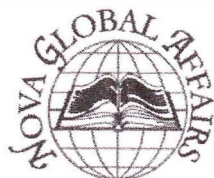


DEFENSE SECURITY AND STRATEGIES

**INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND WAR.
POLITICS AND GRAND STRATEGY IN
THE 21ST CENTURY**

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Chapter 5

THE STRANGE PERSISTENCE OF TRINITARIAN WARFARE

Christopher Bassford

INTRODUCTION

I am an 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 famous 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, “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”, the American national security community appears to be stunned to discover that warfare can be waged by groups that do not look at all like the *Wehrmacht*. Prompted by what evidently appears to many writers to be the utterly new kind of warfare waged by organizations like, say, Al Qaeda, they turn to shamanic incantations designed to capture the innovation by giving it a name. Some popular examples are “non-state war”, “Fourth-Generation War”, and the stunningly uncreative “the New Warfare”. Most misleading of all (to the few who are equipped to assign any meaning whatsoever to the phrase) is “nontrinitarian war”, a term popularized by Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld to encapsulate his allegedly new and “non-Clausewitzian” approach to the theory of war.

Clausewitz’s actual Trinitarian concept bears little resemblance, however, to the concept van Creveld claims to be refuting. Thus we need to take at least a short look at the original formulation. The problem with attempting any short discussion of the Trinity in isolation,

however, is that it is the central concept in *On War*. Central, that is, in the sense that it serves to bind all of Clausewitz's many ideas together into a meaningful whole. It is introduced as the final synthesis of Clausewitz's dialectical examination of the nature of war. It therefore both incorporates and supersedes his famous antithesis, the statement - usually considered Clausewitz's supreme argument - that war is simply an expression of *Politik* with the addition of other means (Clausewitz 1976: 605).

Text Box 1. The Consequences for Theory²

War is thus more than a *mere* chameleon, because it *changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case*. It is also, however, 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;³
- 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 *pure reason*.⁴

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*

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*.⁵

² Section 28 of Chapter 1, Book 1, of *On War*. "What is War?" This working translation is based on comparisons among the first edition of *Vom Kriege* (Berlin: Dümmlers Verlag, 1832); the translation by J.J. Graham (London: N. Trübner, 1873); the O.J. Matthijs Jolles translation (New York: Random House, 1943); and the Howard/Paret 1976/1984 editions; and on long-running consultations with Tony Echevarria, Alan D. Beyerchen, Jon Sumida, Gebhard Schweigler, and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, et al. Obviously, I bear sole responsibility for the result. The reasoning behind this translation is described in detail in "The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought."

³ The elements of the Trinity are enumerated here for the sake of clarity. There are no numbers in the original.

⁴ H/P renders *bloßen Verstande* as "reason alone", which is for rather glaring reasons contradictory to Clausewitz's argument. Obviously, war cannot be subject to "reason alone" if it is also subject to emotion and to chance.

⁵ Shown in *italic* are sections where this translation differs substantially from that in Howard/Paret.

Such a synthetic unifier is of little use without reference to the things it unifies, so a discussion of the Trinity is difficult to confine within tidy boundaries: Any comprehensive examination must lead to every major issue in *On War*. Here we will try to confine ourselves largely to the questions, are the elements of Clausewitz's Trinity present and relevant in contemporary conflicts, and does his formulation offer a useful tool with which to analyze modern wars?⁶

THE ELEMENTS OF THE TRINITY

Martin van Creveld has built something of a cottage industry attacking Clausewitzian theory. That theory, he says, is built upon an obsolete and hopelessly state-centric socio-political construct of People, Army, and Government. This hoary old Clausewitzian construct is applicable, if at all, only to those days, long gone, when the state was the only warfighting political entity worth mentioning.⁷

Let us consider, then, the list of elements Clausewitz actually included in his Trinity. As will be readily evident to anyone who actually *reads* the first paragraph of his description, it comprises: 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) war's element of subordination, as an instrument of *Politik*, which makes it subject to pure reason. For convenience, this set of elements is usually labeled "emotion/chance/reason"; sometimes "violence/chance and probability/rational calculation"; or, even more abstractly, "irrationality/nonrationality/rationality".⁸ Note, in any case, that the words "people", "army", and "government" [hereafter abbreviated PAG] appear nowhere at all in this list.

Van Creveld's PAGan list actually originated in 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) (Summers, Jr: 1982). 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. The 1976 Howard/Paret translation of *On War* [hereafter H/P] reinforced that notion with its

⁶ This article to some extent overlaps with "The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought," in Strachan/Herberg-Rothe (2007), pp. 74-90, which focuses on problems of translation. Both that article and this one are derived from a paper delivered to the conference "Clausewitz in the 21st Century", at Oxford University in March 2005. The latest version of the overall analysis is available on-line as "Tiptoe Through the Trinity", at <http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Trinity/Trinity8.htm> (13.08.2008).

⁷ The term "nontrinitarian war" first gained wide exposure in van Creveld (1991).

⁸ I believe that I myself, in an earlier incarnation, am responsible for this last one, which seems to have caught on Bassford/Villacres (1995).

message that "Our task ... is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies."

Clausewitz, in contrast, was intensely skeptical of any positive doctrine that was not highly context-specific. Such a doctrine was entirely alien to his approach to theory. He was a practical soldier and he intended his work to serve as a very practical approach to real-world complexities - *without* avoiding the complexity. His Trinity was descriptive, not prescriptive, and foretold the very opposite of balance. His message was that the relationships among these elements were inherently unstable and shifting. We must not set, or count upon, any fixed relationship among them. The infinite variability among the trinity's factors and in their interaction underlies Clausewitz's insistence on the inherent unpredictability of war. It is a classic model of Chaos, in the modern scientific sense (Beyerchen 1992). This descriptive approach, permitting infinite variability within fundamental categories that can be identified in any context, makes the Trinity a promising basis for any comparative approach to military-political studies.

We can blame Summers' confusion partly on H/P's unfortunate choice in translating Clausewitz's linkage between the elements of the Trinity proper and the elements of the secondary trinity. By substituting "mainly" for *mehr* (which I've translated as "more"), H/P attempted to lock each of the elements of the actual trinity much 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 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 (though 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 (or more) 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 current misadventures in Iraq threaten to restore its immediate importance) - is much less than fundamental. Clearly, it is quite possible to fight and 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., 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 an occupier. *On War* argues, powerfully and pervasively, that defense is inherently the stronger form of war. Curiously, that aspect of Clausewitz's theory has never been explored in any great depth (in the English language, at least, though Jon Sumida (2005) is working on the problem). That argument turns in significant part on the passions of the people (and of whatever leadership and fighting forces they produce). These passions tend naturally to be more intense on the part of a population fighting on its own soil than they can ever be among 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 does not mean the defender will win: There are other factors and other asymmetries to consider. The main objection has always been doctrinal: Military organizations prefer, for many reasons, to inculcate an offensive spirit. Nonetheless, Clausewitz's view has been amply borne out in examples like Spain, Russia, Britain (1940), Vietnam, and now Iraq (not for the first time). This need not be taken as a moral condemnation of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. The wholly justified Allied invasion of Germany in 1944 was also an act of conquest and occupation. 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 head of state or commander would have dreamed of tolerating armed local militias in 1945 Germany.

It is perhaps understandable that thinkers hostile to the state⁹ or simply focused on "non-state" war might reject the People/Army/Government construct. Their fears (in some cases advocacy) of the eclipse of the State are wildly overblown, but not completely unfounded. One has to wonder, however, 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: Van Creveld'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 (PAG) that, in its generalized form, is quite useful in its own right. In any case, van Creveld's failure to read the actual wording of the theory he so vociferously attacks, and to grasp its deep relevance to the phenomena he describes, is puzzling at best.

The best explanation is that van Creveld, previously author of an article entitled "The Eternal Clausewitz" (van Creveld 1986), and a sophisticated if tendentious historian, is using Clausewitz as a straw man. In doing so, unfortunately, he has confused Clausewitz's original and penetrating approach with the shallow works of some of his disciples - or even with the whole vast literature on war that has accumulated in the last century, much of which reflects the fixation on formalized, state-on-state warfare that van Creveld rightly criticizes. We may applaud the radical goal of sweeping away the pervasive errors of traditional scholarship. But this it is not a useful approach to understanding either war or Clausewitz.

CLAUSEWITZ AND THE STATE

"Non-state war" is one of the more problematic 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 underlies most contemporary critiques of Clausewitz and most discussions of his Trinitarian concept.

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 anthropological literature on the subject¹⁰ will make this abundantly clear.

⁹ "The state's most remarkable products to date have been Hiroshima and Auschwitz.... Whatever the future may bring, it cannot be much worse." Van Creveld (1996). 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.

¹⁰ See, for examples, Keeley (1996), Guilaine/Zammit (2005), Martin/Freyer (1997).

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, Russia, 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 Weberian state has been extraordinarily successful in eliminating non-state military competitors. Alas, one’s successful past experience is useful only if one happens to be aware of it.

It is of course not merely ignorance of the historical success of the state in such warfare that inhibits an effective absorbance of past strategic lessons. Ideologies of all sorts get in the way. The biggest problem in this regard, however, is the state’s very success, which accounts for the wide-spread astonishment when such competition periodically reappears. States achieved their near-universal dominance of the earth’s surface through wildly varied combinations of different strategies - political, social, legal, economic, educational, etc., as well as military. These strategies 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. The state’s success has depended, however, more or less equally upon its demonstrated readiness to employ brutal, sometimes quite arbitrary violence. Such indiscriminant violence has often been unnecessary for success and thus counterproductive, the product of viciousness and incompetence. On the other hand, sometimes it has been merely the inevitable result of Clausewitzian friction: Being fair or reasonable, or even appearing to be, is sometimes impractical - simply too hard to pull off successfully with the means available and under the threat of draconian penalties for failure, 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 their political simplifications and the ethically hard-to-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:¹¹ Can a decent society founded on comfortable myths preserve itself through the kinds of strategies that were necessary to create it in the first place?

Given the inevitable divergences in interest within any given group, Clausewitz’s assumption about policy, i.e., that it is “representative of all interests of the community” (Clausewitz 1976: 606), is a convenient one that allows him to focus on his true subject - i.e., the conduct of war, not the formulation of policy. It is nonetheless a realistic assumption, so

¹¹ See, for example, Clausewitz’s discussion of the dangers of ritualizing war in Chapter 11 of book 4, or of introducing moderation as a principle of theory (rather than as an element of practical policy) in Chapter 1 of Book 1.

long as policy is not so visibly corrupt or disastrous as to break the community's cohesion and 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, war becomes 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 would-be states, and often other intervening states are usually 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 - religious sects, ethnic separatists, political movements and parties, warlords, invaders, interfering allies, etc. Yet somehow the Chinese state emerged on top. Today it brooks no serious internal challengers.

This kind of transformation in the political structure of a society provides an explanation for van Creveld's and Keegan's insistence that "non-state" warfare is "non-trinitarian". Or, to be more precise - because those two authors clearly don't understand what Clausewitz's trinitarian concept is in the first place - it provides an explanation for the appeal of their "non-trinitarian" pronouncements. Operating under the influence of the common but ahistorical illusion that "traditional" warfare has been exclusively of the state-on-state variety, many readers evidently find the allegedly "new" variety of conflicts baffling. They therefore welcome any reassurance that they are not alone in their astonishment.

The reason we suffer from this illusion is not that such 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, for example, a murky internal conflict rooted in ethnicity, gender, class, and a particularly weird form of Christianity, dwarfs that of Europe's inter- and intra-state wars in the same period. Most wars have been struggles within an existing state - civil wars, *coups d'états*, peasant rebellions, revolutions, wars of succession or of secession, or "wars of unification" (i.e., wars of conquest upon which historians later bestowed legitimacy because they united warring communities that somehow seem more natural when joined). 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 entities which felt they had both the right and the duty to employ violence in support of the legitimate order. And the Weberian state has never suffered from any shortage of challengers to its monopoly on violence. The French state, for example, has fought bloody and destructive wars against 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. Sometimes it actually lost such wars - in which case the opponent became the state ("The State is dead - Long live the State").

Americans 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: 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. 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 1870 war, or the War of the Paris Commune. Nor 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 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.

THE PERSISTENCE OF STRUCTURE

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. 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 be so complex as to become 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 seem 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 and their audiences naturally crave - in which case, they may resort to the creation of new buzzwords like “Fourth Generation Warfare” to hide their embarrassment.

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. Of course, 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.” 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 may be 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. (Later, politicians and their historians will call it a “civil war” if the secession failed.)
- genocide, in which one or more competitor 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).¹²

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. It is of course quite conceivable that there may be populations without leadership, or fighting organizations whose leadership represents no interests but its own, etc. 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’ emotions, the interplay 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.

Thus there seems to be little point, and less value, to clinging to the interstate-only interpretation of the famous dictum that war is an expression of *Politik*, 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, and issues 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.

¹² This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of possibilities. But note the deceptions mentioned in each case.

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 usually flow only to a few, 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.

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