

On War's Continued Relevancy

The throng and nature of war

by Maj Scott Helminski

With his master work, *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz sought to bring about a "revolution in the theory of war."¹ In this regard, Clausewitz intended to draw on his experiences in war to develop a way to improve the commander's ability to think about and conduct warfare. This unique approach stands in stark contrast to similar works from his era, which attempted to generate rules and formulas for the conduct of war, and contributes to his theory's continued relevance in the 21st century. Nearly 150 years after Clausewitz's death, a small group of Marines and civilians, disenchanted with recent combat experiences in Vietnam, looked to combine existent and emergent military theories to revolutionize the way the Corps' leaders thought about and conducted war. Their efforts led to the Marine Corps' adoption of maneuver warfare as doctrine in 1989. As the Corps renews its focus on the concept of maneuver warfare,² Clausewitz's *On War* and its influence on *FMFM 1* and its successor *MCDP 1*—both titled *Warfighting*—warrants a closer examination. Clausewitz's direct influence on the present-day Marine Corps and his current relevancy are apparent in *Warfighting's* intent, structure, and espoused views on the nature and theory of war.

A revolutionary theory can change the way military professionals understand the phenomenon of war, which in turn changes the way they think about its conduct. This was not Clausewitz's original intent for his work. Enlightenment-influenced military thinkers, such as Bülow and Jomini, sought to isolate and reduce war to a series of uni-

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versal and immutable principles that, when applied in the conduct of war, could guarantee success. As was the common practice of the time, Clausewitz originally intended to dictate his observations into short, concise statements without considering their impact on the whole phenomenon of war.⁴ However, two major factors influenced the change in Clausewitz's thinking.

First was his extensive combat service, beginning in 1793 and including the time spent writing *On War* between 1816 and 1830. Second was the influence of the changing intellectual environment in Prussia amidst the German movement, which challenged much of the Enlightenment's way of thinking. The movement rejected universal and immutable principles while focusing on concrete human experiences and the creative and unique character of individuals.⁵ Combining the new, German way of thinking with his experiences in war, Clausewitz modified his initial intent and was now determined to develop a new way to think about war as a whole rather than developing reductionist principles for its execution.



There are not immutable principles of war. There is concrete human experience from which we must learn. (Photo by Sgt Aaron Henson.)

In his attempt to understand the phenomenon of war and change the way professionals thought about war, Clausewitz first sought to define the nature of war. The first chapter of Book One reflects his progression from defining war to describing the unchanging nature of war. He initially defines war as a duel, using the metaphor of two wrestlers exerting energy to impose their wills on each other. With this simple metaphor, he introduces the complexity of human interaction into the nature of war. This theme, threaded throughout the entirety of the work, immediately counters the use of immutable science-based rules in war.⁶ He also introduces war's subordination to policy. Clausewitz concludes the chapter with the "marvelous trinity," arguing that the prevailing tendencies of violence, probability, and reason—which generally concern the people, commander, and government, respectively—are always present. They comprise the unchanging nature of war. However, their interactions and wars' subordination to policy explain the changing character of war throughout time.⁷

The majority of the remaining chapters of Book One address the realm of chance. Clausewitz devotes the longest chapter outside of Chapter One to the concept of genius, which he defines as "a very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation."⁸ In this chapter, he discusses the impact a commander can have on uncertainty and chance in war. He discusses character traits that best lend themselves to genius and alludes to the fact that training and education can illuminate and increase a commander's genius to an extent.⁹ He also introduces the concepts of danger, physical exertion, intelligence, and friction. He concludes that these concepts all combine to create the concept of general friction, which makes activity—especially decision making: the cerebral activity—in war increasingly difficult. He argues that the only counter to friction is experience.¹⁰ By introducing the complex and unchanging nature of war and the role of the commander in the realm of chance, Clausewitz sought to change how professionals thought about war.

Recognizing the significant effects of friction and the potential positive impacts of the commander and experience, Clausewitz then turns his attention to theory and its use in influencing how commanders think in war. He contends that theory enables the informed study of war. He avoids prescribing theory as a means to achieve a set of rules and principles for action in the conduct of war; rather, he argues that theory drives study by providing a framework that enables commanders to learn through the

ing philosophy with the publication of *FMFM 1, Warfighting*, in 1989.¹³

Like *On War*, *Warfighting* revolutionized the way Marines think. Although a doctrinal publication, *Warfighting* avoids prescribing specific techniques and procedures. Instead, it provides overarching concepts and direction that requires judgment in application.¹⁴ The publication concludes that "maneuver warfare is a way of thinking in and about war that should shape our every action."¹⁵ Unlike many other doctrinal

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critical analysis of historical cases. From this informed self-study, commanders gain familiarity—vicarious experience—with war, which improves their judgment. This familiarity and judgment aids in avoiding poor decisions in combat and prevents the need for a manual of action that accompanies the commander to the battlefield.¹¹ Thus, theory, based on an understanding of the nature of war, provides the means for commanders to learn how to think about war.

Over a century and a half later, *On War's* influence is evident in the Marine Corps' revolutionary capstone doctrine, *Warfighting*. Like Clausewitz, Marines attempted to synthesize a new way of thinking because their disillusionment with their recent combat experiences in the Vietnam War and perceived organizational and doctrinal problems. They found the answer in retired Air Force Col John Boyd's concept of maneuver warfare. In line with Clausewitz's view of theory and *Kritik*, Boyd developed his brief, *Patterns of Conflict*, as a critical analysis of over 2,500 years of war and conflict, seeking to discern any emergent patterns.¹² The Marine Corps adopted the resultant concept of maneuver warfare as its warfighting

publications, *Warfighting's* emphasis on developing habits of thought and avoidance of specified rules and principles is consistent with Clausewitz's approach to the theory of war. With its adoption, *Warfighting* indeed revolutionized the way Marines thought about war.

Similar to *On War*, *Warfighting* first explores the nature and theory of war in order to provide Marines with a common understanding of the phenomenon of war. The first two chapters borrow heavily from the first two books of *On War*, citing the work thirteen times.¹⁶ *Warfighting's* author even comments in an endnote that *On War* is "arguably the definitive treatment of the nature and theory of war. All Marine officers should consider this book essential reading."¹⁷ In the chapter on the nature of war, *Warfighting* identifies the role of human interaction, complexity, violence, danger, uncertainty, and chance in creating friction in war—all present in Clausewitz's book on the same topic.¹⁸ The chapter on theory begins with war's subordination to policy, another of Clausewitz's unchanging tendencies in the nature of war that accounts for its ever-changing character.¹⁹

However, Clausewitz's influence is not limited to the first two chapters

of *Warfighting*. The value of critical analysis and critique of the training and education of Marines is evident in the chapter on the preparation for war.²¹ Clausewitz's focus on the mind of the commander, self-study, and decision making appears in both the chapter on preparing for war and the chapter on its conduct.²¹ This list of Clausewitz's influences is not all inclusive; rather, it offers an insight into the extent to which Clausewitz's thinking influenced

olutionary thoughts that continue to resonate two centuries after they were written. Clausewitz's ideas are alive and well in the Marine Corps.

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976). This statement is in Clausewitz's Note of 10 July 1827.

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

3. Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also R.R. Palmer, "Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, edited by Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), and John Shy, "Jomini," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*.

4. *On War*. This statement is in the author's comment, "On the Genesis of his Early Manuscript on the Theory of War, written around 1818."

5. *A History of Military Thought*.

6. *On War*. See also Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

7. *On War*.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid. This chapter deserves a separate discussion, and this explanation does not do the concept justice. For a better treatment of the subject, read the chapter in its entirety.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Damian Fideleon, *The Road to FMFM I: The United States Marine Corps and Maneuver Warfare Doctrine, 1979-1989*, master's thesis, Kansas State University, (Manhattan, KS: 2008).

13. Headquarters Marine Corps, *FMFM I, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1989).

14. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP I, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

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the thinking of the Marine Corps. In its attempt to revolutionize the way its Marines think, the Marine Corps used a literary work intended to do the same.

Rather than develop a set of rules and principles applicable to the conduct of war in his time, Clausewitz defined the complex but unchanging nature of war and identified theory's role in enabling informed study. The work has inspired intense debate and discussion about its contents since its publication. Thus, Clausewitz achieved his goal of revolutionizing the way professionals thought about war "that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject."²² The Marine Corps' intent, structure, and views on the nature and theory of war in its current capstone doctrine evidence Clausewitz's continued relevance. As Gen Al Gray, 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps, writes in the preface of *MCDP I*, "*Warfighting* has stimulated discussion and debate from classrooms to wardrooms, training areas to combat zones."²³ Twenty years later, another commandant is urging Marines to rediscover the tenets of maneuver warfare first propounded in *Warfighting*. As today's Marines turn back to *MCDP I*, they will once again encounter rev-

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