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Rethinking Political Supremacy in War: A Review Essay of Clausewitz and Huntington

by Mr Evan A. Laksmana

"Clausewitz does not say much about civil-military relations in On War. Where he does address the subject, [he] is not talking about not politicians or civilians, per se.”

Antulio J. Echevarria¹

"Clausewitz did write a lot about civil-military relations. Even in On War.”

Peter Paret²

"Clausewitz did NOT write about civil-military relations, and... There is a silence in On War, except to tell us that war is the servant and ‘Politik’ is the master.”

Colin S. Gray³

In the realm of modern civil-military relations literature, Samuel P. Huntington, who recently passed away on Christmas Eve 2008, and his book, The Soldier and The State⁴ has been said to be the cornerstone of the subject as he advocated military professionalism and “objective” control by civilians.⁵ Huntington however, was influenced by Clausewitz’s work on political supremacy in war as a foundation of his own thesis. He claimed that Clausewitz “contributed the first theoretical justification for civilian control”⁶, hence, giving a special privilege to Clausewitz’s argument that war is the “mere continuation of politik by other means”.⁷

This most frequently quoted passage from Clausewitz’s On War, however, should be understood within the shadow of the Cold War. The uneasiness of a nuclear threat and major conventional wars had induced scholars to stress the role of policy in limiting war.⁸ Additionally, the liberal-democratic values of Clausewitz’s interpreters had an effect too, as they saw civilian control as a prerequisite to safeguard individual liberties. These notions however indicate that scholars like Huntington might have fallen into the standard mistake of only quoting those chapters or passages to justify their own choices or preferred policies.⁹ Obviously, this is ultimately misleading.

Therefore, this review article is meant to unlock the traditional foundation of civil-military relations, i.e. political supremacy, expressed in Huntington’s work. This would mainly be done by reviewing the thinking of Clausewitz on political supremacy, whom Huntington drew his philosophical foundation from.¹⁰ This article argues that first, Clausewitz’s Trinitarian concept of war – hostility, chance, political purpose – does not portray policy as more dominant than the other tendencies; instead, it presents them as equals, stressing only each one’s uniqueness
in relation to the others. Second, Huntington’s misinterpretation of *On War* might have resulted from his use of a 1943 faulty translation of the book, coupled with his political ideology and inclinations to solve the problems facing the US at that time. This article would proceed, first, by telling the story about the theoretician themselves, and will focus on their careers and personal lives, and how that provided the context which propelled both men to produce their *magnum opus*. The second part would look at the theories that they articulated throughout their work and show how Huntington misinterpreted Clausewitz, while outlining what the latter actually meant. Finally, we would look at some conclusions drawn from the discussion.

**Clausewitz and Huntington: The Men and their Lives**

**Carl Phillip Gottlieb von Clausewitz**

Carl Phillip Gottlieb von Clausewitz was born on 1 June 1780. His father served in one of Frederick the Great’s regiments. Thus, as he was growing up he saw almost nobody but officers, and at the age of 12 he joined the army. By the age of 21, he entered the War College in Berlin under the direction of General Gerhard Scarnhost, who would later become his mentor and biggest influence. Clausewitz was a typical educated representative of his generation. He attended lectures, read relevant non-professional books and articles, and drew scraps of ideas from his cultural environment.

**Samuel Phillips Huntington**

Such an early career and strong influence from school and family upbringing is similar to Huntington’s. Samuel Phillips Huntington was born on 18 April 1927 in New York and grew up among writers: his father was an editor, mother a writer, grandfather a publisher. He graduated with exceptional distinction from Yale College at the age of 18. After a brief stint at the US Army, he went to Chicago University to obtain a Masters degree in 1948. He then moved to Harvard University.
where he encountered a faculty of strong intellectuals, but researched and wrote his dissertation in four months. By June 1950 (age 23), he began teaching there.

Meanwhile, for Clausewitz, his existence as a soldier, and the driving factor in his career, was determined by his relentless focus on France and Napoleonic warfare. Although much of his Francophobia were influenced by his wife, Marie Countess von Bruhl, his focus on France was not blind hatred, but pushed by his ardent nationalism for Prussia, which saw the full wrath of Napoleon’s army in 1806. Thus, Clausewitz lived in a new age of politics and warfare, leading him to write his first draft of On War.

The same could be said for Huntington who lived through World War II and the ensuing nuclear era. By 1952, developments in national and international politics were reshaping his political and intellectual interests. As détente soured in the late 1970s, his research focus began to turn to issues of national security – although thus far he had been focusing on American politics. The rift between Truman and MacArthur drew him into issues of civil-military relations, culminating in his book, The Soldier and The State.

Meanwhile, Clausewitz’s career, although a military professional, was marked by deep reflections and theoretical thinking. His strong interest in military theory dates at least from his days at the War College. In 1810-1811 Clausewitz was in charge of lectures on small war, while tutoring the Prussian crown prince. In this context he applied his thinking and began to theorise many of the issues surrounding war which would later form the basis of his work.

Huntington was somewhat the opposite. Despite his academic commitment, his career was also filled with his involvement in public affairs. He played an increasingly senior role
in several Democratic Party national campaigns. From 1966 to 1969, he chaired the Vietnam sub-committee of the American government’s Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group, and in 1977-78, he was a senior member and coordinator of security planning in the National Security Council.

As an individual, Clausewitz was a difficult person; more at ease in a library than in Berlin’s vibrant salons or among most of his fellow officers. Huntington was also an unusually private person, not given to self-revelation and seemingly more at ease in public debates than in intimate settings. Thus, both men, although marked by striking intelligence and intellectual integrity, seem to display complex personalities that defy easy categorisation.

Meanwhile, Clausewitz’s work reflected a method of combining history and theory as the basis for the study of critical decision-making intended to educate the mind of the commander. For Clausewitz, history and theory were closely linked, and a valid theory of politics and war could be developed only by taking into account the past and the present. Thus, historical study became a major component of his pursuit of theory. Huntington also sought to develop a theoretical framework for understanding military institutions in the modern world. His emphasis on theory was argued on the basis that abstraction and simplification were essential to clear thinking. Like Clausewitz, he also wrote as a historian: over two-thirds of his book consists of a history of military professionalism and civil-military relations in the United States.

Thus, we can see many similarities in their career and personal life. Both began their career at a young age; both had a profound conviction in theory and history; both had strong nationalist fervour; both felt the need to explain the changes of their time; both were involved in the theoretical and policy realm; and both were private, highly intellectual, and complex people. One fundamental difference set them apart: their studious passion. Clausewitz had been preoccupied with war since he was a kid and never turned away from it, while Huntington was a newcomer to the issue of military affairs since he initially focused on American politics.

**Clausewitz and Huntington: Their Theories**

Throughout his life, Clausewitz was motivated by the desire to work out a comprehensive view of war. From the time he first started writing about war, he was convinced that war and policy was related, though the nature of the linkages had to be determined, and was already concerned about the physical and moral realities of war. Additionally, as mentioned before, his military career was determined by Napoleonic warfare. This led him to think and write (from 1804-1827) about the “ideal” type of war – the absolute war fought from a purely logical point of view, “unlimited”.

However, Napoleon’s defeat in 1814 and the settlement of 1815 marked a transition to more stable international politics and Clausewitz’s life reverted to routine. By 1819, he was appointed Superintendent of the War College in Berlin and charged with much
administrative work. Although he was not entirely happy with this, he was in fact beginning to feel free to engage in more inward, intellectual activity. Moreover, this gave him time to write On War, which he began to write in 1818 and last added to in 1830.

In this post-Napoleon period, Clausewitz’s concern shifted to the problem of securing Prussia’s status, strength, and stability within Europe. In addition, as a result of Moscow and Waterloo, he came to appreciate the fundamental contrast between limited and unlimited war. He then tried to reconcile his understanding of the “unlimited” Napoleonic warfare with his new awareness of the diversity of wars in reality. However, before having revised On War completely, he was called to active duty in 1830, and on 16 November 1831, he died after a mild cholera that precipitated a heart attack.

His unfinished manuscript was subsequently published by his widow in 1832-1834 without any alterations, but a second edition was issued in the 1850s with the text heavily disfigured by editorial changes. Paret argued that these obscured texts changed Clausewitz’s argument in favor of civilian supremacy over military leadership in war. The earliest English translation, the “Graham-Maude” text was based on a corrupt third edition – as well as the American version edited by O.J. Matthijs Jolles, released after World War II. Significantly, this is the edition that Huntington used for The Soldier and The State.

Nevertheless, Clausewitz’s theory of war can be considered from two broad perspectives: his thoughts about the relationship between politics and war, and about the nature of war. In the former, Clausewitz insists that the only source of war is politics and “the political object, which was the original motive…will determine both the military objective and the amount of effort it requires”, hence, “war is an act of policy”. He restated that, “war is the mere continuation of politik by other means”. In German, the word politik can mean both policy and politics, and in his usage, the term has objective and subjective aspects – the former means the extension of the will of the ruler, the latter means an actual manifestation of politics that can vary from era to era. Politik is influenced by, and thus reflects, the “specific characteristics” of a geopolitical position as well as the general “spirit of the age”.

However, he warned that “political aim must adapt itself to its chosen means”, implying that although politics must always hold sovereign over warfare, “that does not imply that political aim is a tyrant”. Thus, he is arguing that “war in general, and the commander in any specific instance, is entitled to require that the trend and design of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means”. But although “it is no small demand;
however much it may affect political aims in a given case, it will never do more than modify them”. Clausewitz suggested that this conundrum is avoidable if senior political leaders have some familiarity with military affairs, although he did not use limited professional expertise (military skills) to limit political influence over the conduct of war. This point, as we shall see later, will differ with Huntington’s notion of professionalism.

Many cited this as Clausewitz’s “greatest contribution to the study of war” but as straightforward as it may sound, establishing “political supremacy” is extremely difficult. However, it should be noted that this notion of “political supremacy” is only one of three tendencies within the “remarkable trinity”: “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity; the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone”. These three tendencies of equal importance act as a unity – which stems from a religious analytical dimension of Trinity: the idea of one being three, and three being as one. In addition, according to the 1827 planned revision, the formula of “political supremacy” cannot be separated from the two types of war (unlimited and limited).

Meanwhile, Huntington, who, as mentioned above, used a corrupt edition of On War, finds the theoretical foundations of his thought in Clausewitz’s study of war. From the Clausewitzian primacy of politics over war, he derived the ethical and practical delimitation of the military profession. Some have suggested however that, some Americans, including Huntington, have a higher opinion of Clausewitz partly because his doctrine can be made to serve their ideological interest. This is especially true for those looking for a defense of civilian supremacy and limited war in the aftermath of World War II.

Policy control however is not a literal synonym for civilian control. Clausewitz seems to feel that civilian control over the military is more a matter of empirical historical fact than a normative ideal, while indicating the ideal of “the statesmen and soldier…in one person”. Similarly, political control over the use of force was, for Clausewitz, more a matter of subordinating an operational point of view to a strategic or, better, a grand strategic perspective. What mattered was that the perspective itself was a unifying one and that wartime decisions were made on that basis. Therefore, as Echevarria argues, “does it matter in Clausewitz’s approach whether Napoleon is a military man or a civilian? No. What does matter is that Napoleon has the state’s interests in mind when he makes military strategy and fights campaigns”.

This American simplification of Clausewitz has ideological roots; but their appreciation of him is more than that. Following World War II, America was a superpower in a global contest with nuclear potentials, an unfamiliar condition for Americans. Huntington’s usage of Clausewitzian view was seen as an antidote to this confusion as he accepts the inevitability and normality of international conflicts.
and The State basically outlined that America should expect conflict as a part of life, and should be prepared to use military means in a rational manner to obtain its goals. Meanwhile, the military should embrace an ethos, part of which is the subordination to policy control. Such professionalism would maximise military security.6

The primary question here is to develop a system of civil-military relations that can maximise military security with minimum sacrifice of other social values.6 He also argued that civil-military relations essentially reflect the political relationship between the state and officer corps.6 Moreover, the responsibility of the military profession lies in the fact that managed violence must be used for socially approved purposes: the officer’s client is the state and his fundamental responsibility is to the state.6

Subsequently, Huntington is focused on determining how civilian control can be effectively exercised, and contended that there are two types of political control: subjective and objective control.6 The former is exercised by maximising the power of one or more social groups over the armed forces, while the latter is chiefly based on the recognition of an autonomous military professionalism and on a rigid separation of the latter from the political sphere. His theoretical base, chiefly from Clausewitz, made him lean towards the last one. Once the supremacy of politics is accepted, if the military is an autonomous sector of science and knowledge, the officer must enjoy a professional autonomy of his own.

After The Soldier and The State, Huntington published The Changing Pattern of Military Politics where he argued that there was a new trend in the 1960s characterised by the recovery of old powers and emergence of new ones, and the rapid pace of economic development in advanced societies and of social change in less developed ones.6 Additionally, the principal military arenas in world politics had shifted to the violence and domestic politics of the colonial territories and independent states of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and southern Asia.6 This he believed was a reflection of the prevalence of rapid social and political change. In one sense, this is similar to Clausewitz who postulated that the “transformation in the art of war follows from the transformation of politics and society”.

Huntington also continued to use Clausewitzian dictum in explaining the classic theory of intergovernmental wars when he argued that what Clausewitz meant by war as a continuation policy was actually war as a continuation of foreign policy.6 Ironically, he also argued that Clausewitz’s theory is only partially relevant to the prevailing intra-state wars at that time.6 This of course is a misrepresentation of Clausewitz’s overall approach to war. He also maintained that Clausewitz’s analysis on the relation of military force to politics postulated a system of objective civilian control, although he later conceded that subjective control is more relevant for domestic intra-state wars.6

This notion would be further explored in his Political Order in Changing Societies, where he argued that one of
the most common features of political modernisation is the intervention of the military in politics. Subsequently, Huntington collaborated with Andrew J. Goodpaster to address the shifting pattern of civil-military relations in the US after the Vietnam War. Finally, in perhaps one of his last works on civil-military relations, Huntington addressed the issue of civil-military relations in new democracies.

The legacies of Huntington’s misrepresentation of Clausewitzian dictum on political supremacy have led his subsequent students, and virtually most civil-military relations scholars, to believe in the strict and distinct roles for civilians and military. For example, Peter D. Feaver, a noted scholar of civil-military relations and Huntington’s student, argued that Clausewitzian logic stipulates that operations are the exclusive province of the military.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that Huntington never fully understood what Clausewitz meant. His first misinterpretation was on the fact that Clausewitz did not address civilian control per se when he stated “war is a continuation of politik with other means”. Clausewitz was merely showing that war does not have a logic of its own, that the political objective determines war’s character, and every war has its zeitgeist. His second misinterpretation was that he believed that political supremacy should prevail in wartime and peacetime. In fact, Clausewitz was addressing specifically about issues of war where its grammar and Trinitarian component highlight the unique features of war – which would not be present in peacetime.

Based on our discussion, there are several possible reasons why Huntington misinterprets Clausewitz. First, his usage of a faulty translation of On War which was altered to favour, perhaps unevenly, absolute civilian supremacy over the military. Second, his usage of certain passages from On War driven by his will to justify a theory aimed at answering his concern over the state of national security in America during the Cold War, especially after the Truman-MacArthur episode. In this regard, his intellectual integrity might be compromised to a certain extent by his political ideology and activities. As a final remark, a theory of civil-military relations should distinguish the dynamic relationship between the
political and military leadership during wartime and peacetime. Any theory that tries to encompass both times is bound to fall into a logical fallacy. Understanding Clausewitzian dictum on war is always a good first step in understanding the dynamics in war, including political supremacy.

**Endnotes**

1. Personal communication with author (23 Jan 08).
2. Personal communication with author (26 Dec 07).
3. Personal communication with author (6 Dec 07).
25. Ibid., p842; Harvard University Faculty Website, “Samuel Huntington”.
36. He complained that “I am now a Professor… [my] activities are nearly as peaceful as planting cabbage”. Cited in Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p9.
37. Ibid., p16.
41. Paret, *Clausewitz*, p274.
46. Ibid., p99.
49. Ibid., p735.
51. For one thing, as Gray argues, “because Politik in German means policy and politics, we can never be sure which he means” (Personal communication with author, 6 December 2007). For another, as Paret argues, “soldiers have often rejected it, preferring to think that after war is declared politics should stay out of the fighting” (Personal communication with author, 26 December 2007).
54. Ibid., p94.
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