

**Clausewitz and Sun-Tzu on the Iraqi War 2003**  
1<sup>st</sup> writing assignment, Strategy and Policy

prepared by  
**Benedikt Wahler**  
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by Professor Alan J. Kuperman

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The Johns Hopkins University  
The Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies  
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Two classics of literature on strategy, Carl von Clausewitz' *On War* and *The Art of Warfare* by Sun-Tzu are often critically reexamined as to whether they still convey valuable, valid insights. This is also the purpose of this short paper, the occasion being the War with Iraq this spring. To this end, I will set out by examining central distinctions of both authors' theories with their implications for the event at hand, to then proceed to the comments they hold on the initial phase of combat and the ongoing post-war occupation. This should then allow us to conclude on their relative *utility* for a hypothetical ex ante analysis of this latest war.

Clausewitz has achieved lasting fame for his statement that "war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means."<sup>1</sup>(C605, also C87) From this instrumental notion of war (C607), he derives the demand to first be clear about the political purpose, intended to achieve by means of war, which in turn will determine the operational objectives, "prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required".(C579) Supposing that the destruction of weapons of mass destruction and bringing political change to a key country of the region were the true motivations for this war,<sup>2</sup> it is evident that a post-war occupation phase for screening the country and political and physical reconstruction are intrinsic military means to these political objectives. The destruction of the armed forces would not be enough. Accordingly, any planning for such a venture would thus have to take into account the initial phase of combat just as well as the military activities of the post-combat stage. At a more profound level, yet, the question arises whether the means of war are fit to achieve the desired political objectives, an assessment Clausewitz considers "the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."<sup>3</sup>(C88f) Can soldiers do the necessary work?

Sun Tzu, on the contrary, while establishing no guiding role for politics, centers on the disturbing effects that political interference in military matters can have, favoring that politicians keep out of this realm (S112f). He even suggests disobedience if military assessment of strategic positions contradicts explicit political orders(S150; S135). Moreover, in a diametrically opposed statement to Clausewitz' notion that in war additional means (those of force) are added to the toolbox of politics while not invalidating the continued use of traditional ones, (C605f) Sun Tzu advocates a total suspension of politics during war – "destroy all instruments of agreement, and forbid any further contact with enemy emissaries."<sup>4</sup>(S113)

<sup>1</sup> References to Clausewitz will be marked by a "C" before the page numbers, those to Sun Tzu with a "S"

<sup>2</sup> At least the latter was official US policy since Congress passed the *Iraq Liberation Act* in 1998

One advantage of a Clausewitzian pyramid of political purpose, strategic and tactical objectives is that this process of war plans can also yield measures of success. What are the yardsticks for achievement or non-achievement of the invasion and the continued presence of allied forces in Iraq? Without being clear about that, political leadership of the war effort is near to impossible. As “[t]he degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of political demands on either side”(C585), setting the political objectives straight will also permit an indication of cost and duration of the war. Given that the political demand of the US-led invasion implied an existential question not only for the top echelons of the regime but for the Sunni minority that derived its predominance from their rule, one can derive the conclusion that serious resistance from that side could be expected. Adding the vexing complexity that Sunni leaders will probably be needed in a future institutional set-up of Iraq to a not unimportant degree. Sun Tzu appears to take this stage of analysis as exogenous to war.

It is noteworthy that Sun Tzu promises full foresight on the outcome of the war based on a range of factors (*way/tao*, climate, terrain, command, regulation) that neither provide for the opponents’ goals nor specifically include the numerical relations between the opposing forces. (S103f) And later, he explicitly states that “[i]n war it is not numbers that give the advantage. (S144) As “one wins the war beforehand in the temple rehearsal of the battle” (S105, also S116), he uses images of nature for war that imply inevitability and irresistibility (S120f). The contingencies Sun Tzu mentions apply mostly to terrain and can – if considered – be avoided (S135f), whereas Clausewitz espouses a far more extensive understanding of contingencies when speaking of chance, friction and the fog of war as pervasive features of war (C85; C119-123). “[F]actors that distinguish real war from war on paper” (C119) and intervene in the smooth execution of war plans. During and even more so after the combat phase in Iraq there have been numerous hints that actual war was indeed not going as rehearsed on Pentagon paper. *Incomplete information* does not seem to have an adequate place in Sun Tzu’s thoughts on war, while forming an important point of reference for Clausewitz (C85). It is exactly as a counterweight for contingent circumstances that Clausewitz strongly favors numerical superiority (C194-197) and expects it to contain or even reduce the casualties incurred (C206). This then would echo the alleged preference for *overwhelming force* among the military while the

civilian leadership at the Pentagon supposedly set its hopes on smaller, more mobile and better equipped units.

The latter view went hand in hand with highly prizing intelligence, just as the Sun Tzu had concluded that “[i]ntelligence is of the essence in warfare – it is what the armies depend upon in their every move.”(S171) An attitude that his Prussian counterpart severely contradicts pointing to the limited practical value of intelligence as “[m]ost intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain.”(C117) However, whereas Clausewitz supposes a bias towards the most negative interpretation, (C117) the current case seems to have been suffered from too optimistic assumptions. It is not surprising, then, that only in Sun Tzu both the use of spies to get “foreknowledge”(S169) of “the designs of the enemy” (S161) as well as a concept of “[w]arfare [being] the art (*tao*) of deceit”(S104) assume a central position. Strategic misinformation of the enemy and adapting one’s action to the path least expected by the enemy are suggested while remaining confident that the enemy’s intentions can unequivocally be deduced (S141-144). Avoiding costly battles and rather attacking the strategies and alliances of the enemy are his strategic recommendations for a world where competing states make maintaining a strong army essential.(S111f)

Clausewitz is more conscientious of the interactive nature of deceit and consequently distrusts its usefulness in strategy. (C139f; C198-203) A doubt that at least in the strategic sphere is probably justified given the months of diplomatic and military preparation, size and visibility of troop deployment to the region, and an ultimatum announcing the initiation of combat, providing the Iraqi side with considerable pre-warning time. The Prussian analyst clearly favors the material, unambiguous and less contingent way of achieving victory: to seek out and destroy or occupy the enemy’s “center of gravity” (C595) for which “the defeat and destruction of his fighting forces remains the best way to begin.”(C596)

In the actual course of the recent war, the invasion was initiated with less than the full potential of allied forces (significant parts were on ships from Turkey) who then tried to advance as fast as possible on Baghdad the fall of which was presumably been expected to mean the end of the war, as it was considered something the regime could not afford to lose.(S162)

The consternation in the initial days of the attack at the unexpectedly strong resistance should be surprising. Certainly, the regime had not the “way (*tao*) (...) [that] brings the think-

ing of the people in line with their superiors” (S103) on its list of assets, particularly in the Shiite South where one might suspect inclinations towards the invading forces.(C525) But going beyond that to consider that no one would be interested in and willing to struggle for the regime and the ethnic predominance it entailed seems an unreasonably optimistic hypothesis. Even more so, given Clausewitz’ explicit warning not to underrate the patriotic spirit of the enemy troops.(C186) Particularly, not assuming a total absence of it when fighting in the enemy’s home country. Additionally, Iraqi officers had the learning effect from the 1991 experience of *shock and awe* to make up for lacking patriotic spirit by coercion at gunpoint.

Discounting the decision not to use the full numerical superiority which might have slowed the advance at one point, endangering thinly guarded lines of communication (C525, C527; C347)<sup>3</sup> would probably have found the appreciation of both authors. Clausewitz emphasizes the importance of maintaining momentum, advancing towards the center of gravity on the directest and fastest way.(624f) And also Sun Tzu counsels to “prize the quick victory, not the protracted engagement”(S108), bypassing obstacles that might draw one into combat (S107). Both base this judgment on an argument that Clausewitz describes with the “culminating point of the attack”(C528; cf. S107), inherent in the wear and tear to the invader and the strength of defense.

“The first principle is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest possible sources, and ideally to one alone.”(C617) If, however, one takes Clausewitz serious on this issue, it is questionable whether the decapitating strikes attempted would have sufficed or if rather than Baghdad, the entire *Sunni triangle* constitutes the center of gravity for the enemy at hand. Even more debatable, is the issue of allowing regular and irregular forces to dissipate back into the population against Clausewitz recommendation to secure effective victory by pursuit (C263) for the “direct annihilation of the enemy’s forces” (C228). In the eyes of Sun Tzu, however, these efforts to avoid further confrontations, buying over cities or the retreat of forces via spies and secret contacts to commanders would have to be catalogued as a full success and efficiency in command.(S111, S170)

From Clausewitz’ point of view, this initiation of occupation, by dissolving government and the army would dangerously parallel Napoleon’s bad example in Spain.(C350, C592) Be-

<sup>3</sup> Sun Tzu’s counsel to supply by plundering (S108, S153f) can hardly be seen as advisable in cases of *liberation*

yond suicide attacks, recurring demonstrations by fired soldiers and officers are the top indicating the iceberg below. Even more so given that the number of forces present has been reduced whereas he understands occupation as a particularly depleting factor on overall strength.(C527) Clausewitz would have warned that destruction of the enemy's regular armed forces and occupation of the country are two important, but not sufficient objectives until "the enemy's *will* has not been broken"(C90) With an increasing resistance in the capital and the *Sunni triangle*, it now is the Allies who suffer from being "tied to [their] position and [having] thereby presented the attacker with an objective".(C360, also S125) Although Sun Tzu does not treat insurgency, he and Clausewitz present the *guerilleros* with the same advice: "to have no form" (S126), to be "nebulous and elusive; its resistance should never materialize as a concrete body".(C481) Making the allied forces stretch their lines of defense, thinning them out to the point where "[t]o be prepared everywhere is to be weak everywhere"(S125) and allows insurgents to "nibble at the shell and around the edges".(C 481). In the case of a resistance movement, "the advantages of waiting"(C358) are the "salient feature and chief advantage". (C379) This and the hope for Western public opinion which can be quick to de-value the initial political objectives of the war.

This short analysis should have shown that Clausewitz' demand for perspicacious analysis of the war in its interdependent levels of political and military strategy would have been the preferable choice in advising the President in the run-up to the current war.<sup>4</sup> Setting purposes clear from the outset and deriving the according means to be applied is certainly a key task in that stadium as well as now. With that perspective it would be evident that "there is only one result that counts: *final victory*. Until then, nothing is decided, nothing won, and nothing lost." (C582) That is, in Iraq the mission still needs to be accomplished.

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<sup>4</sup> It is unclear what could have been C's contribution on the military-civilian penumbra of post-war occupation