

Unsound Mind

2004. Acrylic on canvas, 48x48"

by
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Pity the theory which sets itself in opposition to the mind! It cannot repair this contradiction by any humility, and the humbler it is so much the sooner will ridicule and contempt drive it out of real life.

Carl Von Clausewitz
*On War*¹

Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, had grand plans for his invasion of Iraq: there would be flowers adorned to the "liberators"; the war would be short, casualties few. Liberation, freedom and democracy would sprout like fields of daisies throughout the Middle East. It would all be like a World War II movie: America would save the day, the world would be a better, safer, freer place. Perhaps one of the main obstacles to the nostalgic movie ending was the fact that the United States military was conducting a war based on nineteenth century thinking.

U.S. Military doctrine is based on the writings of a nineteenth century Prussian general, Carl Von Clausewitz. Clausewitz entered military service at the age of twelve (1792), and rose through ranks after receiving a military education in Berlin in 1803. He served on various command staff in both the Prussian and Russian armies during the Napoleonic wars. After his death in 1831, his nine volumes of writings on military matters were published, three of which were a treatise on war, titled, *Vom Kriege (On War)*, published in 1832 by his wife.²

According to Clausewitz, war is an instrument of policy; a continuation of policy to advance "national interests." The idea was absolute war concluding in victory. That victory was achieved purely through the will to win. World War I, many Historians believe, was the embodiment of Clausewitz teachings: war as a continuation of policy; destruction of the enemy's army; an imposition of the force of will on the enemy; quick victory; inflicting heavy casualties; and annihilation. The underlying element was belligerent nationalism and aggression. As Clausewitz said, "[t]wo different motives make men fight one another: hostile feelings and hostile intentions."³

In the years prior to World War I, the German army was the strongest military force in Europe, based largely along the teachings of Clausewitz. In turn, other nations modeled their own military doctrine on the German example. Those methods and training, whether consciously or subconsciously, were the teachings of Clausewitz.⁴ In the end, it was a long, bloody stalemate of total war; all were dug in trying to annihilate one another.

When reading *On War*, Donald Rumsfeld's voice almost resonates from the pages, as if the Secretary of Defense either memorized the text, or uses it as a guide in everyday life. An interesting example of their similarities would be: "Everything is very simple in War, but the simplest thing is difficult."⁵ Is that Rumsfeld or Clausewitz? Another would be, and this practically carries Rumsfeld's annoyed tone of voice: "[W]ar should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy; otherwise the entire history of war would contradict us."⁶

Every step of the way, Donald Rumsfeld has conducted his wars along the teachings of Clausewitz; perhaps because, as Clausewitz said, "[a]ll war presupposes human weakness, and seeks to exploit it."⁷

Perhaps the Secretary of Defense believes, as did Clausewitz, that war is just another part of human interaction as comparable to business. The Prussian General

concluded "that war does not belong in the realm of arts and sciences; rather it 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."⁸ Clausewitz compared war more to commerce, "which is also a conflict of human interests and activities; and is still closer to politics, which in turn may be considered as a kind of commerce on a larger scale."⁹ However, Clausewitz did warn about the business of contractors, known in his time as condottieri (mercenaries) and stated that, "[m]ilitary history shows how unnatural and unsatisfactory it turned out to be."¹⁰

Clausewitz also cautioned about using war as an instrument of policy in that "it will naturally take its character from thence. If policy is grand and powerful, so also will be the war, and this may be carried to the point at which war attains to its absolute form."¹¹

Furthermore, Rumsfeld's greatest blunder may have been taking Clausewitz too literally when the Prussian General advised: "Nor indeed is it sensible to summon soldiers as many governments do when they are planning a war, and ask them for purely military advice."¹²

Rumsfeld may also believe, as Clausewitz did in the twisted logic of aggression, that "[p]olitically, only one can be the aggressor: there can be no war if both parties seek to defend themselves. The aggressor has a positive aim, while the defender's aim is merely negative. Positive action is therefore proper to the former since it is the only means by which he can achieve his ends."¹³

The Rumsfeld plan to use fewer troops than was advised by his generals was also Clausewitz: "If a small force beats a larger one, its gain is not only doubled but it shows a greater margin of general superiority, which the loser knows he may have to face again and again."¹⁴ Furthermore, the Prussian general said, "[s]peed and impetus are its strongest elements and are usually indispensable if we are to defeat the enemy. Thus theory demands the shortest roads to the goal. Endless discussions about moving left or right, doing this or that, are otiose."¹⁵ From this theory should come a quick victory because, "[a] victory is greater for having been gained quickly; defeat is compensated for by having been long postponed."¹⁶ Hence, the rush to Baghdad.

"What do you mean by defeat of the enemy?" asked Clausewitz. The answer was, "[s]imply the destruction of his forces, whether by death, injury, or any other means – either completely or enough to make him stop fighting."¹⁷ Furthermore, the most important thing after defeating your enemy is the "[d]estruction of his army and seizure of his capital."¹⁸ The ultimate purpose of war, therefore is, "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will...to impose our will on the enemy is its objective."¹⁹

An even greater goal, according to Clausewitz, is "if you can vanquish all your enemies by defeating one of them, that defeat must be the main objective in the war."²⁰

Perhaps Rumsfeld believed Saddam was the objective and hoped that would somehow also take care of bin Laden and al Qaeda. After all, Clausewitz said, "direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must always be the dominant consideration. We simply want to establish this dominance of the destructive principle."²¹

It is also interesting to note that as recently as July 2004, Prime Minister Allawi wanted to establish "an Iraqi security service to 'annihilate' terrorist groups."²²

The Prussian general also believed that there was a level of genius to conducting war: "[W]e will never find a savage who is a truly great commander, and very rarely one who would be considered a military genius, since this requires a degree or intellectual powers beyond anything that a primitive people can develop."²³ He therefore counseled that: "Possession of military genius coincides with the higher degrees of civilization: the most highly developed societies produce the most brilliant soldiers, as the Romans and the

French have shown us. With them, as with every people renowned in war, the greatest names do not appear before a high level of civilization has been reached."²⁴

Clausewitz also had a theory about rules that Rumsfeld must subscribe to: it's a "paltry philosophy if in the old-fashioned way one lays down rules and principles in total disregard of moral values. As soon as these appear one regards them as exceptions, which gives them a certain scientific status, and thus makes them into rules. Or again one may appeal to genius, which is above all rules; which amounts to admitting that rules are not only made for idiots, but are idiotic in themselves."²⁵

The war America was lured into was based on false information; much of it coming from the Pentagon and Donald Rumsfeld. Perhaps when all was said and done, and Rumsfeld just might not have his war, he once again fell back to Clausewitz: "In a state of weakness and insignificance, when prudence, judgment, and ability no longer suffice, cunning may well appear the only hope. The bleaker the situation, with everything concentrating on a single desperate attempt, the more readily cunning is joined to daring."²⁶ Is that when weapons of mass destruction came in, along with aluminum tubing?

And what is the point of a military if it is not involved in war? According to Clausewitz, "[h]ow, in fact, could we reasonably defend the exertion of so much effort in war, unless action is intended!"²⁷ Furthermore, "the destruction and subjugation of the enemy must be regarded simply as a means toward the general end."²⁸

Today there is continued talk of a moral war, trying to find legitimate reasons to conduct war. The U.S. military operates on a doctrine called transformation, which is a network centric warfare of "friendly combatants" networked together to accelerate information and speed an advance of "major combat operations."²⁹ Meaning, they reach a prescribed target and therefore, achieve a victory. That is to say, U.S. forces got Baghdad, therefore the U.S. won. Mission accomplished.

However, the basic element and purpose of transformation is Clausewitz's doctrine of winning through breaking the opponent's will to fight. It's not defensive, but rather offensive for "national security interests", which for many in the Bush administration, including Donald Rumsfeld, means global business interests. It is aggression.

In the words of retired Marine General Paul Van Riper, 'transformation,' 'network-centric warfare,' 'focused logistics', "are slogans masquerading as ideas. In a sense, they make war more antiseptic. They make it like a machine. They don't understand it's terrible, uncertain, chaotic, bloody business. So they can lead us the wrong way."³⁰

In a preface to a 1909 edition of *On War*, British Army Colonel F.N. Maude, noted that Clausewitz's work was "the ultimate foundation on which every drill regulation in Europe" was taught.³¹ He noted further that, "[m]ost of our present-day politicians have made their money in business - 'a form of human competition greatly resembling war', to paraphrase Clausewitz."³² He also cautioned that the difference between the time of Clausewitz and the beginning of the 20th century was that it became "possible to concentrate by surprise, on any chosen spot, a man-killing power fully twenty fold greater than was conceivable in the days of Waterloo."³³ Lastly, Colonel Maude warned, "[i]n the end, and with every improvement in science, the result depends more and more on the character of the leader and his power of resisting 'the sensuous impressions of the battlefield'."³⁴

Within five years the First World War ignited in Europe.

Perhaps the fact of the matter is, as professor Anatol Rapoport stated in closing remarks to the 1968 Penguin Classics edition of *On War*, "[p]reparation for war in Clausewitz's estimation, had only one objective - war."³⁵ He also noted, as we see in Iraq today, "[i]t is becoming clear that war is not a continuation of policy but a failure of policy."³⁶

Today, men like Donald Rumsfeld, and others in the Bush administration, promote tough speech; make grand threats; talk of morality, clarity, duty, and sacrifice; then wage war by proxy; sending young people into battles that they themselves never experienced. These old men were not witness to human destruction, haunting screams, last gasps of breath, a penetrating final glance of wide, vanishing eyes, a cold corpse, or warm blood seeping through their fingers. Now, they are graying warmongers acting out war games, or landing on aircraft carriers in full regalia, hoping to be heroes. In the modern world their thinking is deteriorated; their speech confused; their philosophy and methods old; their minds dangerously unsound.

Notes

1. Anatol Rapoport, ed., *Carl Von Clausewitz On War*, (Penguin Classics 1968) p. 184
2. Anatol Rapoport, ed., *Carl Von Clausewitz On War* (Penguin Classics 1968); Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds., *Carl Von Clausewitz On War*, (Princeton University Press 1976)
3. Howard and Paret, *On War*, p. 76
4. Ibid., p. 36
5. Ibid., p. 119
6. Ibid., p. 88
7. Ibid., p. 256
8. Ibid., p. 149
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. A. Rapoport, ed., *Carl Von Clausewitz On War*, p. 403
12. Howard and Paret, *On War*, p. 607
13. Ibid., p. 216
14. Ibid., pp. 232-233
15. Ibid., p. 624
16. Ibid., p. 238
17. Ibid., p. 227
18. Ibid., p. 596
19. Ibid., p. 75
20. Ibid., pp. 596-597
21. Ibid., p. 228
22. *Iraqi Premier Forms Security Service to 'Annihilate' Terrorists*, New York Times, nytimes.com July 16, 2004, by Somini Sengupta
23. Howard and Paret, *On War*, p. 100
24. Ibid., p. 101
25. Ibid., p. 184
26. Ibid., p. 203
27. Ibid., p. 217
28. Ibid., p. 227
29. PBS television series Nova, *Immutable Nature of War*
30. Ibid.
31. A. Rapoport, ed., *Carl Von Clausewitz On War*, p. 85
32. Ibid., p. 87
33. Ibid., p. 88
34. Ibid., p. 89
35. Ibid., p. 413
36. Ibid.