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CLAUSEWITZ AND SEAPOWER:
LESSONS OF THE FALKLAND ISLANDS WAR

by

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In attempting to make sense of Clausewitz in terms of naval warfighting, research for this paper required frequent immersion into the often musty and arcane literature of war theory. Although reading even good translations of 19th century writing is often laborious at best, the result can be rewarding and fosters new ways of thinking about the profession of arms.

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Commander St Clair

Finally, no acknowledgment would be complete without thanking my wife Cindy and my son Jack for the extensive moral and logistics support they provided every single step of the way.



Cindy Zellem



Jack Zellem

Abstract

This paper explores the hypothesis that although Clausewitz has been criticized for not specifically addressing naval warfare in his seminal work *On War*, Clausewitzian principles are in fact not only applicable, but highly relevant to the modern conduct of war at sea. The 1982 Falkland Islands conflict between Great Britain and Argentina will be used as the framework to examine this hypothesis. As the largest and most significant series of naval engagements since World War II, the Falklands War provides a rich database of both traditional and nontraditional lessons learned about the conduct of war at sea.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of critiques of Clausewitz and his apparent lack of focus on the naval element of warfare. It will be followed by a historical review of significant events leading up to, and during the Falkland Islands War. Key events in the war will then be reviewed and examined within a framework of Clausewitzian principles. The motives, key assumptions, military strategy, and tactics of Great Britain and Argentina will be discussed within the context of the Clausewitzian dictum that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Selected specific events in the campaign will then be addressed in terms of Clausewitzian principles of war to determine their relevance or irrelevance to modern naval strategy and campaigning.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The influence of theoretical truths on practical life is always exerted more through critical analysis than through doctrine. Critical analysis being the application of theoretical truths to actual events, it not only reduces the gap between the two but also accustoms the mind to these truths through their repeated application.

—Carl Von Clausewitz
On War, Book II, Ch. 5

Criticizing Clausewitz

It is almost universally accepted among military theorists that Carl Von Clausewitz and his landmark book *On War* is one of the most important influences on military theory and military strategy for as long as these disciplines have existed. Nearly every modern writer on the subject of war references Clausewitz at least once as a matter of routine, implicitly recognizing that Clausewitzian principles are so widespread and influential that he must be at least acknowledged to lend credibility to any scholarly discussion of war theory. Martin Van Creveld, emerging as one of today's leading figures in strategy for the 21st century, summarizes it well:

Among military theorists, Clausewitz stands alone. With the possible exception of the ancient Chinese writer Sun Tzu, no other author has ever been remotely as influential, and indeed to this day his work forms the cornerstone of modern strategic thought.¹

However, as with any giant of theory or literature, students of warfare routinely dissect Clausewitz to try and uncover flaws or gaps in his thought. One of the most common criticisms of Clausewitz and *On War* is that his theories and principles of war are too shortsighted, and are too influenced by the historical circumstances of Clausewitz's personal experiences and the times in which he wrote (1816-1832). Even a cursory reading of *On War* shows the profound effect the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had on Clausewitz's thinking. Van Creveld goes on to say, correctly, that "[Clausewitz] can only be understood against the background of the very great historical changes which took place in front of his eyes; in one sense, indeed, it represented an attempt to understand and interpret those changes."²

A related, more specific criticism of Clausewitz is that he completely and very obviously failed to address naval warfare in his theory of war, even though war at sea was an important strategic element in the times in which he wrote. Indeed, the famous naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan cited Clausewitz's enemy and competitor, Antoine-Henri Jomini, "deciding to do for sea power what Jomini had done for land warfare."³ This reflected Mahan's implicit acknowledgment that while Jomini had at least *somewhat* addressed naval warfare, Clausewitz had not addressed it at all.

Additionally, Mahan's interpretation of the Napoleonic Wars seems to contradict the conventional wisdom that Clausewitz was a victim of his exposure only to Continental warfare, and thus did not have the experience or inclination to address war at sea. Mahan's view was that seapower, in fact, was a key factor in the outcome of the Napoleonic Wars. He believed that seapower initiated the beginning of the end for Napoleon Bonaparte after Lord Nelson's naval victory at Trafalgar. Mahan assessed that

the British naval blockade of France after Trafalgar ultimately forced Napoleon to march into Russia, leading to his downfall.⁴ In this view, Clausewitz was not only seriously remiss in not addressing naval strategy, but also had no personal excuse not to do so.

A number of other writers have found Clausewitz at fault for not considering the naval element of warfare. B.H. Liddell Hart, a prominent strategist in ground warfare, was a vehement critic of what he saw as Clausewitz's apparent dismissal of mobility and maneuver in warfare—key tenets of naval strategy and tactics.⁵ Taking another tack, the naval theorist Julian Corbett believed that the British Navy created a seapower strategy distinct from Clausewitzian strategy, focusing on navies' exertion of economic pressure ashore through blockade and embargo, with only limited engagements on the littoral.⁶ This view used seapower to create cascading effects ashore, with Clausewitzian tenets of ground warfare largely irrelevant.

Twentieth century writers continue finding fault with Clausewitz on the subject of naval warfare. Michael Howard says that Clausewitz's "ignorance of the whole maritime dimension of warfare is striking but not surprising. The oceans lay beyond his cultural horizons."⁷ On a similar note, John Elting points out that "there is nothing in *On War* on naval operations.... Prussia then being a nation of rather hard-up landlubbers, such things were completely outside Clausewitz's experience."⁸ Peter Paret says it more eloquently:

Not only does it not directly address the roles of administrative and institutional elements in war, technological change, or the fundamental significance of economics; barring a reference or two to amphibious operations, *On War* ignores naval warfare. Clausewitz has often been criticized for his inability to transcend his experiences as a soldier of a land locked monarchy, and to recognize the other half of war of his time.⁹

Technological developments in the late 1800s further revolutionized naval warfare, bringing it from the "Age of Sail" to the "Age of Steam" and beyond. This only added

more fuel to arguments condemning Clausewitz for not anticipating the importance of seapower. Van Creveld points out that “writing in the 1820s, Clausewitz neither listed military technology among the principal factors governing war, nor expected it to undergo any great development.”¹⁰ Snow and Drew illustrate the importance of technological progress to seapower’s influence:

The development of the internal combustion engine magnified the changes in the process of making strategy. At sea the internal combustion engine (combined with the efficient storage battery) was crucial to the development of submarines, which revolutionized war at sea.¹¹

In short, criticisms of Clausewitz and his failure to address naval strategy and doctrine abound in war theory literature. Van Creveld, arguably one of today’s most prominent and influential strategists, summarizes critics’ positions best when he writes:

However great the emphasis that Clausewitz had put on the changes brought about by the French Revolution, ultimately he presented war as something made by armies. Such a point of view may have been valid in his own day, but during the second half of the [19th] century it began to be undermined by modern economic, technological and military developments.¹²

In the face of all these criticisms, the question of Clausewitz’s relevance to seapower remains. So, then, what to do? Is Clausewitz, in fact, relevant to the modern exercise of seapower and war at sea? A case study approach may be the best way to examine the issue in more depth.

The Falkland Islands Case Study

The 1982 Falklands conflict between Argentina and Great Britain provides a useful framework with which to review the applicability of Clausewitz to seapower. The Falklands War was by far the largest and most extended series of naval battles since the Pacific campaign in World War II.¹³ It featured modern naval strategy, tactics, and

weapons, and proved to be a significant source of naval lessons learned for modern students of maritime warfare. Designated Operation CORPORATE by the British, the five month war included the world's most significant amphibious operations since the Inchon landings in 1950, a logistics pipeline of over 7000 miles, and a winter combat arena 3300 miles from the nearest friendly base at Ascension Island (Figure 1).¹⁴ The Falklands' location 400 miles from land, away from major shipping lanes, provided a classic power projection scenario that highlighted many aspects of naval strategy and operations. Only political objectives and combat capabilities limited the application of forces. This perhaps even *magnified* naval aspects of the war, allowing more clarity as a case study in naval strategy.



Figure 1. The South Atlantic.

This paper will review the background to the conflict, address strategic naval highlights of the war itself, and then apply Clausewitzian principles to British and Argentinean naval strategies. A Clausewitzian framework will hopefully provide insight into why British forces could achieve victory in such a difficult and remote theater of operations. In doing so, it may also demonstrate the relevance of Clausewitz to naval warfare.

Notes

¹ Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 34.

² Van Creveld, 36.

³ John Shy, *Jomini*, in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Peter Paret, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 179.

⁴ Philip A. Crowl, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian*, in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 452.

⁵ Shy, 181.

⁶ Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 67.

⁷ Howard, 3.

⁸ John R. Elting, *The Super-Strategists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 173.

⁹ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz*, in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 208.

¹⁰ Van Creveld, 83.

¹¹ Dennis M. Drew and Donald Snow, *Making Strategy: An Introduction to National Security Processes and Problems* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1988), 8.

¹² Van Creveld, 42.

¹³ Alberto Coll and Anthony Arend, *The Falklands War: Lessons for Strategy, Diplomacy, and International Law* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 163.

¹⁴ James E. Dunnigan and Austin Bay, *A Quick and Dirty Guide to War* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 243.

Chapter 2

Historical Background

Historical examples clarify everything and also provide the best kind of proof in the empirical sciences. This is particularly true of the art of war.

—Carl Von Clausewitz
On War, Book II, Ch.6

The Falkland Islands and their dependency of South Georgia are a group of barren, rocky islands near the Antarctic Circle in the southwest corner of the South Atlantic Ocean. These islands have been subject to territorial disputes since the 1700's, when both Britain and Spain established small whaling colonies there. The British withdrew their colony—but not their claim—in 1774 for economic reasons, placing the islands in de facto Spanish control until 1810 when Spain lost most of its New World colonies in a series of revolutions. The Falklands and South Georgia were claimed by the new state of Argentina in 1820. In 1826, a small Argentinean settlement was established at Puerto Soledad (Port Louis), on East Falkland Island (Figure 2).¹

The small Argentinean garrison at Puerto Soledad tried to assert its newly claimed sovereignty by barring American and British seal hunters from the area, and seized three American-flagged schooners. This led to armed intervention in 1832 by USS *Lexington*, commanded by Captain Silas Duncan, USN. *Lexington* and her crew pillaged Puerto Soledad and blew up its powder magazines, and repatriated the garrison's troops to the Argentinean mainland.²

The islands remained in a state of anarchy until 1833 when the British ship HMS *Clio* arrived and reproclaimed British sovereignty, again forcing all Argentineans to leave the islands. The Royal Navy sent additional ships and colonists to the islands, and built a large settlement at Stanley harbor (Figure 2). The islands have since remained under British rule.³



Figure 2. Location of Stanley and East Falkland Island.

Territorial Disputes

Argentina, however, never renounced its claim to the islands. The next one hundred fifty years were marked by periodic negotiations between Argentina and Britain over the status of the islands, but the negotiations always failed to support Argentina's position. Argentina's claim on the Falklands (which it calls the *Malvinas* Islands) was based on sheer proximity to Argentina's mainland and its purported "inheritance" of sovereignty from the failed 1810 Spanish

government.⁴ This claim had great emotional significance for the Argentinean public, and had been part of public school history curricula for generations that grew up believing it implicitly.⁵

In contrast, the British claim was based on its maintenance and support for the Falklands colony for over one hundred fifty years, a de facto sovereignty claim based on physical occupation that is commonly accepted in international law. The British also claimed popular sovereignty based on the wishes of the Falkland Islanders themselves. Nicknamed “Kelpers” (for the thick beds of seaweed on the islands’ shores), the indigenous population of about 1800 people is almost entirely of British origin. The Kelpers have always made clear their desire to retain British rule.⁶

Other Interests

On the surface, there seems little of significance about the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. The land mass of the islands is about the size of Connecticut, with less than 20 miles of paved roads. The islands have no industry, and the primary occupation is sheep farming—sheep outnumber Kelpers 300 to 1.⁷

However, there are two notable long-term strategic considerations for both countries regarding the Falklands. The first is that both Britain and Argentina claim parts of Antarctica that total over one-sixth of the continent (Figure 3). This is an area that may eventually become the world’s last untapped reserve of oil and minerals.⁸ The Antarctic Treaty of 1961 suspended these competing claims for 30 years, and Britain retained control. Britain feared that ceding sovereignty of the Falklands to Argentina based on proximity might set a dangerous precedent for future negotiations over the British Antarctic territory.⁹

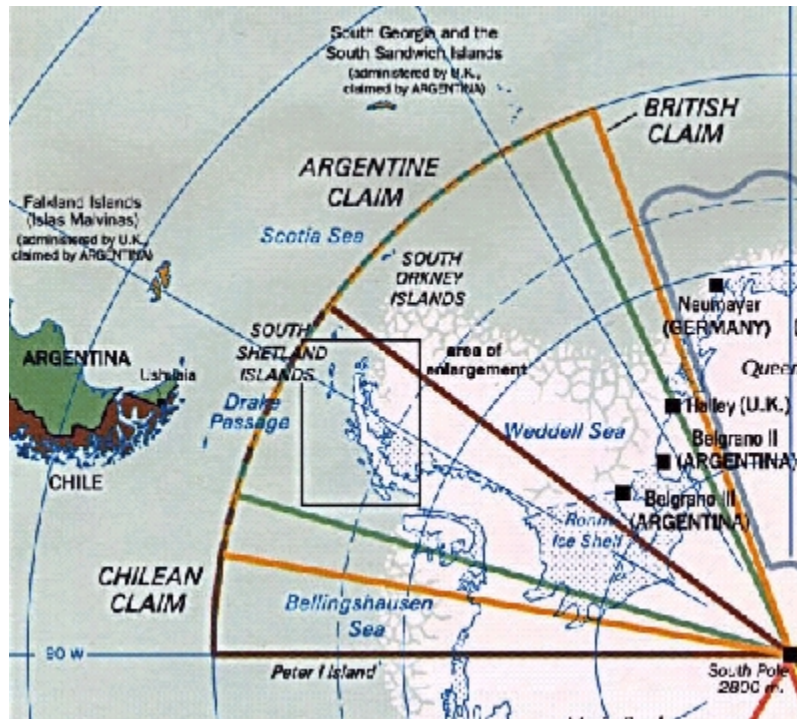


Figure 3. British and Argentinean Claims in Antarctica

The second strategic consideration concerns the yet untapped natural resources potential of the area as a whole, much of which remains unexplored. There could be as much oil, coal, natural gas, and other mineral reserves in the Falklands and Antarctic areas as in any part of the world discovered to date. As Martin Middlebrook says:

When the temperate oilfields expire...and a free-for-all develops in a world desperate for oil, then whoever controls the Falklands, South Georgia and the South Sandwiches will be in a commanding position over that huge sector of the Antarctic mainland...and over approximately one-sixth of the world's last oil and mineral reserves.¹⁰

Argentina in 1981

However, the actual motivation for Argentina's April 1982 invasion was a more immediate threat to General Leopoldo Galtieri's ruling military junta: internal instability in Argentina threatened to topple his dictatorship. Massive unemployment, falling wages, and an inflation

rate of over 100 percent and climbing fueled popular political dissent.¹¹ This led to extreme military repression of the regime's domestic political opponents, with up to 15,000 Argentinean citizens killed or tortured in the preceding decade. So many Argentineans died that a lobby of relatives of the dead had risen to oppose Galtieri, and the military was held in contempt by most of the population.¹²

Galtieri needed a uniting diversion, an outside conflict to distract the public and maintain domestic control. The Falklands/Malvinas, which every Argentinean had grown up to believe was theirs, was a natural choice. Galtieri believed that popular euphoria after successfully reclaiming the islands would unite the people, improve the image of the military, and enshrine him permanently as a hero in Argentina's history books.¹³

Recent negotiations with the British had failed once again, but Britain had also announced that it would permanently withdraw its one aged Royal Navy ship stationed in the Falklands, the ice patrol ship HMS *Endurance*. This, combined with other mixed signals sent by the British during negotiations, led Argentinean military strategists to believe that seizing the Falklands would be met with only token resistance, followed by acquiescence.¹⁴ Thus, General Galtieri decided in late 1981 to invade the Falklands and South Georgia in April 1982.

Notes

¹ Fritz L. Hoffman and Olga L. Hoffman, *Sovereignty and Dispute: The Falklands/Malvinas, 1493-1982*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 42-66.

² Hoffman and Hoffman, 74.

³ Martin Middlebrook, *Operation CORPORATE: The Story of the Falklands War* (London: Viking, 1987), 22-24. See also Dunnigan and Bay, 248-249.

⁴ Peter Beck, *The Falkland Islands as an International Problem* (London: Routledge, 1988), 61-81.

⁵ Arthur Gavshon and Desmond Rice, *The Sinking of the Belgrano* (London: Martin Seeker and Warburg, 1984), 6.

⁶ Adrian English, *Battle for the Falklands: Naval Forces* (London: Osprey, 1983), 5.

⁷ Middlebrook, 17.

⁸ G.M. Dillon, *The Falklands, Politics, and War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 73.

Notes

⁹ Middlebrook, 27-34.

¹⁰ Middlebrook, 34.

¹¹ Gavshon and Rice, 14-18.

¹² Middlebrook, 34-45.

¹³ Beck, 5.

¹⁴ William Fowler, *Battle for the Falklands: Land Forces* (London: Osprey, 1983), 3-5.

Chapter 3

The Conflict Begins

The diminishing force of the attack is one of the strategist's main concerns... Overall strength is depleted if the object of the attack is to occupy the enemy's country.

—Carl Von Clausewitz
On War, Book VII, Ch. 4

Deception and Surprise at South Georgia

On 19 March 1982, Argentina initiated the conflict by landing 30 scrap metal salvagers on South Georgia Island and raising the Argentinean flag. The next day, HMS *Endurance* was dispatched from Stanley with half the Falklands garrison embarked—22 Royal Marines and one lieutenant. They were under orders to deport the salvagers back to Argentina. *Endurance* arrived on 23 March and landed the Royal Marines. On 26 March, 100 Argentinean troops arrived by sea, purportedly to defend the salvagers. The outnumbered British force observed the troops until 03 April, when the Royal Marines on South Georgia surrendered after the fall of Stanley.¹ This Argentinean diversion on South Georgia achieved surprise, and provided a pretext for the 02 April invasion of East Falkland Island and the capture of Stanley. Most importantly, it removed half the British Falklands garrison and its only warship from the main action to come at Stanley.

The Main Invasion at Stanley

Argentina continued its tactics of deception on 28 March, when a seven-ship task force led by the aircraft carrier *Veinticinco de Mayo* departed Puerto Belgrano Naval Base, supposedly enroute exercises with the Uruguayan Navy. However, instead of heading north for Uruguay, the task force sailed southeast toward the Falklands, arriving on 01 April. The Argentinean attack on 02 April consisted of an amphibious landing at the mouth of Stanley Harbor by a force of about 600 Marine infantry and a helicopter airborne assault by 200 Marine commandos. The hopelessly outnumbered British garrison of 31 Royal Marines fought bravely with no losses, killing approximately 40 Argentinean Marines in the first three hours before being ordered to surrender by the governor of the Falklands. Additional Argentinean reinforcements arrived steadily, and within 24 hours over 4000 Argentinean troops were on the islands.²

Argentina's Force Capabilities

Argentina's strengths lay in its air force, which featured outstanding pilots and equipment. The Argentinean Navy was also strong, and was regarded as the second best navy in Latin America after Brazil. It included an aircraft carrier with an airwing of A-4 Skyhawks, and 4 diesel submarines. Operationally, Argentinean naval and air forces were well versed in war at sea tactics due to ongoing territorial disputes with Chile.³

However, Argentinean ground troops were not well suited to their new task as an expeditionary occupation force.⁴ The historical role and general structure of Argentina's ground forces were more like that of a Third World police force. Its primary missions to date had been to prop up whatever government was in power, control banditry and insurgencies in the provinces, and deter its neighbors from any action larger than a border skirmish.⁵ Such a force

was ultimately to prove incapable of defending the islands against highly professional, experienced British ground forces.

British Force Capabilities

The British were also less than ideally equipped as an expeditionary force, but for a different reason: the lack of naval airpower to support amphibious landings. One reason for this is that the NATO force structure assigns U.S. aircraft carriers the mission of sea-based airpower, giving British force planners little rationale for building large-deck aircraft carriers.⁶ Britain's two jump-jet carriers with VSTOL Sea Harriers were clearly not the airpower weapons of choice to support a major amphibious operation over 7000 miles from home, and 3300 miles from the nearest friendly base at Ascension Island. The British could deploy only 28 Harriers on its two carriers, giving Argentina—with 134 combat aircraft—a major quantitative advantage.⁷ Argentina also enjoyed a qualitative advantage in terms of airpower at sea, with airbases on its coast from which reconnaissance and attack aircraft could operate in support of the invasion.

Despite airpower deficiencies, the Royal Navy and its ground forces were otherwise well experienced in conducting amphibious warfare and the tactical application of seapower. They were also capable of a coordinated logistics effort, although an operation at such long distances had never been tried. The key to logistics support was to be the British dependency of Ascension Island, 3300 miles by sea from the Falklands. From Ascension, naval forces could be grouped, stores stockpiled, and long-range reconnaissance flights conducted. Indeed, Ascension's airfield would temporarily become the busiest in the world—with aircraft movements peaking at over 400 per day.⁸

So, although Britain enjoyed a qualitative advantage in seapower, amphibious forces, ground forces, and logistics, the military outcome remained in doubt due to distances involved in

the operation and Argentina's quantitative and qualitative land-based airpower advantage. Clearly, the most difficult problems for the British were naval in nature: getting an invasion force to the islands, and supporting forcible amphibious entry of Army and Royal Marine forces. Once ashore, the experienced British troops would have the advantage over poorly led, poorly equipped Argentinean ground forces.⁹

Notes

¹ Bruce W. Watson and Peter M. Dunn, *Military Lessons of the Falkland Islands War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 135-139.

² English, 5.

³ Watson and Dunn, 22.

⁴ John Laffin, *Fight for the Falklands!* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 74-76.

⁵ Dunnigan and Bay, 254-255, and Fowler, 24.

⁶ Ruben O. Moro, *The History of the South Atlantic Conflict: The War for the Malvinas* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 65.

⁷ Gavshon and Rice, 42-43.

⁸ Middlebrook, 91.

⁹ Dunnigan and Bay, 249-250.

Chapter 4

British Operational Objectives and the War's Conduct

What the theorist has to say here is this: one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.

—Carl Von Clausewitz
On War, Book VIII, Ch. 4

After considering force capabilities on both sides and matching them with Britain's strategic objective of reclaiming the Falkland Islands, British planners developed four operational objectives for what they named Operation CORPORATE:

1. Establish a sea blockade around the islands.
2. Recapture South Georgia.
3. Gain sea and air supremacy around the Falklands.
4. Recapture the Falkland Islands.¹

Objective 1: Sea Blockade

On 12 April, Britain declared a 200-mile Maritime Exclusion Zone around the islands, with the intent of weakening Argentinean supply and reinforcement efforts. Three British nuclear attack submarines enforced it until the arrival of the surface task force three weeks later.² The British made major use of the media to publicize the submarines' presence, hoping to deter Argentinean ships from running the blockade. The blockade was a partial success, although at least one ship passed through undetected.³ More significantly, the naval blockade could not

prevent an almost continuous Argentinean air bridge to East Falkland Island. However, airlift usefulness was somewhat limited, because Stanley airfield was too short to support large transport aircraft.⁴

As the submarines continued interim blockade operations, 65 British ships were enroute the Falklands by the end of April: 20 warships, 8 amphibious ships, and 40 logistics ships from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the Merchant Navy. The British task force carried 15,000 men, including a landing force of about 7000 Royal Marines and soldiers. The logistics ships carried provisions for about three months of combat.⁵

Objective 2: Recapture of South Georgia

The British planned to retake South Georgia first, to display resolve and hopefully induce Argentinean withdrawal from the main Falkland Islands. Initial amphibious landing attempts by SAS commandos from 21 to 23 April failed, due to extreme Antarctic weather conditions. Two helicopters crashed while trying to evacuate a stranded commando team from a South Georgia glacier in whiteout conditions; a second attempt failed when some commandos' inflatable boats were punctured by ice floes.⁶

Finally, on 25 April, a small British surface action group of two destroyers, six helicopters, and 230 men overwhelmed the 156-man Argentinean garrison on South Georgia. Signals intelligence had revealed the Argentinean submarine *Santa Fe* approaching South Georgia; British naval forces caught the submarine on the surface and disabled it by helicopter attack, forcing it to beach on the island. Although the Royal Navy ships in the area were out of position, the on-scene commander seized the initiative and landed 72 commandos ashore by helicopter. They found white flags flying, and captured the Argentinean garrison on South Georgia without a shot fired by either side.⁷ The Argentinean commander was later court-martialed for

“contravening Argentina’s military code by surrendering without having exhausted his ammunition and without having lost two-thirds of his men.”⁸ The second British operational objective had been attained.

Objective 3: Sea and Air Supremacy

Naval Engagements

The third British objective proved the most difficult to achieve. The main Royal Navy task force arrived east of the Falklands on 01 May. Its plan was to establish naval and air supremacy by luring Argentinean warships and aircraft out from the mainland and destroying them, followed by an amphibious landing at Stanley. Two British attack submarines were positioned north of the Falklands to screen British ships against the main Argentinean naval task force and the aircraft carrier *Veinticinco De Mayo*, which had been operating in the area since 20 April. A third submarine was stationed south of the Falklands to monitor the Exocet-equipped Argentinean cruiser *Belgrano* and two accompanying destroyers.⁹

An Argentinean naval attack seemed imminent on 02 May, when both the *De Mayo* and *Belgrano* surface action groups changed course and attempted a classic pincer movement toward the British task force.¹⁰ Intelligence reports indicated the Argentinean aircraft carrier *De Mayo* was located at the maximum combat radius of its A-4 attack aircraft, and had too little wind across its deck to launch aircraft even at its full speed of 20 to 25 knots.¹¹ Although both Argentinean surface action groups were located outside the blockade’s 200-mile Maritime Exclusion Zone, the British task force quickly requested and received authorization from London to attack both *Belgrano* and *De Mayo*. The British submarine HMS *Conqueror* torpedoed and sunk *Belgrano*, which lost 368 of 1042 crewmen. *De Mayo* returned to base untouched.¹²

The sinking of the Argentinean cruiser, the Argentinean aircraft carrier's inability to launch an attack or counterattack, and the clear evidence of British naval superiority broke the will of the Argentinean Navy. The Argentinean task force to the north returned to base, where it remained until the end of the war; *De Mayo* disembarked its A-4's, which operated from bases ashore for the rest of the war. This ended the only major naval surface engagement of the war.¹³ Argentinean naval surface forces reportedly stayed within 12 nautical miles of the coast until the war's end.¹⁴

Although the British were clearly able to establish sea control early in the conflict, it is worth noting that three Argentinean submarines probably remained at sea throughout most of the Falklands War. This forced the Royal Navy to always be on its guard against possible submarine attack, and significantly affected British tactics.¹⁵ British ships were forced to zigzag constantly and investigate many possible submarine contacts, sometimes adding several hours to planned maneuvers. On at least one occasion, British ships were forced to abandon shore bombardment of the Falklands when their anti-submarine warfare assets detected a possible subsurface contact, with the ensuing search sometimes lasting all day.¹⁶ None of the three Argentinean submarines were destroyed during the war, and Argentina's fourth submarine, *Santa Fe*, remained beached at South Georgia.

Air Engagements

The second half of the British operational objective of gaining sea and air supremacy focused on defending against and attriting Argentinean air attacks from the mainland. Air attacks from mainland bases against British ships were frequent throughout the war. Despite high-tech shipboard AAW defenses and the partially successful use of Sea Harriers in an air-to-air fleet defense role, the British Navy always remained on the defensive against Argentinean

airpower.¹⁷ It never gained true air supremacy, or even air superiority, at sea. The British were severely restricted in achieving this operational objective by their lack of a large deck carrier air wing and their lack of an airborne early warning aircraft. They were forced to use Harriers in both roles out of sheer necessity.

Nevertheless, a solid “defense-in-depth” effort by the British Navy managed to destroy over half of Argentina's 134 combat aircraft during the war, using a combination of electronic warfare, Harriers, surface-to-air missiles, and anti-aircraft artillery.¹⁸ These tactics forced Argentinean pilots to fly extremely low for most of the 400-mile overwater route to attack British naval forces. This induced Argentinean pilot fatigue, ineffectiveness, and sometimes mission aborts.¹⁹

Even when Argentinean aircraft penetrated the British AAW screen and were able to attack British ships, the delayed action fuzes on their bombs—designed for use against land-based armored targets—often caused the bombs to pass through the hulls of British ships without detonating. As a result, although Argentinean attack aircraft hit approximately 75 percent of British surface ships with bombs, only three British warships (one destroyer and two frigates) and two landing ships were sunk or severely damaged by bombs. The only other British ships sunk, one destroyer and one supply ship, were hit by Exocet missiles.²⁰

Objective 4: Recapture of the Falkland Islands

The war concluded with Argentina's surrender on 14 June 1982, after a three-week British amphibious and ground operation on East Falkland Island.²¹ With the Argentinean surrender, all British operational objectives for Operation CORPORATE had been attained except for air supremacy. This paper will not discuss the ground phase of the Falklands campaign, as

seapower and airpower played subordinate roles—primarily consisting of shore bombardment, logistics support, communications support, personnel transport, and limited air defense.

Notes

- ¹ David Miller, *Modern Naval Combat* (New York: Crescent Books, 1986), 182.
- ² Dillon, 183-184.
- ³ Dillon, 184-185.
- ⁴ Moro, 75.
- ⁵ Middlebrook, 83-98.
- ⁶ Watson and Dunn, 146-147.
- ⁷ Laffin, 40-41.
- ⁸ Middlebrook, 103-112.
- ⁹ Middlebrook, 145.
- ¹⁰ Gavshon and Rice, 142-143.
- ¹¹ Moro, 121.
- ¹² Watson and Dunn, 149-150 and 7-9.
- ¹³ English, 21-22; Middlebrook, 125-152; and Miller, 182-183.
- ¹⁴ Watson and Dunn, 9.
- ¹⁵ Moro, 117.
- ¹⁶ Miller, 182.
- ¹⁷ Jacob W. Kipp, *Naval Art and the Prism of Contemporaneity: Soviet Naval Officers and the Lessons of the Falklands Conflict*. (College Station, TX: Center for Strategic Technology, 1983), 19-22.
- ¹⁸ Moro, 325-26.
- ¹⁹ Coll and Arend, 172-173.
- ²⁰ English, 26-34, and Watson and Dunn, 37-47.
- ²¹ Moro, 317.

Chapter 5

Clausewitz Applied

The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.

—Carl Von Clausewitz
On War, Book I, Ch. 1

It is safe to assume that at least some British and Argentinean war planners, as military professionals, were familiar with Clausewitz. However, there is no evidence in the record on either side to suggest that Clausewitzian principles were considered in the planning or conduct of the Falkland Islands War. This is perhaps not unusual, as Peter Paret suggests:

It is not surprising that the search for Clausewitz's influence, which began in the second half of the 19th century, has been confused and inconclusive. That one or two sentences from *On War* have entered common usage, or that some of its arguments have been misinterpreted to support the military fashions of the day, scarcely proves that the ideas had a genuine impact. On the contrary, if we examine the conduct of war since Clausewitz wrote, we will find little evidence that soldiers and governments have made use of his theories. Wars have repeatedly demonstrated the relevance of Clausewitz's theories, but nothing has proved more elusive to discover than an application of "lessons" learned from *On War*.¹

Nevertheless, even a brief overview of major naval events in the war—as presented in this paper—demonstrates that Clausewitz can, in fact, be applied to the Falkland Islands War and by extension to modern naval warfare as a general concept. The following discussion applies Clausewitzian principles to a few highlights of the war on both sides.

War as a Continuation of Politics

Clausewitz

It is, of course, well-known that the only source of war is politics—the intercourse of governments and peoples; but it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own. We maintain, on the contrary, that war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.²

Argentina

The Argentinean junta's decision to invade the Falklands clearly had a political goal. The government wished to legitimize itself and the military in the eyes of the people, distracting them from internal repression and economic problems by uniting them around a common cause. It may also have been intended as a political signal to Chile that Argentina was prepared to back up other territorial claims by force.³ Desire for prestige among other Third World states may also have contributed to the decision to invade.

Britain

The political ideals of sovereignty and self-determination were major factors in Britain's decision to reclaim the Falkland Islands by force. Prior to the start of open hostilities, the British also tried to use the *threat* of force to achieve the political goal of retaining sovereignty through Argentinean withdrawal.⁴ Britain's initial invasion of South Georgia is also an example of how the British tried to use force incrementally to push the debate back to the political realm—the negotiating table—before full hostilities began in the Falklands proper. Finally, Britain used force as a political tool to set an example and deny precedents for other Third World dictators, by demonstrating its *political* position that armed invasions are unacceptable solutions to political problems.

Qualities of the Commanders

Clausewitz

...a distinguished commander without boldness is unthinkable...therefore we consider this quality the first prerequisite of the great military leader.⁵

Four elements make up the climate of war: danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance. If we consider them together, it becomes evident how much fortitude of mind and character are needed to make progress in these impeding elements with safety and success.⁶

When all is said and done, it really is the commander's *coup d'oeil*, his ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself, that is the essence of good generalship.⁷

Argentina

The decision to withdraw naval forces from the war after the sinking of the *Belgrano* clearly showed a lack of boldness by Argentinean commanders. It also showed that Argentinean commanders' fighting spirit at sea was easily broken. The ill-fated pincer attack by Argentinean surface ships against the British battle group showed little tactical subtlety, and did not make use of Argentina's clear advantage in airpower. Similarly, Argentinean submarines were poorly used and were never ordered to execute the classic hunter-killer mission of attack submarines.

Britain

The bold and unprecedented decision to fight an expeditionary war over 7000 miles from home illustrated the boldness and fortitude of British commanders. Throughout the war, British commanders at sea displayed excellent leadership, command of advanced tactics, and the ability to foster high spirit and morale among their sailors.⁸ Perhaps the most obvious difference between British and Argentinean commanders was the British willingness to take risks and seize

the initiative at critical moments. The quick decision to sink *Belgrano* and the sudden assault on South Georgia after crippling *Santa Fe* are two excellent examples.

The Trinity

Clausewitz

The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government...A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.⁹

Argentina

According to Clausewitz, any strategy that seeks to fix an “arbitrary relationship” between the people, army and government is a strategy doomed to failure. Argentina's attempt to build legitimacy for the regime and distract the population by invading the Falklands was a clear example of such an arbitrary relationship. The invasion itself provides an excellent example of Clausewitz’s “war as a continuation of politics,” but the *decision* to invade showed a failure to consider the full implications of trying to manipulate the Clausewitzian Trinity. The good relationship that Galtieri’s junta hoped to forge between the people and the government was thus built on the shaky foundation of a military crisis that was largely manufactured and “arbitrary.”

Britain

The British, in contrast, enjoyed a long tradition of solid relations between the three elements of the Clausewitzian “Trinity.” British popular support for the war was overwhelming, and there were no significant concerns in the relationship between the British people, military, and government regarding the Falklands conflict.¹⁰ This allowed the British government to act decisively in deploying forces and committing them to battle, even though a specific vital

national interest was not clearly apparent in the Falklands. Popular support for the war effort and unity of purpose between the British people, government, and military was no doubt a major contributor to the relatively quick British victory.

Surprise and Deception

Clausewitz

For the side that can benefit from the psychological effects of surprise, the worse the situation is, the better it may turn out, while the enemy finds himself incapable of making coherent decisions.¹¹

Surprise therefore becomes the means to gain superiority, but because of its psychological effect it should also be considered as an independent element. Whenever it is achieved on a grand scale, it confuses the enemy and lowers his morale; many examples, great and small, show how this in turn multiplies the results.¹²

The two factors that produce surprise are secrecy and speed.¹³

Argentina

The Falklands War proved the time-tested value of surprise and deception in war at sea, perhaps to an even greater extent than Clausewitz anticipated.¹⁴ The very natures of both over-the-horizon surface warfare and undersea warfare largely rest on these two Clausewitzian elements; there are many examples in the Falklands War showing how surprise and deception are routinely employed in naval strategy and tactics. For example, deception was employed effectively by the Argentinean Navy prior to the initial invasion of the Falklands when its naval task force sailed for an “exercise with Uruguay.” Argentinean submarines also were used effectively throughout the war as a deception tool to distract and divert British naval forces, which were forced to expend valuable, limited resources on screening for enemy submarines that may not even have been in the area.

It should also be noted that the ill-fated surprise Argentinean pincer attack on the British task force, followed by *De Mayo's* inability to launch its A-4's, validated another Clausewitzian principle that attempts at surprise can be held up by friction.¹⁵

Britain

British forces also displayed effective use of deception by using the media to announce that British submarines were in place to enforce the sea blockade, when in fact the submarines were still en route. British surface action groups also routinely used surprise in their “defense in depth” tactics, by placing anti-air warfare picket ships well forward on the threat axes toward the Argentinean littoral, and surprising incoming air raids.

Correlation of Means and Ends

Clausewitz

Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.¹⁶

Argentina

From the Argentinean point of view, the means—invading and securing the Falklands—initially had a clear relationship to the desired end of building popular support for the regime. As Argentinean aircraft losses mounted, it became clear that Argentinean airpower could not defend ground forces on the Falklands against a British amphibious assault. The expenditure of effort exceeded the value of the object, and surrender and peace quickly followed.

Britain

The British application of this Clausewitzian principle is less clear. Aside from its geostrategic interest in oil reserves and its claim in Antarctica, the British decision to go to war seems largely a result of national pride. The sacrifices and potential sacrifices involved in such an ambitious operation seem to exceed the value of popular sovereignty for the Falkland Islanders from a realist standpoint.

Offensive and Defensive

Clausewitz

A sudden powerful transition to the offensive—the flashing sword of vengeance—is the greatest moment for the defense.¹⁷

Just as the commander's aim in a defensive battle is to postpone the decision as long as possible in order to gain time...the aim of the commander in an offensive battle is to expedite the decision. Too much haste, on the other hand, leads to the risk of wasting one's forces.¹⁸

If defense is the stronger form of war, yet has a negative object, it follows that it should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive object.¹⁹

To sum up: there is no growth of intensity in an attack comparable to that of the various types of defense.²⁰

Argentina

Argentina's failed attempt at naval offense on 02 May was a clear example of “wasting its forces” too hastily, as was the six weeks of aerial offensive attacks on the British naval task force while Argentinean surface ships remained in port. Although Argentina's naval surface forces were inferior to the British Navy in nearly every aspect, it did not even play to its few potential strengths—such as employing its three remaining submarines in a traditional offensive role.

Britain

The British, in contrast, spent most of the naval war on the defensive. However, they used to great effect the Clausewitzian concept of a “sudden, powerful transition to the offensive” during the 02 May engagement that sunk *Belgrano*. In this case, the quick British switch from defense to offense was the decisive move that broke the will of the Argentinean Navy. Another excellent demonstration of this principle was by the commander of the British surface action group after crippling *Santa Fe* on 25 April, when he “seized the moment” and captured South Georgia without firing a shot.

Center of Gravity

Clausewitz

What the theorist has to say here is this: one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.²¹

Argentina

Argentina attempted to attack the British center of gravity—the naval task force and its aircraft carriers—for six weeks, but failed because the British recognized their own center of gravity and used naval “defense in depth” tactics to protect it. As a deployed expeditionary force in a clearly maritime theater of operations, it must have been relatively easy for both sides to identify the Royal Navy's capital ships as the center of gravity on which the entire British effort depended. The issue, then, was not failure to *identify* the British center of gravity—the historical record clearly shows that the Argentineans focused on it in a way consistent with Clausewitzian

principles. Instead, the issue was simply Argentina's inability to *execute* attacks on the British center of gravity in a way decisive enough to win the war.

Britain

The key to British success was the ability to recognize British expeditionary forces' own center of gravity as sea-based, and then using tactics and operational art to defend it successfully. Well-trained naval forces generally are adept at using geography, weather, and other features of the maritime environment to their advantage. The Royal Navy made use of all these factors in both tactics and strategy to protect their capital ships, even when on the offensive.

Doing so, however, meant that the British were unable to attack Argentina's center of gravity—its airfields on the mainland—because they lacked the long-range bomber assets to do so. The only alternative would have been naval gunfire close to Argentina's coast, which would have exposed British ships to unacceptable risks, and in any case probably would have been ineffective. However, British inability to attack the Argentinean center of gravity was offset by the Falklands' location 400 nautical miles from the nearest Argentinean airbase. By creative use of geography to help defend against attacks by the *Argentinean* center of gravity, the British were able to wield their *own* forces' center of gravity—seapower—successfully and decisively.

Numerical Superiority

Clausewitz

...superiority of numbers admittedly is the most important factor in the outcome of an engagement, so long as it is great enough to counterbalance all other contributing circumstances.²²

But it would be seriously misunderstanding our argument, to consider numerical superiority as indispensable to victory; we merely wished to stress the relative importance.²³

Argentina

Despite Argentina's overwhelming advantage in aircraft numbers, this numerical advantage was successfully counterbalanced by superior British tactics, better technology, and more effective employment of the operational art. As Clausewitz explicitly says of his own philosophy, it would be misunderstanding him to say that numerical superiority is indispensable to victory.²⁴ The British demonstrated that well-considered strategy and tactics, combined with effective execution, can be instrumental in defeating a much larger force. This may be especially true in the unique physical environment of war at sea, which clever commanders throughout history have used to their advantage as a force multiplier.

Britain

Britain enjoyed both quantitative and qualitative advantages over Argentina in terms of seapower, helping counterbalance the Argentinean advantage in airpower. Royal Navy superiority in numbers helped establish sea control quickly. It was very important in effectively enforcing the sea blockade and the Maritime Exclusion Zone (MEZ) in what was essentially a “blue-water” environment around a few small islands in the middle of the South Atlantic.

It also appears that the Argentinean Navy did not do enough to try and offset the British numerical advantage at sea. Although Argentina used its submarines to *some* effect in distracting and harassing the larger British force,²⁵ more aggressive employment might have helped compensate for the British numerical advantage in seapower. Instead, the Argentinean Navy fought very conservatively, allowing the British numerical advantage to be perhaps more decisive than it might have been.

Friction

Clausewitz

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.²⁶

The good general must know friction in order to overcome it whenever possible, and in order not to expect a standard of achievement in his operations which this very friction makes impossible.²⁷

Argentina

The over-the-horizon nature of modern naval warfare where the enemy often cannot be seen is due to technical innovations that Clausewitz did not, and probably could not, have anticipated. However, his concept of friction remains particularly relevant to war at sea. There were many examples of this principle during the war. One of the most prominent was *De Mayo*'s uncertainty about the exact location of the British task force during the 02 May engagement. As a result, the Argentinean aircraft carrier found itself too far away to launch its fully loaded A-4's in the prevailing weather conditions.

Britain

Friction is always an element at sea, where so much depends on relatively unpredictable factors such as weather conditions and unreliable communications. Good examples of friction on the British side include the two failed commando raids at South Georgia, and the British task force's uncertainty of the location of the three Argentinean submarines throughout the war.

Unit Spirit

Clausewitz

Military spirit, then, is one of the most important moral elements in war. Where this element is absent, it must either be replaced by one of the others, such as the commander's superior ability or popular enthusiasm, or else the results will fall short of the efforts expended.²⁸

No matter how much one may be inclined to take the most sophisticated view of war, it would be a serious mistake to underrate professional pride (*esprit de corps*) as something that may and must be present in a greater or lesser degree.²⁹

Argentina

Most commentators agree that poor leadership and the political orientation of Argentina's senior military officers led to poor morale in the Argentinean armed forces as a whole.³⁰ Clausewitz's two sources for unit spirit, a "series of victorious wars" and "frequent exertions to the utmost limits"³¹ were clearly missing from the Argentinean naval tradition.

Britain

In contrast, British naval forces were superbly trained, had high morale, enjoyed the support of the British public, and were widely praised for their fighting spirit.³² Although a recent "series of victorious wars" was not a contributing factor, Britain's long naval history and many recent years of operations at sea in support of NATO were likely important influences.

Notes

¹ Paret, *Clausewitz*, 211.

² Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 605.

³ Beck, 73.

⁴ Laffin, 16-31.

⁵ Clausewitz, 192.

⁶ Clausewitz, 104.

⁷ Clausewitz, 578.

Notes

- ⁸ Coll and Arend, 173-179.
- ⁹ Clausewitz, 89.
- ¹⁰ Dillon, 113-121.
- ¹¹ Clausewitz, 201.
- ¹² Clausewitz, 198.
- ¹³ Clausewitz, 198.
- ¹⁴ Clausewitz somewhat minimized the role of surprise in warfare, primarily due to the possibility of friction. “The principle is highly attractive in theory, but in practice it is often held up by the friction of the whole machine.” See Clausewitz, 198.
- ¹⁵ See note 14.
- ¹⁶ Clausewitz, 92.
- ¹⁷ Clausewitz, 370.
- ¹⁸ Clausewitz, 530-531.
- ¹⁹ Clausewitz, 358.
- ²⁰ Clausewitz, 525.
- ²¹ Clausewitz, 595-596.
- ²² Clausewitz, 194-195.
- ²³ Clausewitz, 197.
- ²⁴ Clausewitz, 197.
- ²⁵ Moro, 117
- ²⁶ Clausewitz, 119.
- ²⁷ Clausewitz, 120.
- ²⁸ Clausewitz, 189.
- ²⁹ Clausewitz, 187.
- ³⁰ Coll and Arend, 179.
- ³¹ Clausewitz, 189.
- ³² Laffin, 140-182.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

If we wish to learn from history, we must realize that what happened once can happen again...

Carl Von Clausewitz
On War, Book VIII, Ch. 8

Review of Research Question

This paper discussed the hypothesis that although Clausewitz did not specifically address naval principles in his theory of warfare, Clausewitzian principles are in fact applicable and relevant to many elements of naval strategy and tactics. A brief review of major naval events in the Falkland Islands War shows that many principles articulated by Clausewitz can, in fact, be used to interpret, explain, and plan the conduct of war at sea.

Conclusions

Clausewitzian thought appears quite pertinent to war at sea—whether the modern naval warfighter recognizes it or not. It seems clear from reviewing major naval engagements in the Falkland Islands War that no discussion of maritime theory, strategy, and tactics can be complete without considering and acknowledging Clausewitzian principles.

The fact that Clausewitz did not specifically discuss naval warfare in *On War* does not diminish its importance to the naval warfighter. Although the relevance of *On War* to maritime

operations is somewhat masked by the fact that Clausewitz drew the bulk of his examples from personal ground warfare experience in the Napoleonic Wars, this should not prevent naval strategists from extending Clausewitzian principles to address naval issues. Clausewitz's theory of war seems to have been intended to be all encompassing and timeless, articulating basic principles that are equally useful in all warfare disciplines. Thus, observers who criticize Clausewitz on his lack of naval discussion may simply be missing the point. As Peter Paret suggests:

It is possible to develop and analyze a concept without illustrating it exhaustively. Friction, escalation, the interaction of attack and defense exist in war on and under the sea—and in the air—as much as they do on land. It is fallacious to consider the theoretical structure of *On War* incomplete on the ground that its illustrations are drawn only from the types of conflict that Clausewitz knew best and that interested him most.¹

The Falklands example seems to validate Paret's view. As a case study, the Falkland Islands War clearly demonstrates that the principles refined and explained by Clausewitz are broad enough that they can be applied equally well to maritime conflict. Although naval commanders and strategists may tend to apply Clausewitzian principles to maritime warfare more *intuitively* than they do *consciously*, this does not negate their value. As such, application of Clausewitzian thought to war at sea can not only help explain outcomes, but perhaps influence them as well.

Notes

¹ Paret, *Clausewitz*, 208.

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