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Confusion? Or Willful Misreading?

The current *Parameters* has an article that asks

[Can Reading Clausewitz Save Us from Future Mistakes?](#)

The author has a definite answer-- No. As he sees it, *On War* is one of those books that

are so broad in scope, so inclusive, even of contradictions internal to themselves, that they can be used to justify almost anything.

Fleming is not a military officer (although he teaches at the Naval Academy) but rather is an English professor. He approaches *On War* as a text and makes a great show of pointing out the internal contradictions in Clausewitz's work and in several commentators who are self-conscious Clausewitzians.

While he scores several good points, the overall effect is superficial and cavalier. This itself is a serious contradiction in a work which has very big aims. Fleming argues that *On War* which is currently "the foundation document in war theory at the nation's war colleges and command and staff schools" should only be taught as "poetry."

One "contradiction" is that Clausewitz is a theorist who denies the utility of theory. Further, he is a thinker who discusses war as a perfect absolute and yet highlights the ways in which friction and chance keep real war from mimicking perfect war.

The first contradiction is pure canard. Clausewitz recognized the limits of theory: it can't explain everything or make war predictable. To see this as a fatal contradiction is rather like calling meteorology as a pseudoscience because the weatherman can't make every Memorial Day sunny and 75 degrees.

There are two key things to keep in mind when approaching Clausewitz and the role of theory and friction in his work. First, he was a practitioner, a theoretician, and an educator. Second, officers have to prepare for war in long periods of peace. What they are preparing for is nothing like the activities they engage in while preparing. (Clausewitz wrote before modern training methods like war games and field exercises were developed). Few professions face as wide a gap between the experience of preparation and the activity itself.

His emphasis on friction, then, is in part, a reminder to the future commander that the complex and elegant- no matter how intellectually satisfying- can be dangerous. His emphasis on will brings to the forefront a quality that is absent in academic discussions but vital in war.

(This excellent article argues that *On War* has a pedagogical intent as its primary purpose: [The Relationship of History and Theory in On War](#))

Fleming is also cavalier in his handling of neo-Clausewitzian commentators. This is how he dismisses Col. Harry Summers's *On Strategy*:

There is no point in appealing to Clausewitz's famous assertion as if, were we to put it over the mirrors of all the officers in the US armed forces, it could prevent future failures. What for one man is a policy, even a good one, is for another a complete and utter lack of one. Summers writes as if the Vietnam War simply lacked a policy, a direction. Certainly it did not seem so to the people running it from Washington, who (as Summers admits) had many justifications (he counts 22) for US intervention. Those who engineered the war were not bereft of a policy.

Twenty-two justifications (many contradictory) do not equate to a clear policy. Summers's point is that the shifting moves in Washington made it impossible for the military to come up with a strategy and carry it out: the objectives kept changing. Further, some of the objectives were not the sort of thing that could be accomplished by military means.

Summers's broader point is that the US did not take policy seriously, entered the war without thinking through ends and means, and trusted to technology and GNP to solve the problem in Vietnam. As a good Clausewitzian he argues that this was a grave mistake and crippled the war effort. In his refutation Fleming basically quotes Tin Pan Alley- you say tomatoyto, I say tomathto. It's glib, it's clever, but is is hardly a serious critique.

That, in the end, is the problem with the whole essay. It is one thing to mock the Clausewitzians or to find contradictory passages in *On War*. But if we reduce it only to "poetry", what is to replace it as a foundation document for the war and staff colleges? There are not a lot of contenders for the role and all of them have weaknesses even greater than Clausewitz. On this question Fleming is silent.

See also

[Waiting for our Clausewitz](#)

[Clausewitz \(II\)](#)