

Resurrecting the “Icon”

The Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz’s *On War*

Nikolas Gardner

FOR STUDENTS OF strategy, Carl von Clausewitz has long been a polarizing figure. Notwithstanding their rather different interpretations of *On War*, soldiers, statesmen, and scholars such as Moltke the Elder, Gen Colin Powell, and Sir Michael Howard have praised its insights and elevated it to the forefront of the strategic canon. Their enthusiasm has been matched by the hostility of writers like Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, Sir John Keegan, and Martin van Creveld, who have condemned Clausewitz as bloodthirsty, misguided, and obsolete.

Phillip S. Meilinger sides emphatically with the latter school in his article, “Busting the Icon: Restoring Balance to the Influence of Clausewitz,” in the premiere issue of this journal. Meilinger argues that the current predicament of the US military in Iraq stems from its cultural ignorance and its obsession with bloody, decisive land battles, conditions that he attributes directly to its fascination with the Prussian theorist. The extent to which such shortcomings actually afflict American forces in Iraq is debatable. What is clear, however, is that neither recent scholarship on Clausewitz nor a careful reading of *On War* itself supports Meilinger’s diatribe. For Meilinger, like many other detractors, a sound grasp of Clausewitz’s arguments is apparently not a prerequisite for attacking them. His condemnation of *On War* is particularly unfortunate at a time when the book is inspiring insightful and creative attempts to address the strategic challenges facing the United States in Iraq and elsewhere. This essay evaluates Meilinger’s principal criticisms of Clausewitz’s ideas before turning to consider briefly the real influence Clausewitz has had on the US military and the broader strategic studies community.

Dr. Nikolas Gardner is a professor at the Air War College, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, in the Department of Leadership and Strategy. He holds a PhD in military history and strategic studies from the University of Calgary and is the author of *Trial by Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914* (London: Praeger, 2003).

Clausewitz and “The Primacy of Slaughter in War”

Meilinger begins by acknowledging briefly the value of some key concepts in *On War*, including the importance of understanding the nature of a conflict before embarking upon it, the inevitability of friction and fog, the relationship between military strategy and political objectives, and the “paradoxical” trinity. He then quickly transitions to the attack, noting that Clausewitz died before completing *On War* to his satisfaction, leaving his widow to publish the manuscript as a “rough draft.” This, along with the dialectical method of reasoning employed throughout the book, has left it littered with “contradictions and redundancies” that can mislead the modern reader.¹ Numerous writers have observed that these issues have encouraged misinterpretation of Clausewitz’s ideas.² Despite mentioning them, Meilinger does not believe that these problems have presented a significant impediment to understanding *On War*. On the contrary, he contends that Clausewitz clearly and consistently emphasized “the primacy of slaughter in war.”³ To support this assertion, Meilinger provides a sampling of 20 apparently unequivocal statements advocating the destruction of the enemy in a bloody, decisive battle. This apocalyptic approach to warfare should not be surprising, he argues, because “to Clausewitz, decisive battles were the part and parcel of war. After all, he had lived through the Napoleonic Wars and written at length on the wars of Frederick the Great. Fighting major battles made those eras important and different from what had gone before, and that is why Clausewitz emphasized them.”⁴

In an age when Western public opinion takes a dim view of large-scale bloodletting, the utility of such an approach is limited. In Meilinger’s opinion, this Clausewitzian obsession with slaughter has tainted the doctrine, educational institutions, and strategy of the US military. He argues that Army and Marine Corps doctrines echo *On War*, emphasizing the importance of violent, close combat. Enthusiasm for the Prussian theorist at the prestigious National War College is apparently so feverish that the curriculum includes a staff ride to Gettysburg with the intent of “glorifying a battle that included two of the bloodiest and most inane frontal assaults against a fortified position in US military history.”⁵ Meilinger implies that American military operations since Korea have been directed by Army officers whose outlooks have been shaped by an unthinking commitment to close combat.⁶ Disaster has been averted only when political factors have prevented the large-scale deployment of ground forces and instead forced the

use of airpower in conjunction with special operations forces. In cases like Afghanistan in 2003, Meilinger contends that this approach produced “politically desirable results with a remarkably low casualty-toll—to both sides.”⁷ In Iraq, however, he asserts that “the Clausewitzian focus on decisive battle and bloodshed” encouraged American commanders to deploy a large invasion force that sparked an insurgency, a type of warfare on which *On War* offers precious little advice. The Iraqi quagmire can thus be attributed largely to the embrace of outdated Clausewitzian dictums regarding the necessity of decisive land battles.

This thesis is problematic on so many levels that it is difficult to know where to begin. At basis, Meilinger’s description of Clausewitz’s ideas amounts to an inaccurate caricature. Rather than grappling with the complex and often contradictory ideas expressed in *On War*, Meilinger employs an intermittent form of textual analysis to demonstrate Clausewitz’s alleged obsession with decisive battle. This is a wholly inadequate means of explaining a nuanced argument that appears in different stages of development throughout the book. Elucidating this argument and its evolution over time is not prohibitively difficult, thanks to the patient efforts of numerous historians. We know that the Napoleonic Wars had an indelible impact on Clausewitz, leading him to emphasize the centrality of the bloody and decisive clash of arms throughout much of his career as a scholar. In the 1820s, however, his study of history led him to acknowledge the legitimacy of conflicts fought for limited political ends, in which such engagements might be neither necessary nor desirable.

Historians disagree over the extent to which he managed to revise his existing work to reflect the dual nature of war before his untimely death in 1831.⁸ Nonetheless, they concur that chapter 1 of book 1 represents Clausewitz’s ideas in mature form. It also outlines his conception of war in general terms. Entitled “What is War?” this chapter begins by positing that when considered through the lens of a pure (and artificial) logic, war should escalate to extremes, as each belligerent intensifies its efforts to defeat the enemy. It then explains that the political objectives sought by the belligerents, the relative advantage of remaining on the defensive, and the inherent imperfection of intelligence, all tend to limit the escalation of conflicts in reality. This leads Clausewitz to the counterargument that war is a continuation of political activity by other means. He then reconciles these opposing ideas in a conceptual model that aims to shed light on the

nature of any conflict: his “paradoxical trinity” of emotion, chance, and reason.

This chapter is the key to understanding Clausewitz’s theory of war. It makes clear that the bloody, decisive clash of arms is just one of many forms that wars may take. The conflicts of Clausewitz’s time often culminated in such climactic engagements, but he recognized that wars fought for limited objectives did not necessarily involve decisive battles. It is worth noting that this recognition arose at least in part from his comparison of the wars of Napoleon with those of Frederick the Great. Meilinger suggests that these two commanders lived in an age in which “major battles” became more important and more prevalent. To Clausewitz, however, not to mention most military historians, the real dividing line lies between the age of Frederick and that of Napoleon. While Frederick fought “princely” wars of limited duration and intensity for relatively restricted goals, Napoleon engaged in “national” wars that mobilized the resources of entire nations in pursuit of far more ambitious objectives. According to Peter Paret, “Positing a measure of discontinuity between Frederick and Napoleon helped Clausewitz create a unified, all-encompassing theory of war.”⁹

To overlook the chapter in which this theory is expounded in favor of a series of disconnected quotes from throughout the book is to misrepresent the fundamental argument of *On War*. Meilinger justifies this by arguing that the force and frequency of Clausewitz’s endorsements of decisive battle reveal his true feelings on the subject. Yet a closer examination of these endorsements reveals that they are accompanied by numerous caveats and stipulations. Six of the 20 examples that Meilinger lists to demonstrate Clausewitz’s emphasis on “the necessity of decisive and violent battle” appear in chapter 2 of book 1, another chapter which was apparently revised toward the end of his life. In the context of this chapter, which actually explores the relationship between objectives and the military means used to achieve them, these statements are characterizations of war in the abstract, which are invariably followed by descriptions of how real-world conflicts tend to differ from that model. For example, Meilinger includes the following extract from page 95 of *On War*: “Since in the engagement everything is concentrated on the destruction of the enemy, or rather of *his armed forces*, which is inherent in its very concept, it follows that the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces is always the means by which the purpose of the engagement is achieved.” Immediately after this statement Clausewitz continues, “The purpose in question may be the destruction

of the enemy's forces, but not necessarily so; it may be quite different. As we have shown, the destruction of the enemy is not the only means of attaining the political object, when there are other objectives for which the war is waged."¹⁰

Clausewitz certainly does not discount the importance of decisive battle in this chapter. Indeed, its principal argument is that the prospect of battle, even if it never occurs, must exert a significant influence over the planning and conduct of war. Clausewitz expresses this idea in the following well-known metaphor: "The decision by arms is for all major and minor operations in war what cash payment is in commerce. Regardless of how rarely settlements actually occur, they can never be entirely absent."¹¹ This is rather different than advocating the pursuit of a bloody and decisive engagement under any circumstances.¹² Clausewitz clearly recognized that the military means and methods used to achieve a particular political objective depended on the nature of the objective itself. Thus, wars varied widely in their scale, intensity, and duration.

Clausewitz also understood that belligerents might seek victory through unconventional methods. In his attempt to demonstrate Clausewitz's obsession with decisive battle, Meilinger downplays the significance of insurgency in the Prussian theorist's conceptualization of war, arguing that "any lessons derived from *On War* regarding modern revolutionary warfare are largely being imagined by hopeful readers where none exists."¹³ In support of this argument, Meilinger notes that *On War* includes only "one brief chapter" on people's war. He also contends that Clausewitz was so doubtful of the effectiveness of insurgents that he advocated their use only in conjunction with conventional forces. It is important to recognize that, unlike many modern commentators, Clausewitz did not view "people's war" as a type of conflict fundamentally distinct from large-scale conventional operations. Rather, he saw both as different methods of warfare chosen by belligerents based on their relative strengths as well as their offensive or defensive orientations at a given point in a conflict. In book 6 of *On War*, Clausewitz argues that guerrilla warfare gives a significant advantage to the defender because it compels the attacker to disperse its forces and prolong its campaign. This in turn undermines the attacker's political resolve, which is inherently more fragile than that of a defender fighting to preserve its territorial integrity or perhaps even its existence as a sovereign entity. Therefore, guerrilla tactics enable the defender to sap the strength of its enemy until it is able to take the strategic offensive

using conventional forces. Thus, as Jon Sumida recently argued, Clausewitz viewed guerrilla warfare as “an important element of his concept of the greater strength of the defensive.”¹⁴

Not only is insurgency a significant component of Clausewitz’s thought, but also his ideas are of considerable use in explaining the dynamics of real-world conflicts. Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap followed Clausewitz in viewing guerrilla warfare as one stage of a protracted process culminating in a large-scale offensive by conventional forces.¹⁵ While their respective strategies for revolution in China and Vietnam were not executed without flaw, communist victories in both countries followed a pattern that would be recognizable to Clausewitz, with the effective use of guerrilla tactics followed by a transition to large-scale conventional operations. His conception of guerrilla and conventional war as two different hues in an integrated spectrum of violence is also applicable to contemporary conflicts. In their recent examination of the 2006 war in Lebanon, Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey Friedman have demonstrated that Hezbollah employed both guerrilla and conventional methods against Israeli forces. They suggest that the United States will face enemies employing a similar blend of methods in future conflicts. More generally, they argue:

The commonplace tendency to see guerrilla and conventional methods as a stark dichotomy is a mistake and has been so for at least a century. In fact, there are profound elements of “guerrilla” methods in the military behavior of almost all state militaries in conventional warfare, from tactics all the way through strategy. And most nonstate guerrilla organizations have long used tactics and strategies that most observers tend to associate with state military behavior. In reality, there is a continuum of methods between the polar extremes of the Maginot Line and the Viet Cong, and most real-world cases fall somewhere in between.¹⁶

Thus, far from being irrelevant, *On War* remains a valuable tool for understanding contemporary conflicts. By placing insurgency in the broader context of the relationship between offense and defense that characterizes all wars, Clausewitz helps explain why states and nonstate actors choose guerrilla methods to pursue their military and political objectives.

Overall, in his attempt to demonstrate Clausewitz’s alleged fixation with bloody conventional battles, Meilinger has overlooked some of the principal arguments of *On War*. Those parts of the book that he draws upon, he uses selectively, quoting statements out of context with little regard for the qualifications and caveats that often surround them. The result is a fundamentally distorted portrayal. In fact, Clausewitz recognized that the means and methods employed by the belligerents in any war depend on

their relative strengths, their offensive or defensive orientations, and the political objectives for which they are fighting. Thus, the decisive clash of arms is only one of many possible forms that war might take.

“War is a Continuation of Policy by Other Means”

Meilinger is actually well aware of Clausewitz’s argument regarding the relationship between war and the political objectives for which it is fought. Indeed, it is this argument that is the second major target of his wrath. Meilinger notes that Clausewitz’s most famous statement has been translated into English in a variety of ways, with war defined as a continuation of “politics,” “policy,” “diplomacy,” and other slightly different translations of the German word *politik*. This issue has significant implications for our understanding of *On War*, and it has attracted considerable attention from scholars.¹⁷ After mentioning it, however, Meilinger rather arbitrarily settles on policy on the grounds that it is “the most common translation.”¹⁸ He then adopts an interpretation articulated by John Keegan in *A History of Warfare*, contending that when Clausewitz stated that war is a continuation of policy by other means, he meant “that war was an affair of states and that the decision to wage it was based on rational calculations regarding political issues and major state interests.”¹⁹

Meilinger takes issue with this allegedly “Clausewitzian” view. Leaning further on Keegan, he argues that societies throughout history “have made war for distinctly cultural reasons” rather than simply to achieve policy objectives. He also draws on a recent work by Stephen Peter Rosen to show the impact of “nonrational” cognitive processes as well as hormones such as testosterone on human behavior and decision making.²⁰ According to Meilinger, however, the American military is trapped in a Clausewitzian straitjacket, seeing war solely as a rational pursuit of policy. Believing that war is conducted by actors attempting to achieve rational policy objectives, it has become “culturally tone deaf.”²¹ Consequently, its leaders are bewildered when adversaries and allies behave in what they perceive to be nonrational ways. Not only do they misunderstand their enemies, but they also alienate potential allies, such as Iraqi civilians who have become disenchanted by the heavy-handed, “testosterone-induced tactics” of American Soldiers and Marines.

This critique of Clausewitz is neither new nor particularly robust. Like Meilinger’s argument regarding the “primacy of slaughter” in *On War*, it

confuses Clausewitz's descriptions of war in the abstract with his arguments about war in reality. To begin, it rests on an exceedingly narrow understanding of the term *policy*. Meilinger never explicitly defines the term, but his discussion makes clear that he considers it to be separate from a broad range of "other" factors that have sparked conflicts, including economics, ideology, religion, nationalism, revenge, greed, and even domestic politics. Clausewitz has been criticized for his lack of attention to economics. There is no evidence to suggest that he believed that economic factors had no influence on the policy objectives of states. Indeed, the notion that any casual observer of politics, let alone an experienced soldier and historian like Clausewitz, would be blind to the links between economic factors, government policy, and war is difficult to take seriously.²² Nor did Clausewitz consider the development of policy to be a wholly rational undertaking, as John Keegan has alleged. Ideally, he assumed that states would develop rational policies aimed at enhancing their own power. In reality, however, he recognized that the political decision-making process was often far from rational. That he understood the influence of nonrational factors like ideology, religion, nationalism, and revenge on the development of policy is evident in the first aspect of the trinity "composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity."²³ In the words of Christopher Bassford and Edward Villacres, "The 'remarkable trinity' is, in fact, Clausewitz's description of the psychological environment of politics, of which 'war is a continuation.' The only element of this political trinity that makes it unique to *war* is that the emotions discussed are those that might incline people to violence, whereas politics in general will involve the full range of human feelings."²⁴

Despite Meilinger's attempts to resuscitate it, Keegan's argument that some societies make war for "cultural reasons" disconnected from politics has been euthanized by a variety of scholars. Christopher Bassford has pointed out that politics is simply the process by which power is distributed within states and between them. War is merely an extension of this process with the addition of force. Thus, all wars have the same connection to politics, regardless of their often exotic cultural veneer. As he explains:

The power being contested may be social, as in the endemic personal competitions in feudal societies or during the European "Age of Kings"; economic, as with control of gold for the mercantilists, human flesh for the cannibal or slave-trader, or food for the ecological disaster victims on Easter Island; religious, as in the early stages of the Thirty Years' War or, in a rather different sense, Aztec Mexico; ideo-

logical; or anything else. Regardless of the motivation, the contest is for power and is therefore political.²⁵

Meilinger criticizes Bassford's broad definition of the political process. It is evident, however, that Clausewitz understood politics in similarly broad terms. As Antulio Echevarria has pointed out, *On War* uses examples from a diverse range of societies, including "tribal" peoples like the Tartars, to demonstrate "how policy and political forces have shaped war from antiquity to the modern age." Like the Romans of the Republic and the French under Napoleon, the Tartars fought to achieve an objective: in their case, land. The religion and culture of the Tartars influenced the nature of their objective and the way they sought to secure it and, thus, "fell under the rubric of political forces in Clausewitz's mind."²⁶ For Clausewitz, therefore, culture was significant in that it affected how and why societies went to war, but it did not change the fact that they went to war to secure a political objective of some sort.

Stephen Peter Rosen offers rather more reliable intellectual scaffolding on which to construct a serious argument. Unfortunately for Meilinger, Rosen's observations are largely consistent with those of Clausewitz. As Peter Paret has noted, Clausewitz was unique in his own era in that he "took the decisive step of placing the analysis of psychological forces at the very centre of the study of war."²⁷ Rosen in fact quotes at length from Clausewitz's discussion of the psychological impact of defeat on an army.²⁸ Not surprisingly, given when it was published, *On War* makes no mention of testosterone. Nonetheless, Clausewitz considered the desire for status, a quality Rosen relates to testosterone levels, to be of utmost importance in a military commander. As he explains in chapter 3 of book 1, "Of all the passions that inspire men in battle, none, we have to admit, is so powerful and so constant as the longing for honor and renown. . . . It is primarily this spirit of endeavor on the part of commanders at all levels, this inventiveness, energy, and competitive enthusiasm, which vitalizes an army and makes it victorious."²⁹ Thus, contrary to Meilinger's assertions, Clausewitz recognized that neither politics nor war was completely or even predominantly a rational process. Emotional, cultural, and psychological factors profoundly influenced both political objectives and the way in which they were pursued on the battlefield.

Carl von Clausewitz, the US Military, and Contemporary Strategic Thought

Meilinger's portrayal of Clausewitz's ideas amounts to a crude caricature. He may be correct, however, that some members of the US military understand these ideas in similar terms. As Peter Paret explained, when *On War* first gained prominence in Western military organizations in the latter half of the nineteenth century, officers read the book not as a holistic explanation of war as a phenomenon, but rather, "as a kind of operational manual," similar to the work of Clausewitz's contemporary and rival, Antoine-Henri Jomini.³⁰ This approach led readers to seize upon straightforward, prescriptive statements in the text of *On War*, and few of Clausewitz's declarations are more vivid than those concerning decisive battle. In the words of Michael Howard, Clausewitz describes battle "with a vigor and vivacity which make those chapters leap from the pages like a splash of scarlet against a background of scholarly gray."³¹ Thus, many military professionals of the nineteenth century interpreted *On War* as a Jominian blueprint for the destruction of the enemy army in battle.³²

This view has persisted over time because for many soldiers and statesmen, Jomini's prescriptive approach to strategy appears more immediately useful than that of Clausewitz. Rather than reflecting at length on the nature of war and explaining its complex dynamics, Jomini offers specific advice on how to conduct it. For those in search of straightforward solutions to real-world problems, Jomini's principles of war can be attractive, regardless of their contemporary relevance. This preference for practical guidance is evident in the popularity of Clausewitz's "center of gravity" in military circles. As Colin Gray has commented, "It may be no exaggeration to suggest that the American military has seized on the concept of the 'center of gravity' and sought to apply it in a distinctly Jominian spirit. After all, here is a concept with direct practical use. Unlike friction, or the culminating point of victory, and other difficult concepts, center of gravity appears to be ready for the strategic primetime."³³

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to suggest that the meaning of *On War* is accessible only to introspective academics sequestered from the pressures of war and statecraft. Soldiers, diplomats, and political leaders are perfectly capable of grasping Clausewitz's ideas and using them to inform their judgments. The most successful have been those who have read *On War* not for "practical hints and military prescriptions," but for general insights into the nature of war.³⁴ The impact of Clausewitz is evident, for

example, on the authors of US Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, even if he is not the only, or even the most important, influence on them. To Meilinger and others who associate Clausewitz solely with conventional battles, this document appears to be a repudiation of *On War*. In fact, Clausewitz's emphasis on the importance of determining the nature of any conflict can be seen in the manual's observation that "every insurgency is contextual and presents its own set of challenges."³⁵ More generally, the manual's recognition that "political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies" reflects Clausewitz's observations regarding the relationship between war and politics in the broader context of the trinity.³⁶ Lest this be dismissed as wishful thinking by a Clausewitzian desperate to discern signs of "the master" in the doctrinal tea leaves of FM 3-24, it is worth noting that two of the manual's authors have made explicit their debt to *On War* in other publications. David Kilcullen has responded to Clausewitz's admonition regarding the necessity of determining the nature of a conflict to argue for the "disaggregation" of the global war on terrorism.³⁷ John Nagl has used the trinity as a starting point in his own study of counterinsurgency.³⁸

FM 3-24 has also faced criticism from a Clausewitzian perspective. Gian Gentile has argued that the manual is being applied dogmatically, with insufficient consideration to the possibility of an adaptive enemy. While he stops short of advocating the destruction of the enemy in a decisive battle, Gentile also contends that the manual is too dismissive of combat, which Clausewitz saw as the essence of war.³⁹ Such dissent indicates disagreement within the US military regarding the implications of *On War* in today's strategic environment. Given the complexity of the book, this is not surprising. More importantly, while some may continue to view Clausewitz through a Jominian lens, it is evident that understanding of the Prussian theorist's ideas in the US military is much more varied, pervasive, and sophisticated than Meilinger suggests.

The same is true in the broader strategic studies community. The precise meaning and implications of Clausewitz's ideas remain subject to considerable debate and reassessment.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the occasional exposé proclaiming the danger and/or irrelevance of *On War*, scholars generally agree that Clausewitzian concepts provide a very effective framework for understanding the fundamental dynamics of war, adaptable to any time and place. Recent work has applied this framework productively to inform analyses of conflicts and situations that Clausewitz could never have envisioned. For ex-

ample, Adam Cobb draws Clausewitz's observations regarding the relationship of means and will, the difficulty of fighting multiple enemies, and the necessity of determining the nature of a conflict to develop an incisive assessment of American strategy in Iraq.⁴¹ Scott Douglas has built on Kilcullen's argument for the disaggregation of the war on terrorism, calling for the "selective identification" and targeting of enemy centers of gravity by the United States.⁴² More broadly, David Lonsdale has used Clausewitz as a framework to evaluate claims regarding the transformative nature of the Revolution in Military Affairs.⁴³ Rupert Smith has employed the Clausewitzian trinity as an analytical tool to develop the argument that Western militaries have entered an age of low-intensity "War Amongst the People."⁴⁴ Significantly, Smith uses Clausewitz's ideas to develop a powerful critique of the Western preference for large-scale military operations, which Meilinger attributes to a slavish devotion to *On War*. The fact that these authors invoke Clausewitz does not exempt their conclusions from any criticism. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that *On War* is far more than an ethnocentric invocation of decisive land battles.

Conclusion

Overall, there is little evidence to support Meilinger's assertions regarding the malign influence of Clausewitz. A cursory analysis of *On War* contradicts his characterizations of the book's principal arguments. Furthermore, a survey of contemporary military doctrine and strategic studies scholarship reveals that authors—both military and civilian—have a more sophisticated understanding of Clausewitz's ideas than Meilinger suggests. The primary problem appears to be that Meilinger has not read *On War* with a great deal of care. If this is the case, it is only a symptom of a deeper issue. At basis, Meilinger seems less interested in grappling with the complexities of *On War* than with condemning the bloody, "ground-centric," and culturally insensitive approach to war that he believes the book advocates. To a culture that often reduces the learning process to a PowerPoint briefing, it is tempting to comb Clausewitz's ruminations for "takeaways" that prescribe a particular course of action, and this is apparently what Meilinger has done. To read *On War* as a work of advocacy, however, is to misunderstand its purpose. Clausewitz sought not to provide instructions for victory in battle but to illuminate the nature of war, regardless of time and place. Granted, there are sections of *On War* that have little applicability beyond the early nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it also includes discussions of the dynamics of warfare

and statecraft that transcend the period in which they were written and shed light on the nature of conflict today. Thus, in ascribing American military failings to *On War*, Meilinger is condemning a book that actually has many insights to offer into contemporary conflict and diplomacy. These insights are not always obvious or actionable. Nor are they sufficient by themselves to address the strategic challenges facing the United States. Given the scale and complexity of these challenges, it would be unrealistic and intellectually lazy to expect easy answers from any single book. More than any other work, *On War* provides a foundation for understanding the nature of war, which is an essential first step in the process of devising sound strategy. Rather than casting him aside, we need more than ever to read Clausewitz carefully. ❧

Notes

1. Phillip S. Meilinger, "Busting the Icon: Restoring Balance to the Influence of Clausewitz," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 119.

2. See, for example, Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 163; Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 228–54; and Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 22–23.

3. Meilinger, "Busting the Icon," 126.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 129.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 130.

8. Peter Paret and Michael Howard have suggested that Clausewitz completed relatively few of his intended revisions, based on their belief that a note by the author declaring his satisfaction with only chapter 1 of book 1 was written in 1830. Azar Gat, Hew Strachan, and Jon Sumida have dated this note to 1827, which suggests that he revised more of *On War* before 1830. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 70–71; Gat, *History of Military Thought*, 257–65; Hew Strachan, "A Clausewitz for Every Season," *American Interest* 2, no. 6 (July/August 2007): 31–32; and Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), xiv–xv.

9. Paret, *Understanding War*, 151–52.

10. Clausewitz, *On War*, 95.

11. Ibid., 97.

12. For a discussion of this chapter of *On War*, see Michael Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (London, UK, and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001), 135–54.

13. Meilinger, "Busting the Icon," 131.

14. Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz*, 15. See also Christopher Daase, "Clausewitz and Small Wars," ed. Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 182–95.

15. On the relationship between the ideas of Mao and Clausewitz, see R. Lynn Rylander, "Mao as a Clausewitzian Strategist," *Military Review* 61, no. 8 (August 1981): 13–21. On the origins of Giap's ideas, see Robert J. O'Neill, *General Giap: Politician and Strategist* (New York and Washington, DC: Praeger, 1969), 62–63; and Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 18–22.
16. Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), 7–8.
17. See, for example, Christopher Bassford and Edward J. Villacres, "Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity," *Parameters* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 9–19; and Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 163–65.
18. Meilinger, "Busting the Icon," 134.
19. *Ibid.*, 135.
20. Meilinger reiterates and expands slightly upon these arguments in "Clausewitz's Bad Advice," *Armed Forces Journal* (August 2008), <http://www.afji.com/2008/08/3599010>.
21. Meilinger, "Busting the Icon," 132.
22. Peter Paret, "Clausewitz," in Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 208.
23. Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.
24. Bassford and Villacres, "Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity."
25. Christopher Bassford, "John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: A Polemic," *War in History* 1, no. 3 (November 1994): 319–36.
26. Antulio J. Echevarria, "War, Politics and RMA—The Legacy of Clausewitz," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 10 (Winter 1995–96): 78.
27. Paret, *Understanding War*, 114.
28. Stephen Peter Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2005), 101–4.
29. Clausewitz, *On War*, 105.
30. Peter Paret, "Clausewitz and the Nineteenth Century," in Michael Howard, ed., *The Theory and Practice of War: Essays Presented to Captain B. H. Liddell Hart* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 31. See also John Shy, "Jomini," in Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 178.
31. Michael Howard, "The Influence of Clausewitz," in Howard and Paret, eds., *On War*, 35.
32. See for example Robert Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 147.
33. Colin S. Gray, "Clausewitz, History and the Future Strategic World," ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History for the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 122.
34. Bassford, "John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Bashing Clausewitz."
35. US Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006), Foreword.
36. *Ibid.*, 1-1.
37. David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (August 2005): 597–617.
38. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 18–19.
39. Gian P. Gentile, "Our COIN Doctrine Removes the Enemy from the Essence of War," *Armed Forces Journal* (January 2008); Gentile, "Eating Soup with a Spoon," *Armed Forces Journal* (September 2007).

Resurrecting the “Icon”

40. For two recent examples, see Antulio Echevarria, “On the Clausewitz of the Cold War: Reconsidering the Primacy of Policy in On War,” *Armed Forces and Society* 34, no. 1 (October 2007): 90–108; and Terrence Holmes, “Planning versus Chaos in Clausewitz’s On War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 2007): 129–51.

41. Adam Cobb, “Iraq: A Strategic Assessment,” *Civil Wars* 9, no. 1 (March 2007), 32–60.

42. Frank ‘Scott’ Douglas, “Fighting the Inchoate War: Defining, Fighting and Second-Guessing the ‘Long War,’” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 3 (June 2007), 391–420.

43. David Lonsdale, *The Nature of War in the Information Age: Clausewitzian Future* (London, UK, and Portland OR: Cass, 2004).

44. Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).