You may not be interested in war... but war is interested in you.
Highlights from Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*

Bill Rhodes, Ph.D.
Biographical Brief

• Born 1780
• Entered Prussian military service at 12
• Late 1790s subaltern in regiment with school
• 1801 war college under Scharnhorst
• Captured by French 1806
• Refomer (nobility no shelter for mediocrity)
• Joined Russian service in 1812; back to Prussian in time for Waterloo (1815)
• War college 1818; writes *On War*
The Project

• Primarily an analytical work
  – Descriptive – find causes
  – With some prescription
• Regarding an extraordinarily complex matter
• Very high stakes -- history
• What are the constants?
• What limits understanding?
• Unfinished
  – Cholera 1831; wife edits and publishes
• “The only truly great book on war” – B. Brodie
A few preliminary observations

• “Much known but little read”
• Von Clausewitz is trying to make sense of the violence he witnessed
• Post-Enlightenment era; Napoleon
• Studied Kant – Critical Philosophy
  – Seeking regulative principles; heuristics
  – “Contextualize” or perhaps, “frame” the phenomenon
  – Mechanistic models have their limits
  – Teleology: Purposive even if not purposeful
Theory

• Purpose matters
• And should determine means
• Together, these are creative art
• Which must, of course, respect nature
• “Theory is the representation of art by way of concepts.” (P. Paret)
• Assembling a theory in engineering is hard
• How much more difficult in social interaction?
Theory

• Has limits
• Beyond those limits lie
  – Talent
  – Practice
• Military theory is not *immediately* useful
  – Part of developing judgment
  – and a way of understanding history
  – Study great leaders (mil. genius) and their battles
• It must be applied (see above)
Dialectical method

- Proposition and counterexample
- Refined proposition
- Thesis-antithesis-synthesis (thesis)
- A process of flow (theoretical structure “bobs along”)
- “War is never final”; probably true of theory too
On War resembles its subject-matter

- Dialectical tensions *permeate* the work
  - Studying a phenomenon that takes many shapes
  - War is a human endeavor
  - Clarity and truth; not always a happy marriage
- Tough reading; very easy to misunderstand
- But often rewards delaying gratification
- *War is to be considered holistically*
A caricature for thinking about military strategy

• Ends - the purpose or goal. “Why?”
• Ways – the methods. “How?”
• Means – the resources. “With what?”
• If harmonized - may have a chance
• If not, probably not. “Writing checks you can’t cash”
• Stomp: War is to be considered holistically
Security broadly considered

- Various IOP
- D I M E
- Conflict takes many forms
- And often shifts
  - Permanent interests
  - Do we understand our own interests?
- Lots of nonviolent methods in use
- War: “a pulsation of violence”
“Ideal” war

• “A wrestling match on a larger scale”
• Theoretically a contest of military talent, virtues and capabilities
• Theoretically knows no limit
• Targets resistance
  – Power to resist = (means to resist) X will
  – Centers of Gravity: critical means to wage war
  – Necessary conditions for maintaining will
  – Overthrow the adversary; lots of “ways” to accomplish, but best to concentrate on one C of G
“Ideal” war

• Using force compels the adversary to meet or exceed it
• And so, war escalates; no logical limit
• Even the most civilized nations can hate
• So you might think “utter viciousness or defeat”
That’s a dialectical setup

- Such thinking is not holistic
  - Familiar but simplistic; unreal – “idealistic”
- Remember war’s purpose – political goal
- “[Ideal war] would . . . usurp policy the moment policy had brought it into being; it would then drive policy out of office. . . .” (B1c1:23)
“Ideal” war – a strawman

• A “logical fantasy” (but a common misunderstanding)
• The first blow almost never uses all the force available
• Adversaries “size-up” one-another
• Waiting is commonly viewed as smart
  – Most of war is inactivity
Reality: Defense is stronger form

• Consider: Aggressor usually has much more to accomplish than the defender
  – Any pause is “inconsistent” with offense
• Defender merely needs to preserve
• Defender often very motivated
• Defender cedes initiative but may gain by waiting
  – “You have all the watches, but we have all the time.” -- Taliban
Reality: The Importance of Psychology

• Pervasive in politics
• And, therefore, in war
• One *ought* to think of war in this way
  – Summers: “We never lost a battle. . .”
• “War is merely the continuation of politics by (with) other means”
• Occurs within a constellation of shifting influences
Reality: The vital importance of context

• If you take nothing else away . . .
• *Critical* to bear in mind that conflicts take place in contexts
• War is social interaction
• And so, things are not merely complicated; they are complex
• Social and cultural contexts strongly influence outcomes
  – WWII vs. Vietnam
• Context, like war itself, is interactive; dynamic
• Political matters saturate militaries in war and in peace
Military in domestic context

• Civil-military relations vary
  – We still don’t have a unified theory in the US

• Liberal democracies
  – Clear subordination of military to political leadership
  – Tensions result – firings
  – “Two bald men fighting over a comb” – J. Borges

• Competing models
  – Relative tensions?
War’s nature and its character

- Its logic is constant; its grammar quite variable
- Logical whole: immortal; fed by the transient many
- Nature (logic) – concentrate here
  - Violence (but what is that?)
  - Uncertain
  - Clash of political wills
- Character (grammar)
  - Limited or total
  - Terrain, technology, weather, logistics tail, etc.
Major theoretical elements of war’s nature with “loose ends”

• “Pulsation of violence”
  – Classic Napoleonic battles
  – “Nonviolent” most of the time
  – Deterrence – a threat of physical violence?
  – What about cyber?

• Chance
  – Not unlike gambling; efforts to reduce uncertainty
  – “There’s always something”; judgment needed

• Political purpose
  – “Rational”
  – Domestic political needs vs. national security
War’s “Paradoxical trinity”

• Reality supersedes simplistic, idealized notions
• Need to account for people, military, and government, “like an object suspended between three magnets.” (B1c1: 28)
War’s “Paradoxical trinity”

- “Primordial violence, hatred and enmity”; these “are to be regarded as a blind natural force”
  - The people
- “Play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam”
  - The commander and military
- War’s “element of subordination; as an instrument of policy and therefore subject to reason” (B1c1:28)
  - The government
Enmity

- Passion; latent in the people
- To be “kindled”
Interaction with policy

• Government
• Presumably rational
  – Military folk should study politics
  – Proportionality of means to end
• Necessity of subordination
  – Commonly misunderstood
  – Too important to be left to generals
  – “Political interference” often misunderstood
• “War is never final”
  – Japan’s attack in 1941
• “How does this end”? Do the “premortem”
Chance and Friction

• We’re all familiar; collection of experiences under this concept illustrates his method
• Distinguishes reality from plans
  – “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”
  – Spanish Armada; Antietam; Chinese Embassy
• And requires force to overcome
  – Could even drain away all force
• Affects everyone
• Who has more “genius” in its face?
Genius (Broadly considered)

- Something like the way we use “professional virtues” or “mental capacity” today
- Military theory accordingly largely based in history
- Like many virtues, it “rises above” mere rules (B2c2)
- Best studied through granular attention to history
Politics and proportionality

• Political ends rarely require violence to the utmost
• The less A demands, the less B resists
• Terms for surrender?
• Appeasement?
• War by algebra?
• Demonstrations
• Deterrence
“No one in his senses . . .

ought [to start a war] without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.” B8c2)