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sidebar of about 250 words

### CLAUSEWITZ 101

*Who was this nineteenth century theorist and why does he still  
captivate military thinkers today?*

by

Pat Proctor

You may have never heard the name Carl von Clausewitz, but if you have even a passing interest in current affairs or military history, you have almost certainly heard the "quotable" Clausewitz. He is best known to Americans for saying, "War is the continuation of politics by other means." Terms he coined, like *center of gravity* and the *fog of war*, have become the vocabulary for American military thought. A post-Vietnam rediscovery of Clausewitz shaped the Powell Doctrine and the US military that was so successful in the first Gulf War. Some say it is the legacy of this revival that is causing the US military so many problems in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

Who was this man? What did he mean when he penned these words nearly two centuries ago? Why have his words had such a dramatic impact on the US military in particular and the Western way of war in general? To answer these questions, we need to go beyond the bumper stickers and really dig into Clausewitz--the man, his words, and his legacy.

#### THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

To understand Clausewitz, one must understand the time in which he lived. Intellectually, politically, and militarily, it was a time of great change.

After the Protestant Reformation, The absence of Church persecution created an explosion of scientific inquiry. Blaise Pascal and René Descarte in France, and later Isaac Newton in Britain, used new methods of reasoning to expand the boundaries of mathematics and physics. However, dramatic change in Europe truly began when Britons Thomas Hobbes and John Locke ushered in a new age, the Age of Enlightenment, by using these new scientific methods to explore the role of the individual and government in society.

Philosophers in this new age applied the tools of scientific inquiry to political and economic questions. David Hume of Scotland demonstrated the need for franchise for landowners, limits on the power of the clergy, and the

separation of powers. In England, Adam Smith studied the power of the economy to liberate the individual. In France, Montesquieu proposed a political system of checks and balances. Even Isaac Newton had moved beyond scientific inquiry and was questioning the relationship between God, man, and nature. In the German principalities (Germany was not yet a single country), Immanuel Kant applied Newton's ordered universe to the idea of ordered societies of perfect justice and fulfillment. Hegel used dialectic reasoning to arrive at a new understanding of reality.

These were not esoteric, philosophical debates. The powerful ideas of the Enlightenment were reshaping the world. America's founding fathers were asserting John Locke's "natural rights" to life, liberty, and property when they drafted the Declaration of Independence. The French people were asserting that "all men are created equal" when they beheaded their nobles and declared a new republic. The genie was out of the bottle. If leaders ruled by consent of the governed rather than by divine right, then the days of monarchy and nobility were numbered.

The powers of Europe--Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and numerous smaller states--formed a succession of coalitions to crush the French Revolution and restore monarchy in France. Each war was more cataclysmic than the last. The more violently

the European powers assailed France, the harder the people of France resisted. Soon France was fielding vast armies that would have been unimaginable only a few years before. Because they were fighting for their rights--*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*--they were no longer limited by the supply bases and draconian discipline that had previously limited the size of Western armies. Because it was a war of national survival, France could mobilize its entire nation to equip its army with cannons and muskets far faster than other European powers.

However, it was not until the new French meritocracy produced Napoleon Bonaparte that France realized her true potential. Napoleon brought the *Grande Armée* a new organization (corps and a new staff system), new tactics (coordination of artillery, infantry, and cavalry), new technology (more precise manufacture of arms), and new doctrine (coordinated movement of forces across vast fronts). No single thing he did was new, but the combined effect of all of these innovations was, in a word, revolutionary. In a stunning series of victories, he subjugated Europe and ended the war.

When the shock wore off, the first question everyone asked was, what happened? How did an army of amateurs, led by a man who had been an artillery captain only a few years earlier, trounce the combined might of Europe? Especially shocking was the defeat of the Prussian army. This highly professional

military, led so ably by Frederick the Great only a century earlier, had been the envy of Europe. Napoleon had humiliated them in a campaign that lasted less than three weeks.

#### WHO WAS CLAUSEWITZ?

Carl von Clausewitz knew this better than anyone. He had seen the humiliation with his own eyes. In a lightning campaign, Napoleon's 160,000 defeated the quarter-million-man Prussian army, killing 25,000 and capturing another 150,000. Clausewitz, aide-de-camp to Prince August, was one of those 150,000. He was captured at the Battle of Jena-Auerstädt in October 1806.

Clausewitz spent a year in captivity in France before returning to Prussia. After a few years helping to modernize the Prussian army, the humiliation of his country's alliance with France became more than he could bear. Following many other Prussian officers, he travelled to Russia to join the czar, who was preparing to challenge Napoleon. He served in the Russian army, fighting the French during Napoleon's ill-fated Russian campaign. After Napoleon's grueling retreat from Russia, Clausewitz rejoined the Prussian army for the Waterloo campaign that finally ended Napoleon's rule.

Since Napoleon's first dramatic victories, military theorists had been asking the same question: How did he do it?