

The Social Science of Carl von Clausewitz

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Carl von Clausewitz's great, unfinished book *On War* is well-known as being prone to misinterpretation and distortion. At the risk of adding to the veritable cottage industry of distortion, this article attempts to add conceptual clarity by demonstrating that Clausewitz was formulating a social science approach before that terminology and discipline had emerged.¹ Linking Clausewitzian analysis to contemporary social science is appropriate because both aim for greater precision in fields that appear to defy a "scientific" approach. Before proceeding with that task, however, it is appropriate to review some of the common misunderstandings concerning Clausewitz, explaining some of the reasons for them. The discussion then will show that by casting Clausewitz's framework as a social science, we can resolve many apparent contradictions in his ideas.

To begin with, Clausewitz himself recognized the danger that his work would be misunderstood and observed in a note in 1827 that if he did not live to complete his revision of *On War*, the book was likely to be the subject of "endless misinterpretation" and "the target of much half-baked criticism."² Part of the reason for misunderstanding, of course, is due to the fact that the book is long and often only partially read and, in fact, Clausewitz did not live to complete his final revision. Twentieth-century commentators on the book are further handicapped by the trauma induced by that century's two world wars. Reversing the stereotyped image of German-European relations and recognizing that Clausewitz was writing from the perspective of a weak country that had been habitually victimized by its stronger neighbors is the best starting point for understanding *On War*. In fact, Clausewitz's argument to the Prussian government on behalf of the need to create a militia grew from his concern over Prussia's vulnerability and her need to be able to "withstand the two giants who will always threaten her from east and west."³

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Of the many distortions of *On War*, three are sufficiently important for their linkage to key themes in the book to require further elaboration. One of the earliest and most significant of these distortions occurred in translations and condensations of the book published under military auspices from the 1850s through World War II. The distortion involves one key theme in *On War*: that war can never be divorced from politics and that the military must remain subordinate to political authorities. One passage in particular emphasizes Clausewitz's point. In Chapter 6 of Book 8, Clausewitz asserted that one way to ensure that war is fully consonant with political objectives is to make the general ("commander and chief") a member of the cabinet. Although Clausewitz's intent was to suggest an arrangement to ensure the cabinet participated in military decisions, subsequent versions altered the wording to suggest the arrangement was to allow soldiers to participate in political decisions.⁴ That such a distortion should find a receptive audience among military professionals is understandable: although soldiers often easily agree on the role for political leaders at the start and conclusion of a war, there is much less consensus concerning a role for political authorities during the conduct of operations. Indeed, much military criticism concerning the US war in Vietnam was that excessive interference by civilian authorities made the war "too political." Not to belabor an obvious point, but for Clausewitz, there could be no such thing as a war that was "too political."

A second commonplace error made concerning *On War* is the suggestion that Clausewitz was, at a minimum, a proponent of preventive war on behalf of counter-revolution, and, at the maximum, a proponent of total war. Such a characterization often leads scholars on the left of the political spectrum to automatically dismiss Clausewitz's analysis. In addition, Clausewitz has sometimes been blamed for the conduct of World War I and its "cult of the offensive" that led to the stalemate on the Western front. One example that illustrates the aggressiveness often attributed to Clausewitz is Basil Liddell-Hart's description of him as the "Mahdi of mutual slaughter."⁵ There are two reasons for the rather easy acceptance of Liddell-Hart's characterization of Clausewitz, one historical and the other conceptual. From the historical standpoint, because the 20th-century experience during both world wars was characterized by German offensives, the conclusion that Clausewitz provided the inspiration and

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represented an inherently aggressive Prussian view of war was natural to draw. Such a conclusion, of course, amounts to reading history backwards to find in Clausewitz a spokesman on behalf of offensive war.

From a conceptual standpoint, it is almost natural to mistake Clausewitz’s abstraction of “absolute war,” which he intended as a category or meridian from which to measure war, as his recommendation to use it.⁶ Yet the view of *On War* as a statement on behalf of aggression linked to total war is inaccurate and obvious to anyone with even a superficial reading of the book. *On War* devotes one book (Book 6), covering 162 pages, to defense and one book (Book 7), comprising only 50 pages, to the attack. It is true that Clausewitz justified the proportions devoted to each topic by the fact that because the two processes are linked, his discussion of defense necessarily includes some discussion of the attack. This justification notwithstanding, Clausewitz’s book presented a bias toward defensive war. Clausewitz’s defensive preference is made even more clear in other writings where he discussed the role of light troops, and he observed that “the war that a people wages on its home ground for liberty and independence” is “the most beautiful of all.”⁷ Moreover, a view of Clausewitz as the champion of total war cannot be supported with evidence drawn from his writings. To give but one example, as an eyewitness to Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow, Clausewitz observed that he thought he would “never again be free from the impressions of this terrible spectacle,” as the remnants of the Grande Armee attempted to cross the Berezina River.⁸

To be sure, part of the misunderstanding associated with the Clausewitzian concept of absolute war was inflicted by Clausewitz himself. Although most references to “absolute war” (sometimes expressed as “perfection” in war) relate to it as an abstraction, or a theoretical concept that is not fulfilled in practice, Clausewitz also suggests that “absolute war” is actually one specific type of war that might be equated with unlimited or total war. For example, in Book 8, Clausewitz suggests that since the time of Napoleon Bonaparte, war “took on an entirely different character, or rather closely approached its true character, its absolute perfection,” which Clausewitz had seen with his own eyes. Earlier in his book on defense he also suggests that

one type of war, a struggle for life and death that is governed therefore by the need for “a decision,” is “true war—or absolute war, if we may call it that.”⁹ Clausewitz’s slippage in the use of the term absolute war is one factor that sometimes conveys to contemporary readers the rather equivocal, inconsistent nature of *On War*. Raymond Aron notes that Clausewitz’s analysis was typical of 18th-century thinking that “oscillates between two poles, the ideal type, the essence of the simplified model, on the one hand, and the concrete reality on the other.”¹⁰

Not only was Clausewitz not the Prussian aggressor or proponent of total war as he is sometimes caricatured, but he was a genuine voice of moderation among Prussian military leaders. An example of his moderation can be found in his discussion of the balance of power in Book 6, Chapter 6. His analysis suggests that common effort and common interest ultimately maintained the balance of power rather than sheer military might—a view that in contemporary social science places his ideas closer to liberal international relations theory than to realism.¹¹ After Napoleon’s final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo, many of Clausewitz’s contemporaries were urging revenge against France while Clausewitz resisted this temptation. Ultimately, Clausewitz’s moderation meant that he had a better grasp of the requisite conditions for a lasting peace agreement. He expressed his views in a candid letter to his wife:

My dearest wish now is that this aftermath should soon be finished. I dislike this position of having my foot upon someone’s neck, and the endless conflicts of interests and parties are something I do not understand. Historically, the English will play a better role in this catastrophe, because they do not seem to have come here with a passion for revenge and for settling old scores, but rather like a master who wishes to discipline with proud coldness and immaculate purity; in brief, with greater distinction than ourselves.¹²

In fact, Clausewitz’s moderation proved detrimental toward the end of his career because of his commitment to one of his cherished reforms—the creation of a popular militia. Clausewitz failed to appreciate the domestic political implications of a militia for Prussia, although the authorities did not. Thus, Frederick William III denied Clausewitz an appointment to a diplomatic post at the Court of St. James because he assumed that such a vocal champion of the militia would hardly be expected to be politically reliable.

A third distortion, and one related to the above point concerning Clausewitz’s defensive orientation, involves a tendency, particularly in some military interpretations, to downplay his idea that defense is the “stronger form” of war. On this point we must pause for a moment to wonder at the clarity of Clausewitz’s intellect and theorizing that reached a conclusion which must have seemed so counterintuitive to his contemporaries who witnessed

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the successful whirlwind of Napoleon’s offensive campaigns. Clausewitz’s achievement in this insight is comparable to that of Copernicus, who, despite everyman’s commonsense observation that the earth stood still while the sun moved across the sky, founded a radically different view. The validity of Clausewitz’s view concerning defense is linked to a distinction he makes between tactics and strategy and the fact that a characteristic could be true of tactics but not true of strategy. Although we will return to Clausewitz’s definition of tactics and strategy later, suffice it to say at this point that Clausewitz did see strength to the attack in tactics because it allowed one to make the first move. At the level of strategy, however, defense has the advantage because, “To preserve is easier than to acquire.”¹³

This oscillation, as noted above, between the simplified model and concrete reality is one familiar to contemporary social scientists, and it brings us to the final problem with interpretation of Clausewitz. Did Clausewitz believe that the study of war could constitute a “science”? Clausewitz himself raised the question of whether the study of war was an art or a science, and he noted that strictly speaking war was neither, “rather it is part of man’s social existence.”¹⁴ Those who suggest that Clausewitz is contradictory or inconsistent in his point of view do so because of their confusion concerning the function of theory.¹⁵ To begin to clear up the confusion about the meaning and function of “theory,” one needs to recognize the contrast between two distinct but related terms: laws and theories. Laws can be defined as “facts of observation” that establish relations between variables that have been found repeatedly. In contrast, theories are “speculative processes introduced to explain” laws. What is more, “A theory, though related to the world about which explanations are wanted, always remains distinct from that world.”¹⁶ Although these definitions derive from contemporary social science usage, they are quite compatible with Clausewitz’s analysis.

Clausewitz used both “laws” and “theories” in his book, and consequently one can take away the erroneous impression that he was uncertain about whether one could develop a science of war. For Clausewitz, laws tended to be more appropriate at the level of tactics (defined as “the use of

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armed forces in the engagement”) while theory was more applicable to strategy (defined as “the use of engagements for the [political] object of the war”).¹⁷ Hence, tactics are more amenable to the “quasi-science,” where rules and principles facilitate the development of positive doctrine.¹⁸ One might think here of certain Jominian principles like “mass at decisive points,” which at a tactical level provides a law-like proposition. In contrast, strategy, because it deals less with material factors and more with the intentions and objectives of actors, is less reducible to positive doctrines—but remains nevertheless susceptible to theoretical understanding.

To be sure, as with his use of the term “absolute war,” Clausewitz sometimes slipped in his usage of laws and theories. For example, he wrote, “Thus it is easier to use theory to organize, plan, and conduct an engagement than it is to use it in determining the engagement’s purpose.” From the analysis that follows the statement, “laws” might be the better choice of words to apply to the organization and planning of an engagement, while theory provides a framework for determining the engagement’s purpose.¹⁹ Despite the slippage in using the terminology, however, this does not contradict the notion concerning how scientific the study of war can be. In essence, Clausewitz was formulating what we would now call a social science of war. That Clausewitz would recognize the distinction between laws and theories as used in contemporary social science can be illustrated by a generalization he makes concerning war objectives. He notes that in the abstract one should always endeavor to disarm the enemy, but that doing so will not always be the aim in practice, and he concludes, “On no account should theory raise it to the level of a law.”²⁰ The closest thing to an ironclad law found in *On War* is the recognition that achieving military victory almost always requires superior numbers. Thus, Clausewitz notes that Napoleon, “the greatest general of modern times, always managed to assemble a numerically superior, or at least not markedly inferior, army for all the major battles in which he was victorious.”²¹

For Clausewitz (and social science), theory is *not* to provide “a manual for action,” and it is not intended to improve military effectiveness di-

rectly. The target for much of Clausewitz's more acerbic critical observations are those "theorists" who view theory in this way—as if Einstein's theory of relativity should be discarded if it cannot tell people how to return the space shuttle to earth. Yet Clausewitz did not wish *On War* to be merely a philosophic exercise divorced from the real world. Indeed, he was critical of the secluded, contemplative life led by the Prussian General von Phull, who had much understanding "but without knowledge of actual things."²² Therefore, theory for Clausewitz necessarily serves a pedagogic function, that is, to refine judgment in such a way that officers can determine if a particular past experience in war is valid in the current circumstance. Indeed, the great difference between Clausewitz and his contemporary Antoine-Henri Jomini revolves around their different views concerning the role of theory. And this point concerning the educational function of theory is one that Clausewitz reiterates throughout *On War*, as well as in his other writings. For example, in the introduction to Book 8, Clausewitz says:

At the same time we can see how many factors are involved and have to be weighed against each other; the vast, the almost infinite distance there can be between cause and its effect, and the countless ways in which these elements can be combined. The function of theory is to put all this in systematic order, clearly and comprehensively, and to trace each action to an adequate, compelling cause.

He concludes then by saying:

Theory cannot equip the mind with formulas for solving problems, nor can it mark the narrow path on which the sole solution is supposed to lie by planting a hedge of principles on either side. But it can give the mind insight into the great mass of phenomena and of their relationships, then leave it free to rise into the higher realms of action.²³

Once the function of theory is clarified by distinguishing it from laws, other seeming contradictions and problems concerning the scientific study of war fall away. Clausewitz does want to put forward some universals, but he cannot put forward fixed values for those universals because each case of war is anchored to a broader and different social and political context. That other theorists of war attempted to define fixed values and derived geometric rules grew from their emphasis on physical matters and unilateral actions. Clausewitz notes of such theorists:

They aim at fixed values; but in war everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities. They direct the inquiry exclusively toward physical quantities, whereas all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects. They consider only unilateral action, whereas war consists of a continuous interaction of opposites.²⁴

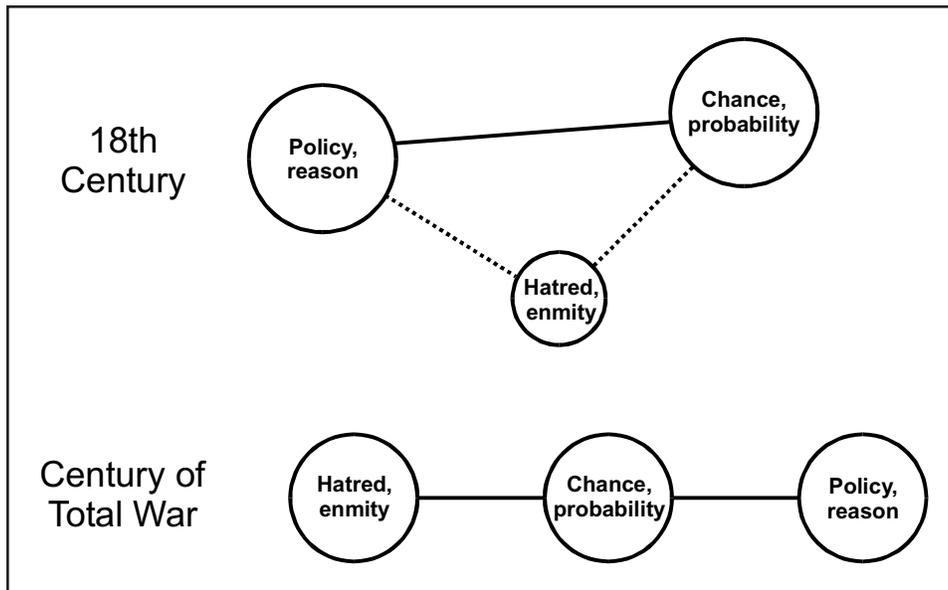


Figure 1. Clausewitz's trinity relative to the 18th and 20th centuries.

A case that illustrates well Clausewitz's point involves the famous discussion of the trinity. Clausewitz does not state what the exact proportion among the three elements (primordial violence/enmity; chance/probability; and policy/reason) should be, because war is anchored always in a broader setting. Clausewitz explicitly rejects fixed values here and says theory should not "fix an arbitrary relationship between them."²⁵ Raymond Aron accurately captures Clausewitz's point about the trinity and notes that although the three elements are present in each war, they "determine by their respective force and relations that war's particular character."²⁶

We might graphically depict the three parts of the trinity for two categories of war that Clausewitz discusses in *On War*: the limited wars of Frederick the Great in the 18th century and the total wars of Napoleon (which resemble the total wars of the 20th century). Our graphic comparison might look something like Figure 1, above.

If, as Clausewitz claims, theory is to serve a pedagogic function and not provide a blueprint for action, is there any practical reason for today's officer corps to read him? I would answer in the affirmative, and point to three aspects of Clausewitz that stand out for the practical value of reading Clausewitz. First, Clausewitz stood at the historic watershed that marked both the age of democracy and the age of nationalism whose impact was one factor prompting Clausewitz to write. Nationalism and democracy remain part of the broader social context for war today. To Clausewitz's credit, and

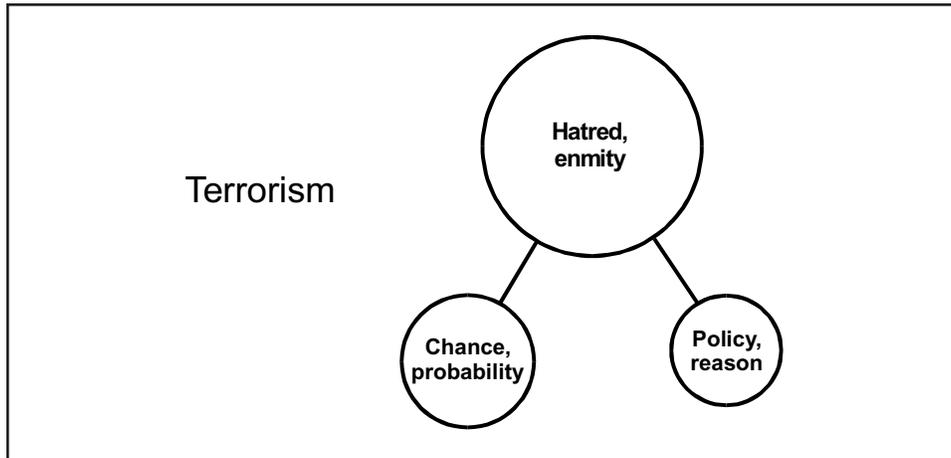


Figure 2. Clausewitz's trinity relative to terrorism.

unlike many of his contemporaries who viewed the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon as an aberration, Clausewitz perceptively saw them as foreshadowing wars to come. One could even argue that the use of terrorism may be emerging as a substitute for war, reflecting the logical extension of the processes of democratization and nationalism unleashed by the French Revolution, whose unfortunate and ironic consequence was the emergence of the first of a series of totalitarian ideologies.²⁷ If so, there is a logic to the fact that terrorist targets for violence have broadened beyond the military to focus on noncombatants. Perhaps, then, the graphic presentation of the trinity that illustrates terrorism as a substitute for war should look something like Figure 2.

In a letter to philosopher J. G. Fichte in 1809 concerning the change to warfare wrought by the French Revolution, Clausewitz observed:

I have seen the traditional military forms and opinions among which I grew up come apart like rotten timber and collapse in the swift stream of events. . . . [T]he tendency, particularly in the eighteenth century, [was to] turn the whole into an artificial machine in which psychology is subordinated to mechanical forces that operate only on the surface, which seek to defeat the enemy, with mere forms.²⁸

Clausewitz's statement in 1809 might well be echoed by a generation of military leaders schooled in techniques of conventional war as they try to come to grips with the reality of insurgency and transnational terrorism.

The second practical value of reading Clausewitz is that by pioneering a social science of war, he applies a comparative method that overcomes the limitations of mere historical study.²⁹ Clausewitz's method is comparative in a dual sense: he moves back and forth from theory to practice, and from the general to the particular. We have already noted the way that Clausewitz uses

the concept of “absolute war” as a way to compare theory and practice. In Book 8, he explicitly says that his purpose is to examine the pattern and situations that occur in warfare, thereby gauging the value of each feature, “both according to its inherent characteristics and in light of military experience.”³⁰ Clausewitz also sought to assert general principles, but recognized the limitations on those principles, observing that they “will not have the same results in every war, but that those will change in accordance to means and ends.”³¹ For Clausewitz, one cannot become trapped in the historian’s view that each event (war) is unique with its own idiosyncratic features, because to do so would preclude the possibility of formulating action in the light of experience. Thus, generalizations must be derived for the man of action who “must simplify understanding to its dominant features.”³²

How successful was the comparative approach adopted by Clausewitz for his understanding of the phenomenon of war? His methodology was sufficiently successful to enable him to be more prescient than many of his contemporaries concerning the impact that the social forces unleashed by the French Revolution would have on war. His method also allowed him to transcend his own experience, which is best illustrated by the extent to which his ideas ran so contrary to actions he took as a practitioner. Clausewitz the theorist was committed to the notion that military operations must necessarily be subordinate to political control. Yet the actions of Clausewitz the soldier were quite different. First, Clausewitz left Prussian service without permission to fight with Russia against France at the time Prussia was allied to France. Then, in Clausewitz’s major contribution to the Russian campaign against Napoleon, he persuaded General Yorck, who commanded the Prussian auxiliary corps serving with Napoleon, to detach his force from the Grande Armée without permission (and some might say in defiance) from the Prussian King. Similarly, Clausewitz’s comparative methodology provides a tool that might enable today’s military analyst or practitioner to transcend his own time and operational experience.

The final important lesson that Clausewitz provides again relates to his comparative methodology that tries to distill more from a case study than a sterile, rote list of “lessons learned” and lies with the profound anti-dogmatism that permeates *On War*.³³ To a profession whose greatest occupational hazard is for doctrine to atrophy into dogmatism, this may well be the ultimate gift that Clausewitz’s work bestows. In short, *On War* should be read and taught to military professionals as social science that offers valuable insights for the profession of arms.

NOTES

1. The inspiration behind the analysis presented here can be found in Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 206.

2. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 70.
3. Carl Von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), p. 328.
4. This point is made in a footnote by Michael Howard and Peter Paret in their translation of *On War*, p. 608. On this point, see also Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), p. 334; and Bernard Brodie, "On Clausewitz: A Passion for War," *World Politics*, 25 (January 1973), 308.
5. Quoted in Aron, p. 233. Ironically, other scholars dismiss Clausewitz because his ideas lack current relevance to the extent they emphasize war as a rational instrument of policy and thus do not apply to intrastate wars. See Kalevi Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 2, 14.
6. Clausewitz's inspiration to use "absolute war" as an abstraction rather than an empirical example may have been Immanuel Kant, although there is controversy concerning this point. See Aron, pp. 228-29. There is some similarity between the way Clausewitz conceives of "absolute war" and the way Kant conceived of the social contract as "a regulative principle of reason." See Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 28.
7. Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 283.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 181. See also the editor's footnote, p. 370.
9. Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 488-89, 593.
10. Aron, p. 202. Aron also gives a simple explanation for some of the contradictions found in *On War*—that some of the book was written when Clausewitz was a young man, while other portions reflect the views of Clausewitz when he was 50. Aron, p. 115.
11. Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 374-75. Raymond Aron went so far as to characterize Clausewitz as "a theoretician of European equilibrium" (Aron, p. 103).
12. Parkinson, p. 287.
13. Quoted in H. Rothfels, "Clausewitz," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Edward Mead Earl (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1943), p. 110.
14. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 149.
15. For a representative example, see Bruce Fleming "Can Reading Clausewitz Save Us from Future Mistakes?" *Parameters*, 34 (Spring 2004), 62-76. Fleming notes that *On War* is contradictory because it sometimes characterizes war as a "quasi-scientific endeavor" and other times as "nothing but a crapshoot" (p. 69).
16. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 6.
17. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 128. Although these are the definitions of "tactics" and "strategy" used most often by Clausewitz, in other passages he suggests that the size of an operation determines whether the action is "strategic" or "tactical" (*On War*, p. 214).
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 151-52.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-41. Raymond Aron offers a different interpretation of Clausewitz and suggests that he used the word "theory" merely to indicate "rational study" (Aron, p. 200).
20. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 91.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
22. Carl von Clausewitz, *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), p. 5.
23. Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 577-78. He makes a similar point in his analysis of the 1814 campaign in France. See *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 208.
24. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 136. Clausewitz's criticism concerning geometric rules for war is equally applicable to much quantitative social science.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 89. For another example showing how Clausewitz asserts some universals while not specifying particular values, see his discussion of combined arms where he asserts they provide "maximum strength" but then goes on to say that one cannot specify the optimal proportions among them (p. 286).
26. Aron, p. 85.
27. In fact, some scholars assert a direct line of continuity between the French government announcing its policy of terror in September 1793, where "the virtuous minority" declared war on its own society, and today's campaign of suicide bombers. See Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand, "Terror, Islam and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (April 2002), 5.
28. Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 280, 282.
29. Given Clausewitz's rather social-science orientation, professional military educational institutions might do well to rely more on that discipline for faculty rather than military history. See, Janeen Klinger, "Academics and Professional Military Education," *Academic Exchange*, 8 (Summer 2004), 264-68.
30. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 577.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
33. Aron, p. 151.