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# Clausewitz and the “New Wars” Scholars

BART SCHUURMAN

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Since the Second World War, western armed forces have been most successful against opponents whose weapons, methods of organization, and ways of thinking closely resembled their own. Conflicts such as Israel’s Six-Day War (1967) and the first Gulf War (1991) exemplified western militaries’ excellence at defeating those adversaries who closely matched their own capabilities. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s seemed to underline the West’s military, economic, and ideological dominance. Yet even as the Berlin Wall fell, new threats were emerging. As western hopes of cashing in on the peace dividend were dashed in Somalia, Rwanda, and the Balkans, academics and military professionals alike sought to explain how the world’s most powerful militaries failed to defeat ragtag militias armed with the most basic of weapons. Many observers concluded that the nature of war had changed and that western armed forces had yet to make the necessary adaptations to the new paradigm.

The “new wars” school of thought has contributed significantly to understanding why conventional military superiority has limited value in civil wars or counterinsurgencies. Victory in such conflicts no longer rests on the ability to inflict massive destruction but on the ability to wrestle popular support away from one’s opponents, isolating the insurgent or the terrorist from the things he needs most. New wars theorists have shown that western armed forces have to decisively alter the way in which they think about and prepare for armed conflict. Unfortunately, some of these theorists have also attempted to fundamentally change the way we think about war in general. This approach has led to several well-entrenched misunderstandings regarding war’s fundamental characteristics and the relationship between contemporary and historical conflicts. This article will shed some light on these misunderstandings and show the faulty reasoning upon which they are based. By doing so, the author hopes to make a contribution to the development of a more nu-

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anced and robust intellectual framework that can be used to study historical and contemporary warfare.<sup>1</sup>

### ***“New Wars” Thinking***

A central tenet of new wars thinking is that the fundamental characteristics of war are subject to change, making it possible for armed conflict to develop through several distinct phases. This proposition stands in direct contradiction to the work of the formidable Carl von Clausewitz, and it is therefore no surprise that new wars theorists have attempted to do away with the work of the Prussian strategist in order to validate their own findings. As Tony Corn phrases it, “Infatuation with Clausewitz can lead to hair-raising absurdities about the Global War on Terror.”<sup>2</sup> Philip Meilinger expresses a similar sentiment when he writes that “[m]istakes have been made in Iraq, and over 3,000 Americans have paid with their lives for those mistakes, as well as tens of thousands of Iraqis. The Clausewitzian paradigm so hastily followed has proven disastrous.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet the arguments for Clausewitz’s dismissal are of a highly contested nature. By a closer examination of the criticisms leveled at Clausewitz, this article aims to show that instead of validating the new wars theory, Clausewitz in fact exposes its fundamental flaws. First of all, though, a brief review of several leading new wars theorists will illustrate the theory and some initial pitfalls.

In many respects Mary Kaldor exemplifies the new wars thinking. She dismisses Clausewitz with the argument that he saw war as “the use of military means to defeat another state” and that this approach to warfare is no longer applicable in today’s conflicts.<sup>4</sup> She argues that states are no longer the primary actors in war, having been replaced by “group[s] identified in terms of ethnicity, religion, or tribe” and that such forces rarely fight each other in a decisive encounter.<sup>5</sup> Kaldor believes that contemporary conflicts no longer revolve around attaining a specific military victory but that they are matters of political mobilization through the use of violence, which has led to civilians becoming the main targets. Sometimes objectives are altogether absent and combatants are inspired to maintain a state of conflict because it provides them with lucrative economic benefits. Kaldor hypothesizes that these new wars speed up the processes of state disintegration that gave rise to them in the first place. In short, she argues that the end of the Cold War saw the demise of interstate war in favor of a new type of conflict characterized by civil strife.<sup>6</sup>

William Lind and Thomas Hammes developed another popular form of new wars thinking. They contend that the history of war has progressed through several distinct stages and that the world is currently experiencing “fourth generation warfare” (4GW). In 4GW, high technology empowered western armed forces to face elusive and materially inferior opponents

who, through a combination of guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and campaigns aimed at undermining western public support, are nevertheless able to pose a significant threat to western security. Lind and Hammes believe that western forces are struggling to effectively utilize their military potential because they are still operating according to the outdated principles and doctrines of earlier generations of war that stressed maneuver warfare as exemplified by the concept of *blitzkrieg*.<sup>7</sup>

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***It is only logical that the materially inferior actor will pursue strategies that bypass his opponent's military superiority.***

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### ***Initial Thoughts***

These cases are but two examples from the new wars literature. Yet they reflect two important general characteristics, namely the tendency to impose clear historical boundaries and the belief that modern developments reflect fundamental changes in the nature of warfare that constitute a break with the "old" Clausewitzian concept. An immediately apparent weakness of these examples is voiced by Colin Gray, who notes that "[t]here always has been intercommunal strife. It is a global phenomenon today, but then it always has been. We should not exaggerate its incidence."<sup>8</sup> Edward Newman underlines this point by showing that many factors viewed as being characteristic of new wars, such as economic or criminal motives, the deliberate targeting of civilians, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide, were already prevalent in a number of conflicts in the early twentieth century and before.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth generation warfare's division of war into distinct historical categories is equally problematic. Critics such as Lawrence Freedman discard the theory due to its use of selective historical sources and improbable clearly demarcated time periods. Likewise, Michael Evans finds its foundation on a Marxist-style division of warfare into definable stages too neat and its linear model of progression too generalized, negating the fact that contemporary war is in fact a synthesis of forms. To a large extent these criticisms reflect 4GW thinkers' tendency to mistake war's outwardly visible variations for fundamental changes to its nature. This error has led proponents to perceive fundamental distinctions between "generations" where there are none. While war certainly has evolved and will continue to do so, these changes concern contextual factors rather than fundamental ones: the parties waging war, the objectives they fight for, and the weapons they use.<sup>10</sup>

For example, recent developments such as global communication networks, the international financial market, and the use of religiously inspired suicide bombings have enabled terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda to threaten their opponents in hitherto unforeseen ways. But in itself, this trend

is nothing truly new. It is only logical that the materially inferior actor will pursue strategies that bypass his opponent's military superiority. As Antulio Echevarria summarizes, "[t]hroughout history, terrorists, guerrillas, and similar actors have typically aimed at an opponent's will to fight rather than his means; the difference now is that they enjoy enhanced access to that will."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, while an individual suicide bomber may be motivated by religious convictions, the groups that employ such means often pursue worldly goals. Al Qaeda's published aims are not religiously inspired mass murder but the removal of western influences from Muslim lands and the establishment of a Palestinian state. In other words, groups such as bin Laden's terrorist network pursue decidedly old-fashioned goals of power and influence.<sup>12</sup>

Different manifestations of war do not necessarily herald a truly new age or generation in the historical development of armed conflict. Instead, they reflect contextual specifics and the current configuration of war's underlying and unchanging elements. This argument is heavily based on Clausewitz's ideas on the nature of war, and it is to these that this article now turns. In order to properly show the new wars theory's shaky foundations, and to propose an alternative way of thinking about armed conflict, it is essential to discuss Clausewitz's ideas regarding the nature of war and those authors who criticize them.

### ***Clausewitz Revisited***

Arguably the most interesting, as well as the most debated, part of Clausewitz's heritage is his theory that war's fundamental nature resembles a "paradoxical trinity" whose constituting elements are violence, chance, and rational purpose. To gain a fuller understanding of the value of this theory, as well as the criticisms leveled against it, it is helpful to first discuss the related concept of "absolute" versus "real" war.<sup>13</sup>

It was this concept that led the influential twentieth-century British military historian and strategist Basil Liddell Hart to accuse Clausewitz of being an advocate of unlimited warfare, and as such directly responsible for the carnage of the First World War.<sup>14</sup> John Keegan has more recently taken a similar point of view, calling Clausewitz "the apostle of a revolutionary philosophy of war making" and declaring that he advocated unconstrained warfare as being in the best interest of the state.<sup>15</sup>

Although *On War* does open with an argument that, at first glance, may seem to support these views, Liddell Hart and Keegan's criticism are unfounded. Clausewitz defines war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" and declares that "to introduce the principle of moderation into the theory of war itself would always lead to logical absurdity," going on to say that because "there is no logical limit to the application of that force" this "must lead, in theory, to extremes."<sup>16</sup> As these quotes show, however, Clause-

witz was writing about war in the theoretical sense. A mere two pages beyond these provocative statements he points out that if one moves "from the abstract to the real world . . . the whole thing looks quite different."<sup>17</sup>

Essentially, Clausewitz was not advocating anything but exploring the philosophical notion of war's "ideal" type in the Platonic sense, as a phenomenon removed from the limitations of the real world. By further contrasting war's absolute tendencies with the factors that limit its scope in reality, Clausewitz shows that war is not governed by any particular logic, but that it is a combination of elements reflecting its diverse nature. Part of the confusion, according to Clausewitz scholar Christopher Bassford, arises from the Prussian theorist's use of a dialectical method of presentation. As such, Clausewitz's musings about war as an abstract phenomenon removed from reality should not be examined independently but should be seen as the first part of a larger argument. He posits war's tendency to extremes as the thesis to which his most famous statement that "[w]ar is merely the continuation of policy by other means" is the antithesis.<sup>18</sup> The thesis of war as unmitigated violence and its antithesis of war as a rational activity are synthesized, writes Bassford, in Clausewitz's trinity with the addition of the element of chance.<sup>19</sup>

Whether through honest misunderstanding or, as Bassford claims of Keegan, a complete lack of critical study, the claim that Clausewitz advocated that war should know no boundaries is shown to lack substance.<sup>20</sup> Another Clausewitz scholar, Andreas Herberg-Rothe, reinforces this point, agreeing that the concepts of absolute war and war as an instrument of politics should not be connected to each other but rather seen as opposites.<sup>21</sup>

On the one hand, Clausewitz shows that if war is observed in the abstract as a clash of forces "obedient to no law but their own," the reciprocal nature of violence inevitably leads to extremes as both opponents attempt to gain the advantage.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, he also realized that in reality several factors keep war from escalating to such extreme levels, and that politics set wars' goals and boundaries. He synthesized these observations as follows:

[W]ar is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical 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>23</sup>

As Edward Villacres and Bassford show, by describing war as more than a chameleon, as something that does not superficially change its appearance, Clausewitz emphasizes that war can take on a host of different forms, all of which can be understood as a combination of irrational (violent emotion), nonrational (chance and luck), and rational (war as an instru-

ment of policy) forces.<sup>24</sup> After describing what has become known as the primary trinity, however, Clausewitz goes on to define the secondary one,

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***Violence, chance, and rational purpose are timeless principles of war.***

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stating that “[t]he first of these three aspects [violence] mainly concerns the people; the second [chance] the commander and his army; the third [rational purpose] the government.”<sup>25</sup> This single sentence has become the focal point of criticism

for authors who would consign Clausewitz to history’s dustbin. Focusing on the secondary trinity, they argue that his trinitarian model implies that war is waged only by states because these political entities singularly have such a clear division between the people, government, and armed forces. Observing the post-1945 world, the critics conclude that since most modern wars are, in fact, waged by nonstate actors, Clausewitz’s work has become obsolete and irrelevant.

In addition to Keegan and Kaldor, the internationally renowned scholar Martin van Creveld is one of the most prominent critics who subscribe to this line of reasoning. Van Creveld boldly states that “[i]f any part of our intellectual baggage deserves to be thrown overboard, surely it is not the historical record but the Clausewitzian definition of war that prevents us from coming to grips with it.”<sup>26</sup> He is led to this conclusion based on his reasoning that the Clausewitzian trinity consists of “the people, the army, and the government”<sup>27</sup> and that this definition reflects Clausewitz’s belief “[t]hat organized violence should only be called ‘war’ if it were waged by the state, for the state, and against the state.”<sup>28</sup> Thus he ascribes to Clausewitz and his work a very state-centric outlook that has become obsolete due to the increase of nonstate warfare in recent times.<sup>29</sup>

Both van Creveld and Kaldor attribute Clausewitz with an inability to come to terms with war serving anything but a rational purpose aimed at the greater good of the state.<sup>30</sup> They are supported by Keegan, who claims that many of today’s nationalistic, ethnically fueled conflicts are irrational affairs of violent emotion and apolitical to such an extent that they stand outside of Clausewitz’s concept of war.<sup>31</sup>

While such views are reinforced by additional modern-day scholars such as Steven Metz, who argues that Keegan and van Creveld “should be required reading for national security leaders in and out of uniform,” the arguments do not hold up under close scrutiny.<sup>32</sup> As Villacres and Bassford write, Keegan, Kaldor, and van Creveld miss the crucial point that Clausewitz describes war as consisting of violence, chance, and rationality and that he connects these to the secondary trinity of people, armed forces, and government mainly as an example. Though seemingly trivial, this distinction is in fact critical because Clausewitz’s primary trinity implies nothing about the sociopolitical nature of the entity waging war.<sup>33</sup>

Whether state, warlord, Communist revolutionary, or international terrorist organization, all entities are subject to the interplay of the forces of violence, chance, and rational purpose. Andreas Herberg-Rothe notes that Clausewitz even devoted a chapter in *On War* to the warfare waged by nonstate actors and that there thus cannot be any other conclusion beyond "Clausewitz's concept of state must be understood as any kind of community."<sup>34</sup> Daniel Moran emphasizes this point, positing that "Clausewitz's trinity consists of abstractions" and "[t]here is no question that [to view it as people, armed forces, and government] is wrong."<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the question of whether Clausewitz's particular notion of rationality precludes his work from being applicable to today's nonstate conflicts in which violence itself may seem to be the goal, once again the primary trinity shows that he endorsed no particular rationale in the waging of war. Hatred and enmity have as much a place as reason. Indeed, as Robert Baumann argues, "the passions and rationales that move states to roll the dice of war differ little from those which arouse tribes or insurgents."<sup>36</sup> Or, as Clausewitz put it, "[p]olicy, of course, is nothing in itself; it is simply the trustee for all these interests against other states. That it can err, subserve the ambitions, private interests, and vanity of those in power, is neither here nor there."<sup>37</sup> Clearly Clausewitz did not believe that war had to follow a particular form of rationality aimed at a greater good.

Finally, Christopher Daase writes that there is a conceptual schema present in *On War* that makes it applicable to any kind of conflict. Daase provides the best explanation of this schema himself.

By categorically distinguishing war and policy and subsuming the former under the latter, [Clausewitz] offers a tripartite stipulation of war as the application of violent means (*Mittel*) to realize military aims (*Ziele*) to achieve political ends (*Zwecke*). If we add the two actors from the initial situation, we arrive at five elements that constitute the conceptual schema of war which Clausewitz had in mind: the attacker, the defender, violent means, military aims, and political ends. With this schema, diverse forms of political violence can be described and compared without the need to draw strict conceptual boundaries or to identify conceptual cores.<sup>38</sup>

To summarize, it seems that those scholars who call for *On War*'s dismissal have done so on the basis of questionable arguments. Clausewitz is neither an advocate of the use of unlimited force nor is his analysis of war in any way state-centric and therefore of no utility in analyzing conflicts where actors other than states participate. Even the most violent insurgents envision their actions as working toward a cause they perceive to be rational, just as the most careful use of force by a state will inevitably spark reactions of violent emotion. No actor in armed conflict, past or present, has been able to escape the influences of chance and luck. Clausewitz is thus just



as relevant for the analysis of twenty-first century civil wars or insurgencies as he is for the study of “classical” interstate war.<sup>39</sup>

### ***More than Merely Relevant***

Beyond Clausewitz’s relevance lies the question of his importance. Villacres and Bassford argue that the main strength of Clausewitz’s primary trinity is its ability to serve as an analytical framework that, due to its multidimensional and dynamic approach to the subject of war, does not limit itself to one-sided explanations.<sup>40</sup> The primary trinity emphasizes that the forces governing war’s course and conduct extend beyond the rational to the irrational influences of human emotion and the nonrational effects of chance and luck. As Clausewitz writes, “[t]hese three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another.” This quote shows that, while all three elements can be found in every armed conflict, the relative prevalence of one or the other can strongly influence a particular conflict’s character. Keegan’s wars “fed by passions and rancors” therefore do not occur outside of the Clausewitzian concept of war but reflect an alignment of the trinity that specifically emphasizes its violent aspect.<sup>41</sup>

The secondary trinity forms a link between the abstract elements of war’s nature and the real world by providing an example of how these forces can come to be represented in society. In the case of democratic states the categorization into government, armed forces, and people that Clausewitz uses is still applicable. Using a state as an example, it can be argued that, although the armed forces are most actively involved in waging war, they do so for goals set exclusively by the government and under its constant supervision and direction. Furthermore, both government and armed forces are dependent on the people. From a military perspective, the people are an essential source of recruits. For the government, maintaining the support of the citizens who voted it into power is vital to its continued existence. Seeking to explain the course, causes, and effects of a particular armed conflict while focusing exclusively on only one aspect of the trinity of government, armed forces, and people is bound to come up short of a conclusive answer. Indeed, as Clausewitz himself wrote regarding the study of war, “[a] theory that ignores any one of [the trinity’s aspects] or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.”<sup>42</sup>

Clausewitz recognized war’s ability to change its appearance in more than a superficial manner when he wrote that “[w]ar is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case.”<sup>43</sup> But as Villacres and Bassford note on war’s different appearances, “[t]he basic sources of changes in those conditions lie in the elements of his ‘trinity.’”<sup>44</sup> Wars can

therefore take on a multitude of forms, but all are shaped by the interaction between the eternal elements of violence, chance, and rational purpose. That these forms are defined by a wide range of contextual factors is explicitly mentioned by Clausewitz, who wrote that "[w]e can thus only say that the aims a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, must be governed by the particular characteristics of his own position; but they will also conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character. Finally, they must always be governed by the general conclusions to be drawn from the nature of war itself."<sup>45</sup> In other words, Clausewitz asserts that the general character of an age can have an influence on the goals pursued in war and the methods used to do so, without signifying a fundamental change in the nature of war.

### *Theory and Practice*

Although Clausewitz's *On War* was published more than 150 years ago, the trinitarian concept of war has withstood the test of time, being as applicable now as it was during the Napoleonic era. This characteristic is a theoretical robustness that the "new wars" thinking lacks as it struggles to divide the history of warfare into distinct categories. The trinity elegantly rejects the notion of distinct historical phases by showing how the variable relationship between three ever-present elements can account for an unlimited variation of conflicts that are given their particular shape by contextual specifics. Such specificity provides historical consistency to the study of war and reminds us to remain critical of any claims that describe a certain development as "new." As M. L. R. Smith writes, "Call it what you will—new war, ethnic war, guerrilla war, low-intensity war, terrorism, or the war on terrorism—in the end, there is only one meaningful category of war, and that is war itself."<sup>46</sup>

While the new wars theorists have made important contributions to the study of contemporary armed conflict, they also have been the cause of considerable confusion regarding fundamental aspects of war. Beyond incorrectly labeling several contemporary developments as "new" and introducing questionable historical boundaries, the main reason to doubt the validity of their arguments lies in their dismissal of Clausewitz. The grounds for dismissing the Prussian strategist are highly dubious. *On War* does not advocate the untrammled use of military force, nor can it be ascribed as having a state-centric outlook or a peculiar view of war as needing to serve a rational purpose aimed at a greater good. While *On War* is certainly not beyond criticism, it cannot be dismissed by the arguments presented by authors such as Kaldor, Keegan, and van Creveld. Rather than supplant the Clausewitzian concept of war, new wars theory reinforces it.

To conclude this article it is perhaps worthwhile to briefly ponder the practical application of Clausewitzian theory as a theoretical framework for

the study of armed conflict. Within the context of the War on Terrorism, for example, a Clausewitzian analysis has the following advantages. First, based

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on the assumption that war's fundamental nature is not subject to change, there would be the necessary desire for possible historical parallels instead of short-sighted accounts of the "new" threat presented by fundamentalist terrorism. Additionally, the primary trinity might

entice a researcher to look beyond terrorism's violent aspect toward the perpetrator's rational or instrumental motives. Combined, these approaches to the problem of international terrorism may contribute significantly to a more nuanced understanding of asymmetric opponents, foregoing the unhelpful tendency to portray such groups as irrational fanatics and looking instead toward what factors drive people to such extremes. Benefits would include a widening of policy options beyond violence and repression. Third, the secondary trinity has potential to play an important role by reminding the researcher to identify and analyze the sociopolitical relationships within the terrorist group and between it and the wider social environment considered to be its "constituents." Such an evaluation, for example, of the Taliban or Hezbollah might yield revealing information regarding the factors upon which the terrorists' legitimacy is based. In other words, which dynamics govern the relationship between people, combatants, and politicians, leaders, and ideologues? Such information is a critical factor in waging a successful campaign for "hearts and minds."

The trinitarian concept can also be a useful tool for the analysis of western strategies in the War on Terrorism, as well as military planning in a more general sense. Mindfulness of the element of chance enhances the realization that the course of armed conflicts can never be accurately planned or controlled. This awareness has important implications for the western obsession with high-tech warfare and the idea that technology can turn war into a controlled and measured affair. Further benefits may be reaped from analysis of the sociopolitical foundations of terrorist groups' legitimacy, by alerting western political and military elites to the fact that terrorism cannot be defeated by force alone. The central weakness of terrorist groups lies not with their military capacities but with the populace on whom they depend for legitimacy, recruits, financing, sanctuary, intelligence, and other material support. If the War on Terrorism is to be won, then western efforts will have to focus on depriving terrorists of the public support that is so vital. This strategy means, however, that the grievances held by the people and the terrorist groups who aim to represent them, no matter how deplorable these groups are, have to be taken seriously.<sup>47</sup>

The primary and secondary trinitaries offer insight into the nature of war that not only clarifies this difficult subject but also provides a theoretical framework through which war can be studied, reminding us of its ever-present characteristics and its tendency to engage societies as a whole. Violence, chance, and rational purpose are timeless principles of war and, due to the variable nature of their relationships to each other, able to describe an infinite variety of conflicts. Whether a calculated use of force by a state, an insurgent's attempt to usurp authority, or a seemingly irrational bout of ethnically fueled violence, Clausewitz's trinitarian concept permits for the study and comparison of all forms of warfare.

#### NOTES

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