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(../index.htm)



Figure 1. Color-enhanced detail from M.C. Escher, Stars. The complex three-dimensional structure is built entirely of intersecting triangles, and the living creatures who inhabit it are, most conveniently for our purposes, chameleons.

TIP-TOE THROUGH THE TRINITY

THE STRANGE PERSISTENCE OF TRINITARIAN WARFARE

• Mobile Compatible •

This 'working paper' is a heavily edited, enlarged, and updated version of one delivered to a conference at Oxford University on "Clausewitz in the 21st Century (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199232024?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0199232024&linkCode=sm2&tag=theclausewitzhom>)" in March 2005; it has been frequently updated ever since. It is designed for presentation in electronic format on the web, particularly because of the serious necessity of animating some of the images it contains. [This version is dated **15 SEP 2020**; a rather substantial change was made in July 2019, regarding the terms "true chameleon" and "mere intellect" in our translation of Section 28 of Book I, Chapter 1.] Two rather different (and shorter) published articles have been derived from this working paper: Christopher Bassford, Chapter 4, "The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought," in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199232024?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0199232024&linkCode=sm2&tag=theclausewitzhom>) (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.74-90; Christopher Bassford, "The Strange Persistence of Trinitarian Warfare (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christopher_Bassford2/publication/292366213_The_strange_persistence_of_Trinitarian_warfare/links/571a63490-strange-persistence-of-Trinitarian-warfare.pdf)," in Ralph Rotte and Christoph Schwarz, eds., *War and Strategy* (New York: Nova Science, 2011), pp.45-54.

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INTRODUCTION

I am a historian. Or, rather, I was formally trained as an historian. Today, as a "Professor of Strategy," I'm not sure I can still characterize myself that way. But my approach to teaching strategy is essentially an historical approach. I routinely start out a new seminar group with the question, "So: Why do we study history, anyway?" Invariably, some earnest young colonel will volunteer that hoary old line from George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I will then fix what I hope is a withering eye on this student and say something to the effect of, "Well, Bubba/Bubbette, I've got some bad news for you: Those of us who do remember the past are also condemned to repeat it. We simply have the added pleasure of knowing we've been down this damned rathole before."

Unfortunately, even this minor pleasure does not appear to be widely shared. It has been barely one generation since the American defeat in Indochina. Nonetheless, in a dazzling display of historical forgetfulness worthy of the brain-damaged female protagonist of the movie "Fifty First Dates," our national security community appears to be stunned to discover that warfare can be waged by groups other than Weberian states. The most disoriented commentators (commonly 'military affairs' or 'national security specialist' types) may be excused on the grounds of historical naïveté, but some of the worst offenders are military historians. Prompted by what evidently appears to many writers to be the utterly new kind of warfare waged by organizations like, say, Al Qaeda, they spin out bold new buzzwords designed, shaman-style, to capture the spirit of this earthshakingly new innovation by giving it a name. Some popular examples are "non-state war" and "Fourth- (or Fifth-) Generation War." Then there's the stunningly uncreative "the New Warfare," a label that, given the nature of the historical process, cannot possibly mean anything at all.¹ Possibly the most misleading (to the few who are equipped to assign any meaning whatsoever to the phrase) is "non-trinitarian war," a term coined by Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld to encapsulate a new, allegedly "non-Clausewitzian" approach to theorizing about war.²

In reality, Clausewitz's trinitarian concept bears little resemblance to the concept Creveld claims to be refuting. The purposes of this paper are to examine the meaning and significance of this trinity and to explore its continuing relevance to contemporary political/military problems. A warning to "hard-headed realists," "operators," and "practical men": Clausewitz was a practical soldier and he intended his work to serve as a very practical approach to real-world complexities—*without avoiding the complexity*. If you are one of those people who are repelled by the allegedly "hair-splitting" character of Clausewitzian theory, I advise you to stop reading now. I would also suggest that you quit—today—any profession connected to the higher levels of politics, public policy, or war.

The Range of Approaches to Clausewitz

My approach to any issue concerning Clausewitz is an eclectic one, reflecting the wide range of correspondents I engage as editor of *The Clausewitz Homepage*.³ These tend to fall into four broad schools:

- an "Original Intent" school, primarily historians narrowly focused on Clausewitz's own influences, drives, goals, and often the presumed limits to his thought and perceptions in the specific context of Prussia in the periods immediately surrounding the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon.
- an "Inspirationalist" school, primarily present-minded political scientists, strategic-affairs types, soldiers, and business theorists who are interested in freely adapting Clausewitzian concepts exclusively to current issues. It also includes some historians interested in applying Clausewitzian ideas to historical problems outside the boundaries of the modern West.
- a "Receptionist" school,⁴ primarily historians who are interested in the ideas and impacts of Clausewitzian inspirationalists over time.
- an "Editorial" school—people who think they have clear ideas as to what Clausewitz "really meant" and how to edit the rough draft Clausewitz left behind in order to more faithfully convey his concepts.⁵

In practice, I find that most of us—however much "purists" of one stripe or another might decry the heresies involved—tend to straddle these various schools to varying degrees, at varying times, for varying purposes. As one very bright business strategist once said to me, "It would be nice to know what's 'true,' of course, but the more important question is, What is *useful*?"⁶ After all, most readers of Clausewitz are fundamentally interested, not in understanding Clausewitz, but in understanding *WAR* (or perhaps its analogs, as in phases of business, etc.). In pursuit of the latter goal, each of the schools has a valuable contribution to make. Fortunately, I find that my own unfolding understanding of war itself seems to keep uncanny pace with my understanding of Clausewitz.

Universalizing Clausewitz

As a final prefatory comment, I should note a certain bias, of which I am well aware, in my own thinking. This is a bias towards universalizing Clausewitz, who, after all, sought with *Vom Kriege* to formulate a valid general theory of war. Thus I think it would be a "good" thing if the entire war-studies community could use the essentials of Clausewitzian theory as the common basis for comparative military-political studies across all human societies and history. A common understanding of the Trinity

would do much to advance that project. While I am under no illusions that the achievement of such a common understanding is imminent (which would make me certifiably insane), that goal is implicit in the very existence of “military theory” as a coherent field of inquiry. Our current utter confusion will continue to prevail until we find some common theoretical structure within which to conduct our debates. I do not have space to explore that notion here to any great degree, but it certainly influences my choices in translation and in defining terms like policy and politics: We want definitions that are not confined to Prussia in the era of the French Revolution, the Westphalian-model state system, or Western civilization. As, I think, did Clausewitz. Because so much of the debate over Clausewitz tends to reflect an academic “instinct for the capillaries,” I offer this bias as a convenient target for anyone seeking the jugular vein of my analysis.

The Problem of the Trinity

The original version of this paper was instigated by Andreas Herberg-Rothe, who invited me to speak on this subject at Oxford University's conference on “Clausewitz in the 21st Century” in March 2005.⁷ I have been thinking systematically about this specific passage in *On War* since about 1991, and I am familiar with its intricacies and sandtraps. Thus it came not entirely as a surprise to me when the project began to metastasize. There is hardly a word or phrase in section 28 that cannot provoke debate, long before we get to wrestling with the section's overall meaning and import. The result is the present, bloated, digression-laden paper.

Conceptual trinities are inherently problematic, but especially in the context of contemporary American politics and policy. It is difficult enough to convey the meaning and implications of any single idea. But the world in which we actually operate is, despite what partisans and fundamentalists of various stripes like to pretend, never the simple unfolding of any one concept or force. Unfortunately, expanding a discussion even to two coexisting or contending ideas requires a philosophical leap into the obscure realm of “dialectical thinking”—especially if one's purpose is more sophisticated than seeking merely to eliminate one of the two options or to split the difference. Attempting to adjust to the complex situation routinely created by the ongoing collision of two real-world facts thus makes one, in modern parlance, a “hopeless flip-flopper.” Juggling the meaning and implications of three interacting realities makes even splitting the difference obnoxiously difficult and is utterly beyond the pale of acceptable political analysis. As famed political strategist James Carville notes, “If you say three things, you say nothing.”⁸ This contemporary reality makes sensible thought impossible, so we will ignore it in this paper.

Many of the difficulties specifically with Clausewitz's trinity seem at first to turn on issues of translation from the German into English. We will have to look at some of these issues. Ultimately, however, the problem has little to do with the German or English languages or cultures, per se. Rather, it derives from the different ways in which various individuals, disciplines, and subcultures understand the universe (or, as many phrase it, “How things *really* work”)—issues raised most ably by Alan Beyerchen's analysis of Clausewitz's worldview in terms of nonlinear mathematics and Complexity science.⁹ For reasons of space I will have to leave most of the staggering implications of Clausewitz's choice of nonlinear scientific imagery to Alan. The two issues are not unrelated, because both turn on the interactivity of interdependent variables. But we can discuss, e.g., the word-choice issues regarding policy, politics, and *Politik* in rather traditional terms without invoking any new cosmic paradigms.

The overarching problem with attempting any short discussion of the Trinity in isolation is that, however much various writers may try to treat the Trinity as a discrete theoretical “nugget”—indeed, as an afterthought, a conception that allegedly popped into Clausewitz's mind in the last phases of his unfinished writing process and was never effectively incorporated into the existing body of his theory¹⁰—in fact, the Trinity is the central concept in *On War*. I don't mean “central” in the sense that, say, Jon Sumida applied in his Oxford conference paper¹¹ to Clausewitz's concept of the inherent superiority of the defensive form of war. That is, I do not argue that the Trinity is Clausewitz's “most important” concept, that the desire to convey it was his primary motivation in writing, or that all of his other insights flowed from this one. Rather, I mean simply that the Trinity is the concept that ties all of Clausewitz's many ideas together and binds them into a meaningful whole. This remains true whether Clausewitz conceived his theoretical universe with this construct in mind, or instead discovered only at the end of his efforts that the seemingly divergent roads he had been traveling all led, inexorably, through this particular intersection.

An intersection is of little significance, however, without reference to the roads that run through it. Thus it is difficult to confine a discussion of the Trinity within tidy boundaries: Any comprehensive examination must lead to every major issue in *On War*.

In any case, the role of the Trinity within the narrow confines of Book One, Chapter One of *On War*, which reflects Clausewitz's most mature thinking, is crucial. That chapter must be read in terms of Clausewitz's dialectical examination of the nature of war. That discussion is very carefully structured but (purposefully, I suspect) largely unmarked by clear dialectical road markers labeling thesis, antithesis, and synthesis,¹² or even by sections clearly devoted to one stage of the dialectic or another. The Trinity itself represents the synthesis of this dialectical process. In this chapter, at least, it is no afterthought, clearly being foreshadowed throughout the discussion. And there is a very clear reference back to this discussion in Chapter 6B of Book 8:

All the circumstances on which [war] rests, and which determine its leading features, viz., our own power, the enemy's power, allies on both sides, the characteristics of the people and the governments respectively, etc., as enumerated in Book I, Chapter 1—are they not of a political nature, and are they not so intimately connected with the whole political intercourse that it is impossible to separate them from it? But this view is doubly indispensable if we reflect that real war is no such consistent effort tending to the last extreme, as it should be according to abstract theory, but a half-hearted thing, a contradiction in itself; that, as such, it cannot follow its own laws, but must be looked upon as part of another whole—and this whole is [*Politik*].¹³

As the synthesis of his dialectic on the nature of war, the Trinity incorporates but also supersedes Clausewitz's antithesis, i.e., the famous dictum that war is “merely the continuation of *Politik* by other means.” That antithesis is almost always treated as if it were the pinnacle and summary of *On War*'s argument. In a sense, the Trinity also contradicts this dictum, and in yet another sense it serves to define its key term—i.e., *Politik*.¹⁴

Unfortunately, it has been my dismal experience in observing Clausewitz's reception that fundamental, seemingly irresolvable, but most often unvoiced disagreements arise the moment that this word, *Politik*, and its most common English translations, politics and policy, are introduced. So our exploration of the Trinity must confront their various meanings and the confusion they create. I realize that most of us would prefer to skip this seemingly elementary-level exercise. But that is precisely why it is so necessary.

A WORKING TRANSLATION OF THE TEXT WE ARE DISCUSSING

[See the German original here (./readings/VomKriege1832/Book1.htm#1x28). See the Howard/Paret version here (HPtrinity.htm).]

28. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THEORY (Bassford translation)

War is thus not only a true chameleon, because it changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case, but it is also, when it is regarded as a whole and in relation to the tendencies that dominate within it, a fascinating trinity—composed of:

- 1) primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; **
- 2) the play of chance and probability, within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and
- 3) its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to mere intellect.***

The first of these three aspects concerns more the people; the second, more the commander and his army; the third, more the government. The passions that are to blaze up in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope that the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone.

These three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship among them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.

The task, therefore, is to keep our theory [of war] floating among these three tendencies, as among three points of attraction. [See Figure 2.]

What lines might best be followed to achieve this difficult task will be explored in the book on the theory of war [i.e., Book Two]. In any case, the conception of war defined here will be the first ray of light into the fundamental structure of theory, which first sorts out the major components and allows us to distinguish them from one another.

Shown in brown type are sections where this translation differs substantially from that in Howard/Paret.*15

You can compare the entire first German edition and the 1873 Graham translation side-by-side here (./CompareFrameSource1.htm).

** The elements of the Trinity are enumerated here for the sake of clarity. There are no numbers in *Vom Kriege* as it was published, though it is numbered in the oldest version we have of the concept, Aphorism #22 in Clausewitz, "Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung," *Zeitschrift für Kunst, Wissenschaft und Geschichte des Krieges*, Band 28, Viertes Heft 1833 to Band 35, Siebentes Heft, 1835, which was based on a manuscript that may date as early as 1817. See Paul Donker, "Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung" as the first version of Clausewitz's masterpiece: A textual comparison with *Vom Kriege*, "108 Research Paper, a publication (mostly in English) of the Faculty of Military Sciences, Netherlands Defence Academy, May 2016.

*** This is a revision from versions of this paper earlier than 2019. I originally translated the phrase as "pure reason," but that was based on an unwise effort to remain as close to the H/P version as possible. The new wording reflects a better reading in the light of Clausewitz's skepticism of human intelligence, similar to his phrase "logical fantasy" to describe the notion of "ideal war"—a major purpose of which was to demonstrate the dangers of relying on logic when dealing with human motives and behavior. The word *Blöße* modifying *Verstand* [intellect, understanding] is the same word H/P translates as "mere" in its phrase "the mere continuation of [*Politik*] by other means."

Text Box 1.**WORKING THROUGH CLAUSEWITZ'S DISCUSSION OF THE TRINITY****Translation Issues—Linguistic, Cultural, and Psychological**

The Howard/Paret translation (hereafter cited as "H/P") of section 28 is problematic in a great many ways. My discussion here reflects an alternate translation (Text Box 1, above) based on a systematic comparison of all three major English translations with the German original. The reader may want to grab a copy of the Howard/Paret translation and open it to page 89 (in the Princeton edition) or view it on-line here (HPtrinity.htm). My proposed corrections have been culled in many cases from the thoughts of others in this field, remain tentative, and are advanced here for the purpose of fostering debate and further progress. It should be no source of dismay to Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret that a whole community of scholars, given thirty years to contemplate their translation of this particular bit of text, should have come to a greater recognition of its importance and to discern alternatives in word choice more appropriate to our emerging understanding of Clausewitz's meaning(s). None of this would have happened without the impetus given to this field by their original efforts.

Opening Metaphors

Starting with the very first sentence, we run into problems, even before the Trinity itself is introduced. Evidently, Clausewitz believed that his discussion prior to this point should have prepared the reader to accept the metaphor that he now introduces of war as a true chameleon—which I take to mean that it easily changes its superficial appearance and coloration. But he also expects the reader to be prepared to understand that this metaphor, while pretty good as far as it goes,¹⁶ is still insufficient, because war also changes in far deeper ways (i.e., its "nature") according to the circumstances of each real-world case. By dropping the initial "thus," H/P de-links the Trinity concept from the rest of the chapter, making it appear to be a new departure. The H/P translation then gives the impression that the Trinity is being offered simply as an alternative metaphor. In truth, Clausewitz has already ceased riffing on the chameleon imagery. He is actually switching to a whole new metaphor, with a new structure, new entailments, and new purposes. The chameleon metaphor pointed to changes in war's appearance from case to case; the Trinity addresses the underlying forces that drive those changes.

The sense that Clausewitz's discussion is preliminary, tentative, and an afterthought is magnified by H/P's rendering of the conclusion to Section 28:

H/P: What lines might best be followed to achieve this difficult task will be explored in the book on the theory of war [Book Two]. At any rate, the preliminary concept of war which we have formulated casts a first ray of light on the basic structure of theory, and enables us to make an initial differentiation and identification of its major components.

This is very different from the proposed translation, which is more similar to the Graham and Jolles versions:

Jolles: What lines might best be followed to achieve this difficult task will be explored in the book on the theory of war [i.e., Book Two]. In any case, the conception of war defined here will be the first ray of light into the fundamental structure of theory, which first sorts out the major components and allows us to distinguish them from one another.

As Jon Sumida put it to me in a recent letter,*17 "Section 28's main point is that war's infinite variability in form poses extraordinary difficulties for anyone wanting to formulate a valid general theory of war, which is what Clausewitz believed his great contribution to theory would be." In this paragraph, Clausewitz confidently refers to the functions of theory—a problem he had already worked through before revising Chapter 1—and describes the elements of the Trinity as its main components.*18

"Trinity" as a Word-Choice

The next issue that arises is the very choice of the word "Trinity" (*Dreifaltigkeit*). Until recently, writers in English, at least, have largely ignored the cultural and psychological implications of this term, dripping as it is with religious implications. Since the re-emergence of religion as a strategic concern, especially since the attacks of 11 September 2001, I have been deluged with e-mails (some from markedly paranoid believers in other faiths) asking whether the Christian connotations of the English word-choice are a mere artifact of translation or—as is truly the case—a trustworthy reflection of the connotations of the original German. I am also asked whether this word-choice reflects some sort of mystical streak (not necessarily Christian) in Clausewitz's personality.

There are, of course, innumerable three-part theoretical constructs to which one can compare or relate Clausewitz's Trinity—in, *inter alia*, Plato, St. Augustine, or Darwin.*19 Indeed, linguistic theorists have often proposed that proto-Indo-European culture revolved around a three-way conception of society, and that this conception is a unique marker of the PIE cultural legacy.*20 J.F.C. Fuller had a mystical obsession with a number of three-component constructs: "earth, water, and air" and "men, women, and children"—to which a skeptical J.E. Edmonds suggested adding "coat, trousers, and boots" and "knife, fork, and spoon."*21 I do not find this approach a particularly fruitful avenue to understanding Clausewitz's meaning, but the other issues are of interest. There is no hint of religiosity or mysticism in Clausewitz's thinking. He is very much a product of the Enlightenment in that respect. And it seems pretty obvious that it was his interest in modern science that brought the three-points-of-attraction imagery of paragraphs 3 and 4 forcefully to his attention. I suspect that many of those who see the Trinity as evidence of mysticism are simply people with a traditionally linear, Newtonian world view, who are baffled by Clausewitz's obsession with chance, unpredictability, and disproportionality in the cause/effect relationship.*22

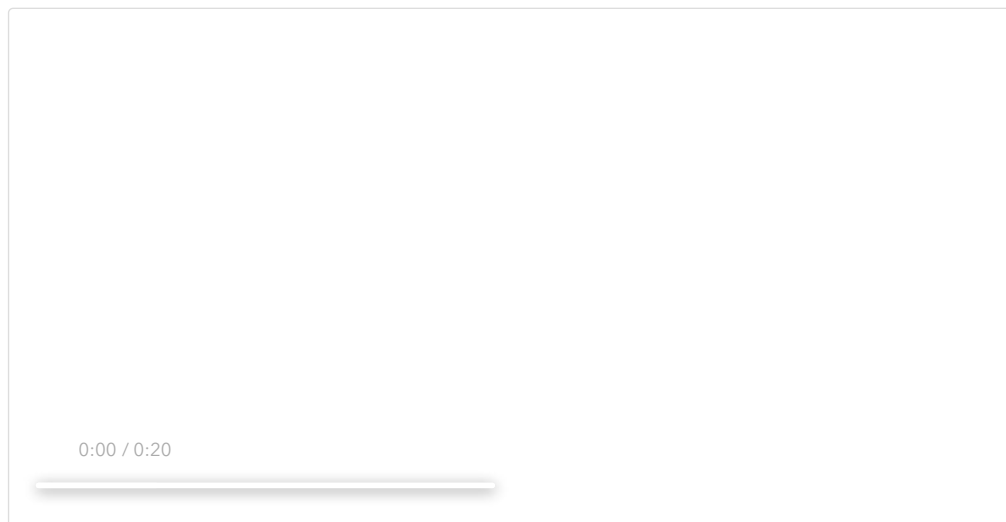
Nonetheless, Clausewitz was no doubt aware of the cultural significance and emotive power of the word. Whether he was seeking to exploit them, to defy them, or simply to have some fun with them, I have no idea.*23 But the blogger *ZenPundit* (<http://zenpundit.com/?p=14019>) makes a powerful point, similar to comments I've heard Tony Echevarria and Andreas Herberg-Rothe make:

the Clausewitzian trinity makes the most sense understood as a true trinity—three separate coexistent forces in unity—and not a mere triad, which would be a simple grouping of three forces. So while Bassford is probably right that Clausewitz had no mystical intentions whatsoever here, his contemporary readership, aristocratic, educated, army officers versed in Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity, would have grasped the difference and that primordial violence and hatred, probability and chance, and the pure reason of policy were in fusion and tension and not three entirely separated forces.*24

([https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B071WMWXB6?](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B071WMWXB6?ie=UTF8&tag=theclauswitzhom&camp=1789&linkCode=xm2&creativeASIN=B071WMWXB6)

[ie=UTF8&tag=theclauswitzhom&camp=1789&linkCode=xm2&creativeASIN=B071WMWXB6](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B071WMWXB6?ie=UTF8&tag=theclauswitzhom&camp=1789&linkCode=xm2&creativeASIN=B071WMWXB6))The second problem here is the choice of modifying adjective. It seems that no modern translator is prepared to render *wunderliche* in the military context as "wonderful" or "marvelous" (much less "queer," "quaint," or "eccentric," all good dictionary definitions). H/P 1976 gives "remarkable," a throw-away word of no particular significance. This was changed to "paradoxical" in the 1984 edition, but this word seems to have no relationship to *wunderliche* and carries inappropriately negative connotations. "Wondrous" has been gaining ground.*25 Clausewitz wants us to accept the practical reality that these dynamic forces are ever-present and constantly interacting in the everyday world. But he clearly found this shifting interaction really, *really* interesting—to the point of being mesmerized by it. If that seems over the top, I suggest you actually watch the scientific demonstration [see immediately below] he alludes to in paragraph 4 and see if you don't find the experience hypnotic. Since *wunderliche* doesn't lend itself to translation as hypnotic, however, I have settled on "fascinating."*26





Above is a video showing the randomly oscillating magnetic pendulum (ROMP), to which Clausewitz refers in the fourth paragraph of Section 28. A somewhat different demonstration of a similar effect can be found in an interactive *FLASH* animation of the famous 3-Body Problem ([chaosdemos.htm#3Body](#)) in Newtonian physics.

Figure 2.

Enumerating the Elements of the Trinity

That brings us to the list of actual elements in the Trinity. Their identity will be readily evident to anyone who actually reads the first paragraph of his description: It is composed of: 1) primordial violence, hatred, and enmity,²⁷ which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; 2) the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and 3) war's element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to mere intellect. I have little complaint about the H/P version of this list, with two important caveats: First, while we can accept "instrument of policy" here, there are factors that make this a special case. Second, H/P renders *bloßen Verstande* ("mere intellect") as "reason alone," which is for rather glaring reasons contradictory to Clausewitz's actual argument. More on that later. For convenience, this set of elements is usually labeled "emotion/ chance/ reason," sometimes "violence/ chance & probability/ rational calculation," or, even more abstractly, irrationality/ nonrationality/ rationality."²⁸

This enumeration of the elements of the trinity—whichever set of words one chooses for shorthand—is not universally understood. For the most part, we will save for another diatribe, another day, the odd manner in which Martin van Creveld (and, in his train, John Keegan) have built an alternate Clausewitzian universe around a creative rewriting of this list. Here we will note only that the words "people," "army," and "government" (hereafter abbreviated PAG) appear nowhere at all in the paragraph that lists the Trinity's components.²⁹

Creveld's anti-Clausewitzian, PAGan interpretation derives not from *On War* itself but from the very much pro-Clausewitz work of U.S. Army Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. Prior to the American debacle in Vietnam, few thinkers writing in English had paid much serious attention to the Trinity as a distinct concept. The term first achieved prominence in skewed form in Summers' influential 1981 study, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (written at the U.S. Army War College).³⁰ Summers focused on a secondary set of elements that were powerfully relevant in the specific circumstances in which American military thinkers found themselves during and after the defeat in Indochina. This unarguably useful secondary trinity (though Clausewitz did not apply that term to it) does indeed consist of the people, the army, and the government. Those elements appear in the second paragraph of section 28, where they are used to illustrate and clarify the primary concept, not to define it. In America's traumatic war in Vietnam, those elements had come thoroughly unstuck from one another. Summers' interpretation of the PAG trinity was a positive doctrine, highly prescriptive: A nation could not hope to achieve victory in war unless these three elements were kept in harness together. H/P's wording reinforced that notion with its message that "Our task ... is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies."³¹

Clausewitz, in contrast, was skeptical (to put it mildly) of any positive doctrine that was not highly context-specific. The pursuit of such a doctrine was entirely alien to his approach to theory. His Trinity was descriptive, not prescriptive, and foretold the very opposite of balance. (*Schwebe* carries the connotation of dynamism, not equilibrium.) The message of this Trinity was that the relationships among his three elements were inherently unstable and shifting. What he actually said was that "the task ... is to keep our theory [of war] floating among these three tendencies," and not to try to set, or to count on, any fixed relationship among them.

We can blame Summers' confusion partly on H/P's unfortunate choice in translating Clausewitz's descriptor for the links between the elements of the Trinity proper and the elements of this secondary trinity. By substituting "mainly" for *mehr* (which I've translated as "more"), H/P locks each of the elements of the actual trinity far too firmly and exclusively to each of these sets of human beings—violent emotion to the people, chance and probability to the commander and his army, and rational calculation to the government. In fact, each of the three categories that constitute the actual Trinity affects all of these human actors, to an extent that will vary wildly among societies, over time, and across situations. The army's officers and soldiers and the political leadership are, to varying degrees in different societies, still members of the society they fight for or rule. In almost all societies there is a "public," whose proportion of the population varies a great deal, that expects to play a role in rational decision making. (Sometimes the only public that counts is the population of the army itself.) Commanders also indulge in rational calculation in pursuit of policy objectives. Political leaders are as often driven by personal needs as by their rational calculation of their societies' practical requirements. Events on the army's battlefields have a tremendous emotional and practical influence both on the people and on the political leadership, while popular and political factors, in turn, affect the army's performance.

As Vietnam fades in salience, it becomes clearer that the political-structural notion of the PAGans—while hardly irrelevant (and America's recent misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan threatened to restore its immediate importance)—is much less than fundamental.³² Clearly, it is quite possible to fight and even win wars about which one's people don't give a damn, especially if that is the case on both sides, or if one side so vastly outclasses the other that victory comes quickly and relatively painlessly (e.g., respectively, the wars of Frederick the Great; Clinton in Bosnia).

In wars in which the population is aroused, however, Clausewitz was extremely pessimistic about the prospects of the aggressor. His powerful and pervasive argument that defense is inherently the stronger form of war was never explored in any great depth, in the English language at least, until Jon Sumida (<http://history.umd.edu/users/jtsumida>) took it on.³³ That argument turns in significant part on the passions of the people, which tend naturally to be more intense on the part of a population fighting on its own soil than they can ever be on the part of soldiers fighting far from home. This analysis has always been extremely controversial, for many reasons. For one thing, simply because the defense is inherently stronger certainly does not mean the defender will win: There are other factors and other asymmetries to consider. Nonetheless, it has been amply borne out in examples like Spain, Russia (several times), Britain (1940), Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. This need not be taken as a moral condemnation of the American invasion of Iraq. The wholly justified Allied invasion of Germany in 1944 was also an act of conquest. Unfortunately, benefiting from Clausewitz's insight requires that one have the intellect and the moral courage to recognize when one is in fact waging a war of conquest. No Allied commander in 1945 Germany would have dreamed of tolerating armed local militias.

It is the infinite variability among the trinity's factors and in their interaction that underlies Clausewitz's insistence on the inherent unpredictability of war. It is a classic model of Chaos ([chaosdemos.htm](#)), in the modern scientific sense.³⁴ And it is this descriptive approach, permitting infinite variability within fundamental categories that can be identified in any context, that makes the Trinity such a promising basis for a comparative approach to military-political studies.

It is perhaps understandable that thinkers hostile to the State³⁵ or simply focused on "non-state" war might reject the people/army/government construct, though their fears (in some cases advocacy) of the eclipse of the State are wildly overblown. But one has to wonder whether *any* warfighting political construct mustn't have analogs for each of these elements—e.g., popular base, fighters, leadership. This makes the "non-trinitarian" concept a most peculiar sort of compound error. Crevel'd's and Keegan's assault on Clausewitz's Trinity is not only a classic "blow into the air," i.e., an assault on a position Clausewitz doesn't occupy. It is also a pointless attack on a concept that is quite useful in its own right. In any case, their failure to read the actual wording of the theory they so vociferously attack, and to grasp its deep relevance to the phenomena they describe, is hard to credit.

The First Element: Violence and Emotion

Returning to Clausewitz's actual Trinity, its first element is violence. Here, however, Clausewitz is not talking primarily about physical violence, but about violent emotion as a motive force. Actual physical violence can be generated by any of the elements, as Clausewitz demonstrated earlier in the chapter during his discussion of hostile intentions. These "are often unaccompanied by any sort of hostile feelings"—e.g., violence generated as a matter of course by the simple fact of military operations (i.e., under item 2 in the list) or as the result of rational calculation (under item 3). Thus these violent emotions need not be a motivating force behind the resort to war. Whether or not they are present initially, however, they will surely be called into being by the experience of actual violence and will affect behavior (whether by their strength or by their weakness). Let us pause to note that this first category is a product of the human mind and exists only inside individual skulls, but it is quite distinct from rational calculation.

The Third Element: War's Subordination to Reason

Because reason, too, exists only inside individual skulls, let us skip the Trinity's second category for the moment and go on to the third, war's subordination to reason as an "instrument" of policy. There are only (!) four critical issues here: the meaning of reason or rationality; the manner in and extent to which war is subordinate to it; the meaning of the word *Politik* (the term that actually appears in the text here is *politischen Werkzeuges*); and the nature of that "instrumentality."

The only point I want to make at the moment about reason or rationality is that, like emotion, it is a product of the individual human mind. Of course, it is quite different, with its properties of conscious ends/means calculation. As to war's "subordination," we can quickly dispose of an annoying translation problem: H/P's version of this line reads that war is "subject to reason alone." There is no reason for the word "alone" to be in there at all: Obviously, if war is subject to two other forces as well, it cannot be subject to reason "alone."³⁶ The correct translation for *bloßen Verstande* here is "mere intellect."

POLITIK, POLITICS, AND POLICY

That leaves us with the problem of *Politik*. This is a huge subject, for it encompasses the entire issue of the relationship between it and war; perhaps 90% of references to Clausewitz turn on it.³⁷ Let us pause for a (long) moment and consider the meaning of those problematic words, *Politik*, politics, and policy.

Clausewitz seldom overtly defines *Politik* in any detail, and when he does so the definition is shaped to fit the immediate context.³⁸ In translating *Politik* and related words, English-speakers feel compelled to choose between "politics" and "policy."³⁹ Some even prefer the much more specialized term "diplomacy," which limits the discussion to relations among organized states—that is how Jomini's *Politique* was usually rendered into English. Our choices can seriously distort Clausewitz's argument. Clausewitz himself would probably have been very comfortable with the word "statecraft," the broad zone of concerns and activities within which "statesmen" operate. But that term avails us no greater clarity and might even lock him exclusively into the state, where so many modern writers want to (uselessly) maroon him. We are interested in what Clausewitz meant by *Politik*, of course, but our focus here is even more on the question of what we mean by policy and politics. The latter two terms are related but far from equivalent. Each captures a part of the meaning of *Politik*, but even used together they do not cover quite the same ground. Often, it seems, we do not understand even our own translations of *On War*, much less the original.

Telling students that war is an expression of X, without defining X, gets them nowhere. However, every reader and every translator has personal definitions of these terms—or, more likely, an inchoate set of definitions triggered selectively by context. Asked to define politics, most will stumble a bit and raise subjects like elections, political parties, ideological competition, personality games and favoritism, etc. We make sharp and utterly artificial distinctions between things that are "political" as opposed to "social," "religious," or "economic." If politics is about elections or parties, then there must not be

any politics in monarchies or one-party states. If various wars are “really” about religion (e.g., those of the Maya, or the Crusades), “culture” (e.g., those of the British regimental system, according to Keegan), or environmental collapse (e.g., those on Easter Island), they must not be “continuations of politics.” If “policy” is made only by the governments of states, then war as waged by non-state actors—say, tribal societies, Al Qaeda, or the Hanseatic League—cannot be a “continuation of policy.”

During the 2005 Clausewitz conference at Oxford, Sir Michael Howard, in his usual matter-of-fact manner, said that he and Pareit actually gave no systematic thought whatsoever to the choice of when and whether to use policy or politics when translating *Politik*. He went on to say, however, that he was biased in favor of the word policy primarily because of its grandeur: “Policy” is what great states do on the grand stage of history, whereas “politics” is a sordid process carried on incessantly, by everyone, but particularly by objectionable little men called “politicians,” in grubby, smoke-filled back rooms.*40

That is an interesting and revealing notion. In itself, however, it is of no great use as a theoretical distinction, especially since wars are waged by all kinds of political actors, not just “great states.” We must find a more fundamental and rigorous relationship between the two words. I don’t mean to impose such a distinction, but rather to derive one from usage (and from necessity). We are looking, of course, for a universal definition that applies across cultures and time, but one not contradicted by Clausewitz’s own usage. In practice, the distinctions I propose *tend* (but only that) to be consistent with the choices made in the H/P translation, because we actually understand the words in the same way. I’ve simply made the distinctions more overt and more consistent.

1. Politics and policy are both concerned with power. Power comes in many forms. It may be material in nature: the economic power of money or other resources, for example, or possession of the physical means for coercion (weapons and troops or police). Power is just as often psychological in nature: legal, religious, or scientific authority; intellectual or social prestige; a charismatic personality’s ability to excite or persuade; a reputation, accurate or illusory, for diplomatic or military strength. Power provides the means to attack, but it also provides the means to resist attack. Power in itself is therefore neither good nor evil. By its nature, however, power must be distributed unevenly, to an extent that varies greatly from one society to another and within the same society over time.*41

2. “Politics” is the highly variable process by which power is distributed in any society: the family, the office, a religious order, a tribe, a political party, the state, an empire, a region, an alliance, the international community—in short, any of the various complex adaptive systems or social superorganisms into which humans organize themselves. The process of distributing power may be fairly orderly—through consensus, inheritance, election, some time-honored tradition. Or it may be chaotic—through intrigue, assassination, revolution, and warfare. Whatever process may be in place at any given time, politics is inherently dynamic and the process is always under pressures for change. Knowing that war is an expression of politics is of no use in grasping any *particular* situation unless we understand the political structures, processes, issues, and dynamics of that specific context.

I frequently hear that Clausewitzian thinking may apply to wars with “political objectives” (using “war” here in a sloppy, unilateral manner) but not to wars over economic issues or with economic objectives. In fact, of course, politics and economics are hardly exclusive of one another. First, even if you treat them as two isolated phenomena, they are very similar types of systems. But in reality, economics is just an element of politics: If politics is the general process by which general power is distributed, economics is just a subsystem by which power specifically over material wealth is distributed. In some societies, as in command economies, there is virtually no distinction. Even in market democracies, how much of domestic politics is really about the distribution of wealth? Economic issues become “politicized” when strictly command or market processes are perceived to be providing economic outcomes unacceptable to groups capable of responding to the inequity with other kinds of tools (i.e., “other means,” which may or may not include violence). Thus, economic objectives easily become political objectives, and these, in turn, may be translated into military objectives. Much the same can be said for any other objective—legal, social, religious, etc.—that people care enough about to actively seek.

The key characteristics of politics, however, are that it is multilateral and interactive—always involving give and take, interaction, competition, struggle. Political events and their outcomes are the product of conflicting, contradictory, sometimes cooperating or compromising, but often antagonistic forces, always modulated by chance. Outcomes are seldom if ever precisely what any individual participant desired or intended. Thus politics cannot be described as a “rational” process (though a community may achieve considerable success in rationally designing its internal political institutions so as to civilize the process). War—like politics—is inherently multilateral, though Clausewitz (and the rest of us) often uses the term sloppily in the sense of a unilateral resort to organized violence.

I remember offering this broad definition over lunch to a prominent critic of Clausewitz, stressing the notion that “politics” permeates human interactions at every level of organization. His response was astonishment: “But that’s so banal! So mundane! Why, it applies to everything!”*42 And so it does. Clausewitz is describing the common, everyday world we actually live in. His definitions of such pervasive realities as power and politics had best be as mundane as possible.

3. “Policy,” in contrast to politics, is unilateral and rational. Policy (like strategy) represents a conscious effort by one entity in the political arena to bend its own power to the accomplishment of some purpose—some positive objective, perhaps, or merely the preservation of its own power or existence. Policy is the rational and one-sided subcomponent of politics, the reasoned purposes and actions of each of the various individual actors in the political struggle. Please do not confuse rationality with wisdom, however. As you may already suspect, there is no shortage of unwise policy out there.

Distinguishing ‘Politics’ from ‘Policy’

The key distinction between politics and policy lies in interactivity. That is, politics is a multilateral phenomenon, whereas policy is the unilateral subcomponent thereof. My ally, myself, and my enemy are all bound up together in politics, but we each have our own policies. I have my policy/policies/strategies; my ally has his policy; as an alliance, we have *our* policy. My enemy also has his own policy. But though they shared the same political stage and then joined together in war, Hitler and Churchill did not share a policy, and the war as a whole had no purpose, objects, or aims at all (unless you assign some guiding teleological intelligence to the historical process, which I do not, nor did Clausewitz).

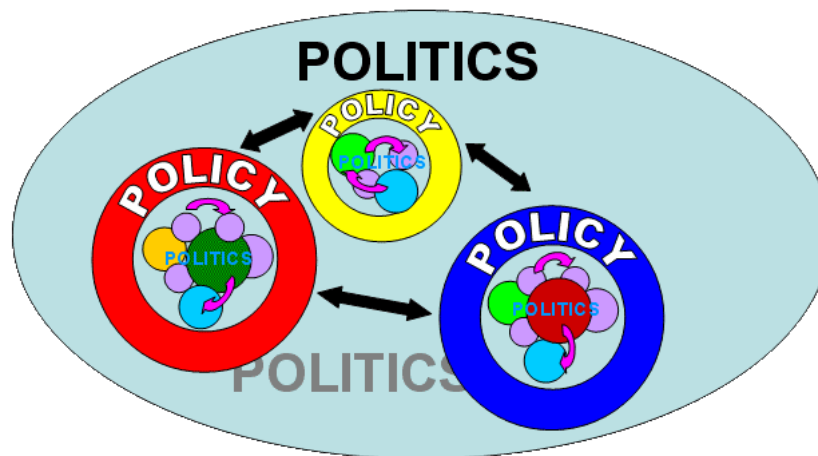
This makes policy and politics very different things—even though each side’s policy is produced via internal political processes (reflecting the nested, fractal (../Complex/FractalLinks.htm) nature of human political organization).*43 This issue is not of merely semantic importance. The distinction is crucial, and there is a high price for confusion. The dangers inherent in thinking that war is “merely the continuation of [unilateral] policy” are obvious in the Bush administration’s strategies in its

invasion and occupation of Iraq: They include most of what Colin Gray has listed as characteristics of American strategic culture: indifference to history; the engineering style and dogged pursuit of the technical fix; impatience; blindness to cultural differences, indifference to strategy; and the evasion of politics.*44 Thus that very common translation of *Politik* is "Clausewitzian" only in a highly defective sense.

In general, H/P's word-choice reflects this logic, despite its strong bias towards "policy." Whenever the context can be construed as unilateral, as in the Trinity discussion, we see "policy." In Clausewitz's final and most forcefully articulated version of the concept, however, the context is unarguably multilateral, with so strong an emphasis on intercourse and interactivity that, ultimately, even H/P is forced to use "politics" and "political":

We maintain, on the contrary, that war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means. We deliberately use the phrase "with the addition of other means" because we also want to make it clear that war in itself does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different. In essentials that intercourse continues, irrespective of the means it employs. The main lines along which military events progress, and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue throughout the war into the subsequent peace. How could it be otherwise? Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged?*45

Within the Trinity discussion itself, because the third element is war's subordination to rationality, it may be entirely appropriate to use the word policy in translating that particular clause. But we must always bear in mind the awkward fact that, while Clausewitz seems in this discussion to be speaking from the perspective of one side in a war, his topic in this chapter is the nature of war, which must by definition be multilateral. The clash of two or more opposing, rational, unilateral policies brings us into the realm of multilateral politics. Thus there really is no reason to avoid translating the Trinity's *politischen Werkzeuges* literally, i.e., as "political instrument."



A simplistic diagram. In reality, of course, the structure of politics is not nearly as hierarchical as such models would indicate. There are political and even policy ties among subgroups in different polities and between polities and subgroups in other polities. Trans-polity subgroups may overshadow one, some, or all polities in some situations. A group of polities (e.g., an alliance) has collective policies as well as political interactions with other polities and groups of polities. Etc., etc. The key points are **a)** that politics is the general phenomenon within which policy exists, **b)** that policy reflects the unilateral interest of a distinct actor while politics describes the bi- or multilateral interaction *among* actors, and **c)** that policy and politics are nested, fractal ([./Complex/FractalLinks.htm](#)) phenomena that tend to look similar at different scales of space, time, and numbers of people involved.

Figure 3.

War as an 'Instrument'

That brings us to the problem of instrumentality. Force or violence is, of course, an instrument, in the sense of a hand-tool or weapon, of unilateral policy. War, however, must be bi- or multilateral in order to exist. Thus, while military force is indeed an instrument of unilateral policy, we should see war as an instrument of politics only in a very different, multilateral sense, as the basketball court is an instrument for the teams to play the game on, the market an instrument of trade, or the courtroom an instrument of litigation ("which," as Clausewitz says, "so closely resembles war").*46 This is precisely the same logic Clausewitz follows in arguing that war belongs neither to the domain of art (though he is willing to place [unilateral] strategy there) nor to the domain of science (though he places tactics there).

[R]ather, [war] is part of man's social existence. War is a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed—that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts. Rather than comparing it to art we could more accurately compare it to commerce, which is also a conflict of human interests and activities; and it is still closer to politics, which in turn may be considered as a kind of commerce on a larger scale.*47

This is a source of much confusion, and were we able to give editorial advice to a living Clausewitz, we would have to insist that he be more consistent in distinguishing between military force as a tool or weapon of one side and war as an instrument or vehicle of multilateral interaction. Clausewitz seems simply to assume that his readers will distinguish, on the fly, whether he is speaking in the unilateral or the multilateral sense. After all, he has stressed time and again the interactive nature of war, and, of course, his own language's term *Politik* encompasses both our multilateral politics and our unilateral policy. But this casual stance results in constant confusion for the translator and the reader. This is especially true regarding his next chapter's discussion of "purpose and means ([./readings/Bassford/PolMilObjModelLGX05.pps](#)),"*48 which—again, assuming that war as a whole has no teleological purpose—are by nature unilateral. When we talk about the fundamental poles or attractors

between which real-world wars vary, the pursuit of limited military objectives vs the objective of “rendering [the enemy] politically helpless or militarily impotent,” obviously (to Clausewitz), these are unilateral objectives rather than types of war in a wholistic sense. And they can coexist—that is, I may be fighting for limited objectives while my opponent is seeking my total destruction. Indeed, I can be fighting for very limited objectives against one enemy in a given theater of war while fighting for quite extreme objectives against another enemy in the same theater: During the war in Vietnam the United States sought merely to deter further North Vietnamese intervention in the south while seeking the utter destruction of the Viet Cong political and military structures.⁴⁹ If I think that my opponent’s objectives and behavior will be constrained simply because my objectives are limited, however, I will never understand our interaction.

On War Is Not On Policy

We sometimes forget that Clausewitz’s *magnum opus* is not about policy or politics, nor about human nature or the nature of reality. It is merely a mark of the book’s profundity that these matters arise immediately in any serious discussion of it. In fact, Clausewitz himself dismisses the political complexities of policy in order to focus on his true subject, the conduct of military operations in war:

That it [policy] can err, subserve the ambitions, private interests, and vanity of those in power, is neither here nor there.... here we can only treat policy as representative of all interests of the community.⁵⁰

There is no question that Clausewitz here is discussing policy in unilateral terms, as we have defined it.⁵¹ The sentence preceding his convenient assumption is unambiguous:

It can be taken as agreed that the aim of policy is to unify and reconcile all aspects of internal administration as well as of spiritual values, and whatever else the moral philosopher may care to add. Policy, of course, is nothing in itself; it is simply the trustee for all these interests against other states.

There is some debate as to the reasons behind Clausewitz’s alleged failure to address policy itself. One view is that Clausewitz was politically cowed in the age of reaction after Napoleon’s defeat, and thus reluctant to address concrete political issues. This is a bit absurd, given Clausewitz’s political boldness during the later Napoleonic Wars, as well as the inflammatory character of some of his other writings (such as the pitiless criticism of the Prussian state in his *Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe*, written in the 1820s but unpublished for generations).⁵² And Clausewitz could easily have made his theoretical points using non-Prussian cases—examples of bad policy leading to military disaster are not, after all, very hard to find. In any case, his wife Marie’s preface gives a very clear explanation of Clausewitz’s determination not to publish while he was still alive, which obviated any political motives for avoiding touchy subjects. Personally, I would argue that Clausewitz’s focus on the relationship of policy to the military conduct of war,⁵³ rather than on what constitutes good policy itself, was simply an author’s act of economy. One gargantuan topic at a time, please.

One could argue that Clausewitz’s convenient assumption that policy “represents all interests of the community” is a fatal flaw in his approach to theory. In practice, one must wonder whether policy does not, even (or even particularly) in the democracies, consistently “subserve the ambitions, private interests, and vanity of those in power.” For example, we frequently see that political leaders—out of short-term self-interest—find it extraordinarily difficult to shut down a failing military adventure, long after it has proven pointless, counterproductive, or even ruinous for their societies. Thus, from the standpoint of the interests of the overall community (i.e., of one unified political entity), war may routinely be “merely an instrument for the continuation of bad policy by other means.” It represents the failure of the rest of the community to enforce its real interests over those of its self-serving leaders. If policy is inevitably driven by the short-term interests of politicians rather than by a genuine concern for the collective best interest, optimistic-sounding Clausewitzian formulations like the following may be a pipe-dream:

Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.⁵⁴

On the other hand, he’s offering some good advice here, not necessarily a prediction. It seems rather superfluous to suggest that perhaps Clausewitz actually grasped the facts that there is such a thing as bad policy, that bad policy has military consequences, and that this in turn may have consequences for both the political leadership and the community whose interests it is supposed to represent. After all, despite his professional admiration of Napoleon as a soldier, Clausewitz had no sympathy whatsoever for the policies and political objectives of Napoleonic France, which he considered to be inherently flawed and very likely doomed to failure by their very nature.

THE SECOND ELEMENT: CHANCE AND PROBABILITY

Having beaten policy and politics to death, we now arrive, at last, at the second element of the Trinity: the play (I’d prefer he’d said “interplay,” just to nail the point down) of chance and probability. I have changed the sequence in this discussion in order to stress the important point that both emotion and reason are products of the human mind. In that sense, they are subjective forces. They are the internal sources of our desires and the internal governors of our efforts. While they are so different from one another that we must treat them separately, they are also intrinsically linked. There can be no “rational” consideration of goals without taking into account the emotions that give rise to the goals in the first place. Can we imagine policy, politics, economics, or reproduction without fear, love, greed, lust, or hope? But the chances and probabilities of which Clausewitz speaks are external to human desire and intent—they represent, purely and simply, the concrete (in this sense, “objective”) reality with which the actors must cope.⁵⁵ That reality yields to their hopes, dreams, and plans only with great resistance (friction) and at great cost to themselves in time, energy, resources, and will. And, in the case of war, blood.

This objective environment consists both of the physical world (including mountains, roads, weather, bullets, bayonets, IEDs, geography, demographics, technology, economics, disease vectors, etc.), and of the personalities, capabilities, hopes, dreams, plans, energies, resources, and will of other actors—i.e., the human ecology within which the participants’ perceptions, plans, and actions must co-evolve. In short, the objective environment includes everything we cannot alter at once by merely wishing. It might be wise to think first of those other actors who are our opponents, though too often our focus narrows almost exclusively to our own internal processes. As Churchill said, “No matter how enmeshed a commander

becomes in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into account.” But we need to think as well of our often recalcitrant and annoyingly self-centered allies⁵⁶ and of potentially influential neutrals. And, as Clausewitz makes clear in his discussion of friction, we need to consider those who are part of our own body politic and even of our own military machine:

But we should bear in mind that none of [war's] components is of one piece: each part is composed of individuals, every one of whom retains his potential of friction. In theory it sounds reasonable enough: a battalion commander's duty is to carry out his orders; discipline welds the battalion together, its commander must be a man of tested capacity, and so the great beam turns on its iron pivot with a minimum of friction. In fact, it is different, and every fault and exaggeration of the theory is instantly exposed in war. A battalion is made up of individuals, the least important of whom may chance to delay things or somehow make them go wrong.⁵⁷

Obviously, such factors are at work during the making of our policy and strategy as well. These, once produced, are unilateral expressions of our collective intentions, but they are produced via an internal process that is multilateral, and therefore political.

'Chance' vs 'Probability'

We have to assume that Clausewitz used the words chance and probability in tandem for a reason. That is, “chance and probability” are not a redundancy. Rather, they are two distinctly different things. Chance, in a pure sense, is arbitrary and incalculable. We can prepare for it only in a general manner. Probability, on the other hand, refers to things whose likelihood can to some useful extent be estimated. It is chance that there is a mountain range between France and Spain; it is quite a good probability that it will still be there when our armies arrive on the border. It is also chance that a copy of General Lee's order of battle should be carelessly wrapped around a bunch of cigars and lost by its owner—and still moreso that the package should be found in the field, recognized, and delivered in a timely manner to the appropriate headquarters. What, however, is the probability that a George McClellan will actually act upon such a chance windfall? We would be fools to plan on such a chance occurrence, but also fools not to have a general apparatus for making and dealing with such finds, and fools for failing to act upon one when it occurs.

In short, this last element of the Trinity represents concrete reality, i.e., everything outside of our own skull and its emotions and calculations. It is true that in the military conduct of war, Clausewitz's primary focus, these factors may loom largest for the commander and his army. The number, scope, range, tempo, and sheer variety of chance and probabilistic factors are massive at that level. But political leaders and policy makers must deal with such factors as well. It is therefore absurd to think — or to claim that Clausewitz thought — that courage, creativity, and skill are “mainly” requirements for military leaders.

“NON-STATE” AND “NON-TRINITARIAN” WAR

“Non-state war” is one of the more amusing labels contemporary writers use when pursuing “non-Clausewitzian” ways to view current events. We need to explore it, because the notion that Clausewitzian theory applies only to warfare among well-defined Weberian states and their uniformed armies underlies most contemporary critiques of Clausewitz and most discussions of his Trinitarian concept.⁵⁸ Ironically, the same critics tend to claim that he's irrelevant to entities like ISIS, which explicitly calls itself a state and clearly aspires to statehood: ISIS seeks to control territory and population and to eliminate all competition to its monopoly on deadly force. It wages positional warfare with essentially “conventional” forces, while, somewhat incidentally, also practicing terrorism against its host population and as an instrument of foreign policy.

Clausewitz and the State

War among non-state entities is, of course, extremely common, both historically and in the present. It is, in fact, the normal and natural situation of humankind. Any survey of the actual anthropological literature on the subject⁵⁹ (as opposed to certain historians' faux-anthropological posturings) will make this abundantly clear. But then, so would simply examining the history of virtually any society.

Nearly all of the discussions of non-state warfare that appear in the field of “national security studies,” however, are *ipso facto* aimed at informing the security forces of modern states about their roles in such wars. Unfortunately for the cause of logical thought on the subject, the moment a state—e.g., the United States, Israel, Indonesia—gets involved in such a war, it ceases to be “non-state” war. And though the “non-state warfare” literature tends to be extremely pessimistic about the state's competence and chances for success in such warfare, the obvious historical truth of the matter is that the post-Westphalian Western-style state has been extraordinarily successful in eliminating non-state military competitors. It is that very success which accounts for the wide-spread astonishment when such competition periodically reappears. Unfortunately, one's successful past experience is useful only if one happens to be aware of it.

To be a bit more generous to the “New Wars” scholars, it is not merely ignorance of the historical success of the state in such warfare that inhibits an effective absorption of past strategic lessons. States achieved their successes through wildly varied combinations of different strategies. These included admirable advances like providing reliable, impartial courts, equality before the law, etc., i.e., all of the gentle and responsible traits of good governance advocated by popular counterinsurgency experts. But the state's success has depended more or less equally upon its demonstrated readiness to employ brutal, often quite arbitrary and unfair violence—sometimes directed at categories of enemies so broad as to justify accusations of genocide. Such indiscriminant violence is often unnecessary and thus counterproductive, the product of viciousness and incompetence. On the other hand, sometimes it is merely the inevitable result of Clausewitzian friction—being fair, or reasonable, or even appearing to be, is sometimes just too damned hard to actually pull off, whatever the ethical character of the political objectives.

Our ability to find the right balance, to understand that either moderation or excess can be suicidal depending on the situation, is crippled by an inevitable collision between the strategist's immediate need for unvarnished truth and the state's permanent need for a very thick varnish of unifying mythology. It is one of the extreme ironies of human nature that even the most violent founders of successful states, often guilty of crimes beyond reckoning, tend to love their own children and to crave their admiration. The historical mythology they generate in order to preserve their achievement must obscure the political simplifications and the hard-to-ethically-justify violence that resulted. Success in this subterfuge may actually create the basis for a stable society and the subsequent growth of a genuine public morality amongst their successors. How else can

we explain the presence in Russian history of a Kerensky, a Gorbachev? This poses a problem, one that Clausewitz addressed only obliquely: Can a decent society founded on comfortable myths conduct the kind of strategies that actually created it in the first place?⁶⁰

Given the inevitable divergences in interests within any given group, Clausewitz's convenient assumption about policy (i.e., that it is "representative of all interests of the community") is nonetheless a realistic assumption, so long as policy is not so visibly corrupt or disastrous as to break the community's cohesion and its submission to existing leadership. In practice, of course, bad policy does lead to such ruptures. Badly managed external wars, in particular, often lead to internal strife, in which war may become a continuation of internal politics by other means. Or, rather, a continuation of politics that once was internal but has now—as the earlier community fragments—become external politics among an enlarged set of smaller players. These are not "non-state" wars: the original state, various state wannabes, and often other intervening states are among the players. The eventual outcome is usually one or more new and stronger states. The Chinese Civil War raged for four decades and involved a huge number of competing political entities, yet somehow the Chinese state emerged on top—and today brooks no challengers.

In the implications of this kind of transformation in a society's political structure lies an explanation for Crevel'd's and Keegan's insistence that "non-state" warfare is "non-trinitarian." Or, to be more precise—since those two authors clearly don't understand what Clausewitz's trinitarian concept is in the first place—it provides an explanation as to why their "non-trinitarian" pronouncements appeal to many readers. Such readers evidently find the allegedly "new" conflicts baffling compared to the common but ahistorical illusion of "traditional state-on-state" warfare. The reason we suffer from this illusion is not that such messy wars have been rare, unimportant, or low in casualties—far from it. In actual fact, most warfare has always been of the "non-traditional" variety, and some of these wars vie in destructiveness with the greatest of conventional conflicts. The destructiveness of China's 19th-century Taiping Rebellion, a murky internal conflict rooted in ethnicity, gender, class, and a particularly weird form of Christianity, dwarfs that of the West's wars in the same period.⁶¹ Most wars have been struggles within an existing society—peasant rebellions, civil wars, coups d'états, revolutions, wars of succession or of secession, or "wars of unification" (i.e., wars of conquest upon which historians later bestow legitimacy because they created larger political communities that, in retrospect, somehow seem more logical). Traditional societies—e.g., India; China; Europe before the Westphalian settlement; the Ottoman Empire with its millet system; Iraq beneath the Stalinist veneer of the Baathist dictatorship—have always been conglomerates of various corporate (but non-state) entities which felt they had both the right and the duty to employ violence in support of the legitimate order. And the state has never suffered from any shortage of challengers to its monopoly on violence. The French state, for example, has fought wars, some of them quite bloody and destructive, against internal enemies: overly powerful feudal vassals; French Protestant town-dwellers; the French middle class; French Catholic peasants; elements of the French army; and the city of Paris—its own capital.⁶² Sometimes it actually lost such struggles—in which case the opponent became the state. ("The State is dead—Long live the State.")

We tend to be unaware of this history, not because it is unimportant but because the myth of the modern state demands that it be minimized. Peasant rebellions and the like may be large in scale and hard-fought, but they tend to be swept under the historical rug. Military historians are generally obsessed with major battles in the open field, which are uncharacteristic of such wars. They are in any case hard to study because the losing side usually leaves few survivors and few if any records. The victorious warrior aristocrats don't boast too conspicuously of their mass butchery of the lower orders, in part because it is embarrassing to acknowledge that such people could have put up a serious fight in the first place. More broadly, no wise person who enjoys the comforts, security, and freedom of life in a modern Western state, defined by Max Weber as "that organization which (successfully) maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within a given territory," really wants to forcefully remind people that there have always been other options.⁶³ Certainly no War College faculty, made up of career government employees, would feel natural doing so.

Because of the demands and power of the statist myth, we systematically fail to study intra-state war, even when it is part and parcel of "normal" state-on-state conflict. War College students in America may learn about the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, normally presented as a struggle between the French state and the Prussian state—i.e., without reference to the other German participants or the alternative governments and armies in France. But they will normally be taught nothing about the Revolutions of 1848, which created the context for the war. Nor will they study the War of the Paris Commune, a bloody part of the war's messy and complex end-game, which left a mark on the French nation arguably greater than did the defeat by Prussia. Neither will they study the problems the Union Army faced during "Reconstruction" of the conquered Confederacy. No, the American Civil War began in 1861 and ended in 1865. The preliminary struggles in Kansas, Missouri, and at Harper's Ferry, and the subsequent failures of occupation and Reconstruction culminating in the political compromise of 1876, exist only in some other universe. Amongst students raised on the healing national myth of Appomattox, the surprise attending the conflict in Iraq after the fall of Saddam should come as no surprise at all.

Wars within a disintegrating state or other long-established political context tend by nature to be especially confusing and complex. The breakdown of established, visible, public structures that accompanies an insurgency adds great ambiguity. New structures struggle to take form but also struggle to hide from still-dangerous remnants of the old order, competitors, or strong external powers who may intervene. Internal wars tend to have a lot of players, at least at first, and the relative complexity of multilateral warfare is always high. Especially if the society in question tends strongly by nature or history to be a single political unit, there is likely to be only one survivor among the contending factions. Thus the stakes will be very high for all and the intensity of the struggle can be expected to be correspondingly great. Uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, and danger ramp up confusion. They therefore ramp up fear throughout a society, to levels seen, in "conventional" wars, only on the battlefield itself.

The structure of the resulting fur-ball may become so complex as to be incomprehensible, not only to analysts but to the participants themselves. In such circumstances, the complexities, ambiguities, and levels of obfuscation necessary for the various players' survival are so high that the competing leaderships will find rational policymaking crushingly difficult. Fighting organizations may find themselves cut off from their originating populations and from their political leadership. A leadership group may be eliminated, perhaps to be replaced by a former enemy or painfully regenerated by elements of the population or its fighting forces. The only rational solution for political or military leaders may be paralysis—i.e., persistence in strategies that may lead nowhere but at least serve to keep the game in play. Similarly, historians and other analysts may find it difficult or impossible to produce the credible illusion of clarity that they, their publishers, and their audiences naturally crave.

None of this, however, means that there is no structure to the conflict. It is simply that the particulars of the structure are difficult to detect through the intensified fog caused by such wars' complexity. As analysts grope through that fog for some useful truth or understanding, both "trinitarian" approaches will remain useful tools. It may take an unaccustomed degree of

imagination to figure out how they apply. As Michelangelo allegedly said while staring at an opaque block of marble, "There's a statue in there somewhere."⁶⁴ In intra-society warfare, there may be several armed organizations and several competing sets of leadership, but they may be drawing on, and competing for control of, a single population. Or the warring populations may be intermixed and ambiguously differentiated by ethnicity, ideology, confession, class, etc. If there is truly only one population, we are talking about a revolution or a true civil war in which the outcome—if the issues are ever actually resolved—is likely to be one state. But if there are in fact or in potential several distinguishable populations, we may be talking about:

- a war of secession (in which the stable resolution may be two or more successor states). If the secession fails, later politicians and historians will call it a "civil war."
- genocide, in which one or more competitor(s) may be wiped out in one sense or another, and thus lost to history. (History may or may not be written by the victors. Confederate and *Wehrmacht* generals managed to exert a rather disproportionate influence on the histories written about the wars they lost. But history is, of necessity, written by the *survivors*.)
- an imperial war in which one population will emerge as the victor over others within a single territorial state that is, in fact, a multi-societal empire rather than a "nation-state" (however the imperial myth or ideology may portray it).

(This is not intended to be an all-inclusive list. But pay attention to the deceits noted in each example.)

In every case, both versions of the Trinity will remain useful tools for breaking into the problem. The PAGan people/army/government structures (or their population-base/fighting organization/leadership analogs) are still there, even if hidden in the fog, though the number and the complexity of their intersections may multiply. How could we possibly understand a conflict without identifying these players? It is quite conceivable that there may be populations without leadership, or fighting organizations whose leaders represents no interests but the army's.⁶⁵ But these cases still fall within the construct, the purpose of which is not to force the contending parties into mirror-image molds, but rather to provide a meaningful basis for understanding the similarities and differences among them. Clausewitz's actual trinitarian formulation also continues to apply. The rolling interplay among the participants' emotional drives and commitments, the impacts of chance and probability on the political and military battlefields, and the considered calculations of leaders on all sides—however blinded by uncertainty and enshrouded in the mystery required for survival in such an environment—will continue to drive events.

It seems obvious that civil wars, rebellions, and revolutions—of which Clausewitz was well aware,⁶⁶ and which by definition take place within a single state or society—are expressions of internal politics, some of it quite "private" in nature. And certainly he was aware that the external policies and strategies of states and other political entities are driven in very large part by the unilateral, purely internal concerns of their leaders. It is ultimately impossible to disentangle internal and external politics. In any case, we are well aware that war occurs even in the absence of the state. Thus there seems to be little point, and less value, to clinging to the interstate-only interpretation of the famous dictum, in terms either of Clausewitz's original intent or of our own understanding of it.

On the other hand, there is great value in recognizing that, if we are to understand and describe war in any context as an expression of politics, it is necessary to understand the structure, methods, issues, and dynamics of politics in that context. If the state is not part of that particular context, or if the state is only one of many players, then we simply have to work through the implications of that fact. This, it seems fairly obvious, is what Clausewitz expected us to do.

The only alternative to making sense of the struggle in this manner is to assume, as many in fact do, that the struggle makes no sense in the first place. Collectively, of course, that may well be true: The potential benefits of any war tend to flow only to a few (though there are exceptions to this, as to any generalization), and even those few may find the outcome a net loss. But to any individual or group caught up in the maelstrom, that conclusion is likely to be worthless as a guide to either understanding or action.

VISUAL METAPHORS

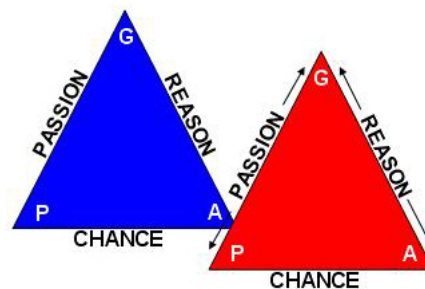


Figure 4. Static, simplistic, and generally useless visual metaphors for Clausewitz's trinity. Presenters often use just one triangle, with a focus only on one political entity (usually our own). But that raises an interesting question: Is Clausewitz describing just one side's interactions or is he describing a single system that encompasses all players?

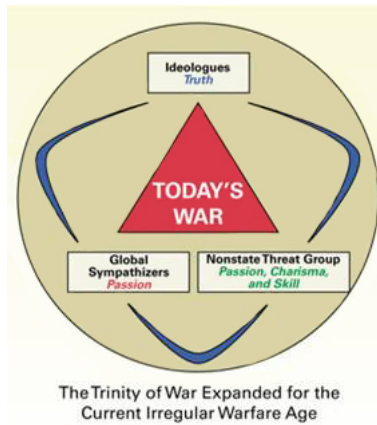


Figure 5. This profoundly confused graphic offers a good example of why we ought to stick with Clausewitz's original model. [From Sebastian L. v. Gorka, "How the Terrorist Attacks of 2001 Have Signalled a Fundamental Change in the Nature of Conflict (http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/web/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ARI135-2010#.VLHvHk10yUk)," *Elcano*, 135/2010 - 14/9/2010.] In this confused and confusing graphic, we can see the people/army/government analog that is not Clausewitz' actual trinity applied: the ideological leadership, the fighting forces/threat group, and a population base (a dispersed set of global sympathizers, plus, presumably, the population of Jihadi-controlled territory). In the actual trinity, "Passion/violent emotion" clearly applies to all of them. "Charisma" and "skill" are tricky categories, simply nouns from an infinite list of words that might be found in any discussion of politics. Don't both ideological and military leadership require charisma? Don't the people/global sympathizers offer any skills (i.e., money-laundering, infrastructure maintenance, etc.)? To quote Spenser Wilkinson's comment about Liddell Hart (<https://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/CIE/Chapter15.htm#Wilk>), "With the best will in the world I fail to see that this is anything more than a repetition of Clausewitz."⁶⁷ But this graphic is merely a clumsy attempt at repeating something its author clearly doesn't understand.

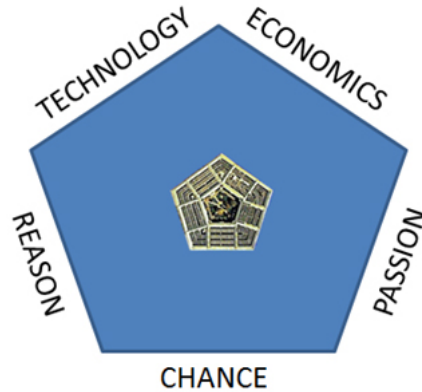


Figure 6. "The Clausewitzian Pentagonity." This model has obvious appeal for the U.S. DoD, but in fact economic and technological factors, which of course existed even in Clausewitz's day (and Caesar's), are covered under the "chance & probability" heading, which accounts for all contextual aspects.

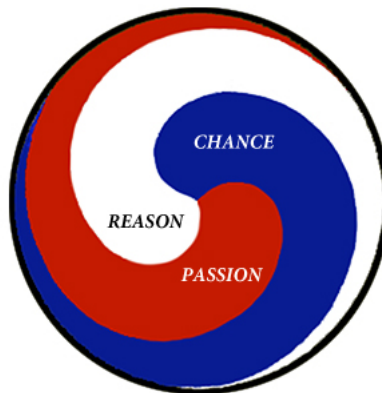


Figure 7. Yin, Yang, Yong. This one has some interesting cross-cultural resonances.

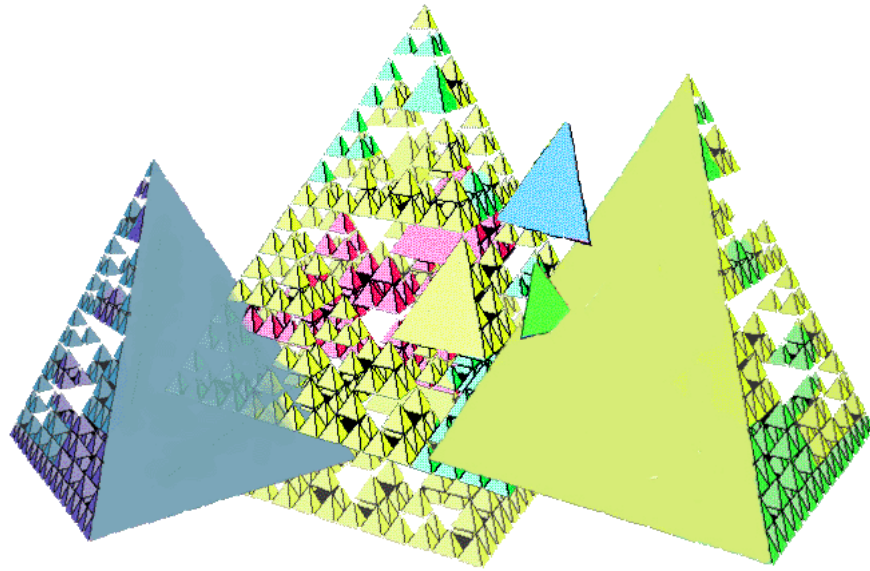


Figure 8. A more realistic visual metaphor, in this case of a war along the lines of the Thirty Years' War or recent struggles in Iraq. But it needs to be animated, as in Figure 2 and Figure 10. No visual depiction of Clausewitz's trinity can convey his concept if it isn't constantly changing. But perhaps the best visual metaphor would be that offered by Figure 1 (if we could animate it).



Figure9. Another ying/yang/yong conceptualization.

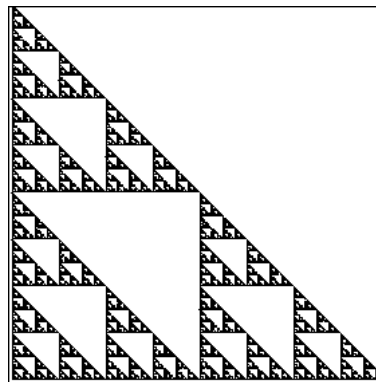
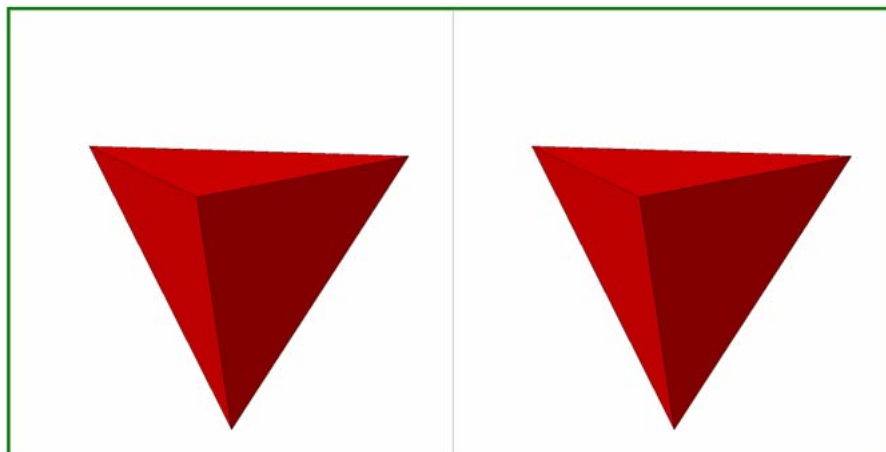


Figure 10. An animated fractal—hypnotic ("fascinating"), dynamic, but in this case far too regular.



(../readings/Bassford/Trinity/Intersection&Compound_polyhedra_from_tetrahedron_to5tetrahedra.gif)

Figure 11. Click to animate: "Generation of an icosahedron by the intersection of five tetrahedra: geometrical and crystallographic features of the intermediate polyhedra." [Original URL for image above. (http://www.mi.sanu.ac.rs/vismath/zefiro2008/_generation_of_icosahedron_by_5tetrahedra.htm)]

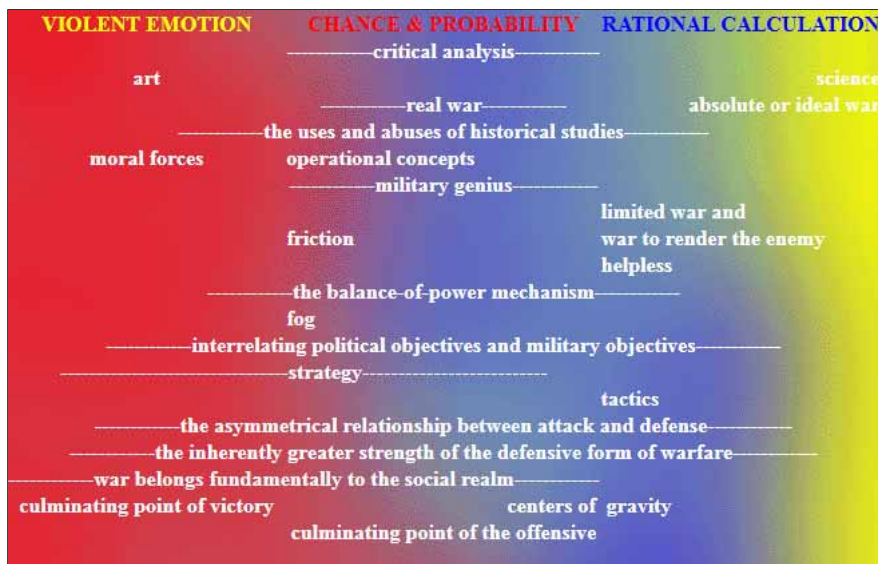


Figure 12. A notional, idiosyncratic, indefensible-in-detail, but useful ordering of some other Clausewitzian concepts under the categories of the Trinity.

CONCLUSIONS

Much of the criticism of Clausewitz essentially boils down to a complaint that he never stated his entire body of theory in a way we could all grasp by reading a single pithy sentence—at most, a pithy paragraph. Nonetheless, the 300-word Section 28 of Book 1, Chapter 1, of *On War* is an amazingly compressed summation of reality. Clausewitz's Trinity is all-inclusive and universal, comprising the subjective and the objective; the unilateral and multilateral; the intellectual, the emotional, and the physical components that comprise the phenomenon of war in any human construct. Indeed, through the subtraction of a few adjectives that narrow its scope to war, it can easily be made to encompass all of human experience. It is thus a profoundly realistic concept. Understanding it as the central, connecting idea in Clausewitzian theory will help us to order the often confusing welter of his ideas and to apply them, in a useful, comparative manner, both to the history of the world we live in and to its present realities. Most important, Clausewitz's realism (not to be confused with political science's artificial "Realism," which only partly overlaps Clausewitz's approach)*68 will help us steer clear of the worst tendencies of theory and of ideology, of "mere intellect" and logic, and of pure emotion. As Clausewitz himself said of his theory as a whole:

Its scientific character consists in an attempt to investigate the essence of the phenomena of war and to indicate the links between these phenomena and the nature of their component parts. No logical conclusion has been avoided; but whenever the thread became too thin I have preferred to break it off and go back to the relevant phenomena of experience. Just as some plants bear fruit only if they don't shoot up too high, so in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned and the plant kept close to its proper soil—experience.*69

But perhaps Sir Michael Howard said it best in criticizing the strategic theorists of the nuclear age:

"[Hermann] Kahn and his colleagues ... ignor[ed] all three elements in the Clausewitzian trinity: popular passion, the risks and uncertainties of the military environment, and the political purpose for which the war was fought. Their calculations bore no relation to war as mankind has known it throughout history.*70

NOTES

Versions of this paper dated after 1 JAN 2016 include substantial enhancements to the documentation reflecting a series of penetrating questions asked by Polish scholar Mgr. Sebastian P. Górka of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

[*1] See Bart Schuurman (University of Utrecht), "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars," *Parameters*, Spring 2010, pp.89-100.

[*2] *Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), *passim*.

[*3] [http://www.clausewitzstudies.org/ \(.../index.htm\)](http://www.clausewitzstudies.org/.../index.htm)

[*4] Obviously, my own historical research has concentrated on this approach—see Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945 (.../readings/Bassford/CIE/TOC.htm)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). My work as a doctrine writer, analyst and teacher tends towards the inspirationist, and the present essay certainly reflects an editorialist approach in places, e.g., in criticizing what I allege to be Clausewitz's sloppiness in the use of the word "war."

[*5] This "editorialist" label covers a lot of issues. I myself have made editorial suggestions like this, arguing that Clausewitz should have said "interplay" rather than "play" (i.e., *Zusammenspiel* rather than *Spiel*, when discussing the interactions of chance and probability in his discussion of the trinity. There is a debate over whether the English translators should have used "wrestling match" rather than "duel" as the translation for *Zweikampf* in the metaphor of the "center of gravity." (The solution requires solving larger issues than the specific translation of the single word *Zweikampf*.) Clausewitz's German editors were known to take issue with him concerning the notions of limited objectives and the superiority of the defensive form of war. Perhaps the most famous editorial intervention by a German editor was in the second edition (1853), when the editor altered Clausewitz's justification for putting the top military commander in the state's cabinet. He changed the rationale from serving to allow political leaders to share in the commander's activities to allowing the commander to participate in political decisions. This is discussed in a footnote on page 608 of the Howard/Paret (Princeton edition) translation of *On War*.

[*6] I should note that, after I had presented this paper at the "Clausewitz in the 21st Century (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199232024?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0199232024&linkCode=sm2&tag=theclassicstudies>)" conference, Andreas Herberg-Rothe thanked me for my "useful discussion."

[*7] The proceedings of this conference at Oxford in 2005 can be found in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds. *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199232024?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0199232024&linkCode=sm2&tag=theclassicstudies>) (Oxford University Press, 2007), ISBN 0199232024.

[*8] James Carville, as [apparently] quoted in Barry Schwartz, "In 'Sticky' Ideas, More Is Less," *Washington Post*, Wednesday, January 17, 2007, p.C08. This is a review of Chip and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007).

[*9] See Alan's contribution to the conference proceedings and Alan D. Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War (.../item/Beyerchen-ClausewitzNonlinearityAndTheUnpredictabilityOfWar.htm)," *International Security*, 17:3 (Winter, 1992), pp. 59-90. I have long argued that this is the most important article published on Clausewitz in the past thirty years. It is also available in French: "Clausewitz: Non Linéarité et Imprévisibilité de la Guerre (.../readings/Beyerchen/BeyerchenFR.htm)," *Theorie, Littérature, Enseignement*, 12 (1994), pp165-98.

[*10] Azar Gat's discussions of the evolution and dating of Clausewitz's thinking seem to be the source of this widespread notion. I have no particular opinion on his reconstruction, other than that it is largely irrelevant. The manner in which Gat expresses his obsession with the ghosts of Clausewitz's earlier conceptions, however interesting those ghosts may be in helping us to understand Clausewitz's personal evolution, serves only to distort our understanding of his mature thought.

Paul Donker's paper "*Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung*" as the first version of Clausewitz's masterpiece: A textual comparison with *Vom Kriege*," 108 Research Paper, a publication of the Faculty of Military Sciences, Netherlands Defence Academy, May 2016, discusses a list of 177 aphoristic statements. This list was published as Carl von Clausewitz, "Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung," *Zeitschrift für Kunst, Wissenschaft und Geschichte des Krieges*, Band 28, Viertes Heft 1833—Band 35, Siebentes Heft, 1835. These aphorisms may be essentially a compilation from a late but not final version of *Vom Kriege* or, as Donker suspects, may be from a significantly older manuscript. If the latter idea proves to be the case (a difficult thing to prove) it will create serious controversy over the existing conventional wisdom concerning the writing of Clausewitz's most famous work. For our immediate purpose, it is interesting that Aphorism #22, which corresponds to the first two paragraphs of Section 28, contains neither the chameleon imagery nor the term *wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit*. Thus the underlying concept was present whenever this aphorism was drafted (the dating is perhaps unclear, but Donker suggests as early as 1817) but the concept might not have drawn any particular notice without the addition of the powerful language with which we are familiar.

[*11] A newer version of which appears as Jon Sumida's contribution to the conference proceedings. See also his book, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

[*12] The terms dialectic, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis appear in *On War*, respectively, one, three, four, and one time each.

[*13] Here I have used the Jolles translation. Both the Jolles and the H/P versions make it clear that Clausewitz is talking about a delusory form of theory, i.e., the "logical fantasy" of ideal war, rather than the real-world approach that he himself espoused. [See the discussion of ideal war' vice 'absolute war,' which I contend are two completely distinct concepts (though the former is an intellectual descendant of the latter), in another of my working papers, "Clausewitz's Categories of War and the Supersession of 'Absolute War,'" at URL <http://www.clausewitzstudies.org/mobile/Bassford-Supersession5.pdf> (<https://www.clausewitz.com/mobile/Bassford-Supersession5.pdf#zoom=100>.) Both, however, made the odd decision to translate *Politik*, in the concluding phrase "*und dieses Ganze ist die Politik*" (and this whole is *Politik*) as "policy." That seems very odd in a paragraph dominated by plurals and by phrases like "political nature" and "political intercourse." Policy may become the 'whole' of internal politics once a policy decision has been made and accepted, but when the policies of multiple polities clash, clearly we are talking about the *political* arena.

[*14] The synthetic trinity includes "war is an expression of policy" [or politics, the word that should generally be preferred in translating *Vom Kriege*, as one of its three elements (rational calculation/policy), but obviously a synthesis must supersede the antithesis. The synthesis contradicts the antithesis in the sense that war cannot be 'merely' the expression of one element when in fact it is an expression of the *interaction among three* elements.

[*15] This working translation is based on comparisons among the first edition of *Vom Kriege*, the 1873 translation by J.J. Graham (London: N. Trübner, 1873); the O.J. Matthijs Jolles translation (New York: Random House, 1943); and the Howard/Paret 1984 edition; and on long-running consultations with Tony Echevarria, Alan D. Beyerchen, Jon Sumida, Gebhard Schweigler, and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, and, more recently, Paul Donker. Obviously, I bear sole responsibility for the result.

[*16] Plenty of sophisticated writers are perfectly happy with this initial metaphor: "War is a chameleon, possessed of an infinite capacity to adapt itself to changing circumstances." Andrew Bacevich, "Debellicised," *London Review of Books*, 3 March 2005.

[*17] E-mail, Sumida to Bassford, 8 April 2014. This is a close paraphrasing

[*18] This may be a matter of taste, but in my view H/P makes it sound like something that the reader will have to puzzle out based on a rather faltering first stab at solving the problem. My own view is that Clausewitz is very confidently pointing to a problem that he has already solved and that he has built that solution into the structure (or at least his *intended* structure) of the overall book.

[*19] See, for instance, Stephen Jay Gould's exegesis of the "three central principles constituting a tripod of necessary support" for Darwinian evolutionism, in *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2002), p.11.

[*20] See J.P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p.139 and *passim*.

[*21] [J.E. Edmonds], referring to Fuller's trinities in a review of Fuller's *Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1926), *Army Quarterly*, 12 (1926), 165-66.

[*22] That is, major effects from minor or even undetected inputs—AKA the "Butterfly Effect"—are a perfectly valid expectation for anyone familiar with scientific Chaos or Complexity theory or nonlinear mathematics. The vast majority of systems and networks in nature and in human society are nonlinear. But that approach appears inexplicable, counterintuitive, and "unscientific" to thinkers trained in the linearizing tradition. Calling the latter view "Newtonian" is a bit unfair to Newton himself. The best introduction to mathematical and physical Chaos is James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0140092501/ref=ase_theclausewitzhomA/), 20th Anniversary edition (New York: Penguin, 2008; originally published 1987). The classic introduction to the larger and encompassing field of Complexity is Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (Touchstone Books, 1992). A more recent overview is Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: A Guided Tour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[*23] Responding to this comment, Andreas Herberg-Rothe noted the following: "The context in which Clausewitz took notice of the concept of the trinity is in my opinion clearly the book *Anthropology* by Henrik Steffens (1822), which ends with praising the trinity—and as we know, Steffens lectured the whole winter 1824/25 after an invitation by Gneisenau, if I remember right, and Clausewitz didn't miss any of the lectures. Taking into account the importance of the trinity for Steffens and that Clausewitz attended his lectures the whole winter, it seems to me very clear that there is a connection between Steffens' Christian/romantic concept of the trinity and that of Clausewitz. Of course, Clausewitz used it in a non-religious way, one could perhaps say in an analytical sense, but the methodological approach is just the same: God the father = Force/violence as generating principle; the son = the army and its commander as the mediating tendency; and finally the Holy Spirit as 'governing principle,' in Steffen's term *Regierer*." And Clausewitz's term, usually translated as "government," is *Regierung*.

We could probably generate an entire cottage industry with this issue alone. However, Clausewitz did not see violent emotion as any more a "generating" principle than the other two elements of the trinity, since he was clear that physical violence or war could just as well be generated via chance or rational calculation.

[*24] ZenPundit, et al, in "Bassford's Dynamic Trinitarianism Part I (<http://zenpundit.com/?p=14019>)" (September 10th, 2012) and "Bassford's Dynamic Trinitarianism, Part II (<http://zenpundit.com/?p=14587>)" (September 24th, 2012); Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p.70.

[*25] On 'paradoxical' and 'remarkable,' compare the 1976 H/P edition, p.89, and the 1884 edition, p.89. Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Tony Echevarria, among others, seem to be gravitating towards 'wondrous.'

[*26] I seem to be having some success selling this: *Google* recently gave me 2640 links for "+fascinating trinity" +war, only a few of which were directly to my own writings. Of course, some had nothing to do with Clausewitz, either.

[*27] Roger D. Carstens, "Talk the walk on Iraq," *The Washington Times*, August 12, 2002, lists these three nouns as the Trinity. In this case, Carstens may simply have been a victim of his editors, but I've seen this formula elsewhere as well.

[*28] I believe that I myself, in an earlier incarnation, am responsible for this last one. See Christopher Bassford and Edward J. Villacres "Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity (<http://hold2/BassfordVillacres-Trinity1995.pdf#zoom=100>)," *Parameters*, Autumn 1995, pp.9-19.

[*29] See Bassford/Villacres, "Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity (<http://readings/Bassford/Trinity/TRININTR.htm>)," *Parameters*, Autumn 1995. (PDF (<http://hold2/BassfordVillacres-Trinity1995.pdf#zoom=100>))

[*30] Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (written at the U.S. Army War College c.1981; published Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982). In conversations I had with Harry in the late 1980s, I gathered that he was aware of both trinities, but he largely dismissed the Trinity proper as a meaningless abstraction. In later conversations, however, it was clear that he'd entirely forgotten the original formulation.

[*31] Section 28 of Bk1 Ch1—the trinity discussion. The issue is the English word 'balance' (which tends to be interpreted as implying equilibrium and stasis) versus 'floating,' by which I am trying to capture the dynamic connotations of the German original, *Schwebe*. A problem is that the English word "floating" may also imply a passive, lazy, dream-like condition—not at all what I mean to suggest. Such are the perils of translation. I'm open to other suggestions.

[*32] This line was originally written pretty early in the Iraq war. Civil-military tensions never rose to the level of the Vietnam era, or, rather, they took on a very different form. See, for example, James Fallows, "The Tragedy of the American Military (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516/>)," *The Atlantic Magazine*, JAN/FEB 2015. This widely-discussed article explored the ironies of the phrase popular in America today, "Thank you for your service." The executive summary read: "The American public and its political leadership will do anything for the military except take it seriously. The result is a chickenhawk nation in which careless spending and strategic folly combine to lure America into endless wars it can't win."

[*33] I discussed this lacuna in my book, *Clausewitz in English*, Chapter 10., "German, French, and British Interpretations (<http://readings/Bassford/CIE/Chapter10.htm>)," pp.87-93. For an example of the manner in which Clausewitz's powerful argument for the fundamental superiority of the defense has been misunderstood, see Ed Luttwak's reference to the ancient Romans' "seemingly ineradicable Clausewitzian prejudice against defensive strategies." Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.61. Sumida's work on the subject can be found in Jon Sumida, "On Defence as the Stronger Form of War," in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* [the proceedings of a March, 2005 conference at Oxford] (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.163-181; Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), *passim* and especially pp.153-175; Jon T. Sumida, "The Clausewitz Problem (<http://bibl/Sumida-TheClausewitzProblem.pdf#zoom=100>)," *Army History*, Fall 2009, pp.17-21.

[*34] The best introduction to the scientific concept of Chaos (which is quite different from what most readers imagine based on the ordinary meaning of the word) is James Gleick's famous best-seller, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0140092501/ref=ase_theclausewitzhomA/), 20th Anniversary edition (New York: Penguin, 2008; originally published 1987). The classic introduction to the larger and encompassing field of Complexity is Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (Touchstone Books, 1992). A more recent overview is Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: A Guided Tour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). The direct relevance of these scientific concepts to Clausewitz's often surprising world view is powerfully demonstrated by Alan D. Beyerchen's article, "Chance and Complexity in the Real World: Clausewitz on the Nonlinear Nature of War ([././hold2/Beyerchen-ClausewitzNonlinearity.pdf#zoom=100](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645442))," *International Security*, Winter 1992/1993, pp.59-90. See also the video, shown later in the text of this paper, of the Randomly Oscillating Pendulum, a chaotic system to which Clausewitz makes direct reference in his discussion of the trinity.

[*35] "The state's most remarkable products to date have been Hiroshima and Auschwitz..... Whatever the future may bring, it cannot be much worse." Martin van Creveld, "The Fate of the State," *Parameters*, Spring 1996. In Creveld's case, such statements may merely reflect pessimism. But hostility to the state has characterized hostile treatments of Clausewitz since Anatol Rapoport's long and atrocious introduction to the Penguin edition of *On War*, first published in 1968, which was animated by outrage at Henry Kissinger's "neo-Clausewitzianism."

[*36] This error appears to be in part a simple mistranslation and in part an erroneous repetition of the phrase from paragraph 4, "government alone." It may also reflect the general tendency in H/P to overemphasize the rational elements in Clausewitz's approach.

[*37] A Google search for the phrase "War is merely simply a continuation of policy politics" (*sic*, in order to capture the most common variations in the phrase) yields 5,010,000 hits.

[*38] See for example the discussion of *Politik* (translated as "policy") on pp.606-7 of the Howard/Paret translation.

[*39] Anders Palmgren (a Swedish military officer) has a very interesting discussion of this issue in a section labeled "What Did Clausewitz Mean by *Politik*?" Anders Palmgren, "Visions of Strategy: Following Clausewitz's Train of Thought," doctoral dissertation, Helsinki: National Defense University (Finland), 2014, pp.22-27. (I understand that this study will be published by Oxford University Press.)

I have thought many times about the fact that many languages make no such distinction as English's policy/politics. People who think in German, Polish, etc., still have to adapt to the various meanings of their single word, and perhaps they find it easier to understand Clausewitz's uses of it because they are used to its flexibility/ambiguity/comprehensiveness. Still, they might not consciously be aware of those various meanings. And they might not be aware of the strange rigidity in the thinking of many writers in English that relates to the purely unilateral meaning of the English word policy. 'Policy' itself has many shades of meaning. All meanings are unilateral, however, and in general the word should be interchangeable with 'strategy,' which is also unilateral. But many writers seem to think that 'policy' does not have the same requirement to consider means/resources that strategy does. I call this the "fantasy-romance of the policy worshippers," and it might account to some degree for our tendency to commit to policies that are strategically unsupportable. But, of course, leaders do this everywhere, regardless of their language or their formal definitions of politics or policy.

[*40] Not an exact quote, but I believe I've captured the essence. Howard revisited the issue in his Foreword to Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, eds. *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199232024?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0199232024&linkCode=xml2&tag=theclausewitzhom>), pp.vi-vii. (He also touched on the issue of translating *wunderliche*, tentatively settling on 'amazing.' In an essay that raises many translation issues regarding all of the English versions of *On War* (but with a natural focus on H/P), Jan Willem Honig raises many of the same points about the *Politik*/politics/policy conundrum that I have been raising since 1991 (with limited impact) in his essay "Clausewitz's *On War*: Problems of Text and Translation," in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds. *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.57-73. Honig draws rather different distinctions, however, between the English words policy and politics. Rather than deriving a basis for a better choice in each particular case of *Politik* (and its variants), Honig moves the issue into an interesting discussion of just how sympathetic Clausewitz might have been to our modern concept of democracy.

[*41] In this discussion, I am to some rather large extent plagiarizing myself from the sections on policy and politics in *MCDP 1-1: Strategy* ([././readings/mcdp1_1.pdf](https://www.marines.mil/Portals/0/Readings/mcdp1_1.pdf)) (United States Marine Corps, 1997). See the updated version of my original draft, "Policy, Politics, War, and Military Strategy ([././readings/Bassford/StrategyDraft/index.htm](https://www.marines.mil/Portals/0/Readings/Bassford/StrategyDraft/index.htm))." However, this definition of politics is essentially congruent with Max Weber's: "Politics" for us means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state." Max Weber, lecture "Politics As a Vocation," January 1919.

[*42] This is the same kind of mentality that insists on describing Clausewitz's "real war" as some very particular sub-type, when in fact all it means is war as we have really experienced it, in all of its real-world variety.

[*43] 'Fractal (<https://clausewitz.com/mobile/FractalLinks.htm>)' is a term from nonlinear geometry. Here, it refers to the tendency of patterns to look similar at different scales—e.g., the surface of a rock under a microscope looks rather like the face of a rock cliff or an aerial photo of a mountain range; the veining in a leaf is similar to the branching of the tree, etc. Similarly, tactics, operations, military strategy, grand strategy, and policy are all essentially the same thing—processes of interrelating means and ends—at different scales of time, space, and numbers of people and resources involved.

[*44] Colin S. Gray, "History and Strategic Culture," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, Editors, *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.592-598. I've listed six characteristics out of Gray's eight.

[*45] Book 8, Chapter 6B, p.605 in Howard/Paret.

[*46] H/P, p.357.

[*47] H/P, p.149.

[*48] I.e., Book 1, Chapter 2.

[*49] Conversely, both Communist forces sought merely to exhaust U.S. will to continue to defend the RVN while pursuing the complete destruction of South Vietnam's military forces, the eradication of its government, and the total conquest and absorption of its people and territory.

[*50] Clausewitz, *On War*, H/P, p.606.

[*51] It is an interesting exercise, however, to think about the implications of changing the word to "politics."

[*52] *Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe* was finally published in 1888 from a manuscript that had been sequestered in the archives of the Prussian general staff. Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, eds./trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.31.

[*53] As in his discussion of civil-military relations in Book 8, Chapter 6.

[*54] H/P, p.92.

[*55] Thomas Waldman [University of York, UK], *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* (Ashgate, 2013), p.128, discusses the argument I make here. (In this particular discussion Waldron cites my "Primacy of Policy" article, but elsewhere in the book he also cites this working paper, from which that article was hived off.) He says "This conception is useful and captures a vital dimension of this element. It forces us to conceive of 'chance and probability' as something 'out there', as characterising the conditions within which action takes place in war." He goes on, however: "Yet, this perspective, important and correct to a point, does not suffice. It ignores its vital complementary aspect which ... is in fact an internal feature of the actors involved in war.... [Chance and probability] also exist as a characteristic of actors' internal predicament, intellectual capacity or psychological condition...." I quite agree. I believe that this issue is (largely) covered in my next paragraph, in which other actors' internal drives are part of our external reality. It should be noted, however, that chance and probability certainly play powerful roles in our own internal lives—determining, for instance, the precise moment at which we become aware of, and thus begin to act upon, some strong feeling or some rational possibility. In truth, none of these factors can be exclusively assigned to any one element or actor—all of the elements of the trinity interact at every level and within any actor. This is why it is so important to reject the exclusivity that H/P's choice to translate *mehr* as 'mainly,' vice our 'more,' seems to inspire in most readers. But even 'mainly' implies some level of cross-leakage, and even 'more' will not stop readers inclined to single-factor analysis from indulging in that mind-numbing habit.

[*56] As we are apt to perceive them when their selfish interests diverge from our own equally selfish interests.

[*57] Book 1, Chapter 7, "Friction in War," H/P p.119.

[*58] This is my inference from wide reading and the assumption is often unstated. For an influential example, however, see John Keegan's argument that Clausewitz understood "only one form of military organization: the paid and disciplined forces of the bureaucratic state." John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, Knopf, 1993), p.222. This notion permeates the work of the "New Wars" scholars, most notably Mary Kaldor.

[*59] See, for examples, Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Noble Savages: My life Among Two Dangerous Tribes—the Yanomamö and the Anthropologists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), especially Chapters 8 and 9; Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Jean Guilaine and Jean Zammit, trans. Melanie Hersey, *The Origins of War: Violence in Prehistory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Debra L. Martin and David W. Freyer, eds., *Troubled Times: Violence and Warfare in the Past* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1997).

[*60] The "oblique reference" to which I refer is Clausewitz's discussion of the dangers of ritualizing warfare. See pp.99 in the Howard/Paret translation.

[*61] Standard works on the Taiping Rebellion include Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Franz H. Michael, ed., *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 3 vols. Casualty estimates range around 25-30 million dead.

[*62] The wars referred to include those of the Reformation; the Fronde; innumerable coups, rebellions and revolutions; the war in the Vendée, and lastly, the War of the Paris Commune (1871).

[*63] Max Weber's lecture, "Politics As a Vocation" (<http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf>) (28 JAN 1919), has been extraordinarily influential considering that it was not published in English until after World War II. His definition of the state is very widely accepted and his definition of politics is very similar to that suggested in this paper. (I do not know the source of the on-line English text to which the link leads—it is included for the reader's convenience.) Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, tr. Rodney Livingstone, eds. David Owen and Tracy Strong (Illinois: Hackett Books, 2004).

[*64] The quotation is given as "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it" at BrainyQuote.com (<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/michelange386296.html>), accessed 5 JAN 2016.

[*65] For example, the Mamertines, a mercenary group that took over the city of Messana in ancient Sicily. The theoretical construct can handle such variations.

[*66] See Christopher Daase and James W. Davis, eds., *Clausewitz on Small War* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

[*67] Spenser Wilkinson, "Killing No Murder: An Examination of Some New Theories of War," *Army Quarterly*, a review of Basil Liddell Hart's *The Remaking of Modern Armies* (London: John Murray, 1927), v.14 (October 1927).

[*68] In international relations theory, the "Realist" school (which has many sects and factions) follows a social-science approach to human affairs that seeks predictability in politics by reducing the motivations of human political entities to rational calculation and the quest for power. This is a reasonable approximation in many contexts and has some general but, in detail, unreliable predictive value. Clausewitz is often painted as a "Realist" in this sense, but that is inaccurate because such "Realism" is reductionist and linearizing. Clausewitz's realism does not attempt to minimize or override the full range of forces that drive human behavior in politics and warfare. He stresses factors that lead to uncertainty and unpredictability, for those are overwhelming factors that real-world strategists must confront.

[*69] Clausewitz, H/P, p.61.

[*70] Michael Howard, "The Military Philosopher," *Times Literary Supplement*, June 25, 1976, 754-755.

Clausewitzian "Trinity" demonstration device

The "Trinity ([trinity8.htm](#))" is a key concept in Clausewitzian theory, which Clausewitz illustrated by referring to this scientific device. You can obtain the ROMP (Randomly Oscillating Magnetic Pendulum) from science toy stores for about \$30. This model is available from **Amazon.com (USA)** (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B071WMWXB6?ie=UTF8&tag=theclassicwizhom&camp=1789&linkCode=xm2&creativeASIN=B071WMWXB6>).



(<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B071WMWXB6?ie=UTF8&tag=theclawsewitzhom&camp=1789&linkCode=xm2&creativeASIN=B071WMWXB6>)



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