

The Continuing Relevance of *On War*

The late Herbert Rosinski, in his classic study *The German Army* called *On War* "the most profound, comprehensive, and systematic examination of war that has appeared to the present day." However, Rosinski also had some concern about its effectiveness, because elsewhere he wrote: "The fact that it towers above the rest of military and naval literature, penetrating into regions no other military thinker has ever approached, has been the cause of its being misunderstood."¹

Misunderstood indeed it often has been, but Rosinski's explanation somewhat misses the mark. He was a close student of Clausewitz and of war, and his characterization of the book is sound enough, but when *On War* is misunderstood the reason lies not in any inherent difficulty in comprehending its ideas. Clausewitz's ideas, though densely packed in, are generally simple and are for the most part clearly expressed in jargon-free language, both in the original and in the present translation. However, these qualities may deceive the casual reader into thinking he is reading mere commonplaces. That may have been why a retired British officer of exalted rank, who was certainly not lacking in intelligence, remarked to this writer some years ago: "I once tried reading Clausewitz, but got nothing out of it." If he had encountered strange new ideas requiring some effort to comprehend them—like some recent strategic essays that use mathematics, game theory, and the like—he might well have made that effort and perhaps carried away a feeling of being suitably rewarded. Instead he encountered wisdom, and thought it was nothing new. Perhaps he also found some of the ideas not quite to his liking, and not liking ideas is a common reason for misunderstanding them.

Inasmuch as an introductory essay should have a purpose that warrants interposing it between the reader and his object, the purpose of this one is mostly to help him avoid the experience of my distinguished military acquaintance. One way to avoid it, naturally, is to avoid reading Clausewitz, which has been the way chosen by all but a minute proportion of literate people, including the great majority of those who have not hesitated to cite or quote him. Civilians have not read his work because

¹ The first of the two Rosinski quotations is from the revised edition of *The German Army* (Washington, 1944), p. 73, and the second is from the original edition (London, 1940), p. 122.

they have erroneously deemed the field recondite, or perhaps too remote from their interests; and the military, except for some special few, have had other reasons for ignoring it. The present reader, however, having the book in hand, obviously has the best of intentions. Let him, therefore, be assured at once that he will not be hindered by abstruse language or difficult-to-fathom ideas. Books on strategy are anyway not often of that character. They may be dull or they may be wild, but they are rarely difficult.

There are indeed some problems in reading Clausewitz, which we shall attempt to explore, because directly confronting these problems helps to diminish them. For one thing, large parts of the work are truly dated, and other large parts sound more dated than they really are because the historical examples cited to illustrate them are inevitably of older times. Also, *On War* is a work in which one easily loses the forest for the trees. Its very length, stretched by innumerable qualifications to its propositions, contributes to this quality, and it is certainly not on the same high level throughout.

Clausewitz himself made clear, in the "Notice" he left with his manuscript, that the revision he planned for the work would be drastic and would "rid the first six books of a good deal of superfluous material, fill in various gaps, large and small, and make a number of generalities more precise in thought and form." In expressing his dissatisfaction with the manuscript as it stood he meant what he said, though many of his most dedicated interpreters seem to forget that. The contrast is often striking between the one chapter he regarded as being revised and completed to his satisfaction, which is the opening chapter of the work, and many of the other chapters. We must, in short, be prepared for a work which is unfinished and therefore on the whole imperfectly organized, often repetitious, and at times even rambling. Sometimes, on the other hand, it is too spare. Occasionally the exact meaning of one or more points is obscure, not from any inherent difficulty of comprehension but because the author did not clearly set down his meaning. What exactly does he mean, for example, by his important concept of "the culminating point of victory" when he seems, not by accident, to exclude Napoleon's march to Moscow as an example of it? Actually, his omitting it is a clue to his meaning, though the casual reader will not notice it.

Although we shall hold that Clausewitz is worth reading today because he is basically timeless, everyone is a child of his age and his culture, and he whose mind eagerly absorbs new ideas will be such in a quite special way. We have already noted and will say more about the datedness of much of Clausewitz's writing, but we encounter also a special idiom, not

only of language but occasionally also of thought. A man who is a young German at the beginning of the nineteenth century (and whose life will be over before a third of that century is run), who is intensely intellectual but also with limited formal education, who is deeply sensitive and passionate and yet lives in an age and is committed to a profession which together expose him to an extraordinary experience with war, and who, like all of us, has certain peculiarities of personality and character, will write in a manner that somehow reflects these things. With Clausewitz no more than with any other great thinker and writer are we dealing with a disembodied intellect.

It would be space-consuming, probably tiresome, and in any case beyond our purpose to attempt the always hazardous business of linking some special thought Clausewitz expresses to what we know of his experience or think we can guess of his character, but sometimes it cannot be avoided. Many readers, for example, have been thrown into confusion at the very outset of *On War* by the author's notion of "absolute war" (a term less used in this translation than in others), and by the metamorphosis that occurs within a few pages from concentration on the needs and properties of the absolute or "pure concept" of war to discussion of something much more practical. Yet what could be more natural to an author living in the age and land of Kant and Hegel who is determined to write what readers will recognize as the most deeply penetrating as well as comprehensive treatise of war that has ever been written? Actually, Clausewitz's very slight infusion of metaphysics into this work poses no problems that cannot be explained with relatively few words, and it virtually disappears after those early pages. The greatest misfortune that has resulted from it has been the reputation accorded Clausewitz even by those who are supposed to know him well as someone who is deeply philosophical, in the metaphysical meaning of that term. His contemporary and rival, Antoine Henri Jomini, was already making such remarks about him—besides calling his work "excessive and arrogant"—and such appraisals have continued to the present day.

The mood with which we approach Clausewitz is bound to be affected by all the extravagant things that have been written about him and his chief work. Rosinski, whom we have already quoted, also says the following: "Out of Scharnhorst's fragmentary and aphoristic heritage he developed the systematic, closely knit, perfectly balanced theory, in which every factor, every aspect, every argument had its place from which it could not be removed without fatally endangering the delicate balance of the whole. From the deep appreciation of the revolution wrought by Napoleon in the art of war, he reached an infinitely broader

conception embracing within its elastic framework and majestic sweep every conceivable form of warfare and strategy."² This hyperbole is clearly denied by Clausewitz himself. A work which has literally not one word to say about naval warfare can hardly be covering "every conceivable form of warfare and strategy" even for its own time, and we have already noted that Clausewitz was planning a revision which would clearly have removed some "factors" and "arguments."

A French scholar of an earlier generation who wrote a book about Clausewitz speaks of him as *le plus Allemand des Allemands* . . . *A tout instant chez lui on a la sensation d'être dans le brouillard métaphysique* ("The most German of Germans. . . . In reading him one constantly has the feeling of being in a metaphysical fog").³ This is simply nonsense. Such quotations could be piled up, and they are by people who knew or professed to know Clausewitz's work intimately, as Rosinski certainly did. Awe may be an appropriate mood for some occasions, particularly religious ones, but it is not conducive to calm, perceptive, and therefore critical study.

We have already said something about readers not liking all the Clausewitzian ideas. Both soldiers and civilians have disliked some of them, often for contrary reasons. The soldier trained to revere offensive spirit does not feel comfortable with the argument that the defensive is obviously the stronger form of war, and he especially does not like being told that the military aim must always be subordinated to the political objectives laid down by the civilian leaders. Among civilians there may be some who feel that there is more than a shade too much ruthlessness in Clausewitz, though this attitude is likely to characterize nonreaders who have formed their opinions by hearsay rather than those who have actually read the book. Clausewitz knew that war is not a pleasant affair, and he enjoins the reader to be immediately clear about that too, so that they can proceed jointly to consider the business in hand—which is to understand basically what war is all about, on its various levels of commitment and of violence. One purpose of such understanding is to increase chances of success in this most demanding of pursuits.

By his time the idea was already ancient that war was inherently evil and often also foolish. His countryman and older contemporary, Immanuel Kant, whose work he knew and respected, had written a tract, *Perpetual Peace* (1795), reasserting that idea within the framework of the new knowledge of his time. But this view enjoyed immeasurably less

² *The German Army*, 2nd ed., 1944, p. 73.

³ Hubert Camon, *Clausewitz* (Paris, 1911), p. vii, quoted by H. Rothfels in "Clausewitz," *Makers of Modern Strategy*, E. M. Earle, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), p. 93.

acceptance then than it does today, which is not to say that it is altogether commonplace now. Anyway, here was a man whose military career was begun when he was age twelve, in an army still imbued with the traditions of Frederick the Great, at a moment that marked the onset of nearly a quarter-century of wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Also, from what clues he left in his letters and his personal behavior about the nature of his inner life, he seems to have had something more than the usual psychological need for recognition, which for him could come only through some mode of excellence in the profession in which he found himself. Thus there is no reason to wonder at his dedication to his grim subject. He was sufficiently sensitive to the extreme costs and hazards of war, of which he had had no lack of personal experience, to place a high value on competence in conducting it expertly and thus with optimum chance of success. Also, what is much rarer, he attached comparable importance to understanding its purpose.

But the reader may have another and more stubborn concern. Can it be, he will ask, that a book written a century and a half ago, and on war of all things, is really worth his time? That question would arise even if nuclear weapons had never been invented, but those weapons do indeed seem to make a totally new universe. Or do they? There has been a good deal of fighting without nuclear weapons since the two were used on Japan in 1945, including wars which for some of the participants represented total commitment. Still, if it is not yet an established fact it is at minimum a strong possibility that, at least between the great powers who possess nuclear weapons, the whole character of war as a means of settling differences has been transformed beyond all recognition. Why then read Clausewitz?

In our crowded times, it is not enough to argue that a book has exceptional merit. Too many books do which we have no time to read. The commitment to the reading of a substantial book like the present one represents in striking fashion the play of what the economist calls "opportunity cost" (that relinquished object or benefit which might have been gained for the same units of value). Reading time, even for the most favored, is a sharply limited commodity. The reading of a serious book is therefore always a serious undertaking, rationally considered in the form of the following question: Is the reading of this book at this time worth more to me than the reading of any other works that I could read with the same time?

It is well that we do not keep this question at the forefronts of our minds, or we should worry so much each time whether we have made the supremely right choice that we should get nothing read. Still, except for some circumstances where the choices are made for us, as in undergradu-

ate courses, we do in fact tend to keep this question somewhere in the backs of our minds. We pick and choose among books to read and put many of them down unfinished. Among the books we skip are usually the classics, especially those which are not purely literary, because we tend to assume, first, that however great they were in their own times they are not particularly pertinent to ours, and second, that whatever wisdom they do contain which is relevant to our times has no doubt been absorbed and exploited by later writers.

Clausewitz's *On War* does not conform with either assumption. Other classics may sometimes be worth reading because they have a distinctive flavor not fully represented or captured even by those later writers who have fully absorbed and refined their thought—Darwin's *Origin of Species* comes to mind, and there are others. But Clausewitz's work stands out among those very few older books which have presented profound and original insights that have not been adequately absorbed in later literature. Naturally, it will be read only by those who have some strong interest, professional or otherwise, in the subject of its title, but for them it is quite indispensable. Of course, there are other books in the field much worth reading in addition to Clausewitz, certainly including some dealing with contemporary and especially nuclear weapons issues, but none can equal it in importance or displace it in its timelessness.

Clausewitz's work was, for example, far more pertinent to the problems and issues of World War I than was Ferdinand Foch's *Principles of War*, published in 1903, only eleven years before that war began. For Foch and his followers the idea of the dominance of the political objective, of which Clausewitz made so much, simply did not apply to modern times. In addition, they romanticized the role of the commander and apotheosized the offensive to a fantastic degree that also proved, insofar as it was followed in action, inordinately costly. Foch gave lip service to the name of Clausewitz, whose work he claimed to have read and absorbed, but his own writing is of totally different character.

Clausewitz indeed made much of the role and talent of the commanding general, but altogether more soberly than Foch. He weighed with great care the relationship of the offensive to the defensive, concluding that the latter was the stronger form of war. If it was so in his time, it was much more so in Foch's, though the latter took the opposite view. For the war of 1914-1918 Foch's highly influential book may not have been dated but it was dreadfully wrong, and it took a whole sea of blood to prove it. There is no utility in reading Foch today, except to observe to what aberrant extremes thinking in this field can go and how ill-considered can be the slogans that guide the military policies of great nations.

And, of course, reading it helps one to understand the stupendous catastrophe that was the First World War.

Another work written after that war which had enormous influence on the organization especially of American forces and on the waging of great campaigns in World War II, that of Giulio Douhet, is also today a museum piece. The several essays usually gathered together under the name of the most famous of them—*Command of the Air*—are brilliant, but they are also narrow in outlook, dogmatic, and, as the Second World War proved, in all their specific prescriptions altogether wrong. Air power enthusiasts refer to Douhet reverently as the “prophet of air power,” and they will therefore reject this appraisal, perhaps indignantly. But all they need do is read him carefully, checking his detailed predictions against the experience of the Second World War, which was the “war of the future” he was writing about. He argued that battle lines on the ground would remain static and that the decision would anyway be won by the nation’s bombers in just a few days. Certainly that is not what happened. It is no doubt true that his ideas would be more appropriate to nuclear weapons than they were to the bombs he had in mind, but it is also true that the nuclear age hardly needs a Douhet to tell it what havoc and terror can be achieved by these weapons. In any case, his specific prescriptions would now be out of date. As with Foch’s book we again have a body of work that has no utility today.

Coming down to our own era, Clausewitz is probably as pertinent to our times as most of the literature specifically written about nuclear war. Among works of the latter genre we pick up a good deal of useful technological and other lore, but we usually sense also the absence of that depth and scope which are particularly the hallmark of Clausewitz. We miss especially his tough-minded pursuit of the idea that war in all its phases must be rationally guided by meaningful political purposes. That insight is quite lost in most of the contemporary books, including one which bears a title that boldly invites comparison with the earlier classic, Herman Kahn’s *On Thermonuclear War*. Kahn incidentally based his main argument—that the United States could survive and therefore ought not too much fear a thermonuclear war with its chief rival—on technical premises which are certainly obsolete today, whether or not they were realistic when his book was published in the not-so-distant year of 1960. Also, Kahn’s book does not, as Clausewitz’s does, have much to say of relevance to the Vietnam War which has intervened since and which caused the United States so much soul-searching and agony, though far less of the latter than that borne by the nation it set out to save. Kahn may still usefully supplement Clausewitz, but only in a lim-

ited sense is he more timely, and he does not in any way help to supplant him.

From all this we deduce that there must be something about the field of strategic thinking and writing that makes it different from other fields of intellectual endeavor. In most other fields the works of older writers tend to become outmoded because they are either absorbed or disproved. They are sometimes interesting to read for historical reasons and often also for various intrinsic qualities, but they are easily skipped without significant penalty. I have mentioned the name of Darwin, who represents (as does Freud in another field) the great discoverer, whose contribution is never quite matched by any successor. But there is also the great innovator rather than the discoverer, like Adam Smith, whose life span overlapped that of Clausewitz and who wrote in a field remarkably akin to strategy in several respects, including a preoccupation with efficiency in the use of resources for specified goals and with solutions which are at least pragmatic, whether or not they confirm laws describing invariable behavior.

His great seminal work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) is generally acknowledged to be the fountainhead of modern economics, owing something to others but nevertheless marking a distinctive break with the mercantilist tradition which preceded it and to which no economist worthy of the name would thenceforward return. But this great work has had mighty successors in the two centuries since its publication, and work in this field continues today a most flourishing business, easily attracting its due proportion of gifted minds. All of Smith's essential contribution was fully absorbed and further developed by later writers, who recognized their indebtedness to him. Clausewitz, on the other hand, though he easily compares in talent and innovation with an Adam Smith, has had no comparable cavalcade of brilliant successors.

Thus, in the more noteworthy writings on strategy there is a discontinuity that is not observed in other fields, partly because those fields are far more densely populated with eager workers and partly because of the discontinuity of war itself. Also, while genius has scarcity value in every field of human endeavor, in the field of strategic writing it has a special rarity. The reason is that soldiers are rarely scholars, and civilians are rarely students of strategy. Clausewitz's genius is indisputable, and also in his field unique.

We therefore find ourselves with at least two reasons why Clausewitz continues to be worth the most careful study: first, he was striving always, with a success that derived from his great gifts as well as his intense capacity for work, to get to the fundamentals of each issue he examined, beginning with the fundamental nature of war itself; and second, he is

virtually alone in his accomplishment. His is not simply the greatest but the only truly great book on war. Where various other writers on that subject seek to be analytical rather than simply historical, they may be highly respectable in their achievements but as compared with Clausewitz the invariable conclusion has to be that they do not come close.

One must so judge, for example, the work of Alfred Thayer Mahan, who of course limited himself to the naval side of warfare and whose writing is mostly historical. His dimensions and characteristics as a thinker are reflected in his owning himself greatly indebted to Jomini but hardly at all to the latter's greater contemporary, Clausewitz. Another naval historian and analyst contemporary with Mahan, Julian S. Corbett, did indeed pay attention to the work of Clausewitz at great benefit to his own. We might incidentally note, insofar as we are thinking of books being dated, that though Mahan and Corbett lived and wrote in an age of essentially modern steam warships, their writings, so tremendously influential especially in the case of Mahan, develop doctrines deriving almost exclusively from naval warfare in the days of sail.

Nevertheless, we must confront the issue of datedness and consider to what extent this factor detracts from the utility of reading Clausewitz today. Obviously, to the military historian it will detract nothing at all but will make the work, on the contrary, advantageous and indeed necessary to read. If he wonders, for example, why the armies of Wellington and Blücher were spread over so much territory when Napoleon came up to fight them in June of 1815, he will gain some enlightenment from Chapter Thirteen of Book Five, which happens to be on the subject of billets, and the description there of that situation gains authority as well as clarity from the fact that Clausewitz was then with the Prussian army and fought in two of the ensuing battles. But much more than that, Clausewitz was himself a keen military historian—*On War* represents less than a quarter of all his work that ultimately found its way into print, and much of the rest is historical in nature—and he was finely alert to the changes in military practices which separated his own time from the generations preceding. Much of his shrewd observation on these matters finds its way in highly condensed fashion into the present work.

Naturally, military historians comprise a very small proportion of the human race, and a small proportion even of those who might want to read Clausewitz. However, anyone interested enough in what Clausewitz represents to wish to read his book ought surely not be deterred by the fact that one will in the process gain some insights into how war was fought in his day. Our own generation is unique, but sadly so, in producing a school of thinkers who are allegedly experts in military strategy and

who are certainly specialists in military studies but who know virtually nothing of military history, including the history of our most recent wars, and who seem not to care about their ignorance. Their skill in systems analysis and related esoteric disciplines is undoubtedly of enormous value in helping them to tread their way among the conflicting claims of the sellers and proponents of different varieties of our extraordinarily complicated modern weaponry. Yet the only empirical data we have about how people conduct war and behave under its stresses is our experience with it in the past, however much we have to make adjustments for subsequent changes in conditions.

Until this new school developed in the period following the Second World War, it was axiomatic that an intimate knowledge of its history was indispensable to an understanding of war. Clausewitz believed it devoutly. "Undoubtedly, the knowledge which is basic to the art of war," he says (in Chapter Six of Book Two), "is empirical." And also, "Historical examples make everything clear, and also provide the best kind of proof in the empirical sciences." Nor is he content with such generalizations, but instead goes on to a careful and characteristically penetrating analysis of the ways in which military history should be used to build up theory.

Still, we cannot avoid considering the drawbacks which attend the fact that Clausewitz died almost a century and a half ago as these lines are written. This condition affects the present utility of his work in various ways, the most obvious of which we have already mentioned. Clausewitz himself asserts that the utility of an historical illustration is generally inversely proportional to its age, and he announces that he will avoid in this work examples antedating the War of the Austrian Succession, the beginning of which in 1740 coincides with the beginning of the First Silesian War and, more significantly, the accession of Frederick II, later "the Great," to the throne of Prussia. Thus, one finds throughout *On War* hardly more than mention of another undoubted genius of war, the Duke of Marlborough, and of his talented colleague, Prince Eugene of Savoy, who collaborated in the brilliant campaign that ended with Blenheim only thirty-six years before Frederick's accession.

Thus, Clausewitz, who as Peter Paret points out wrote also a study on Gustavus Adolphus, confines himself in this work, with but rare exceptions, to historical examples deriving from the seventy-five years ending with Waterloo, which was the last battle he knew and which occurred sixteen years before his death. He dwells on the extraordinarily significant changes in the art of war that occurred during that period, and we cannot help observing that those changes have to be compared to those which have occurred since because of the vast technological revolution

in warfare that began about when he died. After all, the weaponry used in Frederick's time differed only slightly from that used in Napoleon's, and to us it is remarkable that very significant changes in practice could occur despite insignificant changes in arms, not to mention transportation or communication.

Anyway, the illustrative historical material Clausewitz uses has the double disadvantage for us, first, that even the latest of it is so far removed from us in time and condition that Clausewitz by his own standards of acceptance would not have considered it, and second, largely because of that remoteness, exceedingly few of his readers will have any prior knowledge at all of the many campaigns or battles he refers to. One supposes that everyone knows something about Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. Tschaikovsky wrote a popular overture about it and Tolstoy a very great novel, and the latter work has been made into several movies and a television series. But who today besides a few specialists knows anything about the campaigns of Frederick, or for that matter about most of the other campaigns of Napoleon?

Fortunately, in his use of an historical example Clausewitz often reconstructs enough about it to give us an adequate picture of what went on and its relevance to the point he is making. But often he does not. We must, therefore, admit that simply from the expository point of view, we lose a great deal of the richness of his analysis as it must have presented itself to his contemporaries. Naturally, we can take steps to amend this shortcoming by learning something of the history he utilizes—a far less severe burden than, say, learning Greek in order to enjoy the poems of Sappho—but in the net we have to write this factor off as a debit.

There is indeed an obverse side to this issue. War, as Clausewitz asserts in one place, is *different from anything else*. Thus, however much it may change within itself from one era to another, its essential character remains distinct from every other pursuit of man. By the same token, it is not in vain that we seek certain elemental qualities which change very little if at all. We are not speaking of the "unchanging principles" of Jomini but of something more fundamental. This element touches basically on why we read Clausewitz, who comes closer to revealing those fundamentals to us than does anyone else, but it also affects the matter of his historical examples.

The reader can himself provide from whatever store of historical knowledge and personal experience he may possess an example to test whether the point in question remains valid, or at least whether it still applied to a much later time than Clausewitz's. Thus where the latter, drawing examples from the campaigns of Frederick and of Napoleon, concedes that there are exceptions to the rule of concentration (which

otherwise he most strongly supports) and suggests that there are times when a commander *should* divide his forces in the presence of the enemy, one can reflect on how brilliantly Lee did so at Chancellorsville or how Admiral William F. Halsey foolishly failed to do so at Leyte Gulf. And there is a thrill of discovery in seeing suddenly leaping out at one, in the very last chapter of the work, a pattern of ideas which must certainly have provided the conceptual inspiration for the military aspects of the famous Schlieffen Plan. One may remember too that Count von Schlieffen was sufficiently a student of Clausewitz to have absorbed the latter's repeated maxims about not letting the political end be dominated by the military objective, for he is on record as having urged in writing that if the Plan should fail, as of course it did in 1914, Germany should at once seek a negotiated peace. Unfortunately for Germany and for the world, this most basic of the Clausewitzian ideas was discarded by the successors of Schlieffen and of the younger von Moltke. The Schlieffen Plan, to be sure, had an enormous built-in defect of its own which was basically anti-Clausewitzian—that is, the requirement for the invasion of Belgium (originally also Holland), which was bound to bring Britain into the war.

It is for any student of war, or of politics, a never-ending exercise, in reading of some older problems and how they were handled, to make adjustments to later times. It soon becomes automatic, because it really presents few serious intellectual difficulties. Some ideas and admonitions are immediately recognized as still pertaining today, others as being useful only for the better understanding of military or political history.

More troublesome, admittedly, than the question of mere examples are those quite long stretches where Clausewitz discusses methods of marching, provisioning, and the like that belong to a vanished past. This does not apply to all of Books Four to Seven inclusive, but it applies to much that is found within those books. Over these stretches one's reading may tend to speed up somewhat—perhaps a little warning will help one in accomplishing the acceleration—but one would have to be very pressed for time to want to skip them entirely. In these passages the author shares with us his great knowledge of the conduct of campaigns in his own time, and he is at some pains to make us aware of certain important changes from earlier times. Various abbreviated editions have omitted some of these sections, but it is no doubt best to let the reader decide for himself whether or not he desires to accompany so great a master into these areas. All too little of what Clausewitz wrote has been published in English translation, and few of us would want to see his masterwork truncated. Besides, the reader will find that even in the most

unlikely pages he will encounter some sage and penetrating observations that are characteristically Clausewitzian and that apply as much to our own day as they did to his.

Apart from the question of obsolescence or datedness, there are other characteristics of Clausewitz which, though they may be virtues rather than defects, militate against recognition of his genius and accomplishment. Chief among these is his pronounced disinclination to provide formulas or axioms as guides to action. He is often intent upon demonstrating the pitfalls of such axioms, which is the quality chiefly distinguishing him from Jomini, as well as from virtually all his successors. That is one of the chief reasons why military people are so often disappointed with Clausewitz, for they are particularly accustomed in their training to absorbing against a tight schedule of time specific rules for conduct, a practice reflected in their broad use of the term "indoctrination." Clausewitz, on the contrary, invites his readers to ruminate with him on the complex nature of war, where any rule that admits of no exceptions is usually too obvious to be worth much discourse.

This quality is seen especially in his attitude toward such notions as were already beginning to be called "principles of war." Though he could hardly avoid establishing certain generalizations, which is inevitably the result and the purpose of analytical study, he specifically and vehemently rejected the notion that the conduct of war can reasonably be guided by a small number of pithy axioms. It was Jomini, not Clausewitz, who has been responsible for the endlessly quoted remark that "methods change but principles are unchanging," and it is largely for that reason that Jomini had far the greater influence on military thinking in his own and later times, at least among non-Germans. It was Jomini who was looked to for guidance by both sides in the American Civil War, which in his very long life he lived to see concluded. And, as we have seen, it was Jomini whom Mahan called "my best military friend."

It was only following the First World War that various (initially American) field manuals began attempting to encapsulate centuries of experience and volumes of reflection into a few tersely worded and usually numbered "principles of war," such as the "principle of concentration," the "principle of economy of force," the "principle of surprise," and so forth. Though books have been written to explain and elaborate these principles, the main emphasis has been on keeping them lean and taut—to make them more readily communicated in a few days of a war college course by whoever happened to be assigned as an instructor for the purpose, and also more easily carried into combat situations. Clausewitz would have been appalled at such attempts, and not surprised at

some of the terrible blunders that have been perpetrated in the name of those "principles." Some who in his own time attempted comparable things he called "the scribblers of systems and compendia."

The price of admission to the Clausewitzian alternative of intensive rumination, sometimes in pages most densely packed with sharp insights, is a commitment to be responsive. This requires a different kind of reading from what we are normally accustomed to. In our time training courses are given to increase reading speed, and no one doubts the benefit of speedy reading with respect to the great masses of stuff that almost any professional person has to cover. With Clausewitz, however, one should be prepared to tarry, to pause frequently for reflection. Clausewitz's basic wish about his book, though no modest one, will reward anyone who does so.

"It was my ambition," he said in a note found among his papers, "to write a book 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."

Thinking that we have interposed enough comment between the title page and the text, we have placed at the end of the book "A Guide to the Reading of *On War*." Eds.