



**Clausewitz Reconsidered**

By H.P. Willmott and Michael B. Barrett

Praeger Security International, 2010  
236 pp. \$22.95  
ISBN: 978-0-313-36286-6

Reviewed by DOUGLAS PEIFER

Carl von Clausewitz continues to inspire, antagonize, and confuse; at least 5 books have appeared in the last 3 years that seek to explain, contextualize, or critique *On War*. Hew Strachan’s *Clausewitz’s On War* (2007), Antulio Echevarria’s *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (2007), the Oxford University Press conference anthology on *Clausewitz in the Twenty-first Century* (2007), and Jon Sumida’s *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (2008) are inspired by Clausewitz’s study and seek to clarify, elaborate on, or use his concepts to shed light on contemporary war. H.P. Willmott, by way of contrast, contends that *On War* has attained the status of a sacred text, with a fawning preeminence bordering on sycophancy accorded to it. In *Clausewitz Reconsidered*, Willmott and Michael Barrett seek to examine war in the two centuries that have passed since Clausewitz lived and fought. In a critique of Clausewitz reminiscent of those of John Keegan and Martin van Creveld, they contend that Clausewitz conceived of war solely in terms of interstate

conflict pursued for political objectives. Their purpose is not to challenge *On War*’s continued insights and relevance to wars between states, but rather to provide complementary insights about war in its many other forms.

Willmott and Barrett have grounds for their contention that Clausewitz does not provide the “answer to all questions” about war and that his masterpiece left important elements untouched. Clausewitz pays scant attention to finances in *On War* despite Cicero’s 2,000-year-old admonition that “endless money forms the sinews of war.” Economics, seapower, and particularly the issue of credit are outside the framework of his study, despite the essential role that British subsidies played in funding the coalitions that contained Louis XIV and defeated Napoleon. More broadly, Clausewitz consciously excluded weapons development and the raising and equipping of fighting forces from his theory of war (book II, chapter 1), a choice perhaps justified in the context of the Napoleonic Wars but inadequate to understanding the contribution made by technological developments in the world wars and the Cold War. One might justly charge Clausewitz with ignoring finances, technology, and force development in his study of war, and had Willmott and Barrett provided a fuller examination of these factors, their analysis would have been a welcome complement to Clausewitz’s *On War*.

Instead, Willmott and Barrett revive the worst mischaracterizations of Clausewitz and his work. They charge him with conceiving of war as exclusively the preserve of the state and its agents (p. 153). They resurrect the odd notion that Clausewitz’s contention that “war is an instrument of policy” ignores civil, ethnic, religious and other “non-

political” wars. They characterize Clausewitz’s conception of war as “antiseptic and simplistic” (p. 4), an astounding assertion given the attention that Clausewitz devotes to intangible factors such as passion, fog, friction, and morale in books I and III of *On War*. They assert that Clausewitz presents a singular conception of war, an incredible misreading of a book that seeks to grapple with the many manifestations of war, from the limited wars of the ancien régime (book VIII) to the near-total war of the Napoleonic era to the people in arms (book VI, chapter 26).

Willmott and Barrett seek to use Clausewitz as a springboard to examine factors they believe *On War* failed to address adequately. They aspire to provide new perspectives and to challenge conventional wisdom and periodization. Their alternative conceptions of when the modern warfare era began, their use of unusual comparisons (for example, the Civil War and the Pacific campaign of World War II), and their emphasis on wars of decolonialization rather than the Cold War examine modern war from new angles. Their analysis of conflict since the Cold War period embraces nontraditional security issues such as resource and income disparities, population growth, and globalization. They write with verve and style and provide a wealth of colorful details, reflecting the insights gained over decades of writing about naval warfare and teaching military history.

Yet even judged on these merits and ignoring its weak analysis of Clausewitz, the book falls short in three areas. First, its organization is scattered and uneven. The sections dealing with airpower, for example, devote more time to John Warden, *Desert Storm*, and Kosovo than to the preceding 80 years of air warfare. The portion entitled

“Mahan and Corbett Reconsidered” contains absolutely no discussion of Corbett or any of his ideas. Second, the work contains a number of problematic historical interpretations, from claims that the Confederacy sought to fight a war of attrition (p. 42) to an assertion that mental rather than material factors caused the stalemate of World War I (p. 46) to the contention that Nazism played a central role in the Wehrmacht’s victories of 1939–1941 (p. 58). These questionable assertions, among others, certainly merit more elaboration and source citation than they receive. This draws attention to the work’s third shortcoming. The notes and citations are discursive in nature, with little effort made to substantiating the facts, figures, and details that abound throughout the book. This can be overlooked in many cases, but when the text remarks that the Taliban participated in the 1991 coalition against Saddam (p. 157) and refers to allegations that the 1993 “attack on the World Trade Center . . . was organized on the basis of C.I.A. manuals” (p. 207, n. 4), the reader has a right to know the source of these dubious insights.

*Clausewitz Reconsidered* is neither a theoretical critique of *On War* and its concepts, nor a tightly organized history of modern warfare since Napoleon. It is instead a highly idiosyncratic series of essays on modern warfare by two well-established military historians. It is thought-provoking but contentious, alternately insightful and wide of the mark. **JFQ**

**Dr. Douglas Peifer teaches strategy at the U.S. Air War College. He is a historian by background, with his research focusing on the intersection between military strategy, naval history, politics, and culture.**