

On War Without the Fog

Eugenia C. Kiesling

CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ'S *On War* is more often cited than read.¹ Less obvious is that people tend to read *On War* following those famous citations by people who have not read it themselves. Struggling through a difficult book and already apprised of the work's key points, newcomers seize upon the familiar aphorisms: absolute war, war as an extension of politics, the trinity, and role of fog and friction. Unless blessed with unusual resources of time and intellectual energy, they discover little beyond these well-advertised truths—and find them whether or not they are there. Following is one admonitorial demonstration that what is assumed to be in *On War* can eclipse the text itself.

The so-called “fog of war” is one of the most pervasive and natural metaphors in the English language.² War is inherently volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. For this condition, contemporary US military usage offers the acronym VUCA, to which anyone would prefer the terse elegance of fog. For 19th-century writers, fog of war has the added merit of evoking the opacity of the black powder battlefield. It is not surprising that the phrase is popular and widely used. Like most military concepts, “fog of war” is normally attributed to Clausewitz, who receives credit for the alliterative “fog and friction”—friction referring to physical impediments to military action, fog to the commander's lack of clear

information. The only problem with this neat formula is that Clausewitz neither uses fog of war nor gives fog significant weight in his argument.

Friction is, of course, a central element of Clausewitz's theory of war; the word appears at least 13 times in the text and serves an important analytical purpose. Fog is a different matter. Although Clausewitz uses fog four times, he never uses “fog of war.”³ Twice fog refers to a meteorological phenomenon and, incidentally, serves as a type of friction. Thus, “fog can prevent the enemy from being seen in time, a gun firing when it should, a report from reaching the commanding officer.”⁴

In the second instance, fog is still only water vapor: “It is rarer still for weather to be a decisive factor. As a rule only fog makes any difference.”⁵

The third occurrence may be mistaken for the conventional fog of war. Speaking of the unreliability of information in war, Clausewitz notes that “all action takes place, so to speak, in a kind of twilight, which, like fog or moonlight, often tends to make things seem grotesque and larger than they really are.”⁶ But sentence structure denies that Clausewitz liked the fog of war image. Given a perfectly good opportunity to write, “all action takes place in a kind of fog,” he opted, instead, for “twilight,” relegating “fog” and “moonlight” to poetic emphasis.⁷

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Lieutenant General Frederick M. Franks coordinating the movements of VII Corps from a Jump TAC M577 at 0700, 27 February 1991.

Rejecting the friction-fog dichotomy allows a better understanding of what Clausewitz actually means by friction. Instead of mental fog and physical friction, he guides us to see two different forms of friction. On one hand, friction encompasses the physical difficulties of moving and fighting armies. On the other, he links friction with intangible factors—fear, physical hardship and problems of information—that hamper the military commander.

Only one passage in *On War* employs “fog” to describe war’s ambiguities. Discussing “military genius” in chapter 3 of book I, Clausewitz writes that “war is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty.”⁸ The fog metaphor, however apt, is not important in Clausewitz’s analysis.

He does not suggest uncertainty is more important than the other factors—danger, exertion, suffering, chance—or than their antidotes—*coup d’oeil* and determination. Indeed, Clausewitz swiftly shifts subject; most of the chapter on military genius treats, at great length, the commander’s character.

The latter two passages certainly do not give fog the weight necessary to justify the fog and friction scheme commonly ascribed to him. If Clausewitz had wished to use the word “fog” to describe the vagueness, uncertainty, ambiguity and chaos of war, he could have done so in the chapter “Intelligence in War,” a chapter in which, suggestively, he eschews the fog metaphor.⁹ In short, *On War* does not justify the modern tendency to speak of fog and fric-

tion. Instead, Clausewitz identifies four central elements in his “Concluding Observations”: physical exertion, intelligence, friction and danger. These four, he concludes, “can be grouped into a single concept of general friction.”¹⁰

That Clausewitz never mentions the fog of war does not mean that he would deny the importance of the ideas subsumed today under the phrase. On the contrary, uncertainty is central to Clausewitz’s argument. In fact, separating fog from friction actually weakens his claims: friction becomes the purely physical hindrances to military action and fog the confusion that arises from absent, misleading or contradictory intelligence. This distinction is alien both to the text and to the spirit of Clausewitz’s argument.

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tors—fear, physical hardship and problems of information—that hamper the military commander.¹² The friction that impedes the army is clearly far less interesting to Clausewitz than that which impedes the commander's mind. Hence he says little about such practicalities as planning and staff work but much about the commander's moral requisites. Clausewitz even treats physical exertion, superficially an example of simple, physical friction, as primarily a psychological concern, writing that "the mind must be made even more familiar with them than the body."¹³

The purpose of training is to prepare soldiers and commanders to face mental challenges, "those aspects of active service that amaze and confuse him when he first comes across them."¹⁴ Ultimately, this section of *On War* is not about lubricating an army's movements but about shaping the commander's intellect. Armies require training, preparation and intelligence, but victory ultimately depends on the commander's strength of will to carry out his plans in spite of doubt, danger and uncertainty.¹⁵

By reducing the commander's many mental pressures to the fog of war, the fog and friction interpretation makes military command seem easier than it is. All friction is physical, and armies know fairly

well how to tackle, if not solve, physical problems. Fog, on the other hand, is simply a matter of poor intelligence. If one believes the contemporary conceit

that the information revolution will soon supply military forces with near-perfect information, the fog of war will soon vanish.¹⁶ It is surely no accident that reducing Clausewitz's "fear, danger and uncertainty" to the fog of war leaves only that one element of mental friction susceptible to technological solution.

Eliminating fog gives us a clearer and more useful understanding of Clausewitzian friction. It restores uncertainty and the intangible stresses of military command to their rightful centrality in *On War*. It allows us to replace the simplistic message that intelligence is important with the reminder that Clausewitz constantly emphasizes moral forces in warfare.

How fog came to insinuate itself into the standard military interpretation of the text is worth some reflection. So is the resistance among teachers of *On War* to the suggestion that Clausewitz wrote a chapter on friction rather than one called "fog and friction." Also troubling is that we insist on reading fog into Clausewitz's discussion of the friction of war. In what other key passages are we making similar mistakes? *MR*

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NOTES

1. Michael Howard and Michael Handel are merely the most famous people to have made this observation. Thanks to Conrad Crane, Alexander S. Cochran, Martin Cook, Dennis Heath, John Nagl and Jon T. Sumida for their comments on the first draft of this essay.

2. A book picked at random to illustrate this point contains the sentence, "... fog of war" includes the direct stresses arising from the ordeal of battle, but also censorship, secrecy, deception, propaganda, camouflage, and rumour." Roger Beaumont, *War, Chaos, and History* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1994), 2. Note that Beaumont treats fog of war as if it has an accepted definition.

3. A claim that will undoubtedly inspire readers to find additional examples.

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 120.

5. *Ibid.*, 143.

6. *Ibid.*, 140.

7. *Ibid.*, 122. Clausewitz's choice of metaphor involving light rather than fog in chapter 8, book I, suggests that he rejected fog as a metaphor for battlefield uncertainty. "In war," he points out, "the experienced soldier reacts rather in the same way as the human eye does in the dark: the pupil expands to admit what little

light there is, discerning objects by degrees, and finally seeing them distinctly. By contrast, the novice is plunged into the deepest night." The image of a pupil responding to light works better than that of fog for his purposes because there is no mechanism by which some people can see better in fog than other people do.

8. *Ibid.*, 101.

9. By noting in "A Guide to Reading *On War*" that "Chapter Six introduces the element that others have called 'the fog of war,'" Bernard Brodie assumes the equation rejected here, *Ibid.*, 649.

10. *Ibid.*, 122.

11. *Ibid.*, 119-21.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 122.

14. *Ibid.*

15. The emphasis on the moral over the physical appears throughout the work, but see especially, *Ibid.*, 100-110.

16. For such an argument, see Admiral William A. Owens, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, May 2000).

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