

[draft, 15 March 2005]

On Defense as the Stronger Form of War

I am not suggesting that Clausewitz must therefore remain an impenetrably obscure thinker, the reserve of a few learned and logically skilled specialists, who alone can separate out what is best in him from what is confused and fallacious. On the contrary, it would be truer to say that I want to rescue Clausewitz from the Clausewitzian specialists.

--W. B. Gallie (1978)¹

Carl von Clausewitz wrote two notes in which he explained his intentions to revise the unfinished manuscript that was to become On War. In the first, dated 10 July 1827, Clausewitz maintained that the study of war would be greatly facilitated by the concept “war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means.”² He then stated that he was going to use this proposition as the basis of a complete rewriting of his book. In a second undated note purportedly written in 1830, Clausewitz confessed that he was dissatisfied with most of the manuscript, and conceded that he was going to have to “rewrite it entirely and to try and find a solution along other lines.” Just the first chapter of Book I, Clausewitz observed, was “finished,” and he suggested that it indicated “the direction I meant to follow elsewhere.”³ In this chapter, the argument “war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means” was a major feature of Clausewitz’s exposition.⁴ In the fall of 1830, Clausewitz stopped writing after being recalled to active duty. Before he could resume his work, Clausewitz died suddenly from cholera in November 1831.

The two notes have heavily influenced the consideration of Clausewitz’s theoretical masterpiece. In the first place, they served as the basis for the view that the manuscript of On War was little more than a preliminary draft that had been all but repudiated by its author. In the second, they have promoted the use of the first chapter of Book I as a conceptual template for the balance of the study. And third, they have caused many scholars to concentrate their formal analysis of On War as a whole on the one aphorism on the relationship of war and policy/politics, and in particular its significance with respect to the definitions of limited/real and unlimited/absolute war. These factors have promoted highly selective reading, the interpretation of fragments with little regard for textual or historical context, and the dismissal without engagement of most of the book. What has become customary practice, however, is problematical for two reasons.

In the first place, in the note of 10 July 1827, Clausewitz stated that a reading of the first six books as they were would enable “an unprejudiced reader in search of truth and understanding” to discover “basic ideas that might bring about a revolution in the theory of war.” Two conclusions follow almost inescapably from this passage. First, Clausewitz believed arguments that challenged existing conceptions of war in a fundamental way could be discerned from a careful reading of the entirety of his

¹W. B. Gallie, Philosophers of Peace and War: Kant, Clausewitz, Marx, Engels and Tolstoy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 49.

²Carl von Clausewitz, On War, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, ed./trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 69.

³Clausewitz, On War, p. 70.

⁴Clausewitz, On War, p. 87.

unrevised text, and second, whatever these arguments were, they did not require exposition that was planned for the books on attack nor war plans (what became Books VII and VIII). In the second place, Azar Gat, in a book published in 1992, made a strong case for the undated note supposed to have been written in 1830 having been written in 1827 or even earlier.⁵ If Gat is correct, this would allow consideration of the possibility that Clausewitz revised his manuscript between 1827 and 1830. That this indeed occurred is supported by fact that Book VI, which Clausewitz characterized as in an unsatisfactory preliminary form (“sketch” in the standard English translation, perhaps more accurately translated as “attempt”) in the undated note, was in its published form twice the length of the next longest book (Book V) and triple that of the others, and addressed the issue of the relationship of war and politics in no uncertain terms.

If On War provides an essentially sound representation of Clausewitz’s considered views, or at least what he believed was most important, there is far less justification for either restricting careful reading to the first chapter of Book I, or imposing its supposed perspective on the balance of the text. The present paper is based on the study of the entirety of On War as given in the standard English version edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Whatever its shortcomings as an accurate rendering of the German text, this edition has been for a generation the point of departure for most academic discussion of On War in the English-speaking world, and virtually all professional military instruction. I will contend that the unifying concept of On War is the proposition “defense is the stronger form of war.” This was established clearly in Book I, explained in detail in Book VI, and supported and amplified in Books II through V, VII, and to a degree in VIII. Failure to recognize the significance of Clausewitz’s ideas about the superiority of the defense over the offense is to misunderstand fundamentally his primary line of thought and, among other things, his particular treatments of the relationship between war and politics, strategies of attrition and annihilation, and limited and unlimited war

* * *

Much of the first chapter of Book I was devoted to definitions of unlimited/absolute and limited war. Unlimited/absolute war was conflict in which the behavior of one or both combatants was driven by the need to maximize the use of force with no restriction.⁶ Limited war was conflict in which the propensity to maximize the use of force was restrained.⁷ Clausewitz characterized pure unlimited/absolute war as an abstraction, limited war as real,⁸ but he made it clear that war that closely approximated the unrestrained use of violence—also designated unlimited/absolute war—could occur, and thus presumably was also real.⁹ With respect to barely restrained or highly restrained war and everything in between, Clausewitz argued that political considerations had influence—more or less congruence with the maximization of force in the former case,

⁵ Azar Gat, A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Book I, 1992), pp. 257-65.

⁶ Clausewitz, On War, pp. 75-7,582.

⁷ Clausewitz, On War, pp. 78-80.

⁸ Clausewitz, On War, p. 78.

⁹ Clausewitz, On War, pp. 87-8.

shifting to incongruence in the latter.¹⁰ In all forms of real war, therefore, war could be considered “an act of policy.”¹¹

The foregoing discussion was connected to Clausewitz’s introduction of his views on defense, which were presented as a subject of the first importance. “As we shall show,” he declared, “defense is a stronger form of fighting than attack.” “I am convinced,” Clausewitz went on to say,

that the superiority of the defensive (if rightly understood) is very great, far greater than appears at first sight. It is this which explains without any inconsistency most periods of inaction that occur in war. The weaker the motives for action, the more will they be overlaid and neutralized by this disparity between attack and defense, and the more frequently will action be suspended—as indeed experience shows.¹²

Clausewitz, in other words, maintained that the weaker the attacker’s motive—which by definition had political origins—the greater the negative effect of the relative superiority of the defense over the attack would have on the attacker’s willingness to seek decisive action, with the implication that inaction on the part of the attacker would promote commensurate behavior in the defender.

In the event of conflict that approached the conditions of unlimited war, Clausewitz was still convinced that political considerations would ultimately come into play in ways that disfavored the offense. In the real world, Clausewitz observed, the attacker could not achieve a decision with “a single, short blow.” In the time that would elapse between the initiation of attack and the point of decisive battle, a defender could mobilize or deploy additional regular troops augmented by a supportive population; exploit through skillful retreat the effects of topography, distance, and fixed defenses; and receive the support of allies.¹³ “Even when great strength has been expended on the first decision,” Clausewitz maintained, “and the balance has been badly upset, equilibrium can be restored.”¹⁴ And a defender could concede defeat and wait for more propitious times to restore what had been lost. Thus, Clausewitz noted, “the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.”¹⁵

Clausewitz’s discussion of the relationship of war and policy/politics, in short, was not independent, but linked to discussion of the superiority of the defense over the offense. This was also true of Clausewitz’s description of war as a “remarkable trinity” of emotion, contingency, and rational action, which were associated respectively with the people, commander-in-chief, and crown. Clausewitz’s intent with regard to this formulation was quite specific. Its defining context was a situation in which resistance to invasion by a superior enemy by an aroused populace could prove decisive. This point was made clear in the opening of the next chapter. Here Clausewitz explained that even the destruction of a nation’s regular army and the occupation of its territory was not

¹⁰ Clausewitz, On War, p. 88.

¹¹ Clausewitz, On War, p. 87.

¹² Clausewitz, On War, p. 84.

¹³ Clausewitz, On War, p. 79.

¹⁴ Clausewitz, On War, p. 79.

¹⁵ Clausewitz, On War, p. 80.

enough to constitute final defeat—that could occur only after the government and its allies formally abjured hostilities, which was the prerequisite to the cessation of further resistance by the population. As in the case of the connection between the famous aphorism and Clausewitz’s views on defense, this matter would receive more extensive treatment in Book VI.

Much of the balance of the second chapter of Book I was devoted to an examination of defense in the case of resistance to attack by a much stronger enemy. Under such circumstances, Clausewitz observed, the proper objective of the defense could not be the disarming of the enemy, but rather “wearing down” the invader, which meant “using the duration of the war to bring about a gradual exhaustion of his physical and moral resistance.”¹⁶ Adopting the perspective of the defense, Clausewitz then stated that

if we intend to hold out longer than our opponent we must be content with the smallest possible objects, for obviously a major object requires more effort than a minor one. The minimum object is pure self-defense; in other words, fighting without a positive purpose. With such a policy our relative strength will be at its height, and thus the prospects for a favorable outcome will be the greatest.¹⁷

Clausewitz believed that the defense’s acting to preserve its forces without combat was justifiable if a large imbalance in strength made such a course necessary. But he also emphasized the fundamental importance of the destruction of the enemy’s forces through fighting. These were not necessarily mutually exclusive forms of behavior. Clausewitz resolved the apparent contradiction by explaining that the preservation of one’s own forces and the exhaustion of those of the enemy could also be the preliminary to acting with a positive purpose, that is the destruction of the enemy forces through fighting. In this case, the action to preserve one’s own forces

is transposed into waiting for the decisive moment. This usually means that action is postponed in time and space to the extent that space and circumstances permit. If the time arrives when further waiting would bring excessive disadvantages, then the benefit of the negative policy has been exhausted. The destruction of the enemy—an aim that has until then been postponed but not displaced by another consideration--now reemerges.¹⁸

Put succinctly, Clausewitz stated it thus: “The policy with a positive purpose calls the act of destruction into being; the policy with a negative purpose waits for it.”¹⁹ Hans Delbruck, among many others, seems to have regarded Clausewitz’s discussion of attrition and annihilation as essentially taxonomic—that is, as an attempt to categorize forms of strategy in a manner analogous to the identification of the forms of war in terms of limited and unlimited conflict.²⁰ This Clausewitz may in effect have done, but his

¹⁶ Clausewitz, On War, p. 93.

¹⁷ Clausewitz, On War, p. 99.

¹⁸ Clausewitz, On War, p. 99.

¹⁹ Clausewitz, On War, p. 98.

²⁰ Gordon A. Craig, “Delbruck: The Military Historian,” in Edward Mead Earle, Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler (New York: Atheneum, 1966; first published 1941), pp. 272-3; Raymond Aron, Clausewitz Philosopher of War, Christine Booker and Norman Stone, trans. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, first published in France in

specific intent was to provide a prolegomenon to his discussion of the defensive use of retreat and counterattack that was to be given in Book VI.

In the third chapter of Book I, Clausewitz described the salient characteristics of an effective commander-in-chief, upon which the fortunes of either offensive or defensive action would depend. For Clausewitz, such “military genius” was a matter of both intellect and temperament. High intelligence was necessary to perform complex problem-solving. But in addition, qualities such as courage and determination were no less essential because decisions often had to be made in the absence of certain knowledge and in the face of great danger. In war, Clausewitz warned, a commander-in-chief was faced by complex problems that would tax the cognitive capabilities of a brilliant mathematician, while setbacks, uncertainty, and prospects of disaster assaulted his moral equilibrium.²¹ Although he did not say so at this time, these challenges were more pronounced for the leader of the attacking force, and likely to be attenuated for the general in charge of the defense, in the latter case especially so when action was avoided entirely in order to preserve his forces. There can, therefore, be little doubt that this chapter was meant to set up Clausewitz’s explicit discussion of the favorable implications for the defense of the greater psychological difficulties that were inherent to the attack that he provided in Books VI and VII.²²

The next four chapters “identified danger, physical exertion, intelligence, and friction as the elements that coalesce to form the atmosphere of war, and turn it into a medium that impedes activity.”²³ They thus constituted a coda to chapter three, listing and briefly describing factors that affected positive action, and thus were likely to be more applicable to the attacker than the defender. The eighth and final chapter of Book I continued this line of argument by prescribing war experience as the antidote to the negative effects of the factors given in the preceding four chapters, in the absence of which maneuvers or foreign advisors with experience were not considered to be adequate compensation. An unstated though obvious implication was that although Clausewitz’s remedy would not be available to an attacker at the beginning of a conflict that started after many years of peace, it might be possessed by the defender in some measure at the time of counterattack after a period of armed resistance.

In Book II of On War, Clausewitz advanced a novel concept of theory and its relationship to history. Conventional operational history, he argued, was incapable of providing an adequate basis for the study of action by the commander-in-chief because the historical record did not contain enough information to evaluate the motives that underlay high-level military decision-making during crises. In response, Clausewitz formulated a theory that identified and considered the multiple vectors that influenced decision-making under difficult conditions, which in effect delineated the psychological as well as material conditions of directing an army on campaign. Proper case study of supreme operational command was to be based on a combination of verifiable information that was the property of conventional military history and intelligent surmise

1976), pp. 70-81; and Arden Bucholz, Hans Delbruck and the German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985), pp. 35-6.

²¹ Clausewitz, On War, pp. 108, 112.

²² Note especially the anticipation of the discussion of political considerations and its effects on the attacker in Book VI, for which see Clausewitz, On War, p. 112, and 387-8.

²³ Clausewitz, On War, p. 122.

generated by theory. The primary object of such an exercise was not the evaluation of the rightness or wrongness of conduct in a particular instance, which was so often the objective of conventional analysis, but empathetic comprehension through the reenactment of dilemma of why the exercise of choice was difficult in emotional as well as rational terms.²⁴ In Book II Clausewitz thus prescribed a method of study that would facilitate understanding of the psychological factors that favored the defense over the attack, which was a major concern of Books VI and VII.

In Books III, IV, and V, Clausewitz's concerns were broader, and observations that supported his views on defense made for the most part in passing while addressing other matters. In Book III, which was entitled "Strategy in General," Clausewitz dealt with three subjects that for reasons that have been explained or should be obvious, favored the proposition that defense was the stronger form of war. These were the critical importance of the moral element in strategy,²⁵ the enormous psychological difficulty of being able to use all forces simultaneously (which Clausewitz argued was important for the attacker),²⁶ and the suspension of action in war.²⁷ In Book IV, which was entitled "The Engagement," Clausewitz argued that the attacker needed a great battle to achieve decision in the event of resistance by the defender, but that mustering the will to accomplish this was extremely difficult.²⁸ Moreover, he contended that the pursuit and destruction of an enemy army after a great battle, which he considered to be essential for strategic success, posed especially difficult challenges of will for the victorious commander-in-chief.²⁹ In Book V, which was entitled "Military Forces," Clausewitz maintained that inferior forces could resist effectively,³⁰ swift offensive action through rapid marching was exhausting and thus could seriously debilitate an attacking army,³¹ and in the event of a delayed decision, inadequate billeting or logistics during the period of suspended hostilities was more likely to afflict the attacker than the defender.³²

Clausewitz divided Book VI into three main sections. In the first eight chapters, he "surveyed as well as delimited the whole field of defense."³³ In chapters nine through twenty-six Clausewitz covered "the most important methods of defense."³⁴ In chapters twenty-seven through thirty he examined "the defense of a theater of war as a subject in itself" and looked "for the thread that ties together all the subjects discussed."³⁵ The first and last sections are each approximately thirty pages, and constitute the introduction and conclusions. The middle section is roughly one hundred pages long--or twice the length of most of the other books. In Book VI, Clausewitz used length and balanced structure to present carefully rendered arguments that followed from and made sense of what had

²⁴ Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "The Relationship of History and Theory in *On War*: The Clausewitzian Ideal and Its Implications," *Journal of Military History*, 65 (April 2001): 333-54. See also Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War*, p. 46.

²⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 184-5.

²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 209.

²⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 216-9.

²⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 259.

²⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 263-70.

³⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 283.

³¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 322.

³² Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 339-40.

³³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 385.

³⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 484.

³⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 484.

come before. It cannot be dismissed out of hand as a sketch, defective trial run, or mere compendium of obsolete technical observations. Book VI is in fact the expository culmination of On War.

Clausewitz's basic definition of defense, given in the first chapter of Book VI, had two elements: "the parrying of a blow" and "awaiting the blow." Awaiting the blow was critical, because "it is the only test by which defense can be distinguished from attack in war."³⁶ Clausewitz argued the great advantage of defense over offense was the fact that time which is allowed to pass unused accumulates to the credit of the defender. He reaps where he did not sow. Any omission of attack—whether from bad judgment, fear, or indolence—accrues to the defenders' benefit.³⁷

That being said, Clausewitz made it clear that parrying and awaiting did not rule out offensive action. "If defense is the stronger form of war," he observed

yet has a negative object, it follows that it should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive object. When one has used defensive measures successfully, a more favorable balance of strength is usually created; thus, the natural course in war is to begin defensively and end by attacking. It would therefore contradict the very idea of war to regard defense as its final purpose, just as it would to regard the passive nature of defense not only as inherent in the whole but also in all its parts. In other words, a war in which victories were used only defensively without the intention of counterattacking would be as absurd as a battle in which the principle of absolute defense—passivity, that is—were to dictate every action.³⁸

In chapters two through four, Clausewitz examined the relative merits of the offense and defense. In the second chapter, Clausewitz argued that the replacement of passive cordon defense by mobile defense in depth during the Wars of the French Revolution and Empire had shifted the balance of defense and offense in favor of the former.³⁹ In the third chapter, he first examined the weaknesses of the offense by discounting the significance of offensive strategic surprise and initiative, ruling out the offensive use of strategic concentric attack, observing that offensive strategic action created vulnerabilities that could be exploited by defensive counterattack, and noting that moral forces that favored the attacker would not come into play until after the decisive blow had been struck; Clausewitz then enumerated the strengths of the defense, which were the ability to gain strength in retreat because of the support of fortresses, the shortening of supply lines, and the action of militias and armed civilians.⁴⁰ In the fourth chapter, Clausewitz maintained that maneuver and operational depth would enable a defender to exploit the advantages of interior lines and greater concentration.⁴¹

³⁶ Clausewitz, On War, p. 357.

³⁷ Clausewitz, On War, p. 357.

³⁸ Clausewitz, On War, p. 358.

³⁹ Clausewitz, On War, p. 362.

⁴⁰ Clausewitz, On War, pp. 363-6.

⁴¹ Clausewitz, On War, p. 368.

In chapters five and six of Book VI, Clausewitz focused his analysis on the specific characteristics of defense. “War,” he observed in chapter five, serves the purpose of the defense more than that of the aggressor. It is only aggression that calls forth defense, and war along with it. The Aggressor is always peace-loving (as Bonaparte always claimed to be); he would prefer to take over our country unopposed. To prevent his doing so one must be willing to make war and be prepared for it. In other words it is the weak, those likely to need defense, who should always be armed in order not to be overwhelmed.⁴²

In chapter five, Clausewitz also declared his views on the crucial importance of counterattack. “Once the defender has gained an important advantage,” he observed defense as such has done its work. While he is enjoying this advantage, he must strike back, or he will court destruction. Prudence bids him strike while the iron is hot and use the advantage to prevent a second onslaught. . . . this transition to the counterattack must be accepted as a tendency inherent in defense—indeed, as one of its essential features. Wherever a victory achieved by the defensive form is not turned to military account, where, so to speak, it is allowed to wither away unused, a serious mistake is being made. A sudden powerful transition to the offensive—the flashing sword of vengeance—is the greatest moment for the defense.⁴³

Defense as it should be, Clausewitz concluded, meant that all means are prepared to the utmost; the army is fit for war and familiar with it; the general will let the enemy come on, not from confused indecision and fear, but by his own choice, coolly and deliberately; fortresses are undaunted by the prospect of a siege, and finally a stout-hearted populace is no more afraid of the enemy than he of it. Thus constituted, defense will not longer cut so sorry a figure when compared to attack, and the latter will no longer look so easy and infallible as it does in the gloomy imagination of those who see courage, determination, and movement in attack alone, and in defense only impotence and paralysis.⁴⁴

In chapter six, Clausewitz provided a systematic reprise of his examination of the character of the defense by enumerating its major resources, which he regarded to be militia, fortresses, the favorable disposition of a country’s inhabitants to its government, armed civilians, and allies. With respect to the latter, Clausewitz stated that “we believe . . . that as a rule the defender can count on outside assistance more than can the attacker; and the more his survival matters to the rest—that is, the sounder and more vigorous his political and military condition—the more certain he can be of their help.”⁴⁵

In chapter seven, Clausewitz returned to the question of the interaction of the offense and defense and amplified views given in chapter five. “The idea of war,” he

⁴² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 370.

⁴³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 370.

⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 371.

⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 376.

maintained, “originates with the defense, which does have fighting as its immediate object, since fighting and parrying obviously amount to the same thing. . . . It is the defender, who not only concentrates his forces but disposes them in readiness for action, who first commits an act that really fits the concept of war.”⁴⁶

In chapter eight, which concluded his introduction to the subject of defense, Clausewitz restated his major arguments. No summary of this material is necessary except with respect to Clausewitz’s clear rejection of preventive or preemptive action as legitimate properties of the defense. “Since defense is tied to the idea of waiting,” he observed,

the aim of defeating the enemy will be valid only on the condition that there is an attack. If no attack is forthcoming, it is understood that the defense will be content to hold its own The defense will be able to reap the benefits of the stronger form of war only if it is willing to be satisfied with this more modest goal.⁴⁷

The most striking feature of chapter eight, however, is Clausewitz’s examination of the effect of politics on defense and offense, which he held was greater and usually negative in the case of the latter, and which, it will be recalled, he had introduced in the first chapter of Book I. “The reason for the ineffectiveness of most attacks,” Clausewitz insisted,

lies in the general, the political conditions of war. . . . But these general conditions have transformed most wars into mongrel affairs, in which the original hostilities have to twist and turn among conflicting interests to such a degree that they emerge very much attenuated. This is bound to affect the offensive, the side of positive action, with particular strength. It is not surprising, therefore, that one can stop such a breathless, hectic attack by the mere flick of a finger. Where resolution is so faint and paralyzed by a multitude of considerations that it has almost ceased to exist, a mere show of resistance will often suffice.⁴⁸

“The counterweights,” Clausewitz wrote to conclude this line of argument, that weaken the elemental force of war, and particularly the attack, are primarily located in the political relations and intentions of the government, which are concealed from the rest of the world, the people at home, the army, and in some cases even from the commander. . . . If military history is read with this kind of skepticism, a vast amount of verbiage concerning attack and defense will collapse, and the simple conceptualization we have offered will automatically emerge. We believe that it is valid for the whole field of defense, and that only if we cling to it firmly can the welter of events be clearly understood and mastered.⁴⁹

In his closing, Clausewitz indicated that he considered the material presented in chapter eight to be of the first importance. “We should like to add,” he wrote in his final sentence, “that this chapter, more than any other of our work, shows that our aim is not to provide new principles and methods of conducting war; rather, we are concerned with

⁴⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 377.

⁴⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 380.

⁴⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 387.

⁴⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 388.

examining the essential contents of what has long existed, and to trace it back to its basic elements.”⁵⁰

The main body of Book VI was divided into three sub-sections. In chapters nine through twenty-three, Clausewitz examined the physical dimensions of defensive action, covering defensive battle, fortresses, various kinds of defensive positions, and defense with respect to the major forms of terrain. In these discussions, Clausewitz argued against dependence upon fixed defenses centered on fortresses and terrain features, and for action that maximized the effects of freedom of maneuver in general, and counterattack in particular. In chapters twenty-two to twenty-four, Clausewitz criticized and dismissed certain standard concepts of defensive action that he regarded as weak. In chapters twenty-five and twenty-six, he identified two courses of action—retreat into the interior of the country and armed resistance by the populace—as potentially capable of producing major effects. These were, from the spatial and socio-psychological points of view, the ultimate forms of defense in depth. Given the significance of this matter in Clausewitz’s conception of the superiority of the defense over the offense, his specific views on these subjects deserve separate consideration.

Clausewitz observed that “voluntary withdrawal to the interior of the country . . . destroys the enemy not so much by the sword as by his own exertions.” “Debilitation in the course of an advance is increased,” he added, “if the defender is undefeated and retreats voluntarily with his fighting forces intact and alert, while by means of a steady, calculated resistance he makes the attacker pay in blood for every foot of progress.”⁵¹ If major military defeat of the defense was avoided, Clausewitz argued that the attacker would not only be weakened substantially in the course of his advance, but exposed to powerful counterattack whose effects would be magnified by his isolation deep in hostile territory.⁵² Clausewitz discounted the significance of the forfeiture of human and material resources occasioned by retreat, observing that “it cannot be the object of defense to protect the country from losses; the object must be a favorable peace.”⁵³ He had serious concerns, however, about the negative psychological effects of large-scale withdrawal, which could demoralize both the army and the general population, and thereby weaken or even collapse the defensive effort.⁵⁴

Clausewitz ended his examination of methods of defense with the chapter on popular insurrection in support of the war effort of a national government fighting a defensive campaign, which he entitled “The People in Arms.” “Any nation that uses [people’s war] intelligently,” he asserted, “will, as a rule, gain some superiority over those who disdain its use.” The effect of people’s war, Clausewitz observed

is like that of the process of evaporation: it depends on how much surface is exposed. The greater the surface and the area of contact between it and the enemy forces, the thinner the latter have to be spread, the greater the effect of a general uprising. Like smoldering embers, it consumes the basic foundations of the enemy forces.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 389.

⁵¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 469.

⁵² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 470.

⁵³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 471.

⁵⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 471.

⁵⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 480.

Because of the considerable potential effectiveness of People's War, Clausewitz believed that it had to be taken into strategic account, and that this was especially the case in the event of catastrophic military defeat. "A government must never assume," he argued that its country's fate, its whole existence, hangs on the outcome of a single battle, no matter how decisive. Even after a defeat, there is always the possibility that a turn of fortune can be brought about by developing new sources of internal strength or through the natural decimation all offensives suffer in the long run or by means of help from abroad.⁵⁶

In the last chapters of Book VI, which were devoted to the defense of a theater of operations, Clausewitz advanced four major propositions. In chapter 27, he argued that for the defender, in general, preservation of the army was more important than preservation of territory.⁵⁷ In chapter 28, he maintained that territory that had been abandoned as the prelude to counterattack was no less defended than if it had been contested.⁵⁸ In chapter 29, Clausewitz stated that continuous vigorous resistance by the defender's regular forces combined with the negative effects of other factors previously described would in most cases be sufficient to bring about peace that offered the attacker no more than a "modest advantage."⁵⁹ And finally, in Chapter 30, Clausewitz observed that when the political motivation of the attacker was weak, and his actions thus feeble, the reaction of the defender was likely to be similar, producing a situation in which no great battle would occur because neither side sought a decision.⁶⁰ That being said, he warned that either side could at any time choose to seek a decision through more vigorous action, a possibility that had to be taken into account at all times.⁶¹

In these final chapters, Clausewitz made it clear that he was not building a general theoretical system based upon terms that were defined precisely and applied according to fixed conventions, but rather using approximate language to generate understanding and prompt insight about a particular phenomenon, the defense, whose dynamics were complicated and could vary widely. "We want to reiterate emphatically," he declared in chapter 27, "that here, as elsewhere, our definitions are aimed only at the centers of certain concepts; we neither wish nor can give them sharp outlines. The nature of the matter should make this obvious enough."⁶² Clausewitz's objective, in other words, was not comprehensive explanation, but, because of exposure to proper theory—as explained in Book VI—and sound historical study—as explained in Book II—more intelligent observation. "We admit," he confided in chapter 30,

in short, that in this chapter we cannot formulate any principles, rules, or methods: history does not provide a basis for them. On the contrary, at almost every turn one finds peculiar features that are often incomprehensible, and sometimes astonishingly odd. Nevertheless it is useful to study history in connection with this subject, as with others. While there may be no system, and no mechanical way of recognizing the truth, truth does exist. To recognize it one generally needs seasoned

⁵⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 483.

⁵⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 485.

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 488.

⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 500.

⁶⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 513.

⁶¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 517.

⁶² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 486.

judgment and an instinct born of long experience. While history may yield no formula, it does provide an exercise for judgment here as everywhere else.⁶³

In Book VII, Clausewitz amplified his major arguments on the superiority of the defense over the offense by devoting most of his attention to the weaknesses of the attack. His major arguments on this issue are as follows. First, although the strengths of the defense “may not be insurmountable, the cost of surmounting them may be disproportionate.”⁶⁴ Second, an offensive that does not achieve the destruction of the defender’s forces is vulnerable to counterattack, the danger of which increases over time.⁶⁵ Third, while decisive battle is essential to the attacker, it is extremely difficult to achieve if the defender is in a good defensive position or is unwilling to stand.⁶⁶ And fourth and above all, the psychological challenges of the attack are so great as to weaken the resolve of all but the most determined commanders.⁶⁷

In Book VIII, Clausewitz attempted to connect ideas concerned with “the problem of war as a whole” and the planning of a particular campaign. This was not a summary of what had come before, but a consideration of operational military questions in light of general concepts whose proper application required accurate comprehension of what Clausewitz had written in earlier books. Clausewitz was clearly afraid that his general concepts would be used in the absence of such understanding. He thus confessed that he approached the consideration of war in general terms with “some diffidence.”⁶⁸ “We are overcome with the fear,” Clausewitz went on to say, “that we shall be irresistibly dragged down to a state of dreary pedantry, and grub around in the underworld of ponderous concepts where no great commander, with his effortless coup d’oeil, was ever seen.”⁶⁹ Clausewitz explained his objective as improved perception of the particular, not general prescription. “Theory cannot equip the mind with formulas for solving problems,” he maintained,

nor can it mark the narrow path on which the sole solution is supposed to lie by planting a hedge of principles on either side. But it can give the mind insight into the great mass of phenomena and of their relationships, then leave it free to rise into the higher realms of action.⁷⁰

There is little text devoted to defense in Book VIII, because the main work of reorienting the reader’s fundamental outlook on defense was supposed to have been accomplished in the earlier books. With his or her intuition thus remodeled, the reader was to be capable of examining properly particular cases in light of certain general propositions. Consideration of Clausewitz’s direct discussion of defense in Book VIII would thus be pointless, while interpretation of general propositions in light of his views on defense would require what would amount to a reprise of that which has already been given. To do either would in any case violate the spirit of Clausewitz’s masterpiece.

⁶³ Clausewitz, On War, p. 516-7. See also Book VIII, p. 578.

⁶⁴ Clausewitz, On War, p. 523.

⁶⁵ Clausewitz, On War, pp. 524, 528, 547, 571-2.

⁶⁶ Clausewitz, On War, pp. 529, 533-4, 535, 536,

⁶⁷ Clausewitz, On War, p. 573.

⁶⁸ Clausewitz, On War, p. 577.

⁶⁹ Clausewitz, On War, p. 578.

⁷⁰ Clausewitz, On War, p. 578.

* * *

Nineteenth century readers of Clausewitz ignored his arguments on the superiority of the defense over the offense.⁷¹ Britain's leading military theorist of the twentieth century, Basil Liddell Hart, portrayed Clausewitz "as a relentless advocate of mass and the offensive."⁷² The critical essays in the standard English language edition of On War fall in between: while Peter Paret says nothing on the subject, Michael Howard and Bernard Brodie acknowledge Clausewitz's views while not making much of them.⁷³ Raymond Aron examined the question of attack and defense in On War perceptively and at length in his classic study of Clausewitz, without, however, recognizing its full significance.⁷⁴ In contrast, Paret, in his long-standard monograph on Clausewitz and in a well-known critical essay, disregarded or discounted the importance of the issue.⁷⁵ The recent studies of Michael Handel, Azar Gat, Christopher Bassford, Colin Gray, Beatrice Heuser, and Hugh Smith have followed the approach of Howard and Brodie—Clausewitz's views on defense are identified but not connected to discussion of the relationship of war and politics, the latter issue also receiving greater—in some cases much greater—attention.⁷⁶ The under-estimation—not to say marginalization—of Clausewitz's views on the relative merits of the offense and defense is epitomized by a recent collection of essays on these two related issues, in which On War for all intents and purposes does not exist.⁷⁷

In the great work of theory for which he is known, however, Clausewitz not only declared that the defense was the stronger form of war, but made this proposition the central theme to which all others were connected and subordinate. Clausewitz did indeed contend that war was an extension of politics by other means, but in addition made it clear that politics would usually exert a greater negative effect on the attacker than the defender. This formulation was critical to Clausewitz's consideration of the reasons for

⁷¹ Michael Howard, "The Influence of Clausewitz," in Clausewitz, On War, p. 33.

⁷² Christopher Bassford, Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 129.

⁷³ Peter Paret, "The Genesis of On War"; Howard, "Influence"; and Bernard Brodie, "A Guide to the Reading of On War," in Clausewitz, On War, pp. 33, 678-80.

⁷⁴ Aron, Clausewitz Philosopher of War, pp. 144-71.

⁷⁵ Peter Paret, Clausewitz and the State (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 356-81, and "Clausewitz," in Peter Paret, ed., Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 205. Paret even expressed surprise when Clausewitz used the successful French offensive against Prussia in 1806 as an example of the potential strength of the defensive, for which see Paret, Clausewitz and the State, p. 359. The issues of attack and defense, he argued in his essay, were "of more limited relevance than are the concepts of friction and genius," for which see Paret, Makers of Modern Strategy, p. 205.

⁷⁶ Michael I. Handel, Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought, 3rd edition (London: Franck Cass, 2001; first published 1992); Gat, History of Military Thought; Bassford, Clausewitz in English; Colin S. Gray, Modern Strategy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Beatrice Heuser, Reading Clausewitz (London: Pimlico, 2002); Hugh Smith, On Clausewitz: A Study of Military and Political Ideas (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

⁷⁷ Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, Offense, Defense, and War (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). On War is not referenced in the bibliographical section entitled "Early Discussions of Offense-Defense Theory and Related Issues," p. 439, and was mentioned only once in passing in the text, for which see p. 56.

suspension of action in war, which was a fundamental issue because he believed that the primary advantage of the defense relative to the attack was the fact that deferment of decision favored the former and disfavored the latter. Prior to inventing his famous aphorism, Clausewitz may well have explained inactivity in war in terms of the discouraging effect of the inherently greater strength of the defense alone. That is to say, the attacker broke off when the going became too difficult for essentially military operational reasons. But by making the strength or weakness of the political motive the critical variable upon which the influence of the greater strength of the defense with respect to the offense depended, Clausewitz adopted a concept that offered a secure point of departure for inquiry that addressed the full range of factors that shaped the volition of the supreme commander.⁷⁸

Other ideas regarded as characteristic of Clausewitz's thought must also be considered in terms of their relationship to his views on the greater strength of the defense with respect to offense. The achievement of positive objectives, the chosen course of the attacker, was more susceptible to disruption by the fog of war and friction than the waiting or reacting of the defense. Similarly, successful positive action by the attacker required command genius—a quality that Clausewitz maintained was the basis of effective direction of military action in war—in greater measure, or at least of a different and perhaps rarer quality, than the defense. And even when this was the case, success was not sure to follow. Napoleon was a military genius without peer, yet the offensives that he initiated were ultimately contained and rolled back by defensive action followed by counterattack. Determining the culminating point of victory accurately was of critical importance to the offense in order to avoid overextension—the fact that this was a difficult task meant that attackers tended to err on the side of caution; on the other hand, gauging the culminating point of victory of the attacker was of no less importance to the defense as an indicator of the moment for timely counterattack. Quick decisive victory was highly desirable if not essential for the attacker, but extremely difficult to achieve unless the defender made great mistakes, while protracted war of attrition—waged if necessary after retreat and through recourse to irregular warfare—offered a defender the means to defeat an attacker that was greatly superior in strength. The “remarkable trinity” that closed the first chapter of Book I, was an evocative but no more than transitional device that set the stage for the discussion of the advantages of a defensive strategy of attrition.

Clausewitz discussed unlimited and limited war in terms that supported his conception of the defense as the stronger form of war. The central issue in both cases of war was the will of the combatants. Unlimited war occurred when the attacker was determined to destroy the political independence of the defender through battle if necessary, and the defender no less determined to preserve its political independence. Equivalence in the strength of will did not, however, mean the outcome would be determined by the balance of military forces and the fortunes of war. Even catastrophic military defeat at the hands of a militarily superior attacker, Clausewitz believed, would not produce a decision if the defender had the will to preserve what remained of his

⁷⁸ This discussion addresses issues raised in his undated note now thought to have been written before July 1827, in which Clausewitz made no reference to the relationship of war and politics and confessed that his sketch of Book VI would have to be rewritten “along other lines” for which see Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 70.

regular military forces by retreat even to the point of abandonment of all national territory, and resort to armed popular support against the invader in spite of its potential to promote anarchy. Limited war meant a situation in which the attacker's objectives did not involve the destruction of the political independence of the defender, and the defender's stake in the outcome thus not one of survival. With will attenuated on both sides, the inherent difficulties of taking strong positive action would delay or even prevent strong positive action by the attacker to the advantage of the defense.

The function of the foregoing in the real world of action was to prompt the asking of certain serious questions. For the attacker, these are can decision be achieved quickly; if not, are the costs of a long war worth the potential gain; and finally will attack bring exposure to successful counterattack and even military disaster. For the defender, these are is armed resistance of any kind viable and thus worthwhile; must effective armed resistance involve the sacrifice of national territory and if so how much; and is popular support for the government such as to permit resort to irregular warfare in the event that large amounts or even all national territory was occupied. The answers to the attacker's questions depend on the answers to those of the defender. The character of the defense in short determines the character of the war. At the strategic level, this meant it was the defender, not the attacker, that possesses the initiative.

Clausewitz's belief that he had written a book that would "bring about a revolution in the theory of war" was based upon his confidence that his exposition of the superiority of the defense over the offense would counter the almost universal conviction that the opposite was the case.⁷⁹ Such an argument addressed the specific strategic conditions of Prussia, which was the smallest, militarily weakest, and geographically most exposed of the European great powers. Reflection on his own extensive war experience was the source of Clausewitz's revisionist impulse. For Clausewitz, Prussia's collapse in the face of a French offensive in 1806 offered an object lesson in the potential viability of resistance through withdrawal and the support of an armed populace, not the strength of the attack.⁸⁰ As early as 1811, Clausewitz had explored the possibilities of irregular warfare as a valuable support to action by regular forces in the face of a militarily superior enemy, which addressed major Prussian concerns at this time.⁸¹ Clausewitz wrote a book about the French invasion of Russia in 1812, which chronicled and analyzed the retreat of the Russian army into the interior, and its subsequent successful counterattack.⁸² In his account of the Waterloo campaign of 1815, Clausewitz argued that had Napoleon enjoyed the full support of the French people, he could have adopted a defensive strategy that would have been much more effective than the offensive approach that domestic division compelled him to adopt.⁸³

The major implications of the foregoing are as follows. First, Clausewitz presented a coherent conception of armed conflict between nation states in On War that demands careful reading of much more than the first chapter of Book I to engage and comprehend. While mastering On War in its entirety is not essential, a minimally

⁷⁹ Bernard Brodie, "A Guide to the Reading of On War," in Clausewitz, On War, p. 678.

⁸⁰ Paret, Clausewitz and the State, p. 359.

⁸¹ Roger Parkinson, Clausewitz: A Biography (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), pp. 125-30.

⁸² General Carl von Clausewitz, The Campaign of 1812 in Russia (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995).

⁸³ Christopher Bassford and Gegory W. Pedlow, On Waterloo: The Exchange between Wellington and Clausewitz, Chapter 7, unpublished manuscript courtesy of Christopher Bassford.

effective selection would probably involve coming to terms with the first three chapters of Book I, all of Book II, and the first nine and last five chapters of Book VI. Second, Clausewitz's best known concepts and terminology were formulated to facilitate explanation of his views on defense as the stronger form of war under the circumstances of his time, and not as universal truths. Piecemeal consideration of Clausewitzian text without reference to his unifying concept and with no appreciation of the contemporary problems that animated his scholarship, therefore, is an unsound basis for serious criticism of his thought, and likely to be problematical if used in support of the study of current affairs, history, or theory. And third, Clausewitz believed that effective historical case study for military professionals should be based on the contemplation of the psychological factors that had made command decision difficult, not whether the action taken was either right or wrong with respect to the principles of war. Existing practice in war colleges more closely resembles the latter rather than the former—doing as Clausewitz thought appropriate, therefore, will require fundamental changes in pedagogical materials and techniques.

The major substance of Clausewitz's thought in On War is not hard to understand provided one is not misled into believing it incomplete or misconceived, or avoids making it something that he did not believe it to be, namely a taxonomy or phenomenology of war. In addition, readers must recognize that Clausewitz often used language to intimate and evoke rather than define and explain. Or as R. G. Collingwood put it, his approach possessed "that expressiveness, that flexibility, that dependence upon context, which are the hall-marks of a literary use of words as opposed to technical use of symbols."⁸⁴ Clausewitz wrote in this fashion because his primary concern was not the knowing of certain things, but the character of perception that preceded knowing. By correcting the faulty intuitive assumptions that underlay the strategic thinking of his day, and ours as well, Clausewitz hoped to clear the way for productive learning as the foundation of strategic choice. To follow Clausewitz's instruction, therefore, is to ask difficult questions that should have been asked by the current administration of the United States before it decided to launch a preventive war, but perhaps were not.

Jon Sumida

Major General Matthew Horner Chair of Military Theory
U.S. Marine Corps University, Quantico, Virginia
March 2005

⁸⁴R. G. Collingwood, An Essay on Philosophical Method (Bristol, U.K.: Thoemmes Press, 1995; first published in 1933), pp. 204-7.