

über

# Krieg und Kriegführung

von

General Carl von Clausewitz.

## Interpreting the Legacy of Clausewitz

By CHRISTOPHER BASSFORD

**W**hen Clausewitz wrote his famous opus, *On War*, little did he realize that a new industry had been born. Interpreting, reinterpreting, and artfully refining—not to mention plagiarizing—his ideas on war has been a minor but profitable cottage industry ever since.

Clausewitz knew the limits on intellectualizing about war; his concept of friction applies not only to the practical conduct of war, but also to the difficulty of thinking clearly about it. Because war involves many variables,

including chance, individual and organizational mindsets are quickly overwhelmed and events tend to escape control. Consequently, he sought to identify key variables and explore their complex relationships, for “in war more than in any other subject . . . the part and the whole must always be thought of together.” It is easy as well as dangerous to be mesmerized by discrete, equivocal Clausewitzian terms, such as *real war*, *culminating point*, *critical analysis*, or *center of gravity*, and lose track of their connectivity. Like disputations among theologians over matters of faith, some analysts become lost in theoretical hair-splitting and an attempt to overdefine principles that, by their very nature, are mutable and dependent on the context.

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*But it is inevitable that all the terminology and technical expressions of a given [theoretical] system will lose what meaning they have, if any, once they are torn from their context and used as general axioms or nuggets of truth that are supposed to be more potent than a simple statement.*

—Carl von Clausewitz

Clausewitz was interested in fundamental truths on war. He sought to develop concepts of universal applicability to the past and an unpredictable future, while most analysts are concerned with the political-military issues of the day, tending to narrow and redefine concepts in specialized ways. A classic case is the adaptation of the concept of *trinity* by Harry Summers in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Clausewitz argued that the course of war is driven by complex and inherently unpredictable interactions that occur as conflicting human intentions, driven by rational calculation (policy) and violent, irrational emotion, hit the proverbial fan of reality. Addressing the crisis in the 1970s, Summers recast that dynamic trinity as a fixed, triangular relationship among “people, army, and government.” Recognizing

that these elements had become fatally disconnected during the Vietnam conflict was helpful in provoking reform in the military. But the simplified model of people, army, and government offers little guidance for action in the world today.

Similar accounts can be found of other isolated concepts in *On War*, helping to explain how this Prussian military philosopher, long since dead, managed to evolve from being the apostle of total war during the 1920s to the preeminent strategist of limited war by the 1970s.

There is nothing wrong with such an intellectual evolution, for one must always adapt to the task at hand. Nonetheless, it is always necessary to be mindful of the context and intentions of a theoretician. The latest chapter in the what-Clausewitz-really-meant debate can be revealing, as illustrated by the two accompanying articles in this issue of *Joint Force Quarterly*. But it can also inflict elaborate unspoken assumptions and produce rigid tools exquisitely overadapted for a global security environment that has vanished. **JFQ**