

A review of
Clausewitz on Strategy
Edited by von Ghyczy, von Oetinger, and Bassford,
published by
John Wiley & Sons (New York, 2001)
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Rating: 9

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net five point scale from 6-10.)

If you look at the names of the editors of *Clausewitz on Strategy*, you might think that they had duped you into a looking-glass bit of ethnocentrism. After all, here we have

1. a book edited by
2. people of apparent Prussian ancestry about
3. another book written 170 years ago by
4. another Prussian.

I believe, however, that the editors have done us a considerable service. They've reduced Clausewitz's 600-hundred-plus page book *On War* to a manageable size and reorganized the content to fit a 21st-century business audience.

In this brief review, I want to call attention to just three areas where Clausewitz made a worthwhile contribution. These include differentiating between *tactics and strategy*; describing the consequences of *fog*; and describing the critical role of *friction*.

It might help to remember the times in which Clausewitz wrote his book. He served in the Prussian (and Russian) armies against Napoleon and the French onslaught against the whole of Europe. Napoleon achieved his great success largely owing to his superior use of strategy, even though the concept of *strategy* did not enjoy widespread currency. Clausewitz took on the task of exploring strategy as an aspect of war.

Clausewitz thus takes pains to make clear what he means by strategy and how it differs from other aspects of war-making. He writes, "According to our classification, tactics teaches the *use of armed forces in engagements*, while strategy teaches the *use of engagements to achieve the objectives of the war*." That is, tactics concern shorter-term *means* in the ultimate strategic service of longer-term *ends* or objectives. He also makes clear that strategy requires more will than tactics.

"It sounds strange, but everyone familiar with war in this regard would agree that it takes much greater strength of will to make a key strategic decision than a tactical one. With tactics, the actor is swept along by the moment and feels caught up in a whirlwind so intense that to struggle against it would result in the direst of consequences. ... With strategy, one does not see at least half the situation with one's own eyes; rather, everything must be guessed at and presumed, which decreases one's level of conviction."

A soldier makes tactical decisions within the pressure of the moment. Making strategic decisions, however, requires greater will even while it results from less conviction.

This lower conviction results directly from the second key concept Clausewitz introduces: *fog*. The general cannot observe everything with his own eyes. He must instead depend on intelligence. “By the word *intelligence* we mean all the information we have about the enemy and his country, that is, the basis for our own plans actions. ... Much of the intelligence that we receive in war is contradictory, even more of it is plain wrong, and most of it is fairly dubious.” Hence, the general must try to see while plagued by fog originating from several sources. Two ‘facts’ may contradict one another; a ‘fact’ may simply turn out wrong; a ‘fact’ might come from an unreliable source. But these ‘facts’ come together to form the intelligence the general uses, coupled with sound underlying theories, to reach strategic decisions.

Now the general reaches the decision, creates a plan, and launches its execution. Here the third critical concept comes into play: *friction*.

“... in war, countless minor events – the sorts of things that can never be properly taken into account on paper – conspire to decrease efficiency, and one always falls far short of the goal. These difficulties happen over and over again, and cause a sort of friction that only those who have experienced war can accurately understand.

“Friction is the concept that best approximates the distinction between real war and war on paper.”

On paper, the plan looks flawless. Then comes the reality of working against another general also equipped with intelligence and resources. A key messenger gets delayed; a critical supply becomes depleted; a ‘fact’ turns out mistaken. Scores of small unforeseen elements come together to undermine the general’s efforts. I can almost hear the football coach lamenting, “On paper, we were the better team; but we had to play the other team on the field not on paper.”

As I look back through my notes on the book, I see a fourth concept that comes up in the book. The editors write in their introduction:

“His own personality and temperament were not of the sort he describes in his famous discussion of military genius and the ideal of the great commander. Rather, Clausewitz was essentially a brilliant subordinate of the type who helps his superior to better understand himself, his goals, and the obstacles to their achievement.”

Without using the language, or perhaps even without the category to work with, they describe Clausewitz as what Robert Kelley would call an Exemplary Follower.

What can leaders within contemporary organizations – not generals within armies, but leaders of schools and businesses and nonprofits – do with ideas from a 170-year-old book on war? Consider: Does your organization have a clear sense of the difference between and the need for a dynamic balance between tactics and strategy? Does your organization build project plans with an eye toward the inevitable play of fog and friction? Does your organization have an army of Exemplary Followers to “help the superior better understand himself”?