



Clausewitz on Strategy

Inspiration and Insight From a Master Strategist

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Take-Aways

- Though business is not war, General Carl von Clausewitz's approach to strategic thinking has much to teach the modern executive.
- To learn from Clausewitz, focus on understanding his analytical method.
- Only start a war after first deciding what you want to achieve through it and in it.
- Using force to win a battle is tactics; using battles to win a war is strategy.
- A commander needs special genius: clarity of intellect, determination and courage.
- More than any other human activity, war is dominated by chance.
- Everything in war is simple, but it is also very difficult, thanks to the continuous friction that is the hallmark of all wars.
- Strategy is not an art or a science, because in war there is a living opponent who reacts to your efforts.
- Defense is an inherently stronger form of action than offense.
- War is a political act that arises from policy motives. Since war is an extension of policy, the means used to pursue it must never conflict with that policy.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	8	8	7

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why the writings of master 19th century strategist Carl von Clausewitz are relevant to today's business world; 2) The essentials of strategy and tactics, as laid out by Clausewitz and 3) How business is — and is not — like war.

Recommendation

This compilation, which condenses sections of Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz's major work, *On War*, is well worth reading, though dense and sometimes difficult to follow. Clausewitz, a fascinating thinker, approaches his subject with wit and clarity. By his own description, his real contribution isn't his analysis, but the analytical method he applies to problems. That method is essentially dialectical, where the leader considers opposite and extreme courses of action before determining what action to take. The text is interspersed with sidebars. Some elaborate on historical details cited by Clausewitz, some offer views of other Clausewitz experts, and some provide complementary viewpoints from people in different fields. The sidebars provide a welcome respite from Clausewitz's frequently complex ideas. Though the editors freely admit that business and war are different, and that mapping one to the other is a mistake, it takes great discipline to read this book without performing just that kind of mental mapping. After September 11, 2001, business-as-war metaphors seem overblown. Many in business have stopped looking at competition as a death struggle. Instead, they treat it as a mutual effort to foster growth in their sectors so everyone then benefits from the resulting synergies. *getAbstract.com* finds Clausewitz's approach clearly relevant to anyone struggling against an intelligent and resourceful opponent, in business, politics or government, as well as to those pondering ways to go to war.

Abstract

The Editors Explain

Few writers are as frequently cited, or as infrequently read, as Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), author of the dictum, "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means." His writing is so impenetrable that few read his books, yet his great work, *On War*, deserves fresh attention. It provides new ways to order your thinking in these disorderly times. In the adolescent field of business strategy, there is no better source than Clausewitz.

Let's be clear, though: business simply is not war. War has no "customer," and trying to map business to war patterns can lead to gross distortions. Yet business and war share the notion of strategy, Clausewitz' strength. He lived in times similar to ours in that business today is in an economic revolution, just as he experienced a military one. War, formerly a struggle between aristocratic rulers, is now a struggle among entire peoples. Then, as now, the old rules were rendered useless and the world was filled with uncertainty. Yet the true strategist welcomes such times. Uncertainty is an engine of transformation and the generator of new business opportunities. Clausewitz said little about technology, per se, but he recognized that the advantage conveyed by innovations lasts only until the enemy (or the competition) adopts them. In our turbulent times, businesspeople can learn new ways to prepare for competitive battles and wars by studying this major military strategist's beliefs and adapting his way of thinking to the context of business.

I. The Genius of Strategy

Every activity requires specific aptitudes of the mind and heart. Military genius is a harmonious combination of personal qualities, and there can be many different

"The more a commander demands of his soldiers, the more confident he can be that what he asks will be carried out."

"As long as I have not defeated my enemy, I must fear that he will defeat me; therefore, I am not in sole control; he controls me just as I control him."

“Friction is the concept that best approximates the distinction between real war and war on paper.”

“A rapid, powerful transition to the attack — the glinting sword of vengeance — is the most brilliant moment of the defense.”

“In war, more than anywhere else in the world, things turn out differently from what we expected, and look differently up close from how they looked at a distance.”

combinations. In war, more than other human activities, strategists must make room for chance, however, the ability to prepare for chance is not primarily intellectual. Instead, warriors are constantly confronted by the unexpected. Therefore, to survive, you must have the vision to find the light that leads to truth, even in moments of darkness; and the courage, the determination, to follow that light. The French call the first *coup l’oeil*. In war, you need a flash of genius to sift through all forces and relationships in play to find the right course. A warrior needs the courage to face personal danger and responsibility. This kind of courage is an act of the heart, not of the mind. Here, determination relieves doubts and saves you from procrastination.

Commanders need not be scholars, but they must understand the politics and issues behind their struggles and the interests of the people involved. They must know the strengths, characters and capabilities of the people they lead, and must be able to estimate how they will perform in various conditions. This knowledge requires a talented mind. This is why there has never been an outstanding commander who had a lesser mind.

Those who describe war as an “art” or “science” focus only on material issues; that is why these metaphors are irrelevant. As war evolved and became more complex, scholars tried to invent principles and theories to describe it, but none of the theories captured the infinite difficulties of real warfare. Theoretical concepts may be useful tools for gaining insight, but in battle, talent and genius aren’t bound by theory. War is a trinity, made up of 1) innate violence, which is subject to blind hatred and instinct; 2) the interplay of probability and chance, which frees the mind to act creatively and 3) its subordinate nature as a political instrument, which is subject to pure reason. A theory that ignores any of these is worthless.

II. The Theater of Strategy

War is closer to trade or politics than art, for both are conflicts of human interests and activities. War is set apart as an act of will against a person who reacts. One side must balance its efforts against its opponent’s ability to resist, as set by the opponent’s means and strength of will. War looks simple to those who’ve never experienced it. In fact, it is simple — but nonetheless very difficult. Infinite minor events create a friction that only those who’ve experienced war can grasp. The combination of this friction and the randomness of war has incalculable consequences. A good general must recognize this friction and never expect real-life operations to run precisely. Instead, generals must think in terms of probability. True, you try to leave as little to chance as possible, but that doesn’t mean the most certain course is best. Sometimes generals should follow the most daring path instead.

Intelligence means the information you have about your enemy. Much of the intelligence generals get in war is contradictory, dubious or simply wrong. Furthermore, people naturally believe bad news more readily than good. A commander must lean toward hope, not give in to fear. Generals must stay true to their inner convictions even as they’re battered by bad news. Seeing things correctly in war is difficult, and so matters often look very different from what was expected. This is one great difference between planning and execution. A commander needs bravery and ambition, plus experience with danger, to reach even ordinary goals.

III. Thinking Strategy

War planning means planning combat. But combat is the sum of complete, individual acts, which we call engagements. Planning the use of your forces in engagements is tactics; joining them together to achieve the war’s objective is strategy. See engagements as links in a chain, each leading to the next, so that a momentary advantage doesn’t turn to a later disadvantage.

“The average person does not respond to danger and responsibility with renewed intellectual vigor and a sense of liberation — quite the opposite.”

“Talent and genius act outside limited, artificial rules, and theory conflicts with reality.”

“Theory should educate the mind of the future commander, or rather guide him in his process of self-education, but it should not guide him in his process on the battlefield.”

“It sounds strange... But it takes much greater strength of will to make a key strategic decision than a tactical one.”

Battle is more the province of tactics than strategy. But strategy gives direction to battles and determines the plans for campaigns. Once a larger goal is clear, planning a strategy to reach it is easy, but it takes great clarity, confidence and character to stay with the plan amidst war’s jolts. Making strategic decisions is harder than making tactical ones. In tactics, the commander is caught up in the moment. Strategy offers time for deliberation, discussion and remorse. Thus, most generals get bogged down by fear when they should be acting.

In defense, you wait for the blow. Indeed, much of war is spent waiting. Sometimes it’s best to wait for the enemy’s attack, then respond with your attack at a better moment. Waiting is the hallmark of defense and its main advantage. Attack and defense lead to each other. Every defense leads to a means of attack. In any engagement, three critical things lead to victory: surprise, advantageous terrain and attack from several sides. The attacker has only some surprise and a multi-pronged attack in his favor; the defender alone has maximum surprise, varied attack and all the advantage of terrain. Attackers can generate surprise only by using their full forces; defenders can create surprise with the strength and form of their attacks.

The attacker has a positive purpose, conquest, while the defense has a negative goal: preservation. Yet paradoxically, defensive war is inherently stronger than offense. It is natural in war to start on defense and end on offense. If you expect the future to be better than the present, stay on defense. If you think the future is more promising for the enemy, then attack. The third (and most common) situation is when neither side has any strong expectation for the future. In that event, the political aggressor takes the offensive. After waiting, the defense counterattacks. If you have an advantage after the enemy’s attack, strike quickly. This transition to the attack is the vital element of defense.

Just as defense leads to counterattack, so an attack that does not lead to peace must end on defense. The great weakness is that after an attack, the aggressor is in a poor position for defense. Don’t attack a capable enemy who is in a good position. In defense, caution is the true genius, while attackers need boldness and confidence. The weaker the defender’s morale, the more audacious the attack should be. The only real advantage of attack is the ability to achieve some surprise, which can cause confusion among the enemy, shattering his courage. However, the friction of war tends to dilute the advantages of surprise attack. Surprise can succeed, with favorable circumstances, but it rarely yields much benefit.

Numerical superiority is probably the most important advantage a commander can have in battle, but the advantage must be large enough to offset all others. Thus, focus the largest number of troops possible at the decisive point in the battle. Do not divide your forces without an urgent reason. All forces must be available at once. Using more force can often reduce losses, so commanders who use their forces economically are on the surest path to victory. Your battle plan should also be simple enough for you to attack before the enemy can interrupt your plans. Attack the core of an enemy’s strength, unless some secondary target offers extraordinary benefits. Thus, when you draft a war plan, recognize the enemy’s center of power, then combine your forces against that center in a single major action.

Fighting is always interrupted by pauses, long or short. These pauses come when neither side wants anything positive. When one side chooses a new positive goal, acts to achieve it and meets resistance from the other side, there’s a tension of forces. A measure taken during a state of tension is more important, and yields greater results, than it would

“The defensive form of the conduct of war, then, is not an instantaneous shield but a shield formed by skillful blows.”

“In war, everything is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”

during a pause. Generals must recognize these states of equilibrium and tension, and then act accordingly. Often one side does not completely defeat the other, but instead a culminating moment occurs when one side reaches its main objective. This is a dangerous moment for the victor. If the overextended, exhausted victor overshoots the goal, the enemy often responds with a destructive counterattack. A commander must know when to halt the attack.

IV. The Virtues of Strategy

Moral forces are a vital topic in war. Any theory of war must acknowledge their power, but they are not easily defined or codified. In war, the main moral powers are the general’s talents, the army’s military skills and popular sentiment. When all armies seem similarly skilled, sentiment and the army’s excellence play a larger role.

Military virtues go beyond mere courage. Courage, while needed, must submit to a chain of command. Since the individual’s role in war can not be eliminated, an army needs *esprit de corps*, which gives it cohesion and crystallizes its skills. An excellent army is one that stays in order under fire, resists fear, stays obedient even in defeat, and remains confident in its generals. This military virtue is to the individual what the general’s genius is to the whole. This spirit comes only from many victories, or rigorous training. War is a composite of the battles fought by each soldier, and victory is the sum of their victories.

A commander’s virtues must include boldness, but as a general moves up the chain of command, boldness must be paired with a superior mind, so it doesn’t become blind emotion. Generals must have perseverance, so that they are not diverted by mistakes, misinformation and uncertainty. They must also have great self-control, a character that does not lose its balance in the face of the strongest passions.

V. Beyond Strategy

Only start a war if you intend to pursue both your immediate and your ultimate goals with full strength and effort. It is a serious means to a serious end. War always arises from a policy motive. It is the result of pulsating tensions that grow strong enough to burst into fighting, but it always remains under the control of a guiding intelligence. Therefore, war is always influenced by policy. It is, then, an extension of political will by other means. Those means must conform with the policy goal; they can never be separated from the ends.

About The Authors

A faculty member at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business, Tiha von Ghyczy is a fellow of The Strategy Institute of The Boston Consulting Group where Bolko von Oetinger is a Senior Vice President. Oetinger has been author and editor of numerous books and articles on strategy and innovation. Christopher Bassford, professor of strategy at the Naval War College in Washington, D.C., wrote *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America* and *The Spit-Shine Syndrome: Organizational Irrationality in the American Field Army*.

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