

Is Clausewitz's Conception of the Relationship Between "War" and "Politics" Useful For Understanding Warfare Post-1990?

As advancing technology and globalization revolutionizes warfare and our understanding of it, it is tempting to discard Carl von Clausewitz's nineteenth century theory of war as obsolete. After all, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and peripheral, intrastate conflict are a far cry from the musket artillery and "great power" struggles of the Napoleonic Wars that provided the context for Clausewitz's authoritative, yet unfinished, magnum opus, *On War*. Indeed, some dismiss Clausewitzian theory as anachronistic and thus "deserves to be thrown overboard" (Creveld, 1991: 58). Others contend it never had "much application at all to the reality" of warfare to begin with (Fleming, 2004: 71). Certainly, problematic translations, of an incomplete work, written in snapshots of cumbersome, Old World prose exposes *On War* to competing interpretations, as well as misuse by all philosophies across the political spectrum. Yet, as this paper will show, if one accepts Clausewitz's trinity as abstract and descriptive, it is clear that the relationship he conceived between "war" and "politics" still has much to say about modern warfare today.

To appreciate the contemporary relevance of Clausewitz, we must first clarify the ambiguous use of the German term "*politik*" in translation. Subsequently, through examination of Clausewitz's theoretical trinity and the Global War on Terror (GWOt) as case study, this essay will demonstrate that while the context of war has changed over time, war itself is still political. In so doing, the intention is to show that critical theory which negates Clausewitz's conception is largely founded upon faulty premises that distort the purpose and message of his trinitarian framework.

Clausewitz's maxim that war is "the continuation of policy by other means" (Clausewitz, 1976 [1832]: 28) is well known, but its meaning is often misconstrued. Some theorists interpret *politik* to mean policy and politics intimately defined by government, the purveyor of reason (Creveld, 1991: 125). Yet, Clausewitz's understanding of policymaking expands beyond that of the will of the state (policy) and the external state of affairs (politics). *Politik*, he broadly states, is "art". It is "using judgment to detect the most important and decisive elements in the vast array of facts and situations" (Clausewitz, Op Cit.: 229). For him, politics is "an historically causative force" (Echevarria, 1995-1996: 77) that dictates all human social behaviour, including

war. But with the rise of low-intensity “new wars” characterized by intrastate conflict fought by government and non-government actors alike, Clausewitz’s critics contend that modern warfare — typified by the GWOt — is increasingly apolitical and driven more by other interests such as culture, ideology, religion, economics, irredentism and revenge (Keegan, 1993: 27; Meilinger, 2007: 135; Crevelde, 1991: 50; Kaldor, 2013: 8).

Certainly, these interests are valid motives for war. But as causative social forces, they are also subordinate factors of policy, and actions made upon these factors by rational powers constitute political behaviour. The antagonistic roots of the GWOt are often considered to be ideological or religious in nature. Given a prime objective of Osama bin Laden’s was the creation of an Islamic caliphate (bin Laden, 2003), it could be seen that Al Qaeda, an insurgent terrorist group, was driven by the same political motives for power and influence that compel Western nation-states. Indeed, Clausewitz’s *politik* is inclusive of non-state actors. He included the historical example of the Tartars in *On War*, as a semi-barbarous group who engaged in politically motivated war (Clausewitz, Op Cit.: 230). This punctures claims that Clausewitzian theory does not apply to future war involving non-state actors (Keegan, 1993: 24).

Still, Phillip Meilinger contests the validity of Clausewitz’s abstraction here by disputing that terrorists are not rational and wield no power (Meilinger, 2007: 134). Indeed, US counterinsurgency policy defined Al Qaeda’s violence as irrational and illegitimate when it billed the GWOt as a clash between good and evil (Bush, 2002: 5). For Clausewitz though, policymaking is open to “all nature of states and societies as they are determined by their times and prevailing conditions” (Clausewitz, Op cit.: 230). If we heed Clausewitz here, we would eschew the simplistic view of Al Qaeda as psychotic. Rationale is subjective; people fight for a reason. In their farewell videos, suicide bombers describe themselves as soldiers not murderers (Kaldor, 2013: 6). As abhorrent as it may seem, 9/11 and suicide bombing are potent manifestations of Al Qaeda strategic, political behavior. They do not occur as autonomous or spontaneous, hermetic actions. They are irregular acts of asymmetric warfare, continuations of Al Qaeda policy in pursuit of the rational political aim of liberating Muslim lands from Western “occupation”. This, because war is “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” (Clausewitz, Op Cit.: 13).

Thus, politics takes primacy in Clausewitz’s paradoxical framework of war. It represents the constraint of reason against enmity in his dialectical trinity, alongside primordial violence as the blind natural passion of