War, Theory, Clausewitz, and Thucydides: The Game May Change But the Rules Remain

by Williamson Murray

The author points out the value of looking to the "lessons learned" provided by two key military historical figures as the Corps prepares for tomorrow's uncertainties in the world.

We stand at the dawn of a new era in world history. The truisms and certainties of the past 60 years have disappeared in the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union. How to think about the world in the new century is a crying need in a time of uncertainty, ambiguity, and flux. We can hold on to the theories and assumptions about the world, national security, and war that have marked the efforts of those involved in political science and international relations over past decades. But such theoretical approaches have had their difficulties—not the least being that none of them were able to predict even an event of monumental proportions, namely the collapse of the Soviet Union.[1]

But to reject such theories requires that one have something to put in their place, and here historians have generally abdicated even the debate. The result has been to turn the study of current and future problems over to those who, if they do not reject history outright, are happy to rampage through the past with scant attention to context or complexity. And their search for absolutes and answers has only served to muddy the water for those who wish to gain some feel for war, power, and international relations in the coming century.

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As a military and strategic historian, I have generally been suspicious of the claims of those who indulge in theoretical musings about how the world works. To paraphrase Hermann Göring, when I have heard the word theory, I have reached for my gun. Nevertheless as I have aged, I have come to believe that theory, with a small t, does have its place as an organizing principle—as a means to catalog our thoughts and to extend our understanding of the complex, ambiguous, interactive phenomena that make up the real world. Particularly in the world of military institutions, theory about war (or theories about war) provides some direction to thinking about the business of "making the other poor bastard die for his country." Theory will not win wars, and it can never be a template offering directions to victory. We also must understand that it can have serious and destructive results, if it seeks to reach absolute truths and certainties, particularly if it attempts to move away from that harsh auditor of human affairs: experience in the real world. The past is the only laboratory that we have, and if we are to gain some dim glimpse at the future we must have some sense of the "real" past, however contradictory that might be.

Thus the purpose of this article is to suggest why Clausewitz, the greatest theorist of war, and Thucydides, the greatest of strategic historians, are of continuing, even vital, relevance to any understanding of the world we are entering in the next century. And so I shall examine in turn why their discussions—both theoretical and historical—are not just "relevant," but essential as a starting point for examinations of war in the past, present, and future. And finally I will conclude with some observations as to why most theories of war in the 20th century have failed so dismally to capture the full range and complexity of their subject.

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Clausewitz

One of the great ironies of the study of war at the sharp end is the fact that literature, rather than history, reaches into those dark lands where men seek *to kill each other*. Can any history reach the power and psychological understanding that Tolstoy brings to his description of the battles of Austerlitz and Borodino? Or for that matter does any historical account of Gettysburg reach the psychological understanding that Michael Schaara achieved in his masterful novel *The Killer Angels*? Yet the literary view of war, no matter what its insights into the psychological pressures and conditions of combat, provides us with little in the way of an analytic framework for understanding the overarching political, strategic, and operational issues involved in conflict–those issues lying beyond the immediate concerns and impressions of the individual. In fact, literature can be downright misleading, such as when Tolstoy wanders off into the naïve Christianity and pacifism that marks his discussion of the causes for Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812: "but it happened simply because it had to happen."[2]

And so to remedy literature's failings we must turn to Clausewitz and Thucydides in order to place war in a large context, in its political and operational dimensions. In fact at times–particularly in the case of Thucydides–both men rise to the standards of great literature in discussing their subject. Clausewitz has aimed at no less than establishing a "general theory of war," and while Thucydides sees the world very much in historical terms, he also fits clearly within a general framework that accords closely with Clausewitz's view of a world of ambiguity and friction. Yet Clausewitz's general theory stands in stark contradiction of most of the philosophical and theoretical approach of much of the modern social sciences and their claims for what theory can or cannot do.

For Clausewitz the purpose of theory is not to discover fundamental, unchanging truths or laws about war. Theory has the strictly utilitarian purpose of educating the mind; it cannot aim at discovering universal truths applicable to all situations, all places, all times. It forms "a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war . . .; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls."[3] Clausewitz continues: "[Theory] is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield."[4] He concludes a similar argument later in *On War* with the observation that "theory is not meant to provide . . . positive doctrines and systems to be used as intellectual tools."[5]

The problem, as Clausewitz points out, has to do with what is knowable. "Efforts were therefore made to equip the conduct of war with principles, rules, or even systems . . . [B]ut people failed to adequate account of the endless complexities involved."[6] Most theories "aim at fixed values; but in war everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities."[7]

Thus, any theory that is to be of use must in the end rest on the real world, on the actual conditions of historical experiences with war. History is the only laboratory we have, and if we do not ground our theoretical examination of conflict in that reality then we are spinning webs of nonsense. As Clausewitz pointed out:

> [Theory] is an analytic investigation leading to a close *acquaintance* with the subject; applied to experience–in our case to military history–it leads to thorough *familiarity* with it. The closer it comes to that goal, the more it proceeds from the objective form of a science to the subjective form of a skill, the more effective it will prove in areas where the nature of the case admits no arbiter but talent."[8]

Any theoretical understanding of war must arise out of the real acts and occurrences of human conflict; one must not impose on the world theoretical constructs arrived at independently of experience.

Above all Clausewitz was contemptuous of those military theoreticians in his own day who sought neat formulas to solve complex problems occasioned by war:

> In short, absolute, so-called mathematical factors never find a firm basis in military calculations. From the very start there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry.[9]

Above all Clausewitz was contemptuous of those military theoreticians in his own day who sought neat formulae to solve complex problems occasioned by war . . .

The "*jargon, technicalities, and metaphors*" that passed for theory in his own time never seduced him.[10] For Clausewitz, theory could not aim at fixed values; rather "in war everything is uncertain."[11]

In the Clausewitzian universe–one which has over the past decade received considerable support from mathematical research–one looks for general knowledge instead of absolute truths. Contemporary mathematicians, and particularly researchers involved in the biological sciences, have been emphasizing more and more the importance of nonlinear mathematics to any understanding of the physical universe. In the real world there is often a disjunction of cause and effect as a fundamental principle, i.e., actions stimulate unexpected

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and unpredictable reactions. The linear, Newtonian universe is disappearing under a tidal wave of fundamental rethinking about how the universe works. The implications for the study of war and international relations are immense. Clausewitz suggests:

> The conduct of war branches out in almost all directions and has no definite limits; while any system or model, has the finite nature of a synthesis...[Most theorists] aim at fixed values, but in war everything is uncertain and calculations have to be made with variable quantities. [Most theorists] direct the inquiry exclusively toward physical quantities, whereas all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects. [Most theorists] consider only unilateral action, whereas war consists of a continuous interaction of opposites.[12]

Elsewhere he indicates that "war is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty."[13] Uncertainty, chance, accident, ambiguity, and complexity all lie at the heart of Clausewitz's conception of war. At the same time Clausewitz's appreciation of randomness, and his ability to recognize it, explain why so many have found his theories as lacking in clarity, or utility, or even relevance. Yet to reject Clausewitz in favor of simpler, more utilitarian theories of war, theories by and large not connected to the ambiguities of the real world, is to court disaster.

Clausewitz and Strategy

What useful lessons might we draw from Clausewitz's discussions about theory and war? First we must understand that the Prussian has set limited goals for his study. Despite his justly famous aphorism "that war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means,"[14] he concentrates his analysis on the sharp, hard edge of war and leaves much of the discussion of strategy and policy and issues of morality to others. And despite the fact that he spends relatively little time in examining the strategic-political level of war, Clausewitz recognizes the crucial relationships between politics and war:

> War is no pastime; it is no mere joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts. It is a serious means to a serious end . . . When whole communities go to war—whole peoples, and especially civilized peoples—the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object. War therefore is an act of policy.[15]

If we are to gain an understanding of war, Clausewitz argues, we cannot divorce it from its societal and political context—a basic theoretical insight that informs all of his discussions about the interface among politics, strategy, and military operations. His contribution to our theoretical understanding of conflict at the strategic and political levels is best embodied in his depiction of war as:

> a remarkable trinity—composed [first] of primordial violence, hatred and enmity . . . [second] of the interplay of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and [third] of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy that makes it subject to reason alone."[16]

The actual conduct of war is suspended between these three great influences and, torn between external pressures and influences, war follows its unpredictable and nonlinear course.[17]

Clausewitz and Friction

This last point brings us to Clausewitz's greatest contribution to our understanding of war—namely his concept of friction. Commentators on Clausewitz have tended to focus on friction as one of a number of factors described in Book I that impede the general flow and conduct of military operations. In fact, as Barry Watts has persuasively argued, Clausewitz uses *Friktion* as an overarching concept that encompasses the enormous difficulties that confront nations, political leaders, commanders, military organizations, and soldiers in the field in their conduct of war.[18] In its conceptualization of friction *On War* achieves its greatest analytic triumph.

Clausewitz argues that friction, both of the natural variety and of simple human nature, pervades all elements of war and life, although it has its most obvious impact in war. Bad intelligence, incompetence, misunderstandings, personal likes and dislikes, contempt for the enemy, carelessness, stupidity—all the factors that contribute to making any human endeavor involving more than one person difficult—place enormous impediments to the conduct of war at every level. "Everything in war," he writes, "is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war."[19]

Clausewitz aptly describes the effort involved in waging war as comparable to the attempt to run through water:[20] "Countless minor incidents—the kind you can never foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls short of the intended goal."[21] As Winston Churchill described the Gallipoli catastrophe: "the terrible ifs accumulate." An obscure Turkish Colonel, Mustafa Kemal, happens to pass the

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Anzac landings; the Australians take their time in scaling the cliffs overlooking the landing site; the British colonels at Y Beach have no instructions and consequently do nothing despite the gunfire indicating the slaughter of their comrades on the beaches at the tip of the peninsula; the minesweepers are manned by British fishermen who are willing to risk their lives to remove mines, but who refuse to expose themselves as targets for Turkish artillery and machine guns; British forces land at Sulva Bay and for 3 days do nothing despite the fact that there are no Turks in front of them. The *list of ifs* is almost endless, but there they are, the frictions of Gallipoli that ruined the only strategic possibility for avoiding the slaughter of the Western Front—a slaughter that would last another 3 years. If we wish to understand war even in a theoretical sense, the fundamental Clausewitzian reality is that it "is the realm of chance. No other human activity gives it greater scope."[22] Thus, the terrible ifs accumulate.

Clausewitz makes clear that an understanding of friction is fundamental to any understanding of war; because friction pervades any conflict from beginning to end and at every level. To add to the environmental frictions—weather, confusion, bad communications, incompetence, truculence, and irascibility, among a host of others and all of which beset military organizations even in the best of times—is the fact that war presents us with living breathing opponents who are attempting to do no less than to kill us and our comrades and that simple thought is enough to turn some soldiers blood to ice. "In war, the will is directed at an animate object that *reacts*."[23] Above all we lack a knowledge of how he will react; what we do know is that his every action is calculated to undo everything that we are trying to do. "*War is thus an act to compel our enemy to do our will.*"[24] But our enemy has exactly the same intention as far as we are concerned; and he will be willing to go to any length to achieve that objective, including killing us.

What is needed to master these innumerable frictions that hinder and hamper every action in war "is a sense of unity and a power of judgment raised to a marvelous pitch of vision, which easily grasps and dismisses a thousand remote possibilities which an ordinary mind would labor to identify and wear itself out in so doing."[25] Indeed, only the extraordinary intellect still functions "in the dreadful presence of suffering and danger . . . in this psychological fog [where] it is so hard to form clear and complete insights."[26] But in war this kind of presence is all too rare, and military organizations are left to muddle through with all that muddling through entails in terms of long, endless rows of tombstones.

Thucydides: The Clausewitzian Historian

It is anachronistic to call Thucydides, the fifth century B.C. Greek historian, a Clausewitzian historian. Yet in every respect his analysis of war, strategy, power, and international relations prefigures the theoretical framework that Clausewitz established in the early 19th century. Nowhere, of course, does Thucydides lay down a specific theory or theories of war. Yet he makes an extraordinary claim:

> It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of the immediate public, but it was done to last forever. [27]

And let me suggest that still today most of us who study strategic and military history would agree with that claim.[28]

Unlike Clausewitz, Thucydides is willing to examine the full range of war's complexities from the highest levels of policymaking and strategy down to psychological collapse on the battlefield.

What makes *The History of the Peloponnesian War* the greatest book ever written about war is its enormous range. Unlike Clausewitz, Thucydides is willing to examine the full range of war's complexities from the highest levels of policymaking and strategy down to psychological collapse on the battlefield. And again, unlike Clausewitz, he is willing to confront the moral parameters within which human societies interact in time of war. But, as John Keegan has pointed out in the *Face of Battle,* Thucydides is one of the few historians who manages to bring to his account a real sense of the psychological and physical terror and confusion of the battlefield. In Thucydides' account chance, ambiguity, fog, all the frictions that Clausewitz lays out and more, dominate the landscape of the great contest between Athens and Sparta for hegemony of Greece. It is in his depiction of the Peloponnesian War as a contest of independent human wills that Thucydides also discovers the fundamental nature of war. And that contest as he makes clear again and again—often distorted in translation—is one where chance dominates.

Nothing makes his Clausewitzian universe clearer than a short examination of his description of the attempted *coup de main* by the Thebans against the town of Platea at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. At first

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everything works flawlessly. A small Theban attack party crosses Platean territory unseen and arrives at the gates of Platea at first darkness. Conspirators within the city have overpowered the guards and unlocked the gates. Platean resistance collapses before it can begin. The major force of Thebans to solidify the hold on the city is already on the march over a distance that measures only 8 miles as the crow flies. Platea appears firmly in the hands of the Thebans and the Platean traitors.

But is it? A heavy rain begins. The Asopus overflows its banks. The torches of the relieving force sputter and go out. The relieving Thebans then get lost on the mountain track. Meanwhile in the beleaguered, confused city, the Plateans realize how few Thebans are within the walls. In the darkness and confusion of a strange city, Theban cohesion and confidence begins to collapse. Isolated attacks from the roof tops further the confusion. In the strange alley ways and streets Platean hoplites strike at the invaders. The Thebans collapse and those who are not immediately butchered fall into Platean hands as hostages. The relieving force arrives to find their comrades in enemy hands and the gates barred. "The terrible ifs accumulate."

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Since the late 19th century the Anglo-American intellectual consensus has increasingly tended to regard war as an anomaly, as an event or occurrence that is entirely foreign and unnatural in human affairs. Despite a slight increase in the interest in military and strategic history in the United States, it is well to remember that most American colleges and universities still have *no* courses that deal with military history—in effect *no* examination of the impact of war on society. Only a country whose intellectual elites are entirely removed from reality could write history as if wars had never occurred. In that sense both Thucydides and Clausewitz are entirely out of step with current American views and understandings of the world.

The larger intellectual framework within which Thucydides casts his history is a recognition that the coin of international exchange is power: economic power, financial power, and, above all, military power. Nations and states may, or may not, express this last aspect of power; but power, whenever and however expressed, is the basic determinant of human affairs. Thucydides believes that power has no moral attributes; it is entirely amoral in character, but it is *always* present in the exchanges and dealings of nations and human beings. Thus, Thucydides tells us the great cause of the Peloponnesian War lay in "the growth of Athenian power and the fear this caused in Sparta."[29] The Athenian negotiators are equally explicit in their dialogue with the Melian oligarchs later in the war:

> Our opinion of the Gods and our knowledge of men leads us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can. This is not a law we made ourselves, nor are we the first to act upon it when made. We found it already in existence and we shall leave it to exist forever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anyone else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way.[30]

Yet Thucydides does have the Athenians say to the Spartans that those who are especially deserving of praise are those who display a regard for justice beyond what was called for in the situation.

If Thucydides considered the Athenian-Spartan clash as inevitable, the policy errors and idiosyncratic decisions of statesmen, the element of chance, the faulty assumptions of the opposing sides, and the pressures of public anger determined the actual course of events that led up to the outbreak of war in 431 B.C. The precipitating events came far from the epicenter of the Spartan-Athenian clash. On the western coast of Greece a quarrel between Corinth and Corcyra over their colony, Epidamnus, drew in the great powers. The crucial factor was Corcyra's navy and location, both of which pushed the Athenians to intervene. The Corinthians in turn furious at Athens for its interference turned to Sparta, and events moved inexorably towards war.

But even as the Greek city states tumbled over the edge, there were those who tried to hold back the rush to war. Archidamnus, one of the Spartan kings, a man with long experience at war, warned the Spartan assembly:

> Spartans, in the course of my life I have taken part in many wars, and I see among you many people of the same age as I am. They and I have had experience and so are not likely to share in what may be a general enthusiasm for war nor to think that war is a good or safe thing."[31]

Archidamnus warned his listeners about the economic and military strengths the Athenians possessed—a situation that would allow the Athenians to fight a war entirely foreign to Spartan experience. Looking at the wreckage of the Peloponnesian War 30 years later, it is hard to see how he could have been more prescient. Yet, he might as well have been speaking on the moon. The Spartans voted for war with great enthusiasm. It was the miscalcula-

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tions of statesmen and military leaders who created the plausible scenarios and simple, easy, operational and tactical answers to intractable strategic and political problems.

Those Spartan leaders who urged war undoubtedly believed that the mere appearance of their phalanx before the walls of Athens would force the Athenians to come out—a prospect that none could conceive of resulting in anything other than victory. The enemy, of course, would come out and do what was expected of him. But the Athenians *did not* come out and fight; instead they remained impregnable behind their walls for the next 30 years.

On the other hand, the Athenian leader, Pericles, calculated that by relying on its economic and maritime power, by refusing to meet Sparta on land, and by waging a war of "exhaustion," Athens would eventually force Sparta to recognize the Athenian state as the other "superpower" of Greece.[32] Ironically, Athens achieved much of this in the Peace of Nicias.

But Pericles was dead. New and aggressive leaders came forward with grander designs; and the cost of "victory" so embittered and infuriated the Athenians that the Peace of Nicias collapsed shortly after agreement. Dissatisfied with the fruits of victory, the Athenians pursued total victory over Sparta by supporting her traditional enemy Argos, by destroying the city of Melos, and eventually by launching the great expedition to Sicily. War had clearly slipped out of the hands of those who sought to control it; the cool, rational strategies with which the contestants had begun had foundered; and the conflict had degenerated into an eye-gouging fight to the finish. War is uncontrollable, because it is so inextricably linked to the human emotions. Here Thucydides is in complete agreement with what Clausewitz was to write twenty-two hundred years later.

Thucydides explicitly underlines that war carries with it the moral degradation and collapse of civilized values within the societies that wage it. Moreover, war inevitably results in the general loss of humanity as the opposing sides become accustomed to slaughter. As he points out:

> [W]ar is a stern teacher; in depriving [men] of the power of easily satisfying their daily wants, it brings most people's minds down to the level of their actual circumstances.[33]

Further:

> [W]ith the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where laws exist, showed itself proudly in its true colors, as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice, the enemy to anything superior to itself; for if it had not been for the pernicious power of envy, men would not have so exalted vengeance above innocence and profit above justice.[34]

And so the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is very much a descent into hell. What would have been unthinkable at the war's beginning becomes normal practice as it continues. At the start of the conflict the Athenian position in the Aegean is threatened by a revolt by their ally, Mytilene. After considerable debate, the Athenians eventually decided to spare the innocent and kill only those active in the revolt. Twelve years later at Melos under similar circumstances they did not even bother to debate the question, but instead slaughtered the men and sold the women and children into slavery—an incident that Euripides' great, dark play, *The Trojan Women*, celebrates.

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One of the most bizarre spectacles of our century has been the predilection for comfortable, middle-class intellectuals to believe that revolution is a "good" thing. Since 1789, they have enshrined revolution in the temple of virtue. Today with the wreckage of 70 years of the Soviet Union exposed to the light of day, Thucydides' dark wisdom stands as a sad reminder of how little mankind has been willing to learn from the past. Foreshadowing Orwell, Thucydides writes:

> Words too had to change their meaning. What used to be described as a thoughtless word of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's manly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was actually unfitted for action.[35]

In a chilling parallel to the contest between Stalin and Trotsky, Thucydides notes the following about the contest for power during the civil war on Corcyra:

> As a rule those who were least remarkable for intelligence showed the greatest power of survival. Such people recognized their own deficiencies and the superior intelligence of their opponents; fearing that they might lose a debate or find themselves out-maneuvered in intrigue by their quick-witted enemies, they boldly launched straight into action; while their opponents, overconfident in the belief that they would see what was happening in advance, and not thinking it necessary to seize by force what they could secure by policy, were the more easily destroyed because they were off their guard.[36]

Like Clausewitz, Thucydides lays out no template for the future. He only provides a deep and thorough analysis of how men acted

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in his own time. And yet that singular claim, quoted at the beginning of this section—that his account would analyze "events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same way, be repeated in the future."—stands as a tribute to a history which still today allows us to understand our own times and their motivations in a clearer, less ambiguous light. If we truly seek to understand international relations, strategy, and war in real terms then we must come to grips with the intricately constructed account that Thucydides has left us.

Theory and the 21st Century

At its best, theory, as Clausewitz suggests and Thucydides implies, can only indicate the most important kinds of questions we might ask. There are no templates.

What to make of the claims of modern theories to our understanding of war and military institutions over the past century? Here the record is hardly an impressive one. The great theorists from Mahan to Douhet to Liddell Hart and Fuller to the theories of nuclear deterrence have thrown only some small light on the dark paths stretching before them. They have sought answers and certainties where there are none; they have consistently sought to make the facts fit the theory; and in their simplifications, they have pushed aside the real world of difficulties. As Wolfe said before Quebec, "War is an option of difficulties." And more often than not within a short time of their writing, such theories have seen the real world rise up to underline their flawed assumptions and conclusions.

Mahan's greatest contribution may have been to mislead the German Navy in its preparations for two world wars into believing that submarine warfare did not represent a viable option for the Reich's naval strategy, but such a "triumph" is hardly one for theory. In the air power arena the theories of Douhet, Trenchard, and the Air Corps Tactical School may have justified the creation of air forces. But they also provided a theory of strategic bombing that was close to an ideology in its rigidity. Moreover, when the new conflict came such theories littered Central Europe with the wreckage of aircraft and guts of aircrew largely because commanders, indoctrinated by theory, ignored the evidence that unescorted bomber formations *could not* survive without long-range escorts. With the success of air power in the Gulf War, we have seen claims that air power has at last realized the dreams of its early prophets. The *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, however, suggests that the air campaign in that war with its frictions and ambiguities underlines the continuing relevance of Clausewitz more than the triumph of early air power theories.

The fundamental problem with most theories of war in our century has been the fact that theorists have sought simple, easy, comfortable answers to the intractable and often insoluble problems raised by war. In fact, theories that provide answers and solutions have invariably led to dead ends. At its best, theory, as Clausewitz suggests and Thucydides implies, can only indicate the most important kinds of questions we might ask. There are no templates.

The German success in armored warfare in the first years of World War II is instructive about how theory can contribute to impressive military capabilities. The Germans learned little directly from theorists; rather in Clausewitzian terms they focused their efforts in the interwar period on a close examination of what history suggested about the lessons of the last war.[37] Then through careful study of exercises and combat experience they honed their combat capabilities in a fashion that thoroughly intertwined experience (both historical and current) and theory. And their entire philosophy of war was infused with a Clausewitzian sense of the ambiguities of war. As the basic German doctrinal manual of 1933, the great *Truppenführung*, underlined:

> The conduct of war is an art, depending upon free, creative activity, scientifically grounded. . . . Situations in war are of unlimited variety. They change often and suddenly and are only rarely discernable at an early point. Incalculable elements are often of great influence. The independent will of the enemy is pitted against ours. Frictions and mistakes are an everyday occurrence.[38]

Thus if we are to look at theory as a tool to be used in preparing ourselves for the coming century, there are several elements crucial to success. Yes, we need forward thinkers. The Marines at Quantico in the early 1920s thought in terms of concepts and capabilities that did not yet exist. So too did the naval aviation enthusiasts at Newport at the same time. But what had turned their theories into hard combat realities by 1943 was the fact that they were willing to test their theoretical constructs and ideas in the real world. When experience suggested that they were going down a dead end, then they adapted their theories to the real world. *They did not attempt to make the facts fit the theory.*

It is also essential that we not believe that *we possess such enormous wisdom that we can dismiss the past.* Throughout our short span of existence as an independent nation, we Americans have had a tendency to dismiss history; as Henry Ford so eloquently stated: "History is bunk." At times we have paid a price for that

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contempt, but for the most part we have escaped because of our distances from other powers and our economic power. However, we now live in a world where the distances have shrunk and where the lethality of weapons has vastly increased. Whether we like it or not, we live in a world still governed by the same rules, the same general patterns that existed in Thucydides' time, while war has not changed its fundamental nature of ambiguity and uncertainty.

The great advantage of Clausewitz and Thucydides is the fact that their theories of power and war remain consistently tied to the real world of human experience. Their world, whether it be in its theoretical construct or its historical understanding, remains one in which ambiguities, contradictions, chance, uncertainty, and discontinuities are the basic building blocks.

What this author finds particularly worrying in current discussions within the U.S. military about "military technical revolutions," or the "coming information war" are the underlying assumptions that the advances that have occurred over the past decade and which may continue into the future will allow us to comprehend the complexities of war in a fashion that has never been the case in the past. What Clausewitz and Thucydides suggest, however, is that such assumptions–so driven and influenced by an increasingly narrowly focused American *Weltanschauung*–remain as flawed and idiosyncratic as similar theories did in the early 1960s when a poor, technologically inferior opponent refused to play by the rules and theories established by our brilliant military and civilian technocrats. *And we lost.* We should not forget that defeat.

Notes

1. See in particular John Gaddis' challenge: "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Winter 1992/1993.
2. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. by Ann Dunnigan (New York, 1968), p. 729.
3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 141.
4. Ibid., p. 141.
5. Ibid., p. 168.
6. Ibid., p. 134.
7. Ibid., p. 136.
8. Ibid., p. 141.
9. Ibid., p. 86.
10. Ibid., p. 168.
11. Ibid., p. 136.
12. Ibid., pp. 134, 136.
13. Ibid., p. 101.
14. Ibid., p. 87.
15. Ibid., pp. 86-87.
16. Ibid., p. 89.
17. See Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security*, Winter 1992/1993, pp. 69-70.
18. See Barry Watts, "Friction in Future War," *Brassey's Mershon American Defense Annual*, 1996. (Brassey's Washington, DC)
19. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119.
20. Ibid., p. 120.
21. Ibid., p. 119.
22. Ibid., p. 101.
23. Ibid., p. 149.
24. Ibid., p. 75.
25. Ibid., p. 112.
26. Ibid., p. 108.
27. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by Rex Warner (Baltimore, MD, 1954), p. 48.
28. See in particular: Bernard M.W. Knox, "Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War: Politics and Power," *The Naval War College Review*, Winter 1973.
29. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 49.
30. Ibid., pp. 404-405.
31. Ibid., p. 82.
32. See in particular Donald Kagan, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY, 1969).
33. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 242.
34. Ibid., p. 245.
35. Ibid., p. 244.
36. Ibid.,
37. See my chapter, "Armored War in the Interwar Period," in *Innovation in the 1920s and 1930s*, ed. by Williamson Murray and Allan Millett (Cambridge, 1996), Chapter 1, pp. 6-49.
38. *Die Truppenführung* (Berlin, 1933), paragraphs 1 and 3.

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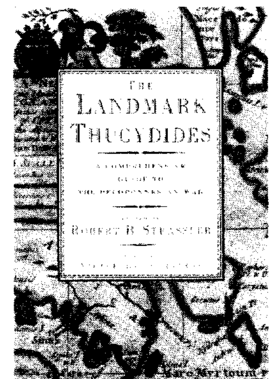
>>For Dr. Murray's review of a recently edited version of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, see p. 70.



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