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101 Uses for the Paradoxical Trinity

“War (is) a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability ...; and ... as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.”

Carl von Clausewitz

Throughout history, fathers and mothers from all races and religious beliefs, have tried to understand *why* their son or daughter was killed in war. Indeed, over the centuries, military professionals, scholars, philosophers, and religious leaders have contemplated and struggled with trying to understand the nature of war in a desperate attempt to learn how to prevent it. More realistic scholars would be happy to learn how to reduce its frequency. Some writers have written about principles of war that provide valuable and time-tested guidance for the *conduct* of war.¹ One writer, however, set himself apart by not just analyzing principles for the conduct of war, but more profoundly, by providing a model for conceptualizing the *nature* of war. That writer, of course, was Carl von Clausewitz, and he labeled his model for describing the enduring nature of war the “paradoxical trinity.”

The *thesis* of this paper is that Clausewitz’s paradoxical trinity serves not just as a useful model for conceptualizing and thus understanding the enduring nature of war, but also for understanding the enduring nature of *any* individual or collective human

endeavor. In support of the thesis, this paper will initially describe the trinity from Clausewitz's perspective and then highlight some criticisms of it. The heart of the argument consists of two points. First, the paper will incorporate the trinity in the decision-making process of individuals and societies. This is an attempt to visualize the trinity in the context of a dynamic human process, instead of as an isolated abstract triangle. Second, the paper will suggest a model for looking at the dynamic relationship between people and leaders and how they share decision-making power, all within the general framework of the trinity. The paper concludes with an observation that by applying the trinity model to any human endeavor students can better understand the enduring nature of human endeavors and where war fits in to the human puzzle. In other words, war becomes less of a mystery.

Clausewitz's Trinity and the Enduring Nature of War

In the first paragraph of Clausewitz's 563-page treatise, "On War," he declares that "in war more than in any other subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole."² He waits until the last section of the first chapter however, to introduce a metaphysical model to describe his view of the nature of war. Clausewitz called his model a "paradoxical trinity" composed of three elements: 1) "primordial violence, hatred, and enmity" more simply referred to as emotion and passion; 2) "the play of chance and probability" and 3) reason and rational thought, because war is an "instrument of policy" designed to achieve political objectives.³ He then identified actors who are "mainly concern(ed)" with each one of the trinity's elements. Specifically, he said that passion must be inherent in the *people*. Second, the courage and talent of the *commander*

and the army will influence the impact of chance and probability on the war. Finally, the *government* alone is responsible for the reasoned pursuit of the political aims of the war.

Some critics of Clausewitz's have noted that wars have plagued mankind well before the creation of nation-states thus by definition, war cannot be "an instrument of policy" generated by the rational process of governments because there were no states or governments to produce policy.⁴ Others comment that wars have been waged for emotionally based causes, such as religion, race, and greed, and that rational politics played no role in the nature of these wars.⁵ Finally, it may be argued that subsequent to signing of the United Nations Charter,⁶ war, as an instrument of policy, has been outlawed, thus changing its nature. The only justification for the use of force by a state is individual self-defense, as legally authorized under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter,⁷ or to restore world order under specific authority of the Security Council under article 42.⁸ In other words, the trinity concept may have been morally and legally supportable prior to the 20th century, but is no longer justified or legal today. States can no longer resort to war as an instrument of policy.

The critics seem to focus too narrowly on the specific words used by Clausewitz, rather than the larger concepts. They select a phrase, apply a literal interpretation, and declare the point obsolete. First, Clausewitz's reference to "government" can easily be thought of as the leadership of any society, regardless of character, size, formality of organization, location or time period. A society can be a college fraternity, a church, a tribe in the jungle today, or a great ancient civilization. Second, as this paper will explore in more detail below, the leaders of a society do not own a monopoly over rational thought. The people of a society and its leaders make decisions in a dynamic process that

constantly shifts, where emotion and reason influence both the people and the leaders. Finally, the attempt to “outlaw” war, while admirable, has certainly not succeeded in eliminating war nor in changing its enduring nature. By looking past the individual words and concentrating on the larger picture painted by the trinity model, its insightful description of war’s nature helps us understand the nature of man, and vice versa. The nature of man and the nature of war are inseparably linked.

Emotion, Reason and Chance Impacting Human Endeavor

The trinity is often graphically depicted as a triangle with each corner representing one of the three elements, i.e., emotion, reason, and chance. Could some other depictions of the trinity be helpful in understanding generic human endeavors besides war? This portion of the paper will attempt to paint the trinity within the context of the dynamic decision-making process which is constantly in motion. Consider human endeavor as a journey towards an objective or end. As humans make decisions concerning the journey, emotion and reason affect every phase of the decision-making process. Why? Because emotion and reason are both inherent and unique human qualities. Science tells us that emotion resides in the right side of the brain and reason in the left side of the brain.⁹ Some people may be predisposed toward one characteristic or the other, but everyone has one brain with both qualities. Of course some animals have remarkable capabilities for rational thought, but there exists no evidence that any animal, other than humans, possesses the capability for sophisticated rational thought that can balance and sometimes overcome the natural instinct driven by emotion inherent in all animals.

Unlike emotion and reason that originate *within* people, chance is an external phenomena that happens *to* people as they embark on daily journeys towards objectives. Chance is not an intrinsic quality of humans, unless one believes that certain folks are “naturally” lucky or unlucky. That would be the subject of another paper; this paper will assume that chance is an external force that affects human endeavors. People who demonstrate brilliant genius, strong will, and great courage will generally respond better to the obstacles as well as the opportunities generated by chance than people who are less so endowed. The more talented people improve their *probability* of getting a favorable result in an uncertain world. Over time, even if they do not always “win,” they will win more often than others who are less talented faced with the same chance-generated problems and opportunities.

How do these concepts fit together in the day-to-day world of human endeavors? Humans constantly strive towards objectives and they use a process, consciously or not, to make decisions. The human brain is so efficient that many of the most mundane decisions taken on a daily basis are done so without even being aware that we are making decisions. More complex decisions by individuals, and most decisions by groups, require a deliberate and conscious decision-making process. This cyclical, never-ending process nevertheless follows a rough sequence:

1. Identify an objective or end;
2. Study the environment and arrive at facts and assumptions;
3. Consider available means and future means;
4. Compare possible ways through cost-benefit-risk analysis;
5. Pursue the best way to achieve the desired end;

<As the journey begins, “chance” may intervene >

6. Assess the results at some point along the journey;
7. Modify the end and maybe the strategy thus restarting the decision-making process.

When working through the decision-making process, individuals and members of a society making the decision will struggle between the application of emotional feelings and rational thought at every step of the process. Emotion and reason impact the selection of the end, the perception of facts and assumptions, the calculation of available means, the cost-benefit-risk comparison of the different ways, the decision concerning which strategy/course to take towards an objective and finally even the assessment of progress towards the objective. Emotion and reason permeate everything humans do.

Is there a moral component to the application of emotion or reason on the decision-making process? The emotions that Clausewitz identifies with war, i.e., primordial violence, hatred and enmity, often connote negative moral values. Clausewitz did not, however, make moral judgements concerning the relationship between emotion and reason. While he does not deny the “brutality” of war,¹⁰ he did not pass judgement on the emotions of the people that led to war. It seems helpful to separate emotion and reason from actions. The former are inherent *qualities* of man; the latter are *deeds* that are subject to judgement by society. It would also be confusing to equate reason with “goodness.” Reason is morally neutral as is emotion. Rational behavior may be positive or negative. Ethnic cleansing may be the result of a rational calculation and humanitarian intervention may result from emotional feelings. Finally, decisions that are

popular are not necessarily rational or positive. Negative emotional mob mentality may sometimes prevail in the face of rational arguments.

Emotion and reason emanate from a human's brain; chance originates from one of two sources: nature or the consequences of other men's actions. Chance is therefore different in essence from emotion and reason. Naturally occurring chance, alias "lady luck," or "divine intervention," depending on your belief, continuously interjects itself into human endeavors. This type of chance occurs unintentionally. For example, if you travel 2 miles to the ice cream parlor to get three scoops of your favorite sherbert and when you arrive, the customer in front of you buys the last scoop not knowing that you also wanted it, you have been victimized by natural bad luck. S_ _ _ happens.

Manmade chance results from *intentional* acts designed by an adversary to frustrate our endeavor or from an ally seeking to support us. In an adversarial contest, the opponent will act and react in unanticipated ways. The adversary is subject to the same emotional-rational tension as we are. He too possesses genius, courage and will, and actively opposes our journey towards the objective. Our endeavor must now deal with an internal struggle between emotion and reason and an external struggle with an animate adversary who reacts to our actions. The adversarial contest need not be war. Competing against someone for a job promotion, the affection of another person, or the purchase of a home, are adversarial endeavors with great uncertainty. Actors who possess the greatest amount of genius, will and courage and will improve the probability of victory over the opponent.

In sum, all individuals and societies struggle with decisions every day. They make the decision pursuant to emotional feelings and rational calculations. Once the

course is set and the journey begins, chance, both naturally occurring and manmade, intercedes. The negative impact of chance may be minimized and the positive impact optimized, by applying genius, courage and strong will to the new circumstance, making quick, but intelligent course correction, and driving on.

Figure 1 uses sailing as a metaphor for the generic application of the trinity within the dynamic decision-making process. Three categories of people on the boat: passengers, leaders of the passengers and members of the group who are most knowledgeable about sailing and will crew the boat. The passengers and the leaders want to get to a particular objective or end; they are on a journey. In consultation with the crew, they consider the known facts (e.g., wind, ocean currents) and make assumptions about future wind and ocean currents. Armed with this information, they compare the various directions to steer in combination with the various sails to raise and how to trim the sails. They make a decision on the optimum way ahead, and the crew executes. As will be discussed in more detail below, this example unrealistically assumes equal roles between the passengers and their leaders in the decision-making process.

Throughout this process the decision-makers' emotional feelings and rational thoughts pulled them in opposite directions. Ultimately they chose a direction to steer, a sail combination and a trim to employ on the sails. If conditions change unexpectedly, through the intervention of chance, the crew must assess the new situation, which may be more or less favorable, and if only minor corrections are necessary, they can employ their talent to effect the required corrections. If the chance alters the conditions significantly, then the passengers and leaders must begin the decision-making process anew.

If the scenario changes from a pleasure cruise to a regatta, or sailboat race against one or more adversaries, the impact of chance on this journey will increase significantly. In addition to naturally occurring chance, the crew of the boat will be forced to act and react to manmade chance generated by his opponent. This is why experienced, courageous, and strong-willed crews win regattas more often than those less imbued with these traits. The reason they do not always win is because sometimes the obstacles erected by chance may be too much to overcome even for the best of skippers.

People & Leaders – Emotion & Reason

We now turn to the second main point, the complex and dynamic relationship between people and leaders and how emotion and reason impact both when they make decisions. As briefly discussed above, when Clausewitz assigned rational thought as a function of the government and emotion as a function of the people, he did so in the context of 19th Century Europe. As noted above however, a broader view could equate Clausewitz's "government" to "leaders" of a *society*, not necessarily a *nation-state*. So, are the leaders of a society exclusively responsible for making the rational decisions? Turning to Clausewitz, the phrase he uses to describe the relationship between the three aspects of the trinity and the three actors is "mainly concerns."¹¹ In other words, he describes a flexible, shifting relationship. The proportion of authority and power to contribute to the decision-making process between people and leaders depends on how the society is organized. The more democratic in nature the society, the relatively greater power of the people, and vice versa. All humans, whether members of the society or leaders of their societies, are subject to the uniquely human nature tension between

emotion and reason. Thus, all decisions taken by a society, democratic or dictatorial, will be influenced by emotion and reason.

Figure 2 attempts to graphically depict these relationships. The dashed horizontal line represents the continuum for the relative decision-making power between people and their leaders. To the left is absolute democracy and to the right is absolute dictatorship. Just as Clausewitz described absolute war and then declared it to be a fiction in the real world, so too are absolute democracy and dictatorship. The two over-lapping triangles represent the varying degree of authority and power between people and leaders in the decision-making process. The graph represents a zero-sum equation. Thus, the gain of power by the people as you move from right to left, produces a proportional loss of power by the leaders, and vice versa.

Next, the vertical bar in the center represents the pull in opposite directions by reason and emotion over both people and leaders. At the exact center of the graph, the decision-making power is theoretically equal between people and leaders. In such a case, for example, a cumulative high *emotion* score for the people, added to a cumulative medium *reason* score of the leaders, result in a medium-low emotional score for the society. This means that the societal decision taken will be considered in a medium-low *emotional* environment.

Figure 3 depicts a hypothetical society where the leaders enjoy 75% power in the decision-making process and the people only 25%, as represented by the dotted vertical line. Here, a cumulative high *emotion* score for the people, added to a cumulative medium *reason* score for the leaders results in a medium-low *reason* score for the society because the leaders are three times more influential in the decision-making process than

the people. In this example, the societal decision taken will be considered in a medium-low *rational* environment.

Experts & Chance

Who would be the actor most concerned with “chance” under a generic application of the trinity? As discussed above, chance acts upon the endeavor from outside. In 19th Century European wars, the commander and armies, experts in military matters, had to implement the decisions of the political leaders. Preferably, the decision-makers (i.e., the government) consulted with the experts (i.e., commanders), prior to making the decision to go to war. But it was up to the commander and his army to demonstrate genius, courage and will to create a favorable probability of winning. In a generic application of the trinity, the actors responsible for displaying talent and courage to confront chance are those experts in their fields charged with the responsibility for executing the decisions of the society for the particular endeavor. To return to the metaphorical sailboat of **figure 1**, if the passengers are the people and the skipper is the leader of the people, then the expert crew represents the actors that respond to the uncertainties of chance.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the genius of Clausewitz by applying his “paradoxical trinity” to any human endeavor, not just to war. By contemplating how the uniquely human qualities of emotion and reason impact the decision-making cycle as well as how chance impacts the human journey towards an objective, the paper tried to portray the sense of the constant motion and dynamic tension that characterizes human endeavors. Additionally the paper sought to describe the

complex relationship between people and their leaders and how emotion and reason impacts both. The result of this exercise, hopefully, will be a better understanding of the enduring nature of human endeavors and one of its components, war. War becomes less mysterious and the trinity less paradoxical.

So what? Armed with a clearer understanding of the enduring nature of humans should help us live a more productive and satisfying life. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the enduring nature of war should provide us with the necessary insight “to avoid half of (the wars) which would be produced by our own follies and our own acts of injustice, and to make for the other half the best preparations we can.”¹²

Fig. 1
EMOTION, REASON AND CHANCE IMPACTING HUMAN ENDEAVORS

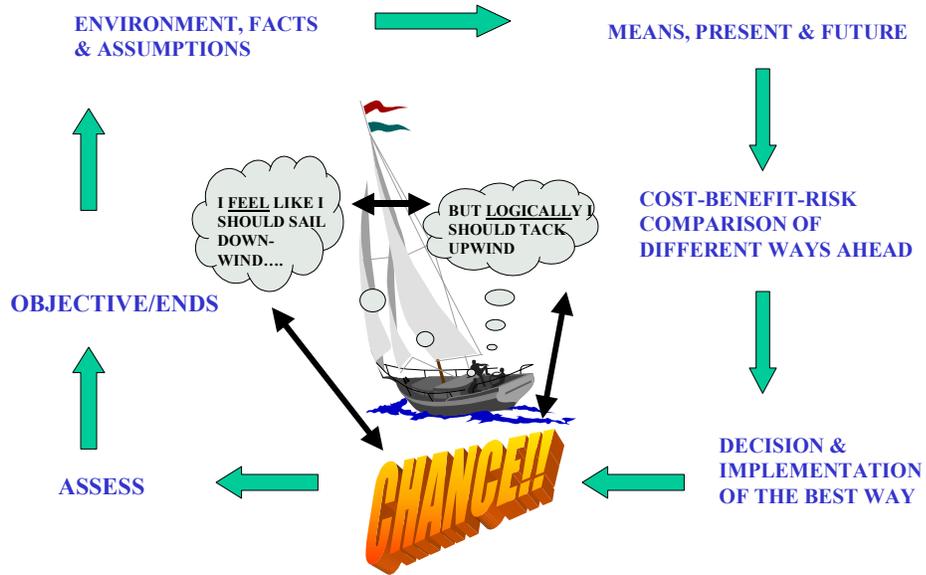


Fig. 2

Influence over the decision-making process

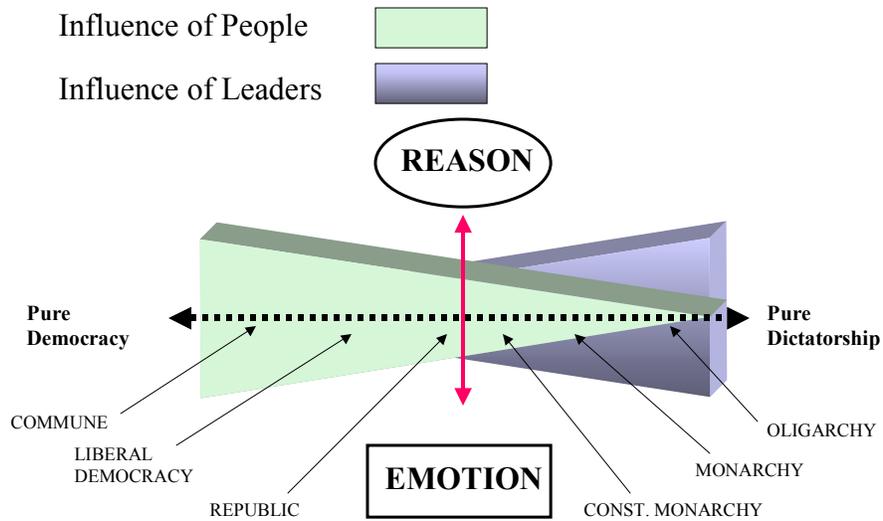
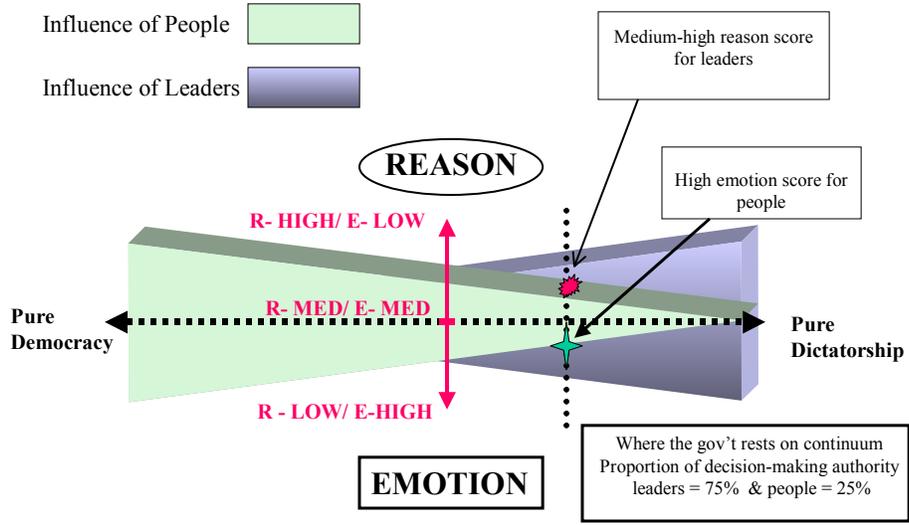


Fig. 3
Influence over the decision-making process



ENDNOTES

¹ John Shy, "Jomini," In The Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, edited by Peter Paret, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986) pp. 143 - 185. B. H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, (Faber & Faber Lt., London, England, 1954).

² Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. And trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Pinceton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 75.

³ Clausewitz, p. 89.

⁴ Christopher Bassford, John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz, <<http://clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Keegan/KEEGWHOL.htm>> (29 October 2003)

⁵ Bassford.

⁶ United Nations Charter, signed on 26 June 1945, states in Article 2(4) **All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.**

⁷ U.N. Charter, Article 51 states: **Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security.**

⁸ U.N. Charter, Article 42 states: **Should the Security Council consider that measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations.**

⁹ Funderstanding, www.funderstanding.com/right_left_brain.cfm

¹⁰ Clausewitz, p. 76.

¹¹ Clausewitz, p. 89.

¹² Tomas Jefferson, quoted in the introduction to 5602 Course.

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