

The Nature of Warfare: Has Clausewitz Maintained Relevancy?

by MAJ Chaveso Cook, MAJ Charles Slider and MAJ Terron Wharton

What is the nature of warfare? Wess Roberts, in his managerial classic *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, says that for humans “conflict is the natural state.”¹ Warfare is man’s natural state writ large, the extension of individual conflicts to the overarching body politic. Over time, societies grind themselves toward conflict at an individual level, and this natural order of man translates over to the body politic writ large.

A few theorists have tried to capture those sentiments regarding our understanding of warfare – namely Carl von Clausewitz, a prominent theorist, who captured these sentiments in his seminal work *On War*. War, he states, is “different than anything else.”² When attempting to understand past wars, scholars often cite aspects of Clausewitz’s theories and their significant role in explaining war’s nature. One could contend that Clausewitz’s ideas find the most prevalence on the World War I battlefield, and his theories provided the philosophical underpinnings for much of the strategic thought and grand campaigning of the early 21st Century.

Undoubtedly, Clausewitz’s theories continue to provide a useful foundation for the study of warfare. However, one must never forget that, like human beings, warfare is not immutable. Warfare is an extension of man’s natural state, and just as man and society change over time, so goes the nature of war. While World War I demonstrates a near-textbook case of Clausewitz’s principles, those same theories arguably provide less utility in the current state of limited, small-scale warfare and even large-scale combat operations of the future unless viewed through a different context.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate this contextual disunion and provide viewpoints for a new theoretical use.

Fascinating ‘trinity’

One of Clausewitz’s most prominent ideas is his “trinity.” In the simplest terms, Clausewitz saw war as an interplay among policy, passion and probability. The interaction between elements shapes and defines the very nature of warfare.

Policy. War is an extension of policy. Policy derives from government, with war subordinate to policy and subject to reason. Interestingly, in World War I, we saw the inverse: policies of the time grew out of the necessities of winning the war. Whole-of-government approaches arose to maximize the promulgation of national will with regard to victory almost at all costs. The national will became the center of gravity – everything else was subordinate.

Competing nations searched to find the balance, but the desire for military victory overshadowed everything. Economic policy became geared toward strategic military success, and both the Allies and the Central Powers “understood the geometry and modern style of warfare through a bloody process of mutual education.”³ In Germany, the Hindenburg Plan arose as a national production plan overseen by the government to support the war efforts.⁴ Conservative estimates say the Allies spent \$80 billion more on the war than the Central Powers, even with America’s late entry.⁵

In the end, the pendulum swung too far, and instead of war supporting policy, war became policy. For Germany, this swing was unsustainable and, ultimately, irrecoverable. Once political, economic and social conditions in Germany approached fatal deterioration, the German military leaders, now the virtual rulers of Germany, were forced to give in and cease hostilities.⁶ Thus, allowing war to become policy instead of a method at achieving specific policy aims, and the subsequent failure as a result, reinforces Clausewitz’s point.



Figure 1. Map of military alliances of Europe in 1914. The years preceding the start of World War I were marked by smaller wars and arms races. (Map courtesy of Wikimedia)

Passion. Next, passion concerns the people, a blind force that exists in “primordial violence and enmity.”⁷ World War I’s large-scale death, suffering, violence and casual indifference to it all at a national level had yet to be seen in human history. In metaphorical fashion, World War I simply represented the ferocity of individual human nature. States personified what psychologist Stanley Milgram would come to call humanity’s “banality of evil.”⁸

Probability. Probability is the trinity’s final element and represents the effects of random chance on the other two elements. In *On War* we read that when war is “no longer theoretical but becomes a series of its own actions, reality supplies the data from which we deduce the unknown.”⁹ However, all the predictive analysis in the world could not have predicted conditions on the World War I battlefield. In fact, most leaders on both sides thought the war would be over in very short order or would follow the European tradition of limited casualties from a national perspective.

The casualty rates begged to differ. War contains millions of variables that cannot be controlled or accounted for: the rifle that misfires, the supply convoy that took a wrong turn in the dark or the staff officer who drew a boundary line 800 meters from where it should have been, thereby creating a point of penetration between his own units. In the end, these small, random acts of chance can have just as much of an effect on warfare’s outcome as a dedicated people or brilliant strategy.

Guns of August

Clausewitz’s trinity provides the underpinnings for the rest of his thoughts on warfare. Later in his work, Clausewitz proposed the concept of **absolute war**, a philosophical construct centered on achieving political victory by military force aimed at the total destruction of the enemy’s forces and military capacity.¹⁰ Clausewitz identified three reciprocal actions as part of absolute warfare: the maximum use of force, the disarmament of the enemy and the maximum exertion of strength.¹¹

Absolute warfare is often confused with **total warfare**, which sees a nation mobilize every aspect of its society in support of warfare, often to the point where the distinction between military and civilian capacity is nearly indistinguishable. World War I is widely considered the first modern instance of total war. Despite absolute war

and total war being different things (one a construct, the other an approach), the reciprocal actions are observable in both.

The first reciprocal action involves employing sheer force by both numerical and motivational superiority. Clausewitz posited that the side undeterred by bloodshed would gain the upper hand if the other side restrained itself.¹² Application of force must be achieved, as comparative figures of strength, or “war by algebra,” would not be enough.¹³ This first manifested in 1914 as nations began to mobilize. All the governmental and military leaders of the belligerent nations planned as if “the dread of loss would ensure failure; [one] can assume that troops who are not afraid of losses are bound to maintain superiority over others who are more sparing of blood.”¹⁴ In adherence with first reciprocal action, those involved automatically accepted the fact that there would be heavy losses, so much so that when the casualty rates began to climb, “they were not seen as horrifying as they were seen to be a measure of national resolve.”¹⁵



Figure 2. Canadian troops advance with a British Mark II tank at the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 1917. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia)

The second compels coercing the enemy to forego war by placing them in a situation that is “even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make.”¹⁶ As the Great War continued, it became apparent that to exert the maximum number of casualties, both sides would have to move toward attrition warfare. Clausewitz would argue that one side would have to dominate the other to point of submission and loss of will. However, the irony is that both belligerents would recognize this and continue to sink resources lest all past efforts came to naught. As such, World War I certainly became a bloody test of wills.

Author T.D. Pritcher reminds us of the Clausewitzian position that war’s object is destroying the enemy’s will to fight. Destruction of morale capacity, rather than physical forces, is the key to victory.¹⁷ The machinegun, massed artillery bombardments, poison gas and other technological advancements, combined with a disregard for casualties, resulted in a loss of life that will remain one of the greatest stains in human history. However, no matter how stubborn nations are as political entities, nations as a collection of people have limits. As America entered the war, the tide began to reverse. Toward the end of the war, the Germans were surrendering in droves. Between July and November of 1918, 760,000 deaths, coupled with an estimated one million deserters or service refusals, drew the war to a close.¹⁸ Their morale had been broken, German will destroyed, as their spring offensives of 1918 failed.

The third reciprocal action is the totality of means. Belligerents reached a grand crescendo of destruction as each ramped up their manufacturing capabilities to equip their forces with more and more capacity for destruction, all in an effort to impose their nation’s will on another. Millions of artillery shells were fired for a singular offensive alone. The use of poisonous gas in various forms was a direct conflict with the Hague Treaty of 1899 and the Hague Convention of Land Warfare of 1907, but both the Central and Allied Powers used it. In explaining why one would do so, a corps commander almost quotes Clausewitz’s idea of reciprocity by saying “war is about incapacitating more of our enemies than they do of us, and if this can only be done by our copying the enemy in his choice of weapons, we must not refuse to do so.”¹⁹



Figure 3. Aerial view of the ruins of Vaux-devant-Damloup, France, 1918. Belligerents reached a grand crescendo of destruction as each ramped up their manufacturing capabilities to equip their forces with more and more capacity for destruction. (Photo by Edward Steichen, public domain, National Archives and Record Administration record 1444144)

World War I also saw unrestricted submarine warfare, which directly contributed to the United States' entry into the war as Germany devolved to sinking anything near their island enemy's coastal zone. The use of offensive and defensive power simply grew to a "degree rare in the history of war."²⁰

Next, a look at World War I trench warfare is imperative. The Western Front alone saw 475 miles of opposing trench lines that extended from the North Sea all the way to Switzerland. To the east, one would find 1,000 miles of trench lines, though by similar manning standards the distance would make it seem to be more sparsely defended. Barbed wire and field fortifications ruled the day, taking away a great deal of the maneuver. In Book VII of *On War*, we find the quintessential point of Clausewitzian theory applied to trench warfare in World War I as he states that "a well-prepared, well-manned and well-defended entrenchment must be considered an impregnable point."²¹ Though the Germans were the first to dig in, both sides determined that defilade and cover would limit the effects of destructive weaponry. "No man's land" was born.

Michael Howard describes this eventuality between combatants, saying, "There will always be an impassable zone of fire deadly in equal degree to both foes."²² Hew Strachan captures the effects of this on the grandest of scales, stating that the stalemate years of World War I created a classic dilemma for its leaders to debate "whether to save lives by pulling back to a better position or to hold ground and risk greater losses."²³ Arguably, World War I strategy became heavily dependent on defense. Clausewitz predicted all this, believing that defenders would hold fast to their defensive advantage to the point of non-maneuver, a prediction that came through as "the battle smolders away like damp gunpowder" from 1915-1917.²⁴

Analyzing World War I via the lenses of the three reciprocal actions, trench warfare in the defense and the paradoxical trinity shows the early transcendence of Clausewitz's theories. "The skepticism for strategic maneuver, the dogged refusal to be put off by heavy casualties, [among others were] all familiar Clausewitzian principles deployed to justify the continuation of attacks" in World War I.²⁵ Some would say that he even predicted the outcome of World War I as the genesis of World War II: "in war, the result is never final."²⁶

Though Clausewitz died 73 years before its beginnings, warfighters still gain understanding of the Great War through his theories on warfare. Clausewitz's work was long seen as "the ultimate foundation upon which every [military] regulation in Europe had been reared."²⁷

War never changes

While his theoretical perspective is foundational, Clausewitz could not have factored in the massive influence current technology plays in influencing the strategic, operational and tactical aspects of warfare. Increases in technological advancements have all but leveled the playing field. Global positioning systems (GPS), encrypted communication, unmanned surveillance and computer network intrusion – capabilities once reserved for the most powerful nation-states – are all available at low or no cost to anyone.

He could also not predict the seismic shift in the international environment caused by World War II, the Cold War, the American Hyperpower Period, the rise of transnational terrorism and globalization.²⁸ Clausewitz's international environment was defined by Great Power competition in continental Europe. While countries rose and fell in power and prominence in an almost cyclical fashion, there was never enough disparity for one to run roughshod over the others for very long.

Today, Great Power competition, at least via open warfare, is a distant memory, considered mostly in thought experiments and wargames. Norrin Ripsman and T.V. Paul indicate that international competition has shifted national security from the battlefield to the boardroom as globalization has made traditional rivals economically entwined with varying degrees of separation.²⁹ In other words, most open warfare is bad for business, as corroborated by Nobel-prize winner Joseph Stiglitz.³⁰ As such, military matters now occur in limited fashion, mostly by proxy, with limited means for limited ends.

As the combat environment has changed, so has most of the utility found in Clausewitz's principles. While Clausewitz's views on the trinity and the three reciprocal actions may have textbook application in World War I, they fail to translate in several areas to modern conflict. Examples from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom respectively, as well as New Dawn), conflicts such as Somalia (Operations Restore Hope and Gothic Serpent), and movements such as the Arab Spring illuminate the disparity.

Breaking news

The average Briton only knew their nation was at war in Europe. They may have known casualties were high, but not necessarily how high. They never saw the effects of massed artillery, poison gas or the rampant disease that tore through trenches. Most got their information from either the newspaper or their nation's leaders, but, minus firsthand accounting, there was no way for the average citizen to independently verify or challenge what they were being told.

Leaders could stoke or quench national passions to support their own ends by controlling the flow of information. As policy aims changed, leaders could manipulate passion (to an extent) to support those policy aims. As such, when Clausewitz's trinity was first proposed, policy and passion remained relatively in balance. The Internet changed that dynamic forever.

Today's 24-hour news cycle and information democratization can shift passions to influence or shift policy before policy has been given the chance to work, especially due to constant and rapid changes.³¹ Had German soldiers conducted mass executions during World War I, the average French citizen would have no idea unless there was a person able to relay the story firsthand or the French government saw it useful to release. As the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) marched across those two countries, ISIS' brutality was beamed directly to not only those in Iraq and Syria but to the entire world's masses.

The Arab Spring protests provide another example of how governments no longer have the biggest hand in controlling passion. Nearly all the nations affected by the Arab Spring had large or total control on the media, information and the ensuing narrative. What they could not control was social media, and the visceral nature of conflict has remained burned in the minds of the international community.



Figure 4. A protester holds a placard in Tahrir Square referring to Facebook and Twitter, acknowledging the role played by social media during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia)

With nothing more than a cellphone and an Internet connection, any person today can become a reporter with global reach – with their views, opinions and stories accessible to millions without filter or oversight. During the Arab Spring, individuals beamed images from the streets, protests and government crackdowns directly to billions of people worldwide – from average citizens to cabinets, judges, generals, presidents and prime ministers. Instead of a government controlling passion in support of policy, the people on the ground used information technology to harness passion and subsequently shift the policies of multiple governments – and ultimately upended the social, political and economic order of their own nations as well as a large swath of the Middle East.³²

Roll the dice

Increase of technological means in modern warfare reduces one of the core variables of the trinity: chance. At the turn of the 19th Century, an assassin eliminated a dictator, propelling the world into unscrupulous conflict. Prior to the assassination, a cable sent to the assassin failed to reach him in time, thus thrusting major nations of the modern world into World War I. In the 21st Century, the speed of communications and platforms would have eliminated or limited such a costly action and prevented massive military and civilian casualties throughout World War I.

Information technology created tools resulting in vastly increased situational awareness and understanding. As the availability of information increases, the effects of chance decreases. Today, world leaders are able to contact each other within minutes due to the increases in communication devices, reducing doubt of pre-emptive strikes, major troop movements and policy changes influencing adjoining nations. Videoteleconferencing enables senior civilian officials and military leaders alike the ability to interact without hindrance of distance, allowing presidents, prime ministers and generals access to advisers anytime or anywhere, lessening the potential likelihood of uninformed decisions.

Chance can never be eliminated completely, of course. A vehicle will always fail to start, a gun will always jam or the network stacks may go down as one headquarters tries to send an update to another. However, modern

technology such as GPS, global communications, satellite technology and others drastically reduce information gaps and the fog of war that once greatly enabled chance, especially from the perspective of Clausewitz.

All or nothing

Earlier wars were ones of extremes: the maximum application of violence, greater will and totality of means was not just about ensuring victory, as the loser often faced complete destruction.³³ As such, every war posed an existential threat to the participants, with a loss potentially meaning the end of the loser's nation. Such was life in the world of Great Power competition.

Today's battlefield is defined by small-scale actions, limited engagements, irregular participants, counterinsurgency and proxy conflict. As such, there no longer is a clear "winner" or "loser," nor is there always-definitive policy outcomes, either in the short or long term. Columbia political scientist Dr. Page Fortna argues that this trend began with the Cold War.³⁴ As such, a country "losing" in today's conflicts does not equate to destruction or extinction. Should the war effort in Afghanistan utterly collapse in defeat in 2019, people in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles or even arguably DC will continue to live as they always have. Citizens are not going to worry about the government crumbling, being subjected to hostile forces marching through the streets or the American way of life coming to an end.

If there is no threat of extinction, then what need is there to exert maximum force? Why bleed generations dry? Why increase taxes and institute rationing? Why watch hundreds of thousands of caskets return from the front? If the cause is limited, then so are the gains. In that sense, it no longer is wise for any nation to go "all in."

Will to power

The second reciprocal action concerns disarming enemies by removing either their physical capacity or the will to wage war.³⁵ While this often involved a large amount of physical destruction, it did not have to. Disarmament could be achieved by achieving a position of relative advantage, either tactically, operationally or strategically. However, in any case, physical proximity was always a factor: proximity between forces or between a force and an opposing center of gravity. In either case, there were physical limitations to power projection governed by logistics and lines of communication. Range was never infinite in Clausewitz's day.

That is not the case today. What need is there for a field army when one state can push a button and send a conventional, or even nuclear, missile into the heart of a rival's territory? Moreover, what is the need for a missile when a single man with an explosive vest can achieve the same effect at the right time and place, or by an offensive cyber operation shutting down a power or communications grid? Technology, both in terms of weaponry and its enabling of globalization, has reshaped what it means to have positional advantage. Coupled with passion, it has also changed not only how national will can be affected, but also by whom.

For example, in 1992, President George H.W. Bush sent U.S. forces to Somalia as part of Operation Restore Hope in an effort to restore order to Somalia and provide humanitarian assistance. In August of the following year, the United States launched Operation Gothic Serpent aimed at capturing Mohamed Farrah Aidid. Gothic Serpent culminated Oct. 3-4, 1993, in the ill-fated raid that became known as the Battle of Mogadishu. The overall casualties were nowhere near those of World War I (19 U.S. servicemembers and about 800-1,000 Somalis killed). However, the images of dead U.S. soldiers being dragged through the streets that were broadcast globally over television were cataclysmic. On Oct. 6, President Bill Clinton ordered military operations halted, with a full withdrawal by March 1994.

Technology, in the form of global media and satellite communication, gave the Somalis a relative advantage that force of arms could not. In turn, it snuffed the American will to fight in Somalia and resulted in a change in U.S. policy.³⁶

While the second reciprocal action remains valid, the methods to achieve it are fundamentally different. Social media, the Internet, precision weaponry and global reach of both state actors (via power projection) and violent non-state actors (via transnational crime, smuggling and radicalizing actors already within a state), coupled with an aversion to casualties, have radically altered the amount of resources, effort and violence it takes to achieve relative advantage. Actors, both state and non-state, can now achieve relative advantage and force capitulation

from multiple domains as opposed to solely on the battlefield, and do it relatively cheaply compared to the resources expended during World War I.

Just because you can ...

The absence of the fear of extinction and changes in relative advantage combine to affect the third reciprocal action: totality of means. As stated before, why put forth maximum effort and suffer maximum casualties for limited outcomes? Also, if relative advantage can be achieved with less resources in a domain outside the battlefield (which can incur massive costs in terms of people and national treasure), then why bother with open warfare? Based on the first two, it is only logical that totality has changed as well.

The Law of Armed Conflict now holds *proportionality* as a tenet. By definition, belligerents must only use the minimum force necessary to gain military advantage, as opposed to all means at their disposal.³⁷ Limited aims give way to limited war, resulting in limited means. Massed artillery bombardments have been replaced by precision weaponry. Special Operations task forces deploy in the place of field armies.

Pictures of civilian casualties resulting in the Allied firebombing of Dresden during World War II were not shown on the evening news around the globe. Pictures of civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan are only a Google search away.

It is important to note that while technology can negatively affect national will, it can also harden resolve. Al-Qaeda believed that the Sept. 11, 2001, attack would cause the United States to withdraw its forces and influence from the Middle East, so al-Qaeda invested a significant amount of resources and planning into the attack. Instead of destroying U.S. will, the attack brought about the only Article V invocation in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) history and initiated the Global War on Terrorism.³⁸

Instead of ending a nation, the 9/11 attacks produced major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, poured billions of dollars more in military aid into the region and generated Special Operations counter-terrorist efforts across Africa, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific region. In the end, al-Qaeda saw much of its capacity destroyed, and while it remains, it is a shadow of its former self.



Figure 5. The north face of Two World Trade Center (south tower) immediately after being struck by United Airlines Flight 175. Al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States on 9/11, instead of ending our nation as it wished, galvanized the United States to action in the Middle East. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia)

For Clausewitz, totality equated to victory. Today, technology and globalization have introduced complexities such that totality does not guarantee victory and, in fact, can ultimately lead to defeat.

Conclusion

Clausewitz provided the most solid foundation for modern military philosophy. Even unfinished, his work revolutionized how professionals viewed warfare and strategy. If Clausewitz did not continue to have relevance, this article could not exist. However, the world is not incontrovertible. While Clausewitz's ideas on the trinity and reciprocal actions still have relevance, what has changed is their application.

The interplay between passion and policy is still very much a critical factor for those leading nations. Chance can still wreck even the most carefully coordinated operations. Endless debates have occurred in Congress and the Oval Office over troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan. America was not all-in for limited war. National will to fight still matters as America learned (to its detriment) in Somalia, and as al-Qaeda learned through its destruction in Afghanistan and Iraq. Means remain important, as misapplication of means can lead to defeat via passion shifts as quickly as it can occur due to military losses.

Clausewitz and his ideas will always remain relevant. The trinity and reciprocal actions will always have a place on both the battlefield and strategy sessions. However, to continue reaping their benefits, we must shift and adapt them to modernity.

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Notes

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

CGSC – Command and General Staff College

GPS – global positioning system

ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

JBLM – Joint Base Lewis-McChord

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

O/C/T – observer/coach/trainer

SAMS – School of Advanced Military Studies

USMA – U.S. Military Academy