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Review Essay

A Wake for Clausewitz: Toward a Philosophy of 21st-Century Warfare

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Like adoration for some family elder, the veneration heaped on Clausewitz seems to grow even as his power to explain the world declines. He remains an icon at all the US war colleges (figuratively and literally) while his writings are bent, twisted, and stretched to explain everything from guerrilla insurgency (Summers) through nuclear strategy (Cimbala) to counternarcotrafficking (Sharpe). *On War* is treated like holy script from which quotations are plucked to legitimize all sorts of policies and programs. But enough! It is time to hold a wake so that strategists can pay their respects to Clausewitz and then move on, leaving him to rest among the historians.

Who to invite to the final vigil? Who can possibly provide future-looking considerations of armed conflict that even approach the power and depth of *On War*? Though the literature on warfare and military matters is vast, few writers have grappled with the sort of fundamental issues so astutely dissected by the great

Prussian. From the small group searching for a new philosophy of war, the most important recent works have been Alvin and Heidi Toffler's *War and Anti-War*, John Keegan's *A History of Warfare*, and Martin van Creveld's *The Transformation of War*.

At first glance, this is a polyglot group. The Tofflers are Americans, probably the world's best-known futurists, and wildly successful mass-market authors. The other two are military historians and trained scholars; Keegan is British and van Creveld Israeli. In this case, heritage plays a major role in the tone and tenor of analysis. The three books also differ in methodology, with distinct notions of why and how future wars will be fought. The Tofflers are economic determinists—Marxist in analytical style though not in prescription. "The way we make war," they argue, "reflects the way we make wealth." Keegan, while sensitive enough to the complexities of war to eschew monocausal explanations, uses *A History of Warfare* to argue that the importance of culture on how and why people fight is often underestimated. Van Creveld turns the causal relationship around and contends that how and why people fight help determine their political, economic, and even social organization. War for him is as much an independent variable as a dependent one.

Despite such differences, these three books do belong together. They share, for instance, a degree of influence. All were written by justifiably renowned authors and have helped shape contemporary thinking on the future of armed conflict. At an even deeper level, all three agree that the world is in the midst of a historical transformation. They expect the future of organized violence to be fundamentally different from its past. And this leads all three to reject what they see as the conceptual limitations of Clausewitz as they peer into the future. From this common starting point, they move in dramatically different directions.

First to the Tofflers. Written for a general audience, *War and Anti-War* is certainly the easiest to read of the three books. It also represents the Tofflers' first extended foray into military matters. Since they are little concerned with staking a claim in the literature of strategic studies, their rejection of Clausewitz is indirect. For Keegan and van Creveld, Clausewitz's notoriety demands that he be executed in public; the Tofflers are willing to let him die quietly in a closed room. And, as newcomers to the field, the Tofflers build *War and Anti-War* from their past writing on economic trends rather than an existing body of work on military matters. The core argument of the book is that a third historic economic transformation is under way (the first was the invention of agriculture, the second the industrial revolution). The emergence of "Third Wave" economics "based on knowledge rather than conventional raw materials and physical labor" will affect all aspects of human life, including warfare. But "First Wave" states or regions (pre-modern, agrarian) and "Second Wave" ones (industrial) will persist even as "Third Wave" states or regions explore new techniques of economic production and social organization. This heterogeneity will have an immense effect on global security. According to the Tofflers, "The historic change from a bisected to a trisected world could well trigger the deepest power struggles on the planet as each country tries to position itself in the emerging three-tiered power structure" (p. 25). The Tofflers thus accept the long-standing notion that deep and fundamental change—whether in the global system or within a developing country—sparks instability and often violent conflict.

The changing nature of production and the emergence of Third Wave states and regions are already shaping military forces. "Knowledge," the Tofflers write, "is

now the central resource of destructivity just as it is the central resource of productivity," an idea that has captured the attention of US Army leadership (Sullivan and Dubik, 1994). In *War and Anti-War* the Tofflers briefly survey the military implications of "demassification," which point to highly specialized "niche wars"; the military use of space; robotic combat; nano-technology; non-lethal weapons; and cyberwar. Throughout, their fascination with existing or potential technology is evident. Quintessentially American, the Tofflers concentrate on technology feasibility with little concern for the strategic, political, social, psychological, or ethical implications of changing military technology. They describe *how* men might fight in the future, but not *why*.

Even while speculating on the future of war, the Tofflers seek ways that "anti-war"—"strategic applications of military, economic, and informational power to reduce the violence so often associated with change on the world stage"—can match evolving military technology. Their analysis of this topic is halfhearted compared to their description of the changing nature of organized conflict. Even here they follow the long American tradition of searching for technological panaceas. As in all of their writing, the Tofflers see technology driving and shaping history rather than reflecting human values and systems of social organization.

John Keegan's *A History of Warfare* takes a diametrically different approach. Technology is barely mentioned. Instead, Keegan seeks the keys to warfare within the human mind. With the opening sentence of the book, he announces his location within the wider currents of military and strategic thinking. "War," he writes, "is not the continuation of policy by other means" (p. 3). The book thus explicitly rejects, or at least attempts to transcend, Clausewitz. Keegan is driven to explain the powerful role that culture plays in determining how we understand most social phenomena, war included. "We all find it difficult," Keegan writes, "to stand far enough outside our own culture to perceive how it makes us, as individuals, what we are" (p. 22). According to Keegan, this constraint applies equally to Clausewitz:

Good historian though he was, Clausewitz allowed the two institutions—state and regiment—that circumscribed his own perception of the world to dominate his thinking so narrowly that he denied himself the room to observe how different war might be in societies where both state and regiment were alien concepts. (p. 23)

By relying solely on European evidence, Clausewitz constructed a culture-specific philosophy of war. In *A History of Warfare*, Keegan attempts to overcome this limitation by examining non-European warfare from the Mamelukes and samurai though Easter Islanders and the Yanomamö tribe of South America. The notion that war was an extension of policy and that soldiers and sailors fought and died for national interests, Keegan contends, may have been what Clausewitz preferred, but it is not a universal and immutable principle. Even Clausewitz was unable to explain the type of war waged by Cossacks and other irregular forces. Despite the efforts of brilliant minds to adapt and update his theory, Clausewitz does not adequately account for much of the real or threatened armed violence of the late 20th century, whether revolutionary insurgency, nuclear deterrence, or counternarcotrafficking.

Like the Tofflers, Keegan is concerned with the control of war. He believes that much of recorded history has been shaped by the tension between mankind's drive for violence and the need to constrain it. But like those of the Tofflers, Keegan's proposals for limiting violence do not satisfy. The controls on war that have developed

in the Western world—whether legal proscriptions, deterrence, arms control, or the fog, friction, and rationality that Clausewitz discussed—have, as the history of the 20th century shows, proven inadequate. Thus Keegan feels that “future peacekeepers and peacemakers have much to learn from alternative military cultures” (p. 392). Unfortunately, the only answers he finds are “the principles of intellectual restraint” and “symbolic ritual.” As the material and human costs of war are increasing, mankind may deliberately choose to abandon it. “Despite confusion and uncertainty,” Keegan writes, “it seems just possible to glimpse the emerging outline of a world without war” (p. 58). This is an alluring idea, but writers since Plato have glimpsed societies without war, yet none have been able to guide us to them. Unlike his analysis of why and how men fight, Keegan offers little that is new or profound regarding why men might choose *not* to fight.

Writing from Israel, where the crack of gunfire more often forms the soundtrack of daily life than it does in the English countryside, Martin van Creveld is less sanguine about the future. *The Transformation of War* is an explicit attempt to explain why and how men fight. In contrast to the Tofflers, van Creveld has thought deeply about why organized violence occurs. He writes, “War, far from being merely a means, has very often been considered an end—a highly attractive activity for which no other can provide an adequate substitute” (p. 218). Like Keegan, van Creveld begins by arguing that most contemporary strategic thought reflects the obsolete Clausewitzian “trinity” of the state, the army, and the people. Specifically, *On War* was based on three core ideas. First, war is waged by the state. Second, war tends toward unrestrained force. And, third, war is a means to an end—it should further state interests and policy. But, van Creveld argues, “trinitarian war is not War with a capital W but merely one of the many forms that war has assumed” (p. 57). His ambitious goal, then, is to provide a new, non-Clausewitzian framework for thinking about war.

He begins with the state. Modern states emerged in part because of their proficiency at war. Because they were able to protect their subjects from bandits and external enemies, states gained a degree of pragmatic support which eventually matured into legitimacy—the moral obligation to obey. But, van Creveld argues, modern states are not very good at protecting their citizens from low-intensity conflict, the dominant security threat of the late 20th century. Not only have the majority of armed struggles since World War II been low-intensity conflicts of one form or the other but, according to van Creveld, these have also been the bloodiest and most strategically significant. History bears this out: with the exception of the Six Days War, most of the major conventional wars over the past few decades have ended in stalemate or the *status quo ante bellum*—Korea, Iran-Iraq, 1973 Arab-Israeli, Desert Storm. On the other hand, many low-intensity conflicts have led to major changes in the internal or international distribution of power, whether in China, Vietnam, Algeria, or throughout southern Africa.

Van Creveld’s conclusions run counter to much of the thinking within the US Army concerning the military force of the future. And, he feels, it is not simply armed forces that are growing obsolete, but also the world’s basic political unit. Since the territorial state with a conventional army has proven unable to decisively defeat low-intensity conflict, it will fade into obsolescence. “The most important single demand that any political community must meet,” he writes, “is the demand for protection” (p. 198). If the territorial state cannot protect its citizens, “then clearly it does not have a future in front of it.” First to go will be the weak states of the Third

World, the last Western Europe and Japan. Even the United States may fall victim if proper preventive measures are not taken. Van Creveld writes:

America's current economic decline must be halted; or else one day the crime that is rampant in the streets of New York and Washington, D.C., may develop into low-intensity conflict by coalescing along racial, religious, social, and political lines, and run completely out of control. (p. 196)

This line of thinking leads to a stark picture of a future where

war will not be waged by armies but by groups whom we today call terrorists, guerrillas, bandits, and robbers, but who will undoubtedly hit on more formal titles to describe themselves. Their organizations are likely to be constructed on charismatic lines rather than institutional ones, and to be motivated less by "professionalism" than by fanatical, ideologically-based, loyalties. (p. 197)

Van Creveld is not arguing that future war will pit conventional, modern forces against guerrillas and terrorists; instead, as low-intensity conflict becomes the dominant form of armed violence, *all* armed forces will move toward a guerrilla and irregular configuration. This is a profoundly radical idea. Americans are used to thinking that as other nations and groups "progress" they become more like us. But van Creveld is on solid historical ground when he contends that "we" may become more like "them." Military innovation often has come from states on the periphery of the most civilized parts of the world. The early Romans in the Mediterranean, Arabs in the Middle East, Turks in Central Asia and Southeast Europe, Mongols in China, and the 20th-century Americans in the Atlantic world were peripheral powers able to adopt military innovations from more advanced armies and navies, thus forcing the developed states to change their own organization, strategy, and tactics. Since, as van Creveld notes, "war represents the most imitative activity known to man" (p. 195), it follows that the military forces of the developed states may be forced to become more like their enemies in order to survive. Early counterinsurgent theorists such as Roger Trinquier who argued that the West had to "fight fire with fire" may prove prophetic; Sarajevo, Gaza, Belfast, and east Los Angeles rather than Desert Storm may be war's future.

As the state and its conventional army become obsolete, so too will classical strategy defined as using battles or linked operations to attain objectives. Armed forces will "move away from today's large, expensive, powerful machines toward small, cheap gadgets capable of being manufactured in large numbers and used almost everywhere" (p. 210). One only has to consider the strategic effect of AK-47s, shoulder-held anti-air missiles, and land mines during the past few decades for a hint of this. And conventional military forces themselves will "degenerate into police forces or, in case the struggle lasts for very long, mere armed gangs." War will be fought not to pursue national interests, but to kill enemy leaders, to convert opponents to one's religion, to obtain booty, or, sometimes, for simple entertainment. Thus the core of Clausewitz's philosophy of war—that states wage wars using armies in pursuit of political objectives—will disappear.

W*ar and Anti-War, A History of Warfare, and The Transformation of War* all have major flaws. The Tofflers, for instance, present more a sketch or survey than a sustained analysis. Their book is an MTV clip, where Keegan's and van Creveld's are

sonatas, perhaps symphonies. The popularity of the Tofflers' book in the US military is understandable, but worrisome. Furthermore, the Tofflers have had to bend history to fit their model of economic causality, most blatantly when they attribute the Napoleonic revolution in warfare to the industrial revolution. If anything, the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, by mobilizing mass armies, sparked the industrial revolution, rather than the other way around. Perhaps more important, *War and Anti-War* never constructs a psychologically sophisticated notion of why people fight. With such an omission, any theory of "anti-war" is incomplete.

Van Creveld's book is much deeper, but also contains problems. Although it may seem a minor point, sloppy proofreading—"Carslyle Barracks," "Bohling Air Force Base"—cause the reader to approach other facts with skepticism. Van Creveld also suffers from bad timing. His publication date of 1991 indicates that the book was written before the end of the Cold War. While the Gulf War probably does not indicate any permanent alteration of the declining utility of conventional war, the negotiated end or petering out of long-standing low-intensity conflicts in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, the Philippines, Israel, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere suggests that many strategy theorists (including van Creveld) overestimated the potential decisiveness of insurgency and terrorism. Of course low-intensity has been and will remain the most *common* type of organized violence simply because it is the cheapest. Its continued strategic *significance*, though, can be questioned. Van Creveld sometimes loses sight of the psychological dimension of strategic significance—what is important is what people believe is significant. In fact, the strategic significance of low-intensity conflict seems to have peaked in the 1960s and declined ever since. Van Creveld himself admits, "A degree of violent activity that even as late as the 1960s would have been considered outrageous is now accepted as an inevitable hazard of modern life" (p. 194). People in the midst of low-intensity conflicts, even severe ones like Bosnia and Lebanon, quickly come to accept their condition and go on about their lives. It is possible that low-intensity conflict was strategically significant in the decades after World War II simply because it was new. Today, the people of the world have grown accustomed to it. Conventional war, on the other hand, will, by its very expense, remain rare, and thus retain the potential for strategic significance.

The flaws in Keegan's book are more subtle simply because his contentions are well-couched, often implied rather than stated, and always surrounded with what might seem irrelevant historical vignettes. Many military professionals will find this frustrating. In addition, *A History of Warfare* is the most difficult of the three books to use as a basis for actual policies, programs, and strategies. One could take the works by the Tofflers or van Creveld and plan a future force including training, doctrine, and leader development. This is not true of the Keegan volume.

In works as ambitious as these, flaws are to be expected. Cogent philosophies never spring unblemished from one mind (or, in the case of the Tofflers, from two). Perhaps the diverse perspectives they offer can be synthesized. But whichever of the three proves to be the truest guide to future warfare, one of their shared premises—that we are in or on the verge of a great historic transformation—is probably true. The basic philosophy of war used by the US military remains Clausewitzian. If Keegan and van Creveld are correct about the obsolescence of the Clausewitzian approach, there could be extraordinarily dangerous times ahead as we prepare for unlikely types of conflict. Our armed forces are not configured for non-Clausewitzian war where the enemy is

motivated by hate, rage, boredom, the need for personal meaning and bonding, or fear rather than by interests and policy. Fundamental concepts of our military strategy such as deterrence and conflict resolution are often useless against such opponents. But those grappling with such ideas remain at the periphery of US military thinking (e.g., Peters, 1994). To move them to center stage, to debate and assess them, Keegan, van Creveld, and, to a lesser degree, the Tofflers, should be required reading for national security leaders in and out of uniform. On the vital issue of a 21st-century philosophy of war, it is time to let a hundred schools of thought bloom.

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Review Essay

The Middle East and US Interests

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After a brief period of euphoria following the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Middle East seems to have receded into a familiar cycle of communal and political violence, with one dramatic difference—the absence of a major role for Russia. Keeping in mind that US interests and objectives in the Middle East have been remarkably consistent