

# CLAUSEWITZ ON LIMITED WAR

William D. Franklin

**T**HE strategic genius of Karl von Clausewitz is one that is often quoted, seldom read, and little understood. Many viewed "classical" strategy, as interpreted by Clausewitz, as a Kafkaesque landscape of violence and brutality, when, in actuality, it was a conscientious effort to translate the surrealist tableau of war to the concrete reality of political intercourse.

Clausewitz was essentially a student of war, and after his death his collected works were published in 10 volumes, the first three of which contain his masterpiece *Vom Kriege* or *On War*. By the beginning of the 20th century, his influence had become so pervasive that his ideas, and even his phrases, had found their way into the thinking and writing of the general staffs of all the great armies of the world.

The greatest contribution which he made to military thought was to show there can be no single, tactical pattern or strategic system by which victory can be insured. Much of the blame for the misunderstanding of Clausewitz must rest with those individuals who read his startling sentences out of their context and without the qualifications that invariably accompanied them.

Karl von Clausewitz was born in 1780 and entered the Prussian Army as an ensign in 1792. He served in the Rhine campaign of 1793-94 and then entered the Berlin Military Academy in 1801. He served in the Prussian Army until the outbreak of the Russian campaign of 1812. He then transferred to the Russian Army, and, during Napoleon Bonaparte's retreat from Moscow, he

negotiated the Convention of Taurogen which led to the War of Liberation. During his long military career, he was present at numerous historic battles whose raw material he distilled into his strategic theories. In 1831 he died of cholera.

### Analysis Unexcelled

His penetrating analysis of the relationship of war and policy has never been excelled and is, perhaps, more important today than when first expounded. Many are familiar with his statement that ". . . war is an act of force, and to the application of the force there is no limit." The depressing result is that words like these have been construed as not only justifying ruthlessness in certain cases, but actually advocating it as the most natural form of warfare.

This form of completely unrestrained violence naturally fits into the theoretical framework of total thermonuclear conflict wherein destruction is the strategic object, but it is incompatible with a strategic concept of limited war. But was unrestrained violence the only alternative offered by Clausewitz? It is interesting to examine carefully exactly what Clausewitz meant when he indicated that war is a "continuation of political intercourse, a carrying out of the same by other means." He actually drew an almost perfect blueprint of modern-

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day irregular operations, and his theories have exerted tremendous influence on almost all major strategic thought—both that of the West and of the Communists.

Clausewitz believed that war is a serious means to a serious end. It always arises from a political condition and is called forth by a political motive. It is, therefore, a political act. We have to think of war not as an independent thing, but as a political instrument.

No war is begun, Clausewitz thought, or at least no war should be begun if people acted wisely—without first finding an answer to the question of what was to be attained by and in war. War never breaks out suddenly, and its spreading is not the work of a moment. But we must sometimes choose war, and thus also make preparations beforehand, because peace is not always an acceptable answer.

### No Separation

War can never be separated from political intercourse. It has, to be sure, its own grammar, but not its own logic. Wars are, in reality, only the manifestations of policy itself.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant said that innocence is a splendid thing, only it has the misfortune not to keep very well and to be easily misled. In an age like ours, states, classes, passions, and interests clash in such confusion that war and not peace seems to be the natural order of things.

War has, nevertheless, always caught Americans unprepared intellectually, emotionally, and materially. This innocence, unfortunately, does not correlate with the harsh face of reality. Clausewitz goes out of his way to explain that war is not made with an abstraction, but with a reality. The advantage of a neo-Clausewitzian

type of analysis is a preservation of that elusive quality of reality. There is no doubt that Clausewitz was a realist.

All civilizations—the Greek city-states no less than the Italian cities of the Renaissance or the nation-states of Europe—have had the same task: to limit violence. The method

the scope and character of the conflict until it would end in mutual nuclear destruction.

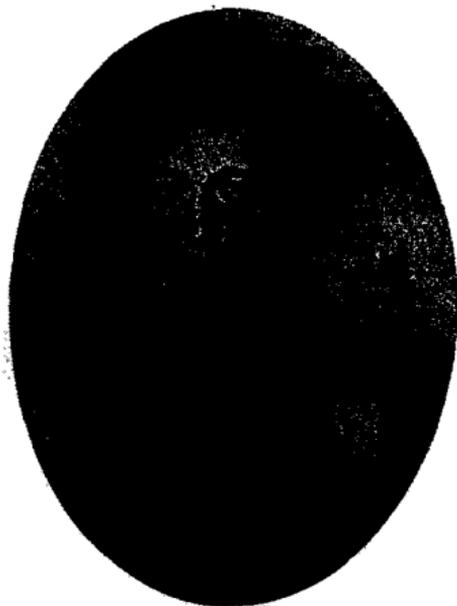
Victory in limited war is not gained by putting the existence of the opposing state—and our own too—in issue. It does not seek unconditional surrender. The aim of limited war is to stop the infringement upon our interests. The aim of war, according to its inception, is always supposed to be the overthrow of the enemy. Clausewitz claimed that this need not always imply the complete conquest of the enemy's country. He felt that, if our opponent is to do our will, we must put him in a position more disadvantageous to him than the sacrifice would be that we demanded.

#### **Degrees of War**

If the aim of the military action is an equivalent for the political object, that action will, in general, diminish as the political object diminishes. The more the object comes to the front, the more this will be so. This explains how, according to Clausewitz, there can be wars of all degrees from one of extermination down to a mere state of armed observation.

Not every war admits of a complete decision and settlement. Discussion must contemplate a vast spectrum of violence—at one end, the destruction which one thermonuclear power may hurl at another, to the hard and bitter fighting now involved in southeast Asia. War does not consist in killing as many men as possible at the smallest cost, nor is it merely reciprocal slaughter. War's effect is more a killing of the enemy's courage than of the enemy's soldiers, but still blood is always its price.

The aim of the West is not simply to avoid war, but to do so without losing vital positions, without allow-



**Karl von Clausewitz**

of the second half of the 20th century is the differentiation between types of war. The fragmentation of the diplomatic field has a military equivalent in the diversity of wars possible in our time. "Theory has, therefore," says Clausewitz, "to consider the nature of means and ends."

With the possession of thermonuclear weapons and means for their delivery, victory, in one sense of the word, is no longer attainable. It is sometimes argued that limited war, which involves nuclear powers even indirectly, is impossible because each side, rather than lose, would expand

ing the Communist giants to expand continuously into the rimlands. What combination of political and military means will prevent total war and allow an effective conduct of diplomacy under thermonuclear conditions?

The conduct of the conflict in Vietnam has followed a neo-Clausewitzian strategy particularly suited to conditions of limited war. Clausewitz said that there were two things which, in practice, could take the place of the impossibility of further resistance as motives for making peace. The first was the improbability of success; the second an excessive price to pay for it. A war need not, therefore, always be fought out until one of the parties is overthrown.

### **Expenditure of Force**

Clausewitz applied himself to the question of how to influence the enemy's expenditure of strength—that is to say, how to raise for him the price of success. He concluded there were three special ways of directly increasing the enemy's expenditure of force. The first was invasion; the second was to direct enterprises preferably at those points which do the enemy the most harm; and third, and by far the most important to Clausewitz, was the wearing out of the enemy. The idea of wearing out in a struggle implies a gradual exhaustion of the physical powers and the will by the long continuance of action.

Dr. Henry A. Kissinger has pointed out that no conditions should be sought for which one is not willing to fight indefinitely, and that the side which is willing to outwait its opponent—which is less eager for a settlement—can tip the psychological balance whatever the outcome of the physical battle. In any concept of limited war, according to Dr. Kissinger, it is im-

perative to find, a mode of operation and to create a psychological framework in which our impetuosity does not transform time into an enemy ally. Henceforth, patience and subtlety must be as important components of our strategy as power.

### **Three-Part Strategy**

General William C. Westmoreland, US commander of military forces in Vietnam, says that our strategy in that conflict consists of three parts: sustained operations against Viet Cong main-force and North Vietnamese Army units in South Vietnam; support of the government of Vietnam's nationbuilding process, and the bombing campaign against military targets in North Vietnam.

According to General Westmoreland, "The enemy thinks in terms of protracted conflict." He gives a further indication of neo-Clausewitzian concepts of a wearing out of the enemy by adding, ". . . I am confident that we must gear ourselves for the long pull."

The first serious attempt to blueprint the characteristics of irregular operations was undertaken by Clausewitz. An inner front was added to the outer front. He points out that, although the influence on war of a single inhabitant is barely perceptible, the total influence of the inhabitants of a country in war is anything but imperceptible.

Clausewitz believed that a resistance so widely distributed is not suited to great blows requiring concentrated action in time and space. Its action, like the process of evaporation, depends on the extent of the surface exposed; the greater this is, the greater the contact. The conditions under which Clausewitz thought insurgency could become effective were that:

- The war is carried on in the interior of the country.

- It is not decided by a single catastrophe.

- The theater of war embraces a considerable extent of country.

- The national character supports the measures.

- The country is of a broken and inaccessible nature either from being mountainous, or by reason of woods and marshes, or from the peculiar mode of cultivation in use.

### Operational Limitations

In sketching the operational limitations of the insurgent, Clausewitz observed that "a poor population accustomed to hard work and privation usually shows itself more vigorous and better suited to war." He draws a picture that could almost be viewed whole cloth as that existing in southeast Asia today. He illustrates the advantages and limitations of what he calls the "people's war" conducted within the inner boundaries of a nation. He felt that:

*Masses of armed peasants cannot, and should not, be employed against the main body of the enemy's army, or even against any considerable forces; they must not attempt to crunch the core; they must only nibble at the surface and the edges.*

It was Clausewitz' belief that armed peasants must seize the enemy's lines of communication and prey upon the vital thread by which his existence is supported.

Armed insurgents make the march of every small body of troops in a mountainous, thinly wooded, or otherwise difficult country become very dangerous, for at any moment the march may become an engagement. They should, like a kind of nebulous vapory essence, nowhere condense into a solid

body; otherwise an adequate force can be sent to crush it. But it is necessary that this mist should according to Clausewitz:

*. . . gather at some points into denser masses and form threatening clouds from which now and again a formidable flash of lightning may*



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*burst forth, and serve to create a feeling of uneasiness and dread.*

The enemy has no means to prevent this action except the detachment of numerous troops to furnish escorts for convoys and to occupy military stations, defiles, and bridges. For example, the magnitude of such operations can be illustrated by the situation in South Vietnam. By July, 120 South Vietnamese infantry battalions are slated to fan out into the countryside in small units to protect some 3,000 hamlets from guerrillas in areas that US troops have cleared of major enemy forces. The easiest way to support insurgency activities is to send

small detachments from the army.

"Without such support of a few regular troops as an encouragement," said Clausewitz, "the inhabitants generally lack the impulse and the confidence to take up arms." This is the thinking behind the military operations in Vietnam; if the support of the regular army units from North Vietnam can be curtailed, the inner conflict will gradually abate, and eventual cessation of overt military operations in South Vietnam will occur.

### **Decisive Engagements**

For insurgency to succeed, situations must never develop into decisive engagements. Clausewitz believed that the insurgents should, therefore, defend the approaches to mountains, the dikes of a swamp, and the passages over a river, as long as possible. But when an engagement was broken, he felt that they should disperse, and continue their defense by unexpected attacks rather than concentrate and allow themselves to be shut up in some narrow, last refuge in a regular defensive position.

The psychological and organizational characteristics of armed civilian groups suggest to Clausewitz that, although they form a weapon of strategic defense, they generally or even always must be tactically on the offensive. As Mao Tse-tung was to write a century later, "The ability to run away is the very characteristic of the guerrilla."

The influence of Clausewitz on Communist military thought is profound. War is not a last resort to be invoked if all else fails; rather, it is one form of a continuing struggle. Karl Marx wrote that Communists everywhere support revolutionary movement against the existing social and polit-

ical order. According to him, the Communists openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of existing social conditions.

Soviet military doctrine rejects the notion that there is such a thing as purely military considerations. "War," wrote Nikolai Lenin, "is part of the whole. The whole is politics. . . . Appearances are not reality. Wars are most political when they seem most military."

Lenin, like Friedrich Engels and Marx, was fascinated by Clausewitz' war theories; he not only studied them with insight, but annotated his books extensively. That Engels, Marx, Mao, and Lenin, the most noted exponents of the Communist philosophy, acknowledged their debt to Clausewitz, who was a non-Communist thinker, is undoubtedly the highest compliment ever paid to his insight on the nature of war.

### **Dialectic Quality**

The dialectic quality of Clausewitz' argumentation attracted Lenin to him. The passage which most appealed to him concerned the relationship of war to politics. This was emphasized by Joseph Stalin in 1946 as a cardinal tenet of Marxist thought. It has also been subjected to typical verbal inversion by a leading Soviet military authority who said that, if war is a continuation of politics by other means, so also is peace a continuation of struggle by other means.

Communist statecraft turns in peacetime to what are, in effect, lesser points on the conflict spectrum—namely, subversion, sabotage, colonial rebellion, and satellite aggression. They have become masters in combining and operating various nonmilitary forms of war—political, economic, and

psychological. Mao Tse-tung has said that, without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail.

In mobilization for insurgency, Marxists, perhaps, derive an advantage from their philosophy. To the traditional motives for popular action of patriotism and self-interest, the Communists have joined an aggressive, supranational political theory incorporating a view of history that claims inevitable success for its policies.

There is, however, a major difference between the theories of Clausewitz and those of the Communist practitioners. Whereas Clausewitz never questioned that morality, as under-

stood by civilized society, was a factor in social life, Communists such as Lenin eschewed it and thereby reduced war to a purely animal struggle.

Karl von Clausewitz was a profound military intellectual who applied himself to the pure theory of war. He visualized a spectrum of conflict that moved all the way from simple, unarmed belligerence through the brutality of total war. Further study indicates that he offered another alternative to unrestrained violence—that of limited war. His work was an early blueprint for insurgency and counter-insurgency of the type being conducted today in Vietnam.

