



Clausewitz and Contemporary War

by Antulio J. Echevarria II
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Reviewed by
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Interpreting the writing of Carl von Clausewitz continues to be a cottage industry; in the last few years, Jon Tetsuro Sumida, Hew Strachan, and Andreas Herberg-Rothe have all added to a library already well stocked with the works of Michael Howard, Peter Paret, and Michael Handel, to name but a few. Indeed, Antulio Echevarria's *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* builds on his significant writings on the work and influence of the Prussian theorist. What can one review add to this voluminous literature? Very little, except a reaffirmation that engaging that literature is still worthwhile for any serious student of military affairs.

With *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, Echevarria, the Director of Research at the Strategic Studies Institute, has provided one of the more useful contributions to the Clausewitz canon. Anyone who has grappled with *On War* is well aware of the difficulty of the material, and Echevarria, like so many before him, has set

out to clarify it, but not at the expense of losing the subtlety and nuance of the original work. For that reason, the first part of his study, on the purpose and method of *On War*, is also the most difficult. Clausewitz sought an understanding or theory of war that transcended specific time and place while recognizing that all real wars remained constrained by their specific context. For example, his discussion of absolute war represented one aspect of a generalized theory, but the probabilities of reality kept actual wars from ever reaching their absolute nature. For Clausewitz, such testing through experience and history of the tension between the ideal and the real improved the understanding of war far more than the declaration of fixed principles found in the work of some of his contemporaries, including Antoine-Henri Jomini.

That said, Echevarria spends most of part two of his work explaining what Clausewitz did find to be universal in the nature of war, focusing especially on the importance of violence. Too many interpreters have misunderstood Clausewitz's emphasis on combat to mean the search for decisive battle, when in reality he was making the assertion that war itself was inherently about the use of violence to achieve some purpose. Policy determines the purpose of the war, and politics (the interplay among political, military, social, and economic institutions) affect the purpose and the conduct of the war; but war itself is always about the use of violence.

Where things get a bit less familiar in today's terms is the discussion of strategy, part three of *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*. Clausewitz understood strategy in the classical sense, as "the use of

engagements to accomplish the purpose of the war," by which he meant the balancing of ends, ways, and means to use violence or, according to Echevarria, the threat of violence to achieve the purpose of the war. In that sense, it is useful to remember that the book is called *On War*, not *On Statecraft*. The threat of war is the domain of statecraft. The threat of violence in war is a dimension of strategy.

Lest those definitions sound too restrictive for contemporary war, Echevarria argues in one of the more contentious sections of his book that Clausewitz said war "occurs whenever one party resists the violent actions of another" (p. 145). Therefore, most of the missions of the military today, to include arms control, peace operations, humanitarian assistance, combating terrorism, and civil support in domestic emergencies, reside in the domain of Clausewitz's definition of strategy. Echevarria probably reaches too far here—some missions carried out by the military belong to statecraft, not war—but then again from the military's perspective, the principles of strategy probably still apply.

Those principles, which Echevarria calls more subjective and flexible than laws, constitute much of *On War* and the final part of *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*. They include the issues of strength of defense and attack, superiority of numbers, concentration of forces, economy of force, surprise, perseverance, turning movements, culminating points, and the much-debated center of gravity (Echevarria makes a solid case for its continued relevance). Much of this section will be familiar to modern readers, even if many of the principles laid out by Clausewitz now more properly belong

at the operational level—a level he did not recognize because it muddled conceptual clarity. That said, it would be a trap for readers to assume that only the familiar is relevant to contemporary military studies.

Perhaps the best that can be said for Echevarria's book is that it is not easy. Whether Clausewitz's intention or not, the effort to find order across his work is exactly the sort of mental exercise that is necessary to find order in either making or studying war, in this or any other era. The easy practice is to take the parts that make the most sense from Clausewitz (or Echevarria, Strachan, Sumida, and others) and excerpt them to prove military theory bonafides. But that is precisely what must be avoided. We must continue to do the hard work of struggling with Clausewitz and his interpreters because after all these years, war is simple, but the simplest thing is still difficult. **JFQ**

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