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**A Question of Relevance**

**Core Course 2 Essay**

Col William L. Shelton/Class of 1995

Course 2

Seminar D

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# Report Documentation Page

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Steve Jackson walked back to his small office and plopped into the worn chair. An Air Force colonel assigned to the Joint Staff in the Pentagon, his pensive mood reflected what had occurred moments earlier in his boss' office. He had been handed one of the most perplexing assignments of his career.

Earlier that day, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff held a senior staff meeting to discuss current military strategy with a view toward the year 2000. Although the Chairman was a man with 35 years of military experience, he had a reputation for being a visionary--and for being a tough old bird. He despised pat answers. To him, they were offspring of intellectual laziness. He also had a nasty habit of playing devil's advocate when someone brought status quo solutions to him. Those poor souls invariably left his presence with little of their pride intact. And the truly bad news? They were told to return after they had answers to his seemingly endless questions on why other alternatives weren't explored. Double your pleasure, double your pain.

According to Steve's boss, the Chairman made it perfectly clear to everyone in the tank that morning that he wanted to see some innovative thinking about the current and future state of warfare. He challenged them to develop creative proposals for a strategy designed to best exploit projected U.S. military capabilities in the year 2000 and beyond. Concerted efforts to improve the efficiency of joint operations were bearing some fruit, in the mind of the Chairman, but he wanted to take the staff's efforts to a higher plane. Rather than focusing solely on operational issues, he also wanted the staff to explore the strategic level.

Several minutes of discussion ensued among the staff, but Steve's boss, the man in charge of plans and policy for the staff, took the Chairman's bony finger in his chest. The strategic thinking, the Chairman said, should come from J-5, but the other directorates were expected to pitch in. Steve's boss was sure he saw the rest of the staff tying their shoes when the Chairman formally assigned the task.

Shortly after the meeting with the Chairman, the job rolled downhill to Steve "Just great," Steve thought, "after all those painful lessons on strategy at the National War College, now I'm expected to develop strategy alternatives that would pass muster with the Chairman " He'd been the author of a bad idea or two for the Chairman, and he wasn't at all anxious to relive the experience. "You got the master's degree, dummy Now it's time to show your stuff "

"Typical tasking," Steve moaned to himself. "About as well-defined as the leading edge of a fog bank. Gotta' think this through. What ax was the old man trying to grind? What's changed in our forces that makes him think we need to take another look at how we do business?" He thought about new systems that were now operational or shortly would be. As an Air Force guy, he thought first about what he knew best: airpower. Precision guided munitions and stealthy aircraft were recent developments. All sorts of new command, control, communications and intelligence systems beamed data directly to field commanders. Steve's thoughts were starting to coalesce. "Precision delivery of weapons and unprecedented information capability. Maybe that's it. Maybe the Chairman believes this combination will produce a revolution in warfare for the U S." With the increasing demands to minimize casualties in war, Steve had long believed PGMs and vast information systems could forever redefine conflict, particularly for wars in the foreseeable future which are likely to be limited in scope

His mind started racing. He thought about the tremendous improvements in computer technologies, not only for data processing, but for weapons guidance and navigation systems which had brought new capabilities to all services Space-based assets were now providing unprecedented situational awareness for the commander and the shooter He knew that all these assets must come to bear in limited warfare And Steve knew that many more revolutionary weapons systems were on the drawing boards "He may not be much fun to get along with," Steve reflected, "but he's got a knack for pushing us in the right direction "

"Okay," Steve thought, "that's the premise, but how do we get a strategy to exploit the dawning of this new information age?" Thinking back to his days at the War College, he remembered studying the famous strategists Sun Tzu, Jomini, Hart, Mahan, Douhet. He remembered questioning the relevance of these writers, given modern weapons and tactics. Even now, he still wasn't sure he could count on much from these guys to help him with this new task. He smiled to himself as he remembered his palpable frustration while studying these theorists.

But now he really needed help. "What's a reasonable approach?" Steve wondered. Although he already was convinced it couldn't be relevant today, had there been similar periods in history that might provide some point of departure?

Steve thought back to his War College work. "Weren't all armies in the early twentieth century slow to adjust to the technological developments brought on by the industrial revolution?" Steve thought he might find parallels between this new information age and the industrial age that might shed some light. "Who was the theorist *du jour* leading up to World War I? Jomini? No, he fell into disfavor because he was too prescriptive. Sun Tzu? Too old. *Passé*." The light bulb finally came on. "Clausewitz. My buddy Carl. Just about as clear as reading E. E. Cummings. The only clear difference between the two was that Carl used punctuation." How could he have forgotten his old friend Clausewitz?

"What was happening in the years before World War I?" He turned to the WWI section in one of his War College texts and found an essay describing the influences of Helmuth von Moltke and Alfred von Schlieffen on the Prussian army. As he recalled, the efficiency and the victories of the Prussian army led most other powers in Europe to emulate the Prussians. "This is the right place to start," Steve thought. "Moltke and Schlieffen." He remembered that as self-proclaimed disciples of Clausewitz, they took his theories and applied them to the Prussian military. Why didn't their strategies work?

He read on. Moltke, the Chief of the Prussian General Staff in the late 1800s, apparently agreed with Clausewitz's caution against reducing warfare to principles and

rules. "Efforts were made to equip the conduct of war with principles, rules, or even systems. This did present a positive goal, but people failed to take account of the endless complexities involved "<sup>1</sup> The essay writer said Moltke rejected rigid systems since nothing in war was certain. He believed it was impossible to lay down firm rules Moltke also thought strategy amounted to little more than massive doses of common sense, a view that very much appealed to Steve.<sup>2</sup> "But if strategy is just common sense," Steve wondered, "why have we seen so many failures? Maybe common sense ain't so common "

As Steve continued to read, he found that Moltke firmly believed in seizing the initiative in offensive operations, and continually driving the opponent into a great battle of annihilation <sup>3</sup> Moltke realized that changes in strategy were needed due to the vast improvements in firepower, transportation, and communications which were made possible by industrialization. The American Civil War graphically demonstrated the stalemate these new factors could produce. Hence, Moltke authored his strategic envelopment concept to avoid the unconscionable casualties of the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz, too, had described the advantages of the offensive and envelopment: "The main feature of an offensive battle is the outflanking or bypassing of the defender--that is, taking the initiative. Enveloping actions obviously possess great advantages. . In most cases, defense is a sorry, make-shift affair "<sup>5</sup>

Moltke's scheme, true to the master Clausewitz, sought to take advantage of new rapid maneuver capabilities Steve concluded that Moltke had given too little emphasis to command and control plans, as well as logistics plans, but history has shown his

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<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton Princeton UP, 1976) 134

<sup>2</sup> Gunther E. Rothenberg, "Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment," *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 299

<sup>3</sup> Rothenberg, 296

<sup>4</sup> Rothenberg, 299

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, 530

operational instincts were correct. Moltke also failed to take into account one of Clausewitz's main tenets that "war consists of a continuous interaction of opposites."<sup>6</sup> If the Prussians could benefit from technological advances, so could their opponents. Steve read that no strategist--Moltke included--could find a way to resolve the dilemma between the compelling rationale for Clausewitzian offensive action, and the enemy's ability to inflict severe losses with modern firepower.<sup>7</sup>

Schlieffen, Steve read, followed Moltke as Chief of the General Staff. Schlieffen had to deal with even greater technological advancements in firepower and communications. Smokeless powder, radio and machine guns were also "changing the nature of land warfare, though armies everywhere did not yet fully understand these innovations."<sup>8</sup> "Sounds like what the Chairman thinks today," Steve thought. "All these new capabilities, yet how can we optimize their employment?"

Steve read that Schlieffen refined and improved upon Moltke's strategies of envelopment. To rectify what he saw as a Moltke shortcoming, Schlieffen believed well-coordinated envelopments would require strong, centrally directed command and control. Even after he yielded the General staff to his successor, Schlieffen continued to be influential in his writings on strategies for the Prussian army. "Out of office, Schlieffen busied himself with revisions of his [plan], making the document ever more rigid. There was little or no margin for 'friction.'"<sup>9</sup> "That's really odd," Steve mused, "a student of Clausewitz becoming more rigid and ignoring the friction of war." Like his predecessor, Schlieffen also failed to take into account the enemy's capabilities to parry his attempts to out-flank them, falling prey to the trap Clausewitz cautioned against: failing to realize the two-sided nature of war.

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<sup>6</sup> Clausewitz, 136

<sup>7</sup> Rothenberg, 310

<sup>8</sup> Rothenberg, 313

<sup>9</sup> Rothenberg, 319

Steve indulged in a little Monday morning quarterbacking. "It's easy today to see the shortcomings of the Schlieffen Plan," he thought "I wonder why the Prussian leadership, who certainly were not unfamiliar with Clausewitz, didn't question the validity of the plan on Clausewitzian terms before adopting it " Moltke's nephew, previously Schlieffen's deputy, saw logistical and communications shortfalls in the Schlieffen Plan, yet he left the basic tenets of the plan intact After succeeding Schlieffen, he also took steps to rectify perceived shortfalls. However, when war came, the plan failed due to "the intrinsic problems of speed, endurance, and logistics, as well as [the younger] Moltke's inability to find a balance between command and control "10

Steve was confused. He hadn't recalled that these disciples of Clausewitz had strayed so far--and worse yet, had failed He continued to read the essay. Clausewitz had written, "When whole communities go to war--whole peoples, and especially *civilized* peoples--the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object War, therefore, is an act of policy."<sup>11</sup> This was one of the fundamental concepts of Clausewitz, Steve recalled, but it was a precept which was ignored by the two Moltkes and Schlieffen in the Prussian strategy for WWI. Steve read that "fundamental shortcomings characterized the [Prussian] strategy, deriving from the [un-Clausewitzian] belief that a growing political-military threat could be removed by military means alone "

The Prussian General Staff had convinced themselves that their only chance for victory in war was a rapid, decisive engagement, and the best way to achieve that end was the strategy of envelopment. However, Steve read that "the technologically determined impossibility of a rapid victory caused war to be increasingly dominated by such forces as national morale, social stability, and economic resources *Although it was not widely recognized, least of all by the military, the nature of war had changed* "[italics added]<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rothenberg, 322-3

<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz, 86-7

<sup>12</sup> Rothenberg, 324



"How could these Prussians be students of the master Clausewitz and so misread his broad intent," Steve wondered "They certainly couldn't argue that something was lost in the translation "

"There was someone else who had something to say about Clausewitz and World War I, someone who was extremely critical--someone who seemed to blame Clausewitz for the strategies of that war." Steve remembered thinking at the time that pinning a few roses on Clausewitz seemed like just desserts. But, decades after his death, it was grossly unfair to blame Clausewitz for the high casualty-producing strategies adopted by the warring nations After a few mental gymnastics, he finally remembered the critic Liddell Hart

Steve found his Liddell Hart text As he was searching for the section on criticisms of Clausewitz he found a section he had highlighted during his War College studies. "From deep study of war, Clausewitz was led to the conclusion that--'All military action is permeated by intelligent forces and their effects ' Nevertheless, nations at war have always striven, or have been driven by their passions, to disregard the implications of such a conclusion *Instead of applying intelligence, they have chosen to beat their heads against the nearest wall.*"[italics added]<sup>13</sup> Steve thought of the Chairman again "We can't let that happen to us," he thought.

He kept reading Liddell Hart wrote, "As so often happens, Clausewitz's disciples carried his teaching to an extreme which their master had not intended Misinterpretation has been the common fate of most prophets and thinkers in every sphere "<sup>14</sup> Liddell Hart believed this misinterpretation had done more damage to Clausewitz's writings than any determined foe could. His style of writing made misinterpretation a distinct possibility--and Steve could certainly buy into that But had they read too much into his words? Liddell Hart wrote that "on the very threshold of the mechanical era [Clausewitz] declared

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<sup>13</sup> B H Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London Faber and Faber Ltd , 1954) 325

<sup>14</sup> Liddell Hart, 339

his 'conviction that superiority in numbers becomes every day more decisive' Such a 'commandment' gave reinforcement to the instinctive conservatism of soldiers in resisting the possibilities of the new form of superiority which mechanical invention increasingly offered."<sup>15</sup> Steve thought this was a stretch. How could Clausewitz, writing in the early 1800s, be expected to anticipate the advances such as the small caliber rifle and the machine gun? Clausewitz was a historian, not a clairvoyant. His frame of reference, and therefore the context of his writings, was Napoleonic-style wars. "But aren't we trying to be clairvoyant?" Steve asked himself. "Aren't we trying to project into the next century to determine how we can defeat the threats we might face? Help, Mr Wizard."

Steve read on. Liddell Hart believed the Prussian leaders just prior to WWI had adopted pithy phrases of Clausewitz without grasping the more practical and substantive meanings of his writing. The Prussian officers, Liddell Hart wrote, were motivated to battle by Clausewitz's call to the fight. "For by making battle appear the only 'real warlike activity,' his gospel deprived strategy of its laurels, and reduced the art of war to the mechanics of mass slaughter."<sup>16</sup> "Was the Schlieffen Plan merely a recipe for mass slaughter?" Steve wondered. "Did the Prussians really blindly adhere to selected portions of Clausewitz, as Liddell Hart seemed to suggest? Or, was part of Clausewitz's teaching overcome by technology and no one realized it?"

Steve thought another criticism by Liddell Hart was the most damning of all. Clausewitz's statement that victory cannot be achieved without great bloodshed led Liddell Hart to write that Clausewitz's words "would henceforth be used by countless blunderers to excuse, and even justify, their futile squandering of life in bull-headed assaults. The teachings of Clausewitz, taken without understanding, largely influenced both the causation and the character of World War I "<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Liddell Hart, 340

<sup>16</sup> Liddell Hart, 342

<sup>17</sup> Liddell Hart, 343-4

Those were the words Steve had remembered from his War College days. It seemed to him at the time, and it still held true for him, that blaming long-dead theoreticians for a modern failing was what psychologists would call transference—transferring that blame you can't accept yourself. "Certainly Clausewitz's writings were abstract," Steve thought, "and perhaps some of his theories had been overcome by new technology. But the job of the two Moltkes and Schlieffen—and for that matter, the military leadership of the rest of the belligerents of WWI—was to use the theoreticians' writings as a launching point for development of a strategy that was true to the times. A strategy was needed that took into account the latest technological achievements and reasonably anticipated the actions of the enemy. The failing," Steve concluded, "was not blind adherence to the gospel of Carl. The failure of the Prussians and the rest of the world was a failure to correctly *apply* what Clausewitz had written—his basic tenets, not just catch phrases."

"Time for one more essay before calling it a day," Steve thought. He turned to one by Oxford professor Michael Howard, who also had edited and translated Clausewitz. Howard wrote that, like the Prussians, the French and Russian armies also studied Clausewitz, and the passages most often quoted were those which emphasized the moral factors in war while downplaying the material elements.<sup>18</sup> Howard concluded that the heavy losses of WWI were not due to a failed strategy; rather, they were due to "inefficiency, inexperience, and the sheer organizational problems of combining fire and movement on such a large scale."<sup>19</sup>

It had been a long day and Steve felt he was no farther along than when he started. Or was he? He had started with the premise that pre-WWI years were similar to today—many new technologies, and yet no requisite strategy to ensure optimum use of those

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Howard, "Men Against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914," Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 515

<sup>19</sup> Howard, 526

technologies. He believed that premise still held. He had also concluded that Clausewitz had not led astray his flock so much as they had departed from him by selecting quotable phrases rather than adopting his broader themes. Any finally, Steve had reinforced his War College conclusion that blindly adopting, and treating as infallible, anyone's theories is supremely dangerous. Clausewitz criticizes Jomini, Liddell Hart criticizes Clausewitz, Schlieffen criticizes Moltke, Moltke the younger criticizes Schlieffen. On and on it goes. "The best I can do," Steve concluded, "is to take what I can from the respected theorists, and press on. Some things won't apply anymore, but many broad concepts will."

Steve remembered his first Air Force boss saying that at the top of all Air Force regulations, there is a statement in invisible ink which reads, "Nothing in this regulation abrogates your better judgment." "Perhaps," Steve thought, "that sums up strategy development. After historical research, after considering the factors which make today different from yesterday, our best judgment is all we can count on. *Study of the master strategists does not guarantee success in the next war, but prudent adoption of their principles, in the context of today's environment, can serve us well.*"

Steve was fatigued, but he took time to skim an essay on German strategy he had read while at the War College. One of the highlighted paragraphs struck him hard.

The two years following August 1914 were characterized by a general lack of purpose in military operations, which were punctuated by continuous action with an ever-higher intensity of destruction. Once decisive victory was precluded, *military planners were at a loss how to use the massed manpower and the material means of destruction that had been placed at their disposal. Strategy as a unified and directional guidance fell apart* [italics added]<sup>20</sup>

Steve had a lot more thinking to do.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945," Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), 533