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Reclaiming Clausewitz's Theory of Victory

Richard M. Milburn

ABSTRACT: This article challenges a recent interpretation of Carl von Clausewitz's work *On War* that includes concepts such as *Natur*, the trinity, and the primary elements of war. After discussing the approaches of universalists and new wars scholars, the article considers trinitarian relationships in the context of modern conflict.

In a recent article for *Parameters*, Emile Simpson challenged conventional interpretations of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. In particular, Simpson called into question the universal applicability of Clausewitz's theory of war and his theory of victory. Simpson also challenged traditional views of the differences between the nature and the character of war. The former is normally associated with the permanent aspects of war, the latter its impermanent features. In his seminal work, Clausewitz described what is generally considered to be the nature of 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."¹

The trinity has been a topic of debate for two broad schools of thought: the universalists (or traditionalists) and the new wars scholars. For the universalists, Clausewitz's theory of war is timeless and comprehensive: the Clausewitzian trinity and the nature of war are synonymous.² In contrast, the new wars scholars purport Clausewitz's theory of war is either temporal, situational, or both.³

Simpson provides the latest challenge to the universalists' view. His method of critique removes the trinity from the core of Clausewitz's theory of war and replaces it with the concept of the "duel." In doing so, Simpson relegates the most strategic Clausewitzian concept to minor

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1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

2 Colin S. Gray, "How Has War Changed since the End of the Cold War," *Parameters* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 14–26; Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds. *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2007.

3 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); and John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

importance and promotes a narrow interpretation of the more tactical duel in its place. This conceptualization presents a straw-man theory of victory. This article uses the trinity to construct a more complete, and fundamentally Clausewitzian, theory of victory.

Simpson's Argument

Simpson's major point, in keeping with the new wars scholars, is that Clausewitz's theory of war is not universal:

To understand what Clausewitz means by the nature of war, it is necessary to recognize that there are two ideas of war at play in *On War*. One is the abstract version found in the realm of logic, which Clausewitz identifies as the nature of war. As Clausewitz stresses, "it must be observed that the phrase the *natural tendency* of war, is used in its philosophical, strictly *logical* sense alone and does not refer to the tendencies of the forces that are actually engaged in the fighting—including—for instance, the morale and emotions of the combatants."⁴

This is an admittedly troubling passage for universalists who conflate the nature of war with the Clausewitzian trinity. If the natural tendency of war does not include the emotions of the combatants, then the nature of war, at least in the abstract form, does not contain one of the elements of the trinity.

Simpson continues:

The other idea of war is the phenomenon produced when the abstract concept of war is modified by reality, to give us real war. This is the idea of war that we reach at the end of book 1, chapter 1, in which Clausewitz presents his well-known image of the "total phenomenon" of war as it appears in reality as a "trinity" comprised of three "dominant tendencies." These three tendencies effectively provide categorical buckets within which to place the various reasons listed above for why war in reality moderates the abstract concept.⁵

In this view, the trinity does not account for other causes of war, such as religion or ideology. Moreover, Clausewitz's theory cannot be universal because it reflects a hierarchical relationship that is not universal according to Simpson:

A hierarchical enemy is presupposed in any strategic theory based on Clausewitz, given how he assumed the enemy to be a unified enemy. This assumption provided the basis for his most important strategic concept, the center of gravity, which necessarily presupposed the enemy had a "will," in the sense that it was a unified enemy. Thus, Clausewitz envisaged the military strategist striking at the enemy's center of gravity to translate a military result into a political result because it was a physical representation of the enemy's will.⁶

Simpson considers such a theory of victory has little utility against networked enemies, who have no fielded forces, nor a capital city, nor

4 Emile Simpson, "Clausewitz's Theory of War and Victory in Contemporary Conflict," *Parameters* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2017–18): 9.

5 Simpson, "Clausewitz's Theory," 9.

6 Simpson, "Clausewitz's Theory," 16.

necessarily alliances to attack. Since there would be no Clausewitzian center of gravity to attack against a networked enemy, the theory of victory must be limited, as would the theory of war.

At first glance, this argument makes sense. But when we consider Clausewitz's discussion of wars for limited aims, it does not. There are wars where striking the enemy's center of gravity would be unnecessary to achieve the political aims of the war, which must guide the scale of military effort to be made.⁷ In fact, decisively attacking centers of gravity is not, and cannot be, Clausewitz's theory of victory because it would ignore great swathes of military history. While Simpson's complex explanation of *On War* is stimulating, such complexity is a blessing and a curse.

Interpretation and Translation

The primary problems with Simpson's article rest with his discussion of the German word *Natur* and his interpretation of the duel. His reasoning is based largely upon the English translation of the word *Natur*, which has caused understandable confusion for Clausewitzian scholars. Michael Howard and Peter Paret's translation of *On War*, for example, states, "War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case."⁸ In contrast, Christopher Bassford's translation (which Simpson follows) asserts, "War is thus more than a mere chameleon, because it changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case."⁹

In Simpson's view, the later translation alters the distinction between the nature and the character of war. There are two principal problems with this belief. First, *Natur* can mean either nature or character, and we have a difficult time separating these concepts philosophically. Second, Bassford does not use "nature" in the same way as Simpson. Bassford declares, "We should accept it as standing here for something intermediate—much more consequential than the chameleon's superficial color, but less than truly fundamental or definitive."¹⁰ With this intermediate understanding of Clausewitz's intent, *Natur* could mean, *the magnitude of each element of the nature of war and the relationships between the elements*. Clausewitz is still referring exclusively to the elements of his trinity and describing their variances and fluid interactions not only in different wars but even in different theaters during the same war.¹¹ This interpretation is consistent with Clausewitz's further discussion about never fixing an arbitrary relationship between the elements of the trinity.

Simpson accepts an open-ended range of the types of war. But he is mistaken to think the trinity does not account for them. A traditional

7 Clausewitz, *On War*, 585–94.

8 Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

9 Christopher Bassford, "The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought," in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz*, 77.

10 Bassford, "Primacy of Policy," 78.

11 This idea links to later discussion of Clausewitz's use of the chameleon as a metaphor for war. Changeability is inherent in the nature of both.

view of the nature of war allows relationships within the trinity to be endlessly changeable, yet requires each be present to some degree. This understanding accounts for guerilla warfare and low intensity conflict, countering the new wars scholars' claims that the Clausewitzian trinity is irrelevant in the modern age. War's permanent elements cannot and do not change. As M. L. R. Smith points out, "in the end, there is really only one meaningful category of war, and that is war itself."¹²

Simpson goes on to suggest Clausewitz defined war as "nothing but a duel on a larger scale."¹³ He claims Clausewitz's use of the duel is insufficient as an abstract, comprehensive definition because it implies war is a two-way, combat-centric struggle against a unitary enemy. Simpson interprets the duel so narrowly as to remove any possible connection to strategy.¹⁴

Clausewitz, however, was an avid student of history, cognizant of the multifaceted character of war in the history of Europe, which abounded with complex and changing alliances. Having fought for both the Prussian and Russian armies in the Napoleonic wars, Clausewitz was fully aware of opposing national interests, shifting alliances, and the absence of a simple two-way struggle. Furthermore, in the Clausewitzian construction of war as simply the continuation of politics by other means, the multifaceted character of politics must be common to both politics and war.

Simpson further argues the duel metaphor implies war is combat-centric. While there must be an element of combat to meet a Clausewitzian definition of war, war need not be combat-centric. All wars, including the Napoleonic Wars, have extended periods of inactivity. Moreover, the character of some wars is simply not combat-centric. Clausewitz describes the fighting value of condottiere wars as negligible: "Extremes of energy or exertion were conspicuous by their absence and fighting was generally a sham."¹⁵ The notion is further supported through Clausewitz's treatment of limited wars for limited aims that he uses as one mechanism to modify his simple definition of war as a duel: "The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires."¹⁶ Sometimes, even the threat of force could be enough to achieve the desired political objectives.

Viewing the enemy as a unitary actor is a common mistake.¹⁷ To suggest Clausewitz conceptualized war as a contest between unitary actors, however, dismisses his experience. In 1806, for example,

12 M. L. R. Smith, "Guerillas in the Mist: Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 34; and Colin M. Fleming, *Clausewitz's Timeless Trinity: A Framework for Modern War* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 171.

13 Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

14 Simpson, "Clausewitz's Theory," 10–11.

15 Clausewitz, *On War*, 587.

16 Clausewitz, *On War*, 81.

17 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 327.

Clausewitz expressed his frustrations with the political wrangling in the military by writing the Prussian army had “three commanders-in-chief and two chiefs of staff.”¹⁸ He was well acquainted with self-interested parties and organizations affecting policy and viewed neither the enemy nor the Prussian state as a unitary actor. In fact, Clausewitz’s entire discussion about war being only a continuation of politics suggests a symbiotic relationship representing a theory of victory rather than an unsatisfactory reality of actual war. During war in the real world,

we must allow for natural inertia, for all the friction of its parts, for all the inconsistency, imprecision, and timidity of man; and finally we must face the fact that war and its forms result from ideas, emotions, and conditions prevailing at the time—and to be quite honest we must admit that this was the case even when war assumed its absolute state under Bonaparte.¹⁹

The friction of the political-military nexus is part of modern warfare. The military commander may have to deal with the timidity of political leadership, something Napoleon was spared. This was perhaps a contributing factor in his spectacular run of victories.

Simpson’s view of Clausewitzian victory is that it is achieved by locating and destroying the enemy’s center of gravity, which is where the enemy’s will can be defeated.²⁰ This perception implies the normal center of gravity is the enemy army, though the capital city or key alliances are other possibilities. Simpson’s claim that this theory of victory is incomplete, as networked enemies lack such centers, is correct.

Nevertheless, he is incorrect in thinking this was Clausewitz’s theory of victory. This concept represents a way to achieve victory only in wars tending toward the absolute. Clausewitz’s broader theory of victory centered on matching political ends with military means. In this sense, war’s subordination to politics and to policy could be regarded as an ideal state rather than a fact.

There is no universal theory of victory in *On War*. Starting with the Clausewitzian trinity, however, a more complete conceptualization of Clausewitz’s theory of victory is possible.

Strategic Interaction

Holistic consideration of the trinity is a fundamentally strategic enterprise. War is a competition that can be characterized as the protection of the friendly trinity while simultaneously attacking the enemy’s trinity—a clash of trinities. During war, the magnitude of each of the elements—passion, reason, and chance—is fluid and changes rapidly due to precipitating events. “Our task,” said Clausewitz, “is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies.”²¹ At

18 Carl von Clausewitz to Marie von Brühl, September 29, 1806, quoted in Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 124.

19 Clausewitz, *On War*, 580.

20 Simpson, “Clausewitz’s Theory,” 16.

21 Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

the center of this balance is the state (or community) itself, composed of the government, the people, and the military or its analogues.²² The relationships between these elements of the Clausewitzian social trinity are constantly fluid and evolving, becoming stronger or weaker depending on prevailing circumstances and as affected by myriad factors including military action. The elements of the primary trinity, the most powerful of which is passion, also influence relationships in the social trinity.

Passion often acts as a binding force and may give the people justification for war. Passion could be stoked by ideology, religion, nationalism, injustice, racial hatred, or outrage to strengthen the resolve to go to, or to stay at, war. In total war, passion can dominate rational thought, which Captain Ramsey, Denzel Washington's character in the movie *Crimson Tide*, acknowledges, "The true nature of war is to serve itself."²³ As wars tend toward totality, passion takes on a logic of its own, and increasingly, the military decision becomes the political end state.

Passion and reason may complement one another in wars of necessity, but reason may equally counter passion. In limited wars, directly linking political goals to the use of military force may be difficult. This void is sometimes called the Clausewitzian gap.²⁴ As wars become more limited, and the justification of primordial violence becomes more difficult, reason often comes to the fore, especially in the information age where the horrors of war are continually dissected. Constant network news coverage can alter public perception, especially if friendly interests are unclear. In democracies where open debate is encouraged, it can be especially hard to present a united political front, which might be required to maintain public support for military action and to protect one's own trinity. This effort might call into question the value of the military instrument of power in matters of limited national interest. David Betz, among others, considers the diminishing utility of war as a tool of policy.²⁵

Chance is the embodiment of war's uncertainty. At the extreme end, the king of Persia lost an entire army to a sandstorm, and the Spanish Armada was devastated by storms. Likewise, the death of Gustavus Adolphus in 1632 during the Battle of Lützen quickly precipitated the end of Sweden's time as a great power. In the modern world of precision weapons, luck is a more dangerous force precisely because the public may be led to believe that accidents such as the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 are deliberate acts. Chance is ever-present on the battlefield, and though it can be reduced, there may be, as General

22 This has been another bone of contention for the new wars scholars, but Bassford, Jan Willem Honig, and James Gow have all constructed more flexible analogues for these actors. Thomas Waldman, *War, Clausewitz, and the Trinity* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 169.

23 Captain Ramsey to Commander Hunter in *Crimson Tide*, directed by Tony Scott (Hollywood Pictures, 1995).

24 Leo J. Blanken, Hy Rothstein, Jason J. Lepore, eds., *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 17–18.

25 Betz David, *Carnage and Connectivity: Landmarks in the Decline of Conventional Military Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4–5.

Stanley McChrystal found, a corresponding reduction in military effectiveness or an increased risk to friendly forces.²⁶

Understanding both trinities requires understanding the kind of war the enemy is embarking upon as well as your own. There is no natural balance here: a limited war for one side is not necessarily so for the other or indeed for coalition partners on either side. The disparities in military capability between sides in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were more than balanced by the other side's abundant passion and will to keep fighting.²⁷ Considering war in this light naturally leads to grand strategic considerations that drag military leaders out of their comfort zones and into the policy arena, which is where the only meaningful victories reside.

A Clausewitzian Theory of Victory

In the clash of trinities, there are two ways to win a war.²⁸ The enemy trinity must be destroyed by breaking either a relationship in, or an element of, its trinity. Clausewitz said an enemy's power of resistance is comprised of the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will.²⁹ Most battle-centric strategies attack capability, primarily within the enemy's military, but others, including coercive strategies, attack the will to fight through trinitarian relationships. There are many possible strategies to win wars beyond what Clausewitz actually discussed in *On War* that can also be discussed through this theoretical extension. One such example is Robert Pape's four types of strategic bombing: punishment, risk, decapitation, and denial.³⁰ The trinitarian model can show where a particular strategy is supposed to affect the enemy trinity. But it is still incumbent upon the strategist to assess the metrics of how successful such a strategy is or even if there is a causal link between the choice of strategy and the intended breakdown of the relationship being attacked.

As Simpson noted in *War from the Ground Up*, there may be many strategic audiences to particular actions in war.³¹ Thus, our actions to affect the enemy's trinity also have secondary and tertiary effects on relationships in our own trinity that must be considered during strategic deliberations. Punishment of a civilian population provides an excellent example. Even though the model identifies the target as the people-to-government relationship, it cannot indicate a probability of success. Such a strategy posited by Giulio Douhet was sporadically successful in

26 "Tactical Directive," Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force, July 6, 2009.

27 Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975): 175–200.

28 Waldman, *War*, 161.

29 Clausewitz, *On War*, 77.

30 Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

31 Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Rotterdam and Rome during World War II despite more public failures during the Combined Bomber Offensive.³²

The repeated defacement of the statue of Sir Arthur Travers “Bomber” Harris, the man synonymous with this British use of airpower, illustrates how strongly the public can react to military action. Risk, posited as a weaker form of punishment and unlikely to work, targets the same mechanism. Both decapitation and denial try to affect the government-to-military relationship. Denial is the only one of the four strategies that targets both capability and will and is unsurprisingly the most historically successful.

Many strategies attack the relationship between the people and the government such as terrorism, economic war, attrition, and simply enduring until the enemy’s public support wanes.³³ A trinitarian approach to assessing war allows us to look at key vulnerabilities as well as opportunities; we must have continuous assessment of both since the trinitaries are constantly changing. Moreover, war considered in this way is not just about military activity but also about diplomacy, economics, and information. Only through using all of the instruments of power can strategy be optimized to protect the friendly trinity and to exploit perceived weaknesses in the enemy’s.

For democracies such as the United States and Britain, who fight on distant shores with conventional superiority, this raises questions about likely enemy strategies and the limitations of friendly plans. Former Commandant of the Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak presciently observed “enemies will attack us asymmetrically. They will take us where we’re weak, and they will negate our strengths, which is our technology, and so the best way to do that is to get you into close terrain—towns, cities, urban slums, forests, jungles.”³⁴

These attacks often occur in the information domain, where the West must learn to fight more effectively. That will require congruence between political thought and military action. The information domain can be particularly problematic for democracies where attitudes to war are openly discussed in their respective parliaments, inviting dissention. As R. D. Hooker Jr. contends, war is “a contest of wills played out by thinking and adaptive opponents.”³⁵ It is easy to attack the will of Western democracies in wars of limited national interest, and it would be foolish for most nations to try to attack a US-led coalition head-on. Indirect strategies, therefore, come to the fore: “Asymmetry is inherent in the nature of war.”³⁶

32 Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943).

33 Some of these strategies are discussed in R. D. Hooker Jr., “Beyond *Vom Kriege*: The Character and Conduct of Modern War,” *Parameters* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 15.

34 General Charles Krulak (commandant, US Marine Corps), interview with Jim Lehrer, NewsHour, PBS, June 25, 1999).

35 Hooker, “Beyond *Vom Kriege*,” 12.

36 Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Rediscovering US Military Strategy: A Role for Doctrine,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 2 (January 2016): 233.

Although indirect strategies may not have been the focus of *On War*, a brief study of the trinity shows that these ideas are easily extrapolated from it, which allows us to discuss war and strategy more generally than Clausewitz himself did, to find a road to victory. During war, victory comes about through the knowledge and protection of one's own trinity and the simultaneous knowledge and destruction of the enemy trinity. This trinitarian strategic analysis mirrors Sun Tzu's maxim: "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."³⁷ In this manner, Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are perfectly aligned regarding both the nature of war and the path to victory.

Conclusion

Simpson's interpretation of Clausewitz removes much of the explanatory power that the trinity possesses. His complex reading does not enable predictive strategic consideration because it lacks clarity and relegates discussion of *On War* to the tactical arena. While Simpson's argument is intellectually thought-provoking, its practical utility for military and political professionals is questionable. Furthermore, this interpretation unwisely clouds basic understandings of what war is. As Antulio J. Echevarria II states, "Understanding the nature of war is important for more than academic reasons; the nature of a thing tends to define how it can and cannot be used, which, in the case of war, makes it extremely important to both political and military leaders."³⁸

By restoring Clausewitz's trinity to its proper place we can advance a more comprehensive theory of victory than even Clausewitz himself. The link between military means and political ends forms a fundamental, but insufficient, element of this theory because the singular dimension does not account for the economic and informational instruments of power. The expanded Clausewitzian theory of victory embraces the competitive nature of war, showing the flexibility and utility of the Clausewitzian trinity at the grand and military strategic levels of war. This simple model can help military and political professionals bridge their different conceptual approaches to strategy, leading to better considerations of second- and third-order effects. This deeper understanding and consideration of the inadvertent and adverse consequences of military action is essential to the pursuit of successful grand strategy.

³⁷ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 84.

³⁸ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Globalization and the Nature of War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), v.

