

**Strategic and Combat Studies Institute**  
**Occasional Paper No 47:**

Professor Colin Gray on Clausewitz and the Modern Strategic World  
Professor Colin Gray on Mackinder – A Defence of The Heartland  
Professor Sir Michael Howard on Military History and The History of War  
Professor Christopher Greenwood – The Case for Intervention in Iraq  
General Sir Hugh Beach – The Concept of Preventive War

**ISBN: 1 874346 37 0**

Copyright © The Individual Authors

First Published 2004

No part of this Publication, except for short quotations, may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the Strategic and Combat Studies Institute.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking or policy of either Her Majesty's Government or the Ministry of Defence.

The Strategic and Combat Studies Institute was formed in September 1991. It has the following aims:

- To act as a forum and catalyst for discussion and debate.
- To sponsor and manage official and non-technical research on strategic and, operational and combat related issues affecting present and possible future concerns of the Armed Forces.
- To help and encourage officers in the preparation and publication of work.
- To establish a research and information retrieval database between a number of relevant national and international organisations.
- To be a focus for the study of war, past present and future.

Manuscripts are welcomed and should be submitted to the Editor on A4 paper and on disk in any normal PC WP format. A length in the region of 10,000 to 15,000 words is suggested, though this is only intended as a guide.

Copies of this paper may be obtained from:

SCSI, Colonel Defence Studies (Army), Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre, Shrivenham, Swindon, Wilts SN6 8RF.

Applications for inclusion on the mailing list should also be addressed to the Editor.

Email: [defencestudies@gtnet.gov.uk](mailto:defencestudies@gtnet.gov.uk)

Front Cover

- Morning with The Jungle Warfare Wing - Brunei (W01 Simon Leak)
- other photographs (Media Ops Land Command)

THE STRATEGIC AND COMBAT STUDIES INSTITUTE

THE OCCASIONAL  
NUMBER 47

**CONTEMPORARY ESSAYS**

**Professor Colin Gray on Clausewitz and the Modern Strategic World**  
**Professor Colin Gray on Mackinder – A Defence of the Heartland**  
**Professor Sir Michael Howard on Military History and the History of War**  
**Professor Christopher Greenwood – The Case for Intervention in Iraq**  
**General Sir Hugh Beach – The Concept of Preventive War**

This SCSi Occasional Paper was designed and typeset in Officina Sans  
by The Design Studio Upavon

Published by the Strategic and Combat Studies Institute  
Printed in the United Kingdom under arrangements of  
Astron Document Services



# CLAUSEWITZ, HISTORY, AND THE FUTURE STRATEGIC WORLD

Colin S. Gray  
University of Reading

June 2003

Prepared for the Strategic and Combat Studies Institute Conference – ‘Past Futures’  
Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, 3-4 July, 2003  
and  
Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Quantico, VA,  
USA, 9-10 September, 2003.

*Professor Colin Gray joined Reading University in 2000. He has held academic posts at the Universities of Lancaster, York (Toronto), British Columbia and Hull. He worked in the USA for a number of years, initially at the Hudson Institute and then as founder and director of a defence think tank in Washington DC, during which time he served for five years in the US Government (Reagan Administration). He has also served on the British Labour Government’s Strategic Defence Review, and currently advises the Royal Navy. Interests include modern strategic studies, US foreign and defence policy, and the history of strategic ideas. He is the author of 18 monographs, 60 book chapters and over 200 articles in journals ranging from World Politics to Joint Force Quarterly, as well as many reports for Government. His recent publications include: **Modern Strategy; The Second Nuclear Age; The Navy in the Post-Cold War World; Explorations in Strategy.** In 2003 he published **The Sheriff: America’s Defense of the New World Order.***

---

## CLAUSEWITZ, HISTORY, AND THE FUTURE STRATEGIC WORLD

If this were a sermon, this declamation by Carl von Clausewitz would be its text: “*All wars are things of the same nature*”.<sup>1</sup> This is the master claim that provides coherence and unity to the argument that follows in this essay.

Writing in approximately 1818, Clausewitz revealed the ambition and pride common to many authors when he declared that “*it was my ambition to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked upon more than once by those who are interested in the subject*”.<sup>2</sup> Since this essay is not a detective story, I am not inhibited from revealing the plot at the outset. The heart of the matter is that there are two reasons why Clausewitz’s book is unlikely ever to be forgotten. In the first place he developed, albeit sketchily in some regards, a theory of war that is not tied for its relevance to a particular time, character of belligerent, or technology. While secondly, his theorizing was manifestly superior to anything else written before or since. Christopher Bassford is exactly right when he claims, about Clausewitz, that “*his work survives as a living influence because his approach, overall, comes closer to capturing the complex truth about war than any writer since*”.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Clausewitz is the best that we have to help us understand the nature of war, and how it works, and above all why it works. But even as an admirer of the great theorist, and as a person who has found his writings to be of profound practical help on a host of subjects pursued in contemporary defence analysis, I do not confuse the wisdom of **On War** with holy writ. I am not in company with John Keegan when he asserts that “*those who go for Clausewitz*” ascribe to him “*a possession of absolute truths – which would make strategy unique among the social sciences*”.<sup>4</sup> To be fair, more accurately, generous, to Keegan, those of us who are in the habit of deploying favourite Clausewitzian quotations, sometimes inadvertently can give the impression that we regard the ever convenient words from **On War** as concluding the debate of the moment. *Mea culpa*, most probably.

It is important to place on the record early in the essay that this author subscribes to the principle, or doctrine, of continuous revelation. I believe neither that Clausewitz wrote the last words that are needed for a fully satisfactory theory of war, nor that some of his analysis could not stand some improvement: if only one were sufficiently talented to undertake the task. Although the international body of literature on

---

1 Carl von Clausewitz, **On War**, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. and ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p.606 [emphasis in the original]. Henceforth cited as Clausewitz.

2 Ibid., p.72.

3 Christopher Bassford, “Book Review”, RUSI Journal, Vol.148, No.1 (February 2003), pp.98-9.

4 John Keegan, “Peace by other means?” **The Times Literary Supplement**, December 11, 1992, p.3.

defence subjects is vast, general theories of war are distinguished by their extreme rarity. There are not even many incompetent imitators of Clausewitz. The only really successful such theorist in the past hundred years was Rear Admiral J.C. Wylie of the U.S. Navy, with his brilliant, and agreeably brief, study, **Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control**.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, it is exceptionally difficult to devise a general theory of war that avoids the minefields, on the one hand of banality, and on the other of an undue, and therefore dating, specificity. It is perhaps a little less obvious to need to record that the market for general theory is not, and has never been, a very lively one. There was a good reason, beyond his longevity, why Jomini was more popular than Clausewitz through much of the nineteenth century. Indeed, to this day the American approach to war owes far more to the spirit of Jomini than it does to Clausewitz, not withstanding the near reverential terms in which the latter is mentioned, I hesitate to say discussed. Clausewitz tends to provide answers to questions that policymakers and soldiers have not asked, or insights which, for all their brilliance, are less than obviously useful now.<sup>6</sup> For example, Andrew Marshall, the Pentagon's long serving Director of Net Assessment, and certainly no foe of Clausewitz, has advised that it is virtually impossible to operationalise the compound concept of "friction".<sup>7</sup> Everyone agrees that the concept is prominent among the more glittering achievements of **On War**. But, what can one do with it? Similarly, Clausewitz is unique among theorists in the strength of his emphasis on the fact that "*war is the realm of chance*".<sup>8</sup> But, as with friction, having grasped the point that chance reigns, if not rules, in war, what are the practical implications? Admiral Wylie offers the helpful judgment that "*planning for certitude is the greatest of all military mistakes*".<sup>9</sup> A general theory of war, even one as outstanding as that provided by Clausewitz, can find itself adrift from the working library of those who direct the course of strategic history, because, as Bernard Brodie insisted, strategy "*is nothing if not pragmatic .... Above all, strategic theory is a theory for action*".<sup>10</sup> **On War** is long on the higher education of the defence professional, but relatively short on the provision of practical advice. Of course, that is its principal glory, and a reason why its reputation stands so high after more than a hundred and seventy years.

Before presenting the argument of this essay in detail, it is appropriate for me to illustrate my attitude towards the subject by registering my shock and awe at the title of a 1997 essay. Specifically, a British based scholar wrote a study of "*Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting*".<sup>11</sup> The very idea of a "*post-Clausewitzian setting*" is,

---

5 J.C. Wylie, **Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control** (1967; Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989).

6 This point is well made in Beatrice Heuser, **Reading Clausewitz** (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.12.

7 Cited in Barry D. Watts, Clausewitzian Friction and Future War, McNair Paper 52 (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, October 1996), p.122n.

8 Clausewitz, p.101.

9 Wylie **Military Strategy**, p.72.

10 Bernard Brodie, **War and Politics** (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p.452.

11 Jan Willem Honig, "Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting", in Gert de Nooy, ed., *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), pp.109-21.

I contend, an absurdity. One might as well postulate a context wherein the sun will cease to rise. The author of this appallingly unsound thought, asserted, with a dubious existentialism, that *“the crisis in strategic thinking is caused by the domination of a Clausewitzian strategic doctrine that is inappropriate to combating or solving likely conflicts facing the West”*.<sup>12</sup> It would be difficult to compose a sentence that contained more serious errors. Nonetheless, John Keegan made a powerful entry into the competitive lists, when he wrote that *“Clausewitz may ... be shown to have failed as a historian, as an analyst and as a philosopher”*.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to appearances, perhaps, this essay is far more interested in the robustness of Clausewitz’s theory of war given history’s continuities and discontinuities, than it is in pursuing rather tiresome scholarly debate with people who do not always seem to have read the same master work as have I.

By way of organisation, the ‘story arc’ of this essay proceeds initially by outlining a clear argument which, as a radical departure from frequent practice, attempts to address and answer the major issues suggested in the title. The essay then moves on to discuss Clausewitz’s theory of war in relation to ‘the future strategic world’.

#### **ASSUMPTIONS AND ARGUMENT**

It seems bizarre to this author that anyone should question seriously the relevance of Clausewitz in the twenty-first century, but the evidence of such scepticism is all too easy to locate. In addition to scepticism, of course, there is the opinion that Clausewitz’s theory of war, though really irrelevant, is both influential and harmful. John Keegan, probably the most unrestrained of contemporary anti-Clausewitzians, accuses the Prussian theorist of promulgating *“the most pernicious philosophy of warmaking yet conceived”*.<sup>14</sup> In Keegan’s colourful view, *“Clausewitz was polluting civilised thought about how wars could and should be fought ...”*.<sup>15</sup> These are strong words by a gifted popular historian. They require answer by a view of comparable clarity, if not comparable eloquence. This section of the essay specifies an argument in five parts and many of the assumptions upon which it is based.

#### **1<sup>ST</sup> ELEMENT**

First, to quote Robert Kaplan from his stimulating book, **Warrior Politics**, *“there is no ‘modern’ world”*.<sup>16</sup> This is a shocking, even ridiculous, proposition to many, probably most, people. After all, is it not an article of liberal faith that history shows the march

---

12 Ibid., p.109.

13 Keegan, “Peace by other means”, p.3.

14 John Keegan, **War and Our World: The Reith Lectures, 1998** (London: Hutchinson, 1998), p.41.

15 Ibid., p.43.

16 Robert D. Kaplan, **Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos** (New York: Random House, 2002), the title of ch.1.

of progress, that it is essentially arrow-like, rather than cyclical. For reasons of an optimistic national culture, even some American conservative realists believe that the future will be better than the present or the past. In many material respects, they have an easy case to make. However, with regard to security, the politics of its provision, and the organized violence for political ends that we know as warfare, a belief in progress is not so easy to sustain. It is interesting to note that the exciting and bold essayist, Ralph Peters, recommends that in our search for some guidance in the war against terrorist, we have more to learn from the Romans than from the counter-terrorist campaigns of modern times. Peters writes

*Do not look for answers in recent history, which is still unclear and subject to personal emotion. Begin with the study of the classical world – specifically Rome, which is the nearest model to the present-day United States. Mild with subject peoples, to whom they brought the rule of ethical law, the Romans in their rise and at their apogee were implacable with their enemies. The utter destruction of Carthage brought centuries of local peace, while the later empire’s attempts to appease barbarians consistently failed.*<sup>17</sup>

But, for good or ill, the social context of war is much transformed, even from its condition only several decades ago. Indeed, this transformation of war is likely to be more significant than is the technology-focussed transformation that is so actively in process among the American military today. Peters’ implicit approval of Rome’s formula for lasting peace with Carthage, reminds me of the bloody maxim of the abominable Russian General Mikhail Skobelev. In 1881, explaining his approach to the pacification of troublesome Turcomans, Skobelev said, “I hold it as a principle that the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them, the longer they remain quiet”.<sup>18</sup> Russian methods in Chechnya over the past decade bear more than a faint trace of Skobelev.

The assertion that there is no modern world warrants understanding as a useful exaggeration. In its essential structure, nature and purpose, war and strategy is unchanging. Recall the quotation with which this essay began: “All wars are things of the same nature”. I am guilty of writing a book with an arguably misleading title, **Modern Strategy**. Strategy is strategy, whether it be ancient, mediaeval, modern,

---

17 Ralph Peters, **Beyond Terror: Strategy in a Changing World** (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2002), p.65.

18 Quoted in Peter Hopkirk, **The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.407.



or future. Naturally, the character of the military instrument, and the social, political, and even ethical, contexts are ever in flux. But, as we shall see, that fact poses no real difficulty for Clausewitz's theory of war.

## THE 2<sup>ND</sup> ELEMENT

My second thread of argument also has been expressed with a convenient eloquence and economy by Kaplan. To quote from **Warrior Politics** again, "*the greater the disregard of history, the greater the delusions regarding the future*".<sup>19</sup> Liberal and conservative optimists, who believe deeply in progress, are wont to resist the idea that history, especially strategic history, is broadly cyclical, notwithstanding technological and other changes. Clausewitz did not take a teleological view of history, but today many of his admirers and certainly most of his more severe critics do so. In fact, a common ground for finding fault with Clausewitz, at least with what is claimed for his persisting influence, is that his ideas allegedly are a barrier hindering the emergence of a braver new globalised world. Some ten years ago this author delivered an inaugural lecture which bore the unpopular message that the 1990s were an interwar period.<sup>20</sup> This unwelcome, distinctly cyclical perspective on the course of history was notably out of step with the attractive notion that the post-Cold War world offered a unique opportunity for right thinking folk to achieve some lasting improvement in the human security condition. I am told that it is now unfashionable among historians to profess a belief in the possibility of deriving lessons from history.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, I am a social scientist, so I can ignore that fashion. An attitude of disdain for history is quite common among defence professionals. This unhappy reality is explained partly by the fact that officials and analysts are so focussed on the distinctiveness of the issues of today and tomorrow, that they are not open to the idea that those concerns are only superficially novel. The other leading explanation of a disdain for history stems from nothing more complex than an ignorance of past events. One should not expect a community to place high value upon a skill that by and large it lacks.

Whatever the deeper motives, for example concealing psychological insecurity in the face of historical expertise, factors of different kinds tend to combine to impede recognition of the potential value of history. The obvious differences in political, social, and technological contexts offer an easy excuse for those who assert, near axiomatically, that times have changed to the extent that historical study must be mere antiquarianism. Interesting, fun perhaps, but fundamentally not a serious player as a

---

19 Kaplan, **Warrior Politics**, p.39.

20 Colin S. Gray, *Villains, Victims and Sheriffs: Strategic Studies for an Inter-War Period, An Inaugural Lecture* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1994).

21 For some judicious comments from the history profession, see Richard J. Evans, **In Defence of History** (London: Granta Books, 1997), p.59; and Peter Mandler, **History and National Life** (London: Profile Books, 2002), pp.5-6, 144-45.

contributor to strategic thought and policy deliberation now. Furthermore, those of a politically progressive persuasion may well grant the salience of historical experience, but primarily either as a record of negative happenings which we must avoid, or as steps already taken on a journey towards a world security order truly worthy of the label. It can be surprisingly difficult to convey the point, or rather the plain implication of the point, that history, for all its imperfections, is the only evidence available to us. Simulations and other games may be valuable, even essential, but they cannot substitute for the real experience of conflict and war that is accessible to us only as history. History is all we have. Futurology in its several guises is probably unavoidable and necessary, but if it does not rest upon an historical education, it is likely to be useless or worse. Officials should find it reassuring, perhaps a little humbling, and just possibly helpful, to realise that there are no new strategic dilemmas. Others have been there before them. Of course, the distinctive details of today matter, but those details will pertain to issues that are as old as the history of warfare. It would be a supremely self-confident, not to say arrogant, as well as foolish, person who would intentionally decline to be open to what might be learnt from the two and a half millennia of experience with war and strategy that is variably accessible.

### THE 3<sup>RD</sup> ELEMENT

The third element in my argument is the Clausewitzian belief, quoted already, that “*all wars are things of the same nature*”. This eminently reasonable proposition is by no means as widely understood as it merits. Michael Howard is thoroughly convincing when he restates this Clausewitzian postulate as follows:

*After all allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity. All are fought, as Clausewitz insisted, in a special element of danger and fear and confusion. In all, large bodies of men are trying to impose their will on one another by violence; and in all, events occur which are inconceivable in any other field of experience. Of course the differences brought about between one war and another by social or technological changes are immense, and an unintelligent study of military history which does not take adequate account of these changes may quite easily be more dangerous than no study at all.<sup>22</sup>*

---

22 Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1983), pp.214-15.

Some critics have latched on to the fallacy that there was a Clausewitzian era in warfare, an era approximately coterminous with the Westphalian period of state-centric international politics. From this perspective, Clausewitz might be praised for his grasp of, or at the least recognized as relevant to, the experience of war from 1648 to either 1945, or possibly ca.1990. One might wish to claim that the Clausewitzian era was terminated by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The weaponisation of atomic physics may be held to have rendered his central dictum that “*war is merely the continuation of policy by other means*”,<sup>23</sup> definitively obsolete, at least for all who have a nuclear element in their security. Alternatively, one might prefer to close the Clausewitzian era with what often is interpreted as the demise of interstate warfare. The end of the Cold War with its useful discipline over small states and the unstoppable spread of information technology as the *schwerpunkt* of globalisation has led to new, at least different, patterns of conflict. The ‘new wars’ of today are dominated by ethnic and cultural, including religious, motives, and tend overwhelmingly to be either civil or transnational in kind.<sup>24</sup> It should be unnecessary to add that war remains an instrument of policy, whatever the ideological or other urges that inspire it. All of the dates just cited are challengeable. If 1648 is a little too neat an historical marker, so 1945 and 1990, or even 2001, also are not beyond contention. What matters for this essay, though, is not the superior plausibility of one date over another, but the underlying postulate that there was a Clausewitzian era. It follows both that there could have been a pre-Clausewitzian period, and that now we may have entered a post-Clausewitzian era. This is simply wrong.

The error may have several causes, but the principal culprit appears to be a misreading of Clausewitz’s “*remarkable trinity*”.<sup>25</sup> Many commentators have believed, indeed still believe, that Clausewitz’s theory of war was a theory for an era of so-called ‘trinitarian war’, when fairly sovereign states raised and used armies as instruments of policy, while the people were a more or less potent source of emotion in support of their state’s cause (obviously this was not the case prior to the nineteenth century). However, if Clausewitz’s trinity is read not as a description of a recent era wherein recognisably modern states had armies, but rather as a description of the most fundamental ingredients of warfare, the idea of ‘trinitarian war’ dies an instant death. The better scholarship on Clausewitz has revealed beyond any room for argument that **On War** presents a primary and a secondary trinity.<sup>26</sup> While the secondary and subsidiary trinity certainly makes qualified reference to the people, the commander (and his army) and

---

23 Clausewitz, p.87.

24 See Martin van Creveld, **The Transformation of War** (New York: Free Press, 1991); and Mary Kaldor, **New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

25 Clausewitz, p.89.

26 See especially, Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, “Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity”, *Parameters*, Vol.25, No.3 (Autumn 1995), pp.9-19. Heuser, **Reading Clausewitz**, pp.52-6, also is useful.

the government, that most definitely is not the dominant story. The primary trinity is explained thus by its author:

*War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristic to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a remarkable trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.<sup>27</sup>*

In the words I have emphasized, Clausewitz unquestionably is claiming a timeless and universal authority for his remarkable trinity of violence and hatred, chance and probability, and reason or policy. If Clausewitz is deemed persuasive, it would be ridiculous, certainly redundant, to refer to trinitarian war. In his theory, all war in all periods is trinitarian. Indeed, war cannot be other than trinitarian; it is war's very nature, and an enduring nature at that.

An important source for the erroneous belief that Clausewitz wrote only for a distinctive era in modern history that now has passed, lies in the carelessness with which people employ a key idea. The idea in question is the nature of war. Clausewitz conceived of war as having two natures, objective and subjective.<sup>28</sup> The former, war's objective nature, is the totality of the characteristics common to warfare in all periods. Indeed, those features, "*the climate of war*" and its primary trinity for just two examples, are what make war what it is, rather than something else.<sup>29</sup> One would think that Clausewitz could not easily be misunderstood when he explained as follows:

*But war, though conditioned by the particular characteristics of states and their armed forces, must contain some more general – indeed, a universal element with which every theorist ought above all to be concerned.<sup>30</sup>*

He had just revealed the purpose behind the historical survey and analysis that he was presenting in Book VIII, Ch. 3B.

---

27 Clausewitz, p.89 [emphasis added].

28 For a particularly clear explanation of Clausewitz's notion of war having two natures, objective and subjective, see Antulio J. Echevarria II, **Globalization and the Nature of War** (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2003), pp.7-8.

29 The climate of war is composed of four elements: "danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance". Clausewitz, p.104.

30 Ibid., p.593.

*At this point our historical survey can end. Our purpose was not to assign in passing, a handful of principles of warfare to each period. We wanted to show how every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions. Each period, therefore, would have held to its own theory of war.*<sup>31</sup>

It should be crystal clear that in his theory Clausewitz strives to identify the most vital parts of that “universal element” which comprises war’s objective nature. His theory recognises also that “every age had its own kind of war” and “each period ... would have held to its own theory of war.” The subjective nature of war is always evolving. If we rephrase Clausewitz for yet greater clarity, he is saying that on the one hand war has a permanent nature, in all periods. While on the other hand he makes the thoroughly unremarkable claim that the character of war is ever changing. It is something of an accomplishment to misunderstand an argument that simple. Nonetheless, many people have succeeded. Moreover, their misunderstanding can lead to radical conclusions about the future of war.

The contemporary defence literature is seeded profusely with references to the alleged changing nature of war. With only the rarest of exceptions authors do not reveal whether they refer to the changing objective or subjective nature of war. In other, more modern terms, are they envisaging change in war’s very nature, in which case presumably war has to become something else, or are they merely discussing the changing character and conduct of war. As a general rule, the nature and character of war, two hugely different ideas, are simply conflated, and whether one word or the other is employed appears to be a matter of stylistic preference. Since the thesis of a changing nature of war is vastly more exciting than is the rather banal observation that war’s character is always on the move, it tends to be the preferred formula. The fact that it is a nonsense is not widely appreciated. Casual deployment of the notion that war’s nature is changing when what is meant is only that its character is altering, can have an understandably encouraging effect upon those people who fail to realize that they are being misled by conceptual incompetence or laziness. Liberal optimists and other progressive people are soft targets for such attractive grand ideas as the demise of war itself, or at the least some systemic change in warfare in a benign direction. It is natural and only to be expected that when defence professionals, who should know better, make confident sounding reference to the changing nature of war, large expectations are encouraged.

---

31 Ibid.

At a somewhat less elevated level of misunderstanding, undisciplined rehearsal of an alleged changing nature of war, when all that is meant, strictly, is a changing character, cannot help but fuel unsound analysis of the rich variety of violent nastiness that abounds globally. This fallacy must incline people to see new manifestations of politically motivated violence, new to them, that is, as examples of something different from what they really are. Terrorism and civil strife of several kinds are all warfare phenomena. Clausewitz's theory of war applies to them all. They are not activities of a nature quite distinctive from previous, or other, cases of war. Lt Cdr Ashcroft RN is entirely correct, and useful, when he refers to "*the perennial problems of war*", as is Peter Paret with his reminder of "*the timeless reality of war*".<sup>32</sup> Clausewitz recognised both that different features in war's "universal element" would function distinctively in each unique historical episode, and that there must be a dynamic relationship between that "universal element" and the ephemeral circumstances of the day. Similarly, he specified that the relations among the components of his primary (passion, chance, reason), and secondary (people, army, government) trinity are "variable" and cannot yield to a theory that "*seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them*".<sup>33</sup> If Clausewitz is judged persuasive when he insists that there is a "universal element" in war, and indeed that all wars, of all kinds and in all periods, are events of the same nature, the major implication should be irresistible. It is specified as the fourth strand in my argument.

#### THE 4<sup>TH</sup> ELEMENT

The fourth element in the argument of this essay follows necessarily from the third. Specifically, Clausewitz's theory of war is eternally relevant because his subject has an unchanging nature. In principle, a superior general theory of war might yet be devised, though it would be sure to owe much to Clausewitz, and certainly there are ways in which his theory could be improved. Clausewitz assuredly would have endorsed the latter point, and probably the former also. After all he informs us in an "Unfinished Note", probably written in 1830, only a year before his death from cholera on November 16, 1831, that "*the first chapter of Book One alone I regard as finished*".<sup>34</sup>

More often than not, criticism of Clausewitz tells one more about the critics than about the theory of war with which they find fault. The criticism will reflect the attitudes and opinions fashionable in the critics' time, and the identity and character of the strategic problems to which those attitudes and opinions were a response. **On War** was, of

---

32 A.C. Ashcroft, "As Britain Returns to an Expeditionary Strategy, Do We Have Anything to Learn from the Victorians?" *Defence Studies*, Vol.1, No.1 (Spring 2001), p.83; Carl von Clausewitz, **Historical and Political Writings** Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, ed. and trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.3.

33 Clausewitz, p.89.

34 *Ibid.*, p.70.

course, intended to be the author's summative explanation of war's nature and working. If, as Raymond Aron observed, "*strategic thought draws its inspiration each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose*",<sup>35</sup> there is no doubt that Clausewitz's first-hand experience of the new way of war enabled by the French Revolution, and practiced *à outrance* by Napoleon, was the basic fuel for this theory. However, in at least two respects he managed to transcend the stimulus provided by the strategic problems of his day. Firstly, he drafted a general theory of war which, whatever its origins in his bitter experience of humiliating national defeat at Jena-Auerstadt,<sup>36</sup> was successfully non-specific in its historical applicability. Secondly, in his intellectual crisis of 1827 he succeeded in transcending the influence of the principal strategic experience of his active military career, and began to reshape his theory so that it could accommodate war for limited objectives.<sup>37</sup> These were mighty achievements. Few theorists would be able to transcend in their writing the influence of the kind of traumatic strategic events that had dominated Clausewitz's life from the age of twelve, when he joined the Prussian Army in 1792, until the Ligny-Waterloo campaign of 1815, twenty-three years later.

Clausewitz left a great deal of work to be done on his general theory of war. As noted already, his premature death in Poland in 1831 prevented him from doing much of what he knew needed to be done. Much of the manuscript of **On War**, Books II-VI in particular, still required revision at the time of his death. Furthermore, as Beatrice Heuser has observed plausibly in her recent study, it is probable that some of the more intriguing and difficult political ideas that assumed prominence in Clausewitz's mind after 1827 were by no means fully explored, or necessarily even completely comprehended, by their author.<sup>38</sup> This is an observation, not a complaint. I confessed earlier to belief in the doctrine of continuous revelation, not that there has been much of that to offer improvement upon Clausewitz's theory of war in the past one hundred and seventy-two years. It is thoroughly appropriate for us to look for strategic inspiration to the finest general theory of war ever written. However, it is not appropriate for us to look to Clausewitz to resolve all of our deeper strategic puzzles. The quality of **On War** is unparalleled, and its relevance, in keeping with the longevity of its subject, is prospectively permanent. Nonetheless, those plausible claims do not absolve us from thinking strategically for ourselves.

---

35 Raymond Aron, "*The Evolution of Modern Strategic Thought*", in Alastair Buchan, ed., **Problems of Modern Strategy** (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p.25.

36 See Peter Paret, **Clausewitz and the State** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), ch.6.

37 See Azar Gat, **The Origins of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. p.199.

38 Heuser, **Reading Clausewitz**, p.180.

## THE 5<sup>TH</sup> ELEMENT

Finally, my fifth strand of argument is to the effect that the Clausewitzian theoretical legacy needs to be protected against ignorant, careless, or wilful misrepresentation. Despite the importance of war to the course of history, there exists only a handful of first-rate efforts at general theory, and even that is probably an exaggeration. So rare is fundamental exploration and explanation of war, let alone a study as brilliant as **On War**, that mistaken and misleading criticisms are potentially too expensive to be tolerable. If Clausewitz is retired on the grounds that his theory applied, allegedly, only to the period where the “master narrative” was the rise of total war, which strategic or anti-strategic guru might replace him?<sup>39</sup> Philosophers of war worthy of the title, be they premodern, modern, or postmodern, are not exactly pressing hard and persuasively to seize Clausewitz’s crown. Martin van Creveld and Edward Luttwak, for example, certainly have their virtues, but no-one is likely to confuse them with Carl von Clausewitz.<sup>40</sup>

This final element in my edifice of argument could hardly be more practical in its motivation. Because war remains so important to us, because there are so few studies that penetrate and explain its very nature, and because **On War** is the work of outstanding brilliance in an admittedly impoverished field, we cannot afford to allow unsound criticism of Clausewitz to flourish unchallenged. Alas, it is necessary also to recognize that Clausewitz’s theory of war can require protection not only from its detractors, but also from some of its more enthusiastic devotees. There is a long history of people finding the Clausewitz that suits them. This phenomenon is scarcely surprising when one considers the fact that Clausewitz died before he could revise much of the manuscript of **On War** so that it would reflect his post 1827 determination to theorise about real war; that is to say war conducted for, and shaped by, political purpose. The pre-1827, non-political Clausewitz is present in the text in good measure. **On War** allows for the waging of limited war for limited political goals, as well as for the conduct of Napoleonic style operations intended to destroy the enemy’s armed forces in decisive battle and thereby render him defenceless. There is a Clausewitz for everyone, so it seems. Adolf Hitler was fond of quoting him, while Mao Tse-tung found his writing more inspirational than that of Sun-tzu.<sup>41</sup>

Not much can be done to re-educate those who wilfully misread, if not actually misquote **On War**, just as it is a sad reality that villains as well as heroes may be able to make

---

39 Roger Chickering, “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept”, in Manfred F. Boemke, Chickering, and Stig Forster, eds., **Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.13-28, claims that the “master narrative” of modern military history is the story of the intensification of war.

40 From van Creveld’s extensive canon, see **The Transformation of War**; from Edward N. Luttwak’s, see **Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace**, rev.edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

41 Heuser, **Reading Clausewitz**, esp. pp.138-42.



good use of Clausewitz's wisdom. However, much can and needs to be done to help those who inadvertently misuse some of the more potent ideas in **On War**. For leading examples, Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity" and his relatively few references to a belligerent's "centre of gravity" have both fuelled as much if not more honest misunderstanding, as enlightenment. Recent scholarship should help address this problem, but it can take many years before light reaches the zones where it is most needed, let alone is accepted there.<sup>42</sup> It may be no exaggeration, and is perhaps not surprising, to say that the American military has seized upon the concept of the "center of gravity" and sought to apply it in a distinctly Jominian spirit. After all, here is a concept that has direct practical use. Unlike friction, or the culminating point of victory, and suchlike difficult concepts, centre of gravity appears to be ready for strategic prime-time.

For a possibly unpopular proposition, I believe it is important to protect the Clausewitzian legacy from some of its more fanatical guardians, as well as from those who would misuse it either knowingly or in ignorance. Of course it is essential to respect Clausewitz's theory of war on its own terms, and comprehend it as its author intended as best we can. That can be difficult, given the vagaries of translation, the very different cultural contexts of the 1820s and today, and the author's incomplete revision of his text. However, for a mildly blasphemous thought, we should not mistake Clausewitz for Moses. By his own admission, as well as by the plain evidence of the book, **On War** was regarded by its author very much as a work in progress. We should share that attitude. Some of the most powerful ideas in **On War** are treated in a quite cursory manner. That is not surprising, given the fact that the author had barely three years in which to effect a systemic and near traumatic revision of his magnum opus. Moreover, in those three years, from 1827 to 1830, he was heavily engaged in historical writing, not to mention his, admittedly light, military administrative duties. In company with its author, we should regard **On War** as a living document, always provided we begin by striving carefully and honestly to be faithful to what we understand to have been Clausewitz's meaning. As I have argued already, on the truly major issue of proper historical domain, it is scarcely possible to misunderstand him, so direct is his argument. If this essay accomplishes nothing else, at the very least it should bury with all due ignominy the fallacy that Clausewitz theorised for an era that now is past. This error need not be an expression of liberal or conservative assumptions. Whether one is an optimistic liberal, a pessimistic conservative, or – confusingly –

---

<sup>42</sup> See Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz' Center of Gravity: Changing Our Warfighting Doctrine – Again!* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2002).

a different combination of noun and adjective, one might believe, honestly, yet mistakenly, that the strategic world about and for which Clausewitz theorised is no longer extant. It is to this apparently contentious subject that the analysis now turns.

### **CLAUSEWITZ AND THE FUTURE**

How does Clausewitz relate to the future strategic world? Some people would wish to rephrase the question so that it posed a ringing challenge: does Clausewitz relate to the future strategic world? The extensive previous section of this essay, devoted to assumptions and argument, should have answered that question to the general, if not universal, satisfaction. Historians know a great deal that can serve as valuable education to prepare us for what the future may bring, but they are not particularly blessed with the foresight that can yield the kind of predictive wisdom which policymakers crave. If it is any consolation, social scientists are no better at prediction than are historians. Fortunately, the precise character of the future strategic world is a subject of notable indifference to the argument of this text. So long as the future world is going to be a future strategic world, Clausewitz's general theory of war must be as relevant as ever. By a strategic world, one means a world wherein force is threatened or employed for political ends. The force may be an instrument of policy for states, for factions within states, or for movements and groups that lack any particular state affiliation. For so long as war or its possibility continues to scar our history, then for so long will we inhabit a Clausewitzian world. Clausewitz was not much interested in trying to predict the future, a wise attitude that we should emulate, at least, that is, those of us whose duties do not require us to make guesses and pretend that they rest upon some useful knowledge. Trend analysis for example, is notoriously apt to mislead. If history teaches anything, it is that trend-spotting is a relatively elementary matter, generally of little importance. What really matters are the consequences of trends, particularly of trends that appear in clusters, and those can be all but impossible to identify far in advance. Warfare and its vital social context are evolving, as usual, but there is no prospect worth mentioning of it going out of style on a global basis. This means that nearly everything currently of interest in Clausewitz's theory of war must continue to apply. It simply does not matter which character of conflicts will dominate in the twenty-first century. So long as the world remains a strategic world, it will be a world addressed by Clausewitz in **On War**.

My next point almost begs to be misunderstood. Specifically, in preparing to cope with the future strategic world, our best guide is the past. But, since history is played

---

only once and in no sense can be a laboratory for the testing of theories, its inherent uniqueness has to limit its value as a guide to the future. However, although details of the future strategic world are currently unknown and unknowable, it so happens that we know a great deal about strategy, war and warfare. What is the source of this knowledge? Purportedly scientific study of the future? Hardly. Guesswork, inspired and otherwise? Perhaps. In the view of Clausewitz, and of this author, our understanding of the strategic future can derive only from the interpretation of strategic experience, which is to say, history. Of course, critics may object that this deeply conservative perspective all but precludes anti-strategic 'constructivist' projects. There are those who believe that humankind is not doomed to repeat its past errors in a fatally cyclical process, but can construct a brave new world that would lack a strategic dimension. I wish them well. Clausewitz did not build his theory of war on an architecture of hope, or even just expectation, for the future. Instead, he was uncompromising in his commitment to achieving such objective historical knowledge as he was able. He made plain his attitude in a fairly early, unpublished manuscript. Describing that manuscript on the theory of war, he confided that

*Its scientific character consists in an attempt to investigate the essence of the phenomenon of war and to indicate the links between these phenomena and the nature of their component parts. No logical conclusion has been avoided; but whenever the thread became too thin I have preferred to break it off and go back to the relevant phenomenon of experience. Just as some plants bear fruit only if they don't shoot up too high, so in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned and the plant kept close to its proper soil – experience.<sup>43</sup>*

In a letter ten years later, dated December 22, 1827, Clausewitz reaffirmed unambiguously his view of the essential dependence of theory upon historical experience. He wrote that “*if we want to deduce the art of war from the history of war, and that is indisputably the only way to get there, we must not dismiss as unimportant the manifestation of war in history*”.<sup>44</sup> Peter Paret explains that

*Clausewitz's theoretical writings on war were based on the experience of war – known experience and that of his generation,*

---

43 Clausewitz, p.61 [emphasis added].

44 Quoted in Heuser, **Reading Clausewitz**, p.31.

*but also on another form of experience that only history can transmit. By opening up the past for us, history added to the fund of knowledge that we can acquire directly and also made possible universal concepts and generalisations across time.*<sup>45</sup>

The twenty-first century has seriously mysterious aspects to its future strategic world, wholly impenetrable even to armed forces pursuing information dominance and dominant battlespace knowledge. However, on the brighter side, that future strategic world must be obedient to *“the timeless reality of war”*. If we read Clausewitz and appreciate the theory of war that he derived empirically from historical study of war’s objective nature, we will be helping ourselves immeasurably to cope with the certain shocks and other surprises of the future strategic world. There is, of course, another possible approach to the creation of a general theory of war. One could proceed deductively from first principles and postulate Rational Strategic Persons exercising culture-free rational choices. Much of the partial theory of war devised for the control of nuclear weapons was, perhaps had to be, of this character. After all, what did history have to say about nuclear strategy? The answer was a great deal, but it did not seem like that to theorists in the 1950s, especially those who were innocent of a historical education.<sup>46</sup>

Next, while it may be considered a weakness of **On War**, its all but total silence on the subject of technology is a virtue in that it serves as a healthy antidote to our contemporary technophilia. Clausewitz’s theory of war is content to assume that belligerents will arm themselves competently, and train in their effective use. Having seen active service, off and on, from 1792 to 1815, we can presume that the absence of a technological dimension to his theory was anything but an oversight. Implicitly, at least, he accommodates the evolution of weapons technology, a slow evolution in his first-hand experience, by recognising the ever changing subjective nature of war. But the objective nature of war is not keyed in any memorable way to weapons technology. In words that might not find a friendly audience in the Pentagon today, Clausewitz advised that *“very few of the new manifestations in war can be ascribed to new inventions or new departures in ideas. They result mainly from the transformation of society and new social conditions”*.<sup>47</sup> Communities do not fight because they are armed; they are armed because they wish to fight. Understanding of this elementary political logic has not always been complete among people who have seen great value in arms control.

---

45 Parete, “Introduction”, to Clausewitz, **Historical and Political Writings**, p.3.

46 Writing in 1973, Brodie lamented the undue influence of scientists and economists in Washington. He noticed that “political scientists, including area specialists”, had yet to achieve a comparable hearing among policymakers. **War and Politics**, p.460 n.35.

47 Clausewitz, p.515.

Clausewitz's theory of war does not by any means dismiss technology as unimportant, but by plain implication it demotes it. He wrote in that letter of December 22, 1827, from which I have quoted already, that

*War is nothing but a continuation of political endeavour with altered means. I base the whole of strategy on this tenet, and believe that he who refuses to recognise this necessity does not fully understand what matters. This principle explains the whole history of war, and without it, everything would appear quite absurd.*<sup>48</sup>

A noteworthy fraction of the defence community treats the past, present, and future of strategic history as the story of machines. Studies of future warfare are apt to reduce to prognoses for weapons and their supporting equipment. By implication, which in this case means by noticeable omission, Clausewitz tells us that technology is not a matter of primary significance. The great, or not so great, RMA debate of the 1990s, now revived under the banner of transformation, was focussed very heavily indeed upon the promise in an information-led way of war. While the debate, and the slow but inexorable momentum in policy, was by no means wholly fixated upon hardware, still it was a heavily technological story. In a period when no dominant threat was perceived which might have stimulated strategic thought, it was only to be expected that the American defence community would devote itself to matters with which it felt most comfortable – namely, those with a preponderantly technological content. However, many participants in the American RMA-transformation debate, who undoubtedly believed that they were addressing cutting-edge issues for the future strategic world, probably missed, and may still be missing, the other strategic revolution of our time. Specifically, in addition to the narrowly military RMA-transformation that has been the subject of seemingly countless conferences and studies, it is argued that there has been a transformation of war itself, regarded holistically.<sup>49</sup> More precisely, and employing Marxist terminology, Mary Kaldor argues *“that there has been a revolution in military affairs, but it is a revolution in the social relations of warfare, not in technology, even though the changes in social relations are influenced by and make use of new technology”*.<sup>50</sup> Later on she offers the pure Clausewitzian thought that *“every society has its own characteristic form of war”*.<sup>51</sup> That characteristic form will show a distinctive subjective nature, in Clausewitzian terms, but it cannot reveal a unique objective nature, because that nature is universal and timeless.

---

48 Quoted in Heuser, **Reading Clausewitz**, p.34.

49 See Colin McInnes, **Spectator-Sport War: The West and Contemporary Conflict** (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), ch.4; and “A different kind of war? September 11 and the United States’ Afghan War”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol.29, No.2 (April 2003), pp.165-84.

50 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p.3.

51 *Ibid.*, p.13.

Those who are engaged in planning, executing, or commenting upon the current military transformation as announced by the U.S. Department of Defense, would be well advised to consider Clausewitz's theory of war, and to ask themselves why it is that it lacks a technological element.<sup>52</sup> They might profit from reflection upon these penetrating words by British historian, Jeremy Black:

*In its fundamentals, war changes far less frequently and significantly than most people appreciate. This is not simply because it involves a constant – the willingness of organised groups to kill and, in particular, to risk death – but also because the material culture of war, which tends to be the focus of attention, is less important than its social, cultural and political contexts and enablers.*<sup>53</sup>

Clausewitz would approve wholeheartedly of Black's judgement.

Moving on, Clausewitz's timeless theory of war reminds us that in the future strategic world, as in the past and present ones, "war is nothing but a duel on a larger scale".<sup>54</sup> This eternal truth is as central to the fundamental and unchanging nature of war as often it appears to be neglected by overconfident defence planners. **On War** insists, unarguably, that "force ... is thus the means of war; to impose our will on the enemy is its object".<sup>55</sup> Proper respect for the enemy's culture, even in the narrow sense of a strategic culture likely to influence style in war, is probably the historical exception rather than the norm. Great powers, in particular, can have understandable, if unfortunate, difficulty taking lesser enemies as seriously as they sometimes merit. This burden of hubris is especially noticeable when a very great power is both the rather aggressive bearer of a distinctive ideology and the beneficiary of a clear technological superiority. Such a power is much in need of reminder by Clausewitz's theory of war of the potential strength of political will, as well as of the roles of chance and friction, for example. The report on a recent conference at the U.S. Army War College on "The 'New' American Way of War", had these revealing words to say about America's future foes:

*Most of America's small wars have been successes, and recognizing that fact as the norm for future wars is more productive than the irrational mania surrounding the Vietnam War experience. The United States will not be fighting peers, it will be fighting*

---

52 For the official view, see Donald H. Rumsfeld: *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, September 30, 2001), ch.5; *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2002), ch.6; and *Transformation Planning Guidance* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, April 2003).

53 Jeremy Black, **War in the New Century** (London: Continuum, 2001), p.114.

54 Clausewitz, p.75.

55 *Ibid.*, [emphasis in the original].

*“indians”. Thus, the past as prologue to the future is what Americans should expect.*<sup>56</sup>

Almost any comment would be superfluous. However, a somewhat different view of the future strategic world has been offered by Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, both on the staff at the U.S. Army War College. Metz suggests that *“the era of the ‘stupid’ enemy is over”*.<sup>57</sup> Maintaining the spotlight on that institution, a former commandant, Robert Scales, who happens to be a historian as well as a professional soldier, has written an outstanding speculative essay on the all too pertinent subject of *“adaptive enemies”*.<sup>58</sup> Of recent years the US defence establishment warmed to the fashionable concept of asymmetrical threats and strategy. But asymmetry is a fundamentally vacuous concept, impossible to operationalise; all that it means is to be different. It can have no meaning save in contrast to its opposite, symmetry. The only merit in the concept of asymmetrical behaviour is its potential for alerting people to the fact that the putative enemy has an independent will. He must be assumed likely to strive to find a way of war, perhaps a way of grand strategy short of war, that might compensate for his weakness.

Clausewitz’s theory of war speaks to the future strategic world, as it does to the past, with its potent imagery of war as a duel and as a wrestling match. His definition of war should make it difficult for us to ignore the enemy. We are told that *“war is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will”*.<sup>59</sup> A little further on, Clausewitz warns of the difficulty in assessing the enemy’s strength accurately.

*If you want to overcome your enemy you must match your effort against his power of resistance, which can be expressed as the product of two inseparable factors, viz. the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will. The extent of the means at his disposal is a matter – though not exclusively – of figures, and should be measurable. But the strength of his will is much less easy to determine and can only be gauged approximately by the strength of the motive animating it.*<sup>60</sup>

Net assessment is a notoriously inexact business.

My penultimate point on Clausewitz and the future strategic world is to draw attention to the fact that his theory of war, driven and shaped by “a universal element”,

---

56 Raymond A. Millen, “The ‘New’ American Way of War”, U.S. Army War College and Strategic Studies Institute, XIV Annual Strategy Conference, April 8-10, 2003, *Conference Brief*, p.2.

57 Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, *Future War/Future Battlespace: The Strategic Role of American Landpower* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2003), p.viii.

58 Robert H. Scales, Jr., **Future Warfare: Anthology** (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 1999): “Adaptive Enemies; Dealing with the Strategic Threat after 2010”, pp.33-55.

59 Clausewitz, p.75 [emphasis in the original].

60 *Ibid.*, p.77 [emphasis in the original].

is eminently inclusive in its strategic behavioural domain. Those who would consign Clausewitz's theory to an honourable or dishonourable retirement for this period when major inter-state warfare has become a rarity, just do not understand its reach. Lest the argument somehow has lost its sharp edge, let me repeat and emphasise the point that Clausewitz's theory of war applies to all cases of organised violence for political ends, no matter the period, the identity of the belligerents, or the character of the warfare that they conduct. It is true that Clausewitz was writing very much with the organised strategic behaviour of states in his mind. But that fact does not restrict the grasp of his theory. Certainly he was open to new developments in warfare; witness his perceptive, if somewhat ambivalent, chapter on "*The People in Arms*" in **Book VI**.<sup>61</sup> There is no room for doubt over Clausewitz's belief that his theory of war had a universal reach. The fact that he did not specify some of the kinds of conflicts prevalent today is a point of no significance. He did not have much to say about the maritime dimension to war, about aerial warfare, or about nuclear, space, or cyber war either: so what! He was clear enough when he outlined the inclusivity of his perspective.

*Generally speaking, a military objective that matches the political object in scale will, if the latter is reduced, be reduced in proportion; this will be all the more so as the political object increases its predominance. Thus it follows that without any inconsistency wars can have all degrees of importance and intensity, ranging from a war of extermination down to simple armed observation.*<sup>62</sup>

Elsewhere, Clausewitz makes the same vital point when he begins a most important chapter with these words: "The degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of political demands on either side".<sup>63</sup> As quoted before, he argues that "all wars are things of the same nature". Because "war is an instrument of policy ... It must necessarily bear the character of policy and measure by its standards. The conduct of war, in its great outlines, is therefore policy itself".<sup>64</sup> This must be as true for the wars of the future as it was for those of the past. It is always possible for the policy logic of war to be undone by war's "grammar", especially "if statesmen look to certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature ...".<sup>65</sup> There is nothing one can envisage about the future strategic world that would invalidate Clausewitzian theory.

---

61 Ibid., pp.479-83.

62 Ibid., p.81.

63 Ibid., p.585.

64 Ibid., p.610.

65 Ibid., pp. 605, 608.



Finally, I will risk the possible redundancy and argue that Clausewitz's theory of war, though it is philosophical and therefore difficult, if not impossible to operationalise, is needed most urgently to help us cope both with the challenges of the future strategic world, and with the temptations encouraged by our own apparent or anticipated prowess. A succession of easy military victories against "indians" – to quote the U.S. Army War College again – may or may not provide a sound education for future strategic excellence. But even the wars that one could not lose, for example, the two Gulf Wars, Kosovo, and against the Afghan Taleban, should serve as reminders of the potency of Clausewitz's cardinal point concerning war as a political instrument. As he wrote in a letter on December 22, 1827, "this principle explains the whole history of war, and without it, everything would appear quite absurd".<sup>66</sup>

Because war is so extreme an activity, so dramatic, so costly and, depending upon the period, so unusual, those who plan it as well as those who wage it have been known to give unduly short change to its political dimension. Since "war is only a branch of political activity ...in no sense autonomous", its success or failure can be judged only by its political consequences, and not strictly by the verdict of the battlespace.<sup>67</sup>

The primacy of policy, of political purpose is the most important of a host of concepts and perspectives that Clausewitz's theory of war bequeaths us the better to deal with the challenges of the future strategic world. His inductive, timeless theory forearms us with ideas and caveats of priceless value. His study of the history of war, as well as his personal experience, produced such gems as friction; the primary trinity as a potentially master framework; the emphasis on war as the realm of chance, risk and uncertainty; the relationship between the policy logic and the grammar of war; centre of gravity; the culminating point of victory; and, above all else, the primacy of the political. I am not suggesting that these concepts should be extracted, or cherry-picked from a lengthy book for stand-alone utility. Rather is the point simply that his theory of war is well armed with ideas that have the most profound implications for prudent political and strategic behaviour.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Since this essay has been less of an enquiry and more of a sustained argument, the conclusions have been well flagged throughout. That granted, a handful of points of exceptional importance merit elevation to the status of conclusions.

---

66 Quoted in Heuser, **Reading Clausewitz**, p.34.

67 Clausewitz, p.605 [emphasis in the original].

First, Clausewitz's theory of war is as timeless as the phenomenon of war, notwithstanding war's rich cultural, political, social, and technological variety. *On War* recognises that "every age had its own kind of war", and "would have held to its own theory of war".<sup>68</sup> Clausewitz's theory sought the universal elements in war; this is war's objective nature. In Clausewitzian terms, war's subjective nature is its ever-changing character.

Second, Clausewitz probably is doomed to be attacked, both by those who misunderstand him and by those who do not. Many people just do not warm to a theory of war, least of all to one that enjoys the most elevated of reputations. The guiding light for Clausewitz's theory in his post 1827 revisions, the insistence that war must be an instrument of policy, is a descriptive and normative position that, again, many find distasteful and possibly obsolescent. The unrevised or under-revised state of Books II-VI, and even VII-VIII in some measure, means that there appears to be more than one Clausewitz to choose from, if one is seeking quotable support for an assault upon the man and his theory.

Third, to this author at least, it is clear beyond room for sensible argument that our statecraft and strategy are always in need of the education, not prescriptive advice, that Clausewitz's theory of war provides to those who are open to its wisdom. In particular, his insistence upon the supremacy of policy, indeed upon the fusion of policy and the conduct of war at its higher levels, would be a possible banality were it not so frequently ignored in practice. His discussion of friction, chance, and uncertainty is eternally essential as timely caveats to those who function in a 'can do' mode and have difficulty conceiving of bad luck or truly cunning enemies. One should not need constantly to be reminded that war is "nothing but a duel on a larger scale", but effectively enemy-independent planning is a perennial temptation to members of a profession that necessarily are wont to focus on what they intend to do to the enemy, rather than on how that enemy might thwart their plans.

Fourth, it is probably useful to repeat as a conclusion the point that the ever-changing character of future warfare is a matter of supreme indifference for the relevance of Clausewitz's theory of war. Whether the future strategic world resembles the present, or is radically transformed, is of course a subject of huge significance for humankind at the time, time, but whichever is the case it will not affect the continuing authority of **On War**. People will be fortunate in having to hand in Clausewitz's magnum opus an

---

68 *Ibid.*, p.593.

educational guide to war's permanent nature that is robust in the face of any and all historical developments, save one. That one would be the happy conclusion to strategic history per se. Since the threat and use of organised force for political purposes appears to be with us for the long haul, we can claim with high confidence that demand for the services of Clausewitz's theory of war should be all but permanent.

Fifth, although Clausewitz's theory is expressed philosophically and can appear rather abstract, it was developed by inductive reasoning from his deep historical studies. He believed that theory, to be of any value, had to remain in close touch with historical experience, which is to say with evidence. That belief may seem commonplace to historians, but social scientists of various persuasions are much given to deductive, abstract theorising. Many Rational Strategic Persons stalk the pages of modern strategic theory.<sup>69</sup> By and large, a tradition in strategic theory that owes much to the assumptions of rational choice, and next to nothing to cultural empathy, let alone historical knowledge, would benefit markedly from adopting a more Clausewitzian approach to the building of theory. War is a social enterprise in several senses, and one size in ideas does not fit all potential belligerents. In that regard, the interesting notion that the domain of Clausewitzian theory may be culturally limited seems unsound to this author, but still well worthy of further investigation.<sup>70</sup> Jeremy Black, for example, argues that "*war and success in war are cultural constructs*".<sup>71</sup> I do not believe that challenging proposition is lethal for the timeless universality of Clausewitz's authority, but it is an idea in need of careful consideration.

Sixth and last but not least, Clausewitz is not holy writ, only cannon lore. Sensible claims for the excellence of Clausewitz's theory of war are carefully bounded. They amount to an insistence not that **On War** provides the best theory of war that ever could be, but only that it is the best available. As Clausewitz himself admitted in some detail, the manuscript of **On War** was by no means the best that he could achieve, were he only granted the time to complete the necessary revisions. While Clausewitz can be criticised on many grounds for inconsistencies, omissions, and failure to develop key ideas, we would do well to be generous and recall the old motto that the best is the enemy of the good enough. In **On War**, hugely under-revised though it is, Clausewitz provided a theory of war good enough to explain the eternal nature of the phenomenon at issue. That was a heroic accomplishment. I will let Richard Betts provide the final thought for this essay. He has ventured the aptly celebratory opinion that "*one Clausewitz is still worth a busload of most other theorists*".<sup>72</sup>

---

69 Rational choice is handled roughly in Hedley Bull, "Strategic Studies and Its Critics", *World Politics*, Vol.20, No.4 (July 1968), pp.593-605; Colin S. Gray, *Strategic Studies: A Critical Assessment* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), ch.4; and Stephen M. Walt, "Rigor or Rigor Mortis; Rational Choice and Security Studies", *Security Studies*, Vol.23, No.4 (Spring 1999), pp.5-48.

70 Chris Brown speculates that "the Clausewitzian account of war ... may be culturally specific". **Understanding International Relations** (London: Macmillan, 1997), p.116.

71 Black, **War in the New Century**, pp.vii-viii.

72 Richard K. Betts, "Should Strategic Studies Survive?" *World Politics*, Vol.50, No.1 (October 1997), p.29.