

Beyond *Vom Kriege*: The Character and Conduct of Modern War

R. D. HOOKER, JR.

“You may not be interested in war . . . but war is interested in you.”

— Leon Trotsky

It is the tragedy of history that man cannot free himself from war. Indeed, far more than by the development of art or literature or trade or political institutions, the history of man has been determined by the wars he has fought. Time and again, advanced and cultured societies have been laid low by more primitive and virile enemies with superior military institutions and a stronger will to fight. The end of the Cold War, the rise of globalization, the spread of democracy, and the advent of a new millennium raised hopes that mankind might move beyond the catastrophic wars that shaped the 20th century. Those hopes were dashed by Somalia and Rwanda and Bosnia, by the Sudan and the Congo and Kosovo, by Chechnya and Afghanistan and Iraq. Understanding war, not as we would like it but as it is, remains the central question of international politics. And for the most primal of reasons: War isn't going anywhere.

Political and military leaders are notoriously averse to theory, but if there is a theorist about war who matters, it remains Carl von Clausewitz, whose *Vom Kriege* (“*On War*”) has shaped Western views about war since the middle of the 19th century. While it goes too far to say, as John Keegan has, that Clausewitz “influenced every statesman and soldier interested in war for the past 100 years”—most never actually read or grasped him—Clausewitz endures, not because he is universally understood or accepted but because he is so often right about first principles.¹ Much of what he wrote about the conduct of war in the pre-industrial era, about marches and magazines and the

“war of posts,” fits best with his own time. But his insights about the nature of war itself remain uniquely and enduringly prescient.

Clausewitz described war as “nothing more than a duel on a larger scale . . . an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will.”² Today, “war” is used to mean very different things in very different contexts, from the war on poverty to the war on drugs to the war on terrorism. Because it evokes a call to action and stimulates national resolve, “war” is perhaps the most used and abused word in the political lexicon. What does it mean precisely?

War is surely both a duel and an act of force, but it is perhaps best described as *armed conflict between states*. While not inconsistent with Clausewitz, this usage lends both simplicity and clarity to often-muddied waters. Thus defined, war can be distinguished from raids, rescue operations, peacekeeping missions, counter-drug and anti-terror operations, military occupations, shows of force, and a host of other activities which involve the use of military forces. Implicit in this usage is reciprocity; an unanswered, one-time cruise missile attack is a military operation and a use of force, but hardly a war. However ineffectually, however great the mismatch, both sides must participate in the “duel” for war to exist.

Nor does official sanction particularly matter. Whether formally declared or not, war is war. Nowadays, even advanced states routinely forego the diplomatic niceties, though all seek and welcome the imprimatur of international support and recognition when they can get it.

Here, “armed conflict” means fighting—not a show of force or the threat of invasion, but actual combat. The difference is important because the many gradations of the use of “forces” are distinct from the use of “force.” Fundamentally, war itself is not about deterrence or dissuasion, although the capability and the will to wage it may be. As Bedford Forrest so pungently put it, “War means fighting. And fighting means killing.” The distinction is crucial. The chance of stumbling into war is too great. All too often, statesmen have used the threat of war as a tool of policy, only to be astounded when it fails and war erupts.

If war is armed conflict between states, what is its purpose? *The purpose of war is to impose the will of one state on another by force*. Ideally, wars

Colonel Richard D. Hooker, Jr., commands the XVIII Airborne Corps Combat Support Brigade (“Dragon Brigade”) now deployed to Iraq. He commanded an infantry battalion in the 82d Airborne Division and has served as Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, with the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, as Aide de Camp to the Secretary of the Army, and with the National Security Council. Colonel Hooker holds an M.S. in national security studies from the National Defense University and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Virginia in international relations.

are waged for some definable, rational purpose; as T. R. Fehrenbach explained, “The object of warfare is to dominate a portion of the earth, with its peoples, for causes either just or unjust. It is not to destroy the land and people, unless you have gone wholly mad.”³

But not always. War also can be inchoate and incoherent, its object not far removed from insensate mayhem. Sometimes, states do go mad. It may be wisdom to insist, as Clausewitz so famously did, that war conform to its political objective.⁴ It would be foolish to think that it always does.

The term “state” also deserves precise definition. Political scientists often attach stringent conditions to statehood, but a state can be described accurately as any political entity which controls territory and population and can effectively wield power relative to its neighbors. It may be vast, like the Democratic Republic of Congo, or tiny, like Chechnya or Abkhazia. It may or may not be internationally recognized or conventionally organized. It may be ethnically homogeneous like Sweden or a tribal mosaic like Iraq. The form of government is not particularly important. What matters is the ability to exercise control internally and maintain it when challenged.

States so defined may rise and implode. They may be little more than criminal syndicates thinly disguised, like Transdniestria, or patchworks of rival clans, like Somalia, or entities tortured by irreconcilable differences, like Sudan. Whether stable or failing, however, states matter because, among other things, they provide havens for international terrorism and transit points for the flow of arms. While the West can conduct military operations against transnational threats, as we have seen in Yemen and the Philippines, it may take more to destroy the protected enclaves that a functioning regime can offer when the financial or ideological price is right. It may take a war.

Critics have strenuously objected that the Clausewitzian thesis ignores the grave threats posed by international terrorism and other transnational actors.⁵ These are indisputably and powerfully real. But one does not wage war in the pure sense against shadowy cells dispersed among many different sovereign states, some of whom are close allies and others of whom may not even be aware of the terrorists in their midst. The war in Afghanistan meets our definition because the Taliban controlled territory and population and exercised the practical functions of statehood. Except in the purely local sense, al Qaeda does not.

This is not to say that al Qaeda or Hezbollah or Hamas are not exceedingly dangerous. But the means used to combat terrorism, or narco-traffickers to cite another example, lie primarily in the intelligence, law enforcement, public diplomacy, and information-sharing arenas and only secondarily in the military sphere. This is an important point. *States are not waging war when armed force is not the primary agent.* Used imprecisely,

“war” assumes rhetorical importance as a way to mobilize popular support, express seriousness of intention, and prepare the citizens for sacrifices. But the state-directed use of armed force is not the thrust of the campaign against international terrorism; it plays only a supporting role.

The vocabulary of war is important because so much is done in its name. Perversely, Clausewitz is often condemned to irrelevance by those who first redefine war and then castigate him for not describing it “accurately.”⁶ War understood in the classical sense remains consistent with Clausewitz’s most famous aphorism, that war is simply the continuation of political activity by other means. Explicit in Clausewitz’s formulation is the notion that, because of its unpredictability and tendency toward extremes, war must be subordinated to a rational purpose and clearly defined: “The first, the supreme, most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and the commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking.”⁷ And while military force is only one weapon among many, with diplomatic, economic, political, informational, and even “soft power” instruments of statecraft available, it is by far the first among equals in wartime. Even more powerful than the impact of death on societies is the impact of ideas for which people are willing to die. Those ideas find their ultimate expression in the organized violence of states.

Today, no power on earth can compete with the United States and its allies in major conventional war, and few seem inclined to try. But war itself is flourishing, its essential nature unchanged. In northern and sub-Saharan Africa, in Central Asia and the former USSR, in Kashmir and Tibet and above all in the Middle East, war is a growth industry. Fueled by many things, but above all by religion and economic disenfranchisement, war attracts desperate and disillusioned youth into a culture of violence. All too often, as a tool for concentrating political power in the hands of the few, rearranging the political landscape, and redirecting challenges to authority toward real or imagined enemies, war works.

The Character of War

Given the dramatic changes sweeping the globe in virtually every field, the temptation to think about war as something altogether different from before is overpowering. Indeed, advocates of military transformation in the United States assert that technology has redefined war altogether. Nothing could be more mistaken. While the methods used to wage war are constantly evolving, the nature and character of war remain deeply and unchangeably rooted in the nature of man.

Clausewitz wrote, “If war is an act of force, the emotions cannot fail to be involved.”⁸ The emotional or passionate side of war receives scant attention

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from modern theorists and policymakers, though it permeates state-to-state conflict at every level. It is easy to imagine the fear and rage and grief of the combatants, harder to see it in the cool press briefings of the leaders who make war and the often mute suffering of the populations who must endure and support it. Yet it is ever-present. Clausewitz saw clearly that war has a nature all its own, a nature that left to itself must run to extremes. This tendency of war to run away with itself—to leap its banks and escape the original purpose of the conflict—recurs over and over in history, pressing hard against the rational courses of policy and strategy. Where does it come from?

War is much more than strategy and policy because it is visceral and personal. Even when the existence of the state is not at risk, war in its purest form is a struggle for personal or political survival, a contest for the highest stakes played out directly by its participants and indirectly by the people and their leaders. Its victories and defeats, joys and sorrows, highs and depressions are expressed fundamentally through a collective sense of exhilaration or despair. For the combatants, war means the prospect of death or wounds and a loss of friends and comrades that is scarcely less tragic. But society is an intimate participant too, through the bulletins and statements of political leaders, through the lens of an omnipresent media, and in the homes of the families and the communities where they live. Here the safe return or death in action of a loved one, magnified thousands of times, resonates powerfully and far afield.

Depending on the state’s success in building popular support for war, a reservoir of endurance to losses and defeats can exist. But it is finite, its depth a measure of the public’s support for the causes engaged, and when it is exhausted the government itself faces grave political risks. For this reason, if for no other, war is the ultimate gamble. For soldiers and premiers alike, war is about survival. And the struggle for survival is inherently impatient with limits.

In this stressful and highly charged environment, violence has a cascading effect as the frustrations and frictions of the battlefield encourage ever-increasing uses of force. Restraint and moderation are often the first casualties.

The mounting toll of military and civilian casualties and the images of war, seen firsthand or worldwide on CNN, beget a traumatized population and an increasingly exasperated and desensitized military. Except in very short conflicts, mounting impatience soon permeates the conduct of war, enhancing and emphasizing its inherent emotional component. War's ebb and flow may lead to changes in its aims and objectives in mid-course, either from the thrill that accompanies success or the dismay and even panic that follows defeat or stalemate. In either case, the rational and sober conduct of the war is constantly challenged and influenced by passionate and elemental currents closely related to the character of war itself. The ineluctable nature of war is summed up in the words of the German general in Russia who said, "We are like a man who has seized a wolf by the ears, and dares not let go."⁹

The passion and emotion generated by war unquestionably account for its durability and its tendency to spawn new and more vengeful conflicts afterward. For wars are difficult to win conclusively. The wars of Napoleon led to a reformed Prussian army and a revived military state that within the same lifetime created modern Germany and destroyed the French Second Empire. France smoldered for decades over the loss of Alsace-Lorraine ("never speak of it, never forget") and leapt eagerly into the fray in 1914. The destruction of Wilhelmine Germany and the shame of Versailles birthed National Socialism and the Second World War, from which emerged the bitter rivalry between Russia and the United States and its peripheral wars in Korea and Indochina. Today America is at war with many of the same mujahideen it supported against the Soviets in Afghanistan, that Cold War spinoff of the 1980s. And on, and on. Enmities so powerful are transmitted through the generations with fearful force, as though the Glorious Revolution of 1688 or the Battle of Kosovo Polje were current events and not ancient feuds.¹⁰

As Clausewitz noted, it is just this tendency which gives war its own trajectory, its inherent anti-deterministic and nonlinear character. The first-order effects of armed conflict between states may be apparent—the military defeat of one side or the other, an exchange of territory, the fall of a regime, or a shift in the local or international political equilibrium. But the second- and third-order effects are never as easy to predict, and may be profound in their unintended consequences. Even victory is often not the end. National populations, and the populist leaders who exploit them, do not easily forget or forgive. Taking the state to war is always a gamble, regardless of the military balance of forces. Invariably, war will have its way. As Churchill put it:

Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The Statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once

the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events. Antiquated War Offices, weak, incompetent or arrogant commanders, untrustworthy allies, hostile neutrals, malignant Fortune, ugly surprises, awful miscalculations all take their seat at the Council Board on the morrow of a declaration of war. Always remember, however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance.¹¹

Despite a terrifying increase in its scope, scale, and lethality, war persists as a political genre, first because it mobilizes and unifies the state behind its leaders as nothing else can, and second because states so often persuade themselves they can win. Rarely do states accept battle with no hope of victory. Even the Melians expected succor from Sparta.

Intuitively building on war's nonlinear character, Clausewitz advanced his famous "trinity" as one way to describe the contending forces which affect the course of war. Often summarized as "the people, the army, and the state," the Clausewitzian trinity is actually more subtle and penetrating. He saw the emotional, inconstant force of the masses, the role of chance and probability experienced on the battlefield by the military, and the state's attempts to subordinate war's tidal forces to rational policy as a dynamic and interactive process.¹² A keen student of science, Clausewitz likened this interplay of forces to an object suspended between three magnets. Although subjected to like, measurable forces, the object reacts erratically and in ways which cannot be replicated even under identical conditions—an apt analogy for war that for all our modernity holds true.¹³

Over the millennia, man's practical experience of war, of its horrors and excesses, has brought forth all manner of international legal codes designed to limit its extent and effects. Augustine's concepts of just and unjust war and the attempts of Grotius to regulate its conduct in law have powerfully influenced Western thought. But in the end, states most often interpret justice in light of their interest, giving the use of force an enduring place among the tools of statecraft.

Understanding war in its true form is crucially important because otherwise war can become an instrument for resolving all manner of political disputes—an exceedingly dangerous state of affairs. Especially for powerful states, whose military dominance suggests "easy" solutions for intractable problems, war cuts through the tortured legalisms of international institutions, shortcuts leaky economic embargoes, and truncates difficult and frustrating diplomacy. Power and impatience are a seductive but deadly combination, best controlled by thoroughly comprehending war as it really is. War is sometimes the right, the true, and the wisest course. Sometimes the attacked party is given no choice at all, except whether or not to resist. But a full understanding of

war's tendency toward extremes of violence and its unpredictable outcomes militates against an early or easy recourse to force except under conditions of great risk.

All of this may frustrate those who believe in more expansive or less limiting definitions. Ongoing military operations in Iraq, for instance, or the "Global War on Terrorism," are proof to many that war has slipped the bonds of state-to-state conflict. In Iraq or Afghanistan, however, military force may be used to provide a secure environment, but in the current phase of "stability" operations, armed conflict, in military parlance, is not the "main effort." Public diplomacy, intelligence sharing, economic assistance, national and international law enforcement, and many other tools are as important, or more important, than armed force in these and like instances.

The Conduct of Modern War

If Clausewitz's reflections on the character of war remain valid, his observations on the conduct of war are less apt. Few things change more rapidly than the conduct of war, rooted in the intersection between technology and the political, economic, and military institutions of the state. That trend is accelerating at a fantastic rate.

Beginning with the industrial revolution, the technology of war began to change exponentially rather than incrementally, outstripping tactics and strategy, doctrine and organization. In the American Civil War, neither side ever really grasped the impact of new technology on old ways of fighting. Fifty years later, the same could be said about the Great War. Because technology evolves so quickly, the weapons of war often outrun its methods and modalities. In general, technology has increased the distance at which man kills, enhanced the lethality of his weapons, and reduced the time needed to train him for war. For advanced, wealthy states, cutting-edge technology is accelerating trends toward smaller, more professional, and more expensive militaries oriented on precision weaponry and networked sensors.

As crucial as technology can be to war, other factors can and do play decisive roles. At least from the time of the Punic Wars to the time of Constantine the Great, a span of some 500 years, the Roman army bestrode the military scene and proved by far the most important factor in the growth and stability of the Roman empire. Its greatness was based not on better weapons but on its superior military institutions, expressed in careful training, organization, and discipline. These "human" factors often overshadowed technology in the centuries that followed. Although the Mongols possessed nothing like the heavily armored horsemen of Europe, and did not grossly outnumber their opponents as usually assumed, they created in a short time perhaps the largest empire in history, stretching from the Sea of Japan to the gates of Vienna. The

victories of Gustavus Adolphus, Cromwell's New Model Army, the Prussian army of Frederick the Great, and the armies of Napoleon were not in the main the results of technological overmatch. In the modern era, the Germans, Chinese, North Vietnamese, and Israelis all achieved outstanding battlefield successes against opponents armed with equal or superior technology. Future wars may well see technology playing an even larger role. But other dimensions will still play an important part in what remains essentially a contest of wills played out by thinking and adaptive opponents.

Modern war, at least as practiced in the West, trades on American and European technology and wealth, not on manpower and ideology. Western militaries are typically small, professional organizations officered by the middle class and filled by working-class volunteers. Their wars are universally "out of area"—that is, not fought in direct defense of national borders—placing a premium on short, sharp campaigns won with relatively few casualties. Although land forces remain indispensable, whenever possible Western militaries fight at a distance using standoff precision weapons, whose accuracy and lethality make it difficult or impossible for less-sophisticated adversaries to fight conventionally with any chance of success. Increasingly, the West's advantage in rapid data transmission on the battlefield is changing how American and European militaries wage war, as control and use of information assumes decisive importance.

The qualitative gap between the armed forces of the West and their likely opponents is not likely to narrow for the foreseeable future. In this sense the West's absolute military advantage, arguably in force since the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, is likely to persist for generations. Although challengers may pursue niche technologies like anti-ship weapons, theater ballistic or cruise missiles, or computer attack systems, their inability to match the capital expenditures and technological sophistication of the United States and its NATO allies will make military parity highly doubtful, even when they act in coalitions. Nor will nuclear weapons change this calculus. While the small nuclear arsenals of potential adversary states may yield some deterrent benefits, their offensive use as weapons of war (as distinct from their use in terrorism) is doubtful given the vastly more capable nuclear forces belonging to the United States, Britain, and France.

This gap in economic and technological capacity suggests other approaches for weaker adversaries. Here there is real danger. A quick look at the protracted insurgencies of the past one hundred years is not encouraging. In China, Vietnam, and Algeria, the West or its surrogates struggled for decades and lost. Russia is experiencing the same agony in Chechnya. Even Western "successes" in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Malaysia, and Aden proved painful and debilitating.¹⁴ The ability of Western democracies to sustain major mili-

tary ventures over time, particularly in the face of casualties suffered for less than truly vital stakes, represents a real vulnerability. The sheer cost of maintaining large fighting forces in action at great distances from the homeland is a liability that can be exploited by opponents able to tie down Western forces in extended conflicts.

The costs of waging long, drawn-out conflicts will be counted in more than dollars and lives. By a curious logic, the loss of many Americans in a single event or short campaign is less harmful to our political and military institutions than the steady drain of casualties over time. By necessity, the military adapts to the narrower exigencies of the moment, focusing on the immediate fight, at some cost to the future investment, professional growth, and broader warfighting competencies which can be vital in other potential conflicts of greater import. A subsidiary effect is loss of confidence in the military as an institution when it is engaged in protracted operations involving mounting losses without apparent progress. It is too soon to tell if ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan will yield timely and fruitful results. But if they do not, the long-term effect on the health of the American military could and probably will be damaging.

The experience of the Vietnam conflict, while not an exact fit, suggests that very long and enervating campaigns, fought for less than truly vital objectives, delay necessary modernization, absorb military resources earmarked for other, more dangerous contingencies, drive long-service professionals out of the force, and make it harder to recruit qualified personnel. These direct effects may then be mirrored more indirectly in declining popular support, more strident domestic political conflict, damage to alliances and mutual security arrangements, and economic dislocation. These factors will fall more heavily on ground forces, since air and naval forces typically spend less time deployed in the combat theater between rotations, suffer fewer losses, and retain career personnel in higher numbers.

Viewed as a case study in the application of Clausewitzian thought, current military operations offer a vivid contrast to the wars fought in Afghanistan in 2001-02 and in Iraq in the spring of 2003. There, coalition military power could be directed against organized military forces operating under the control of regularly constituted political entities. Political objectives could be readily translated into military tasks directed against functioning state structures (“destroy the Taliban and deny al Qaeda refuge in Afghanistan; destroy the Iraqi military and topple Saddam’s regime”).

In the aftermath, the focus shifted to nation-building, a more amorphous and ambiguous undertaking with fuzzier military tasks. In Iraq, for example, there is no central locus of decisionmaking power against which military force can be applied. Large-scale combat operations are rare, and mili-

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tary force, while a key supporting effort, is focused on stabilizing conditions so that the main effort of political reconciliation and economic reconstruction can proceed. Resistance appears to be local and fragmented, directed by a loose collection of Sunni Baathist remnants, Shia religious zealots, foreign jihadists, and, increasingly, local tribal fighters seeking revenge for the incidental deaths of family and tribal members. Access to military supplies and to new recruits is enabled both by neighboring powers like Iran and Syria and by local religious and cultural sentiment.

In many ways the military problem in Iraq is harder today than it was during major combat operations. Only rarely can we expect to know in advance our enemy's intentions, location, and methods. In this sense, seizing and maintaining the initiative, at least tactically, is a difficult challenge.

Clausewitz was well aware of this environment, which he called “people's war.” We can be confident that he would be uncomfortable with open-ended and hard-to-define strategic objectives. However much we may scoff at classical notions of strategy, with their “unsophisticated” and “unnuanced” focus on destroying enemy armies, seizing enemy capitals, installing more pliable regimes, and cowing hostile populations, ignoring them has led to poor historical results. A close reading of *Vom Kriege* shows that Clausewitz did not neglect the nature of the problem so much as he cautioned against ventures which could not be thoroughly rationalized. Put another way, he recognized there are limits to the power of any state and that those limits must be carefully calculated before, and not after, the decision to go to war.

In Iraq, it may well be that American and coalition forces will destroy a critical mass of insurgents sufficient to collapse large-scale organized resistance, an outcome devoutly to be wished for. But if so, we are in a race against time. For the American Army and Marine Corps, and for our British and other coalition partners, the current level of commitment probably does not represent a sustainable steady state unless the forces available are considerably increased. If the security situation does not improve to permit major reductions in troop strength, eventually the strain will tell. At that point, the

voting publics of the coalition partners and their governments may face difficult choices about whether and how to proceed.¹⁵

These choices will be tempered by the knowledge that the homeland itself has now become a battleground. Open societies with heterogeneous populations make Western states particularly vulnerable to terrorist attack, always an option open to hostile states or the terrorist groups they harbor. And however professional, the armies of the West are not driven by religious or ideological zeal. That too can be a weapon—as the Americans and French learned in Indochina and as we see today in the Middle East.

The foregoing suggests that in future wars the United States and its Western allies will attempt to fight short, sharp campaigns with superior technology and overwhelming firepower delivered at standoff ranges, hoping to achieve a decisive military result quickly with few casualties. In contrast to the industrial or attrition-based strategies of the past, in future wars we will seek to destroy discrete targets leading to the collapse of key centers of gravity and overall system failure, rather than annihilating an opponent's military forces in the field. Our likely opponents have two options: to inflict high losses early in a conflict (most probably with weapons of mass destruction, perhaps delivered unconventionally) in an attempt to turn public opinion against the war; or to avoid direct military confrontation and draw the conflict out over time, perhaps in conjunction with terrorist attacks delivered against the homeland, to drain away American and European resolve.

In either case our enemies will not attempt to mirror our strengths and capabilities. Our airplanes and warships will not fight like systems, as in the past, but instead will serve as weapon platforms, either manned or unmanned, to deliver precision strikes against land targets. Those targets will increasingly be found under ground or in large urban areas, intermixed with civilian populations and cultural sites that hinder the use of standoff weapons.

The Future of War

Tragically, but inescapably, war remains a growth industry. Globalization and the development of international organizations notwithstanding, armed conflict between states has accelerated sharply since the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the creation of dozens of new, weak states, flooded the developing world with arms, and reignited simmering ethnic feuds throughout the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. Where bipolarity lent discipline to an otherwise anarchic system, its demise fanned the flames of war, abetted by the powerful impulse of fundamentalist Islam and an ever-growing gap between the prosperous nations of the West and the Pacific Rim and everyone else.

What does this mean for the West? First, it means that the United States and its European allies must retain the heart and stomach for conflict, however distasteful and unwanted. Their advanced economies, political leadership, and standards of living can and will be threatened. While challenged by well-organized and capable terrorist groups, the West must also face the states which arm, sponsor, or harbor them. Potentially threatening too are large, economically maturing powers like China, as well as politically fragile middleweights like Iran and North Korea, who possess very different worldviews, significant economic or military power, demonstrated antipathy to the West, and nuclear weapons.

Overshadowing the clash of political interests is an increasingly incendiary religious struggle between Islam and other major world religions. In the next century few things will matter more than the battle for the soul of Islam; should fundamentalist brands triumph and become mainstreamed, the destabilizing effects throughout the Islamic world and the community of nations itself will be almost incalculable. Given a congruence between instability in the Islamic arc, increasing access to weapons of mass destruction, and the presence of much of the world's energy resources there, the interests at stake for the West cannot be overstated.

Nevertheless, the future cannot be seen with perfect clarity. No government or state can see with precision the full panoply of future threats. In the time of kings a ruler's first duty was "to keep my own." For the democracies of the West, no public duty rises higher than to preserve the freedoms and institutions of democratic government and the people and territory they nourish. That duty will be as fully tested in the future as in the past.

In the West, the clear trend toward more technical approaches to warfare and smaller, volunteer forces in part reflects a distaste for the sacrifices and rigors of military service, a distaste which is endemic in wealthy states. If it continues, the shadows could well be lengthening for the West. It has happened before. As their empire declined, the Romans, abandoning their earlier traditions, hired barbarian armies, manned their legions with foreign recruits, and relaxed their exacting discipline. Successive waves of primitive but warlike tribes, pushed westward by the pressures of migratory populations and exhausted soil, battered and then overwhelmed the frontier.

The West will not fall to that fate in this century, but its standard of living and leading economic position in the world could be profoundly affected by military misadventure. Here there are dangers at both extremes. America and the West, as a cultural and strategic consortium, may decline through indifference to the effort, expense, and sacrifice of a competent national defense. Here the willingness of the citizenry to participate in the

common defense will be decisive. But we may also be weakened through open-ended, enervating military operations, or by fighting wars that do not command strong and sustained popular support.

Western societies are best served by armed forces that are respected as disciplined, capable, selfless institutions that do not unduly burden the state. Short, decisive wars fought for understandable and compelling reasons and in support of Western, democratic values can strengthen, not erode, our armed forces and military institutions. But the reverse—extended, indecisive conflicts fought for peripheral interests or vague objectives—can impose crushing financial burdens, seriously degrade military capability, and damage long-standing alliances and relationships. Democracies always have been uncomfortable with professional militaries. But Western values and strong economies are not enough.

Clausewitz would not be surprised at war's enduring persistence and ferocity. No less than in the past, the scourge of war remains with us, however ardent our desire for a better way. When we can, the sum of human history argues eloquently for recourses other than war. When we cannot, the potential consequences of defeat compel resolve. The sword still hangs in its scabbard, waiting for the next round. The battle will go on. And if we are "to keep our own," so must we.

NOTES

1. Cited in Christopher Bassford, "John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz," *War and History*, 1 (November 1994), 13.

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 75.

3. See T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* (New York: Brassey's, 1994).

4. Much ink has been spilled over what exactly Clausewitz said, or meant to say, on this point. The author inclines to the side of those who believe the most famous Clausewitzian dictum—"war is a continuation of politics by other means"—reflects the view that resort to war should be a rational decision undertaken in pursuit of rational ends. Here the linkage between political ends and military means is apparent. This is not to say, however, that it always is, or that Clausewitz believed so. See Bassford, p. 6.

5. See Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

6. See Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).

7. Clausewitz, p. 88.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

9. Attributed to Major General F. W. von Mellinthin, Chief of Staff of the German 48th Panzer Corps in Russia in World War II.

10. "In war the result is never final." Clausewitz, p. 80.

11. Winston Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1930).

12. Clausewitz, p. 89.

13. See Alan D. Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security*, 17 (Winter 1992), 59-90.

14. "The Chinese Communists fought for over 25 years, the Vietnamese over 30, the Sandinistas 18, the Afghans 10 years against the Soviets, the Chechens over 10 years, and the Palestinians over 25 years—with no end in sight. Even when the British won in Malaysia, it took 12 years." T. X. Hammes, "The Long Haul," *The Washington Post*, 1 April 2004, p. A31.

15. These choices might involve increases in troop strength, a return to conscription, higher military budgets, or even disengagement.