force that is usually much stronger than that of the original attack. This is what we mean by the culminating point of attack." Given the fact that the transition to the defense in the midst of an attack deep inside the enemy's territory leads to a much weaker form of defense. "What matters, therefore, is to detect the culminating point with discriminative judgement." NO DOUBT, Clausewitz formulated many of these perceptive observations while witnessing and later studying Napoleon's disastrous invasion of Russia. Because Napoleon marched beyond the culminating point of the attack without being able to dictate peace terms, his invading army of 422,000 numbered only 10,000 by the time it returned to Poland.