

Family and Future: Five Assignments for Future Leaders

U.S. Representative Ike Skelton

The Honorable Ike Skelton, U.S. House of Representatives, Democrat, Missouri, was scheduled as the graduation speaker for the Command and General Staff Officer Course of 2006. Official duties kept the congressman from attending the graduation, so he asked to share his prepared speech with a wider audience through this article in Military Review.—Editor

IN MAY, I was honored to be invited to speak to a distinguished group for the 125th Anniversary of the Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. On that occasion, I talked about the ancient Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu because I had been thinking about how our military approaches counterinsurgency and how we train future leaders to be able to respond to any challenge they might face.¹ I had just been reading LTG David Petraeus's article in *Military Review* and George Packer's articles on the efforts of COL H.R. McMaster and the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar.² I was very impressed with their approaches in Iraq to intelligence and leadership. When the College invited me back to give the graduation address, because I felt I had just given quite a history lesson, with tongue in cheek, I promised that the next time I came to Fort Leavenworth I would talk about Carl von Clausewitz.³

When I returned to the Capitol, I began to think seriously about what more field grade officers could learn from arguably the greatest military thinker of all time. Many of these officers have recently experienced combat in Afghanistan or Iraq, and all of them had just spent most of a year studying how to apply their studies and experience to national security challenges and opportunities, today and in the future. I knew that they did not expect to get another history lesson on their graduation day. Instead, they would be thinking, "I thought classes were over." I also knew that for these action-oriented people, a year in the classroom must sometimes feel like being in prison. I knew they would just want to get on with things.

While I wanted to congratulate them on completing a rigorous course of study, I also felt compelled to give them something meaningful that they could take with them as they faced even more challenging assignments, issues, and situations almost immediately. Although all I could give them were words, the words could embody ideas that might serve them well. Because I so strongly believe in lifelong education, I thought I would urge these young people who have voluntarily made a commitment to serve the Constitution and the people of this Nation to continue to study and think and learn about serious professional issues as they took on assignments of increasing authority and responsibility. So I decided that I wanted to talk to them about their families and the future. I knew it would surprise them, but I

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decided to give them five postgraduate assignments to guide their way.

Unfortunately, because I am the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, the debate in the House of Representatives on Iraq kept me from attending that graduation. So I wanted to share these thoughts with a wider audience.

I know the old saw, “If the military had wanted you to have a family, it would have issued you one.” But the leaders of today’s military recognize that we recruit Soldiers, but retain families. Leaders should never forget that their personnel have a family outside the military. More than ever before, with cellular phones and electronic mail, photographs, and video clips, Soldiers can have almost constant contact with their friends and family, no matter where they are in the world. As with most things in life, this can be either a positive or a problematic thing. This constant contact can be a great comfort or a source of worry. Most important, Soldiers’ performance can hinge on knowing that the military is taking care of their families while they are deployed. While our Nation often says thank you to our men and women in uniform, I encourage all military leaders, as well as all our citizens, to recognize the sacrifices military families make and to thank them as well.

But what about the families of the field grade officers? The officers might feel as if their branch of service is their family, but we know they would not have been able to achieve what they have in their profession without the support of family and friends. So, we and they should thank their husbands and wives or significant others; their grandparents and moms and dads, and children; and their close friends. These family members have all helped the Nation by sustaining these officers in their endeavors at school, on staff, and in the field. And all our military professionals should always remember that they belong to a family, a community, and a nation beyond the military.

Now I knew these officers might have thought, “I’ve read Clausewitz, and he never mentioned family.” So I wanted to remind them that it was only through Clausewitz’s wife, Marie, that his masterpiece *On War* survived.⁴ After his untimely death, she took the fragments of that masterwork and finished it so that generations of military students around the world would not only be able to study his observations of Napoleonic battles and

Revolution, but would also think about the essence of war and strategy beyond their own particular time and place. Were it not for his wife; were it not for their close and special relationship; were it not for her shared understanding of the importance of his military theories; were it not for the urging of their mutual friends; Clausewitz’s most significant insights might have been lost for all time.

In addition, Clausewitz recognized that militaries depended on the societies from which they came for both moral support and physical sustainment. He wrote that militaries are bound to the values and structures of their societies. But when militaries become disconnected from the people or lose the Nation’s support, they are bound to be defeated. So leaders must not forget that they and their Soldiers also embody this Nation—their larger family.

Beyond these considerations of family, as time passes, I appreciate the timelessness of Clausewitz’s thoughts on the art of war and strategy more and more. These ideas, distilled from history, his extensive and broad wartime experience, and his powerful intellect, will continue to be relevant in the future. And as officers graduate from field-grade-level professional military education institutions, I wanted to tell them in the starkest of terms, *This Nation does not have enough strategists*. So, the post-graduate assignments I would give them would challenge them to become master strategists. I think a review of Clausewitz’s ideas will help in this endeavor.

Most of us know that, even though many people quote Clausewitz, few have actually read his work. Even fewer understand what he was trying to do, so they misunderstand what he said. One who does understand him better than most is Peter Paret, the editor of the best English version of *On War*.⁵ Paret gets it because he knows that to understand Clausewitz’s ideas, you have to understand his historical context. Paret has studied both the history of ideas and the history of war.

During the Napoleonic Wars, there were other military experts who tried to devise better strategies and tactics in order to master military science. These thinkers, in the period of the Enlightenment, sought to master war through rational thought. Clausewitz was unique. He wanted to understand war itself. Also a child of the Enlightenment, he sought to understand war as a human phenomenon. He wanted to devise a theory about war’s structure,

its internal dynamic, its links with other elements of man's social existence. He and his mentor, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, analyzed the interdependence of military, social, and political changes brought about by the French Revolution.

Unique for his time, Clausewitz had broad experience in small-unit tactics, climactic battles, staff duties, and strategic planning. He became a reformer who helped modernize the Prussian army in ways that had huge social implications. This transformation, as in our time, was undertaken in the midst of fighting an asymmetric, revolutionary conflict, while preparing for other possible adversaries.

In the midst of this, Clausewitz decided that in order to devise a true theory of war, experience with the technologies and techniques of war and the study of history were necessary. But experience and study were not sufficient to bring true understanding or wisdom. One also had to explore many aspects of the world outside the military. His goal was not to distill timeless strategies or to master tactics. He really wanted to understand history in order to identify the essential elements of war and to understand how they functioned together.⁶ He reached for wisdom beyond knowledge.

Because Clausewitz thought strategy was an art rather than a science, he compared the study of war to the study of painting. One could study the history of painting and have all the right tools, but that would not enable one to master art. Great art could not be mechanically pursued or mass-produced. Outcomes were unpredictable, uncertain. Study was not important for memorizing techniques or mimicking others. Study and experience simply formed a foundation for one's own theories, one's own art, appropriate to one's own context.

So Clausewitz, rather than trying to find solutions to his generation's military and security challenges, hoped his work would stimulate the ideas and debates of others in the future. By this, each generation would move the ideas forward. Important to this perspective, Clausewitz was an idealist in the 19th century tradition, the tradition named for Friedrich Hegel, which posited that ideas move history. Clausewitz wrote about war as an "idea," and he used Hegel's dialectic to examine its nature. He juxtaposed total war and limited war as thesis and antithesis. He did not prefer or advocate for one or the other, he simply recognized that in contemplat-

ing them, one would reach a synthesis which would, of course, become the new thesis to argue against. So the first postgraduate assignment, after a bit of a break from studies, is to reread Clausewitz, with his historical context in mind.⁷

There were others who recognized that the late 18th century political and social revolutions had changed war.⁸ But they did not understand that change. As they tried, in the tradition of the day, to reduce war to applied mathematics, their systems were abstracted from reality and from history. Their definitions of tactics and strategy were bound by time and technology, using "within range of the cannon" and "out of range of the cannon" to denote the difference. In the pursuit of a science of warfare, they left out the things they could not measure—the human parts, like the morale of the soldiers, the psychology of the commander, and an assessment of the human enemy.

Clausewitz knew from his study of history and his combat experience that these were essential to any theory. He knew that military reforms would impact other aspects of human existence, society and the economy; he pushed for the officer corps to be based on merit rather than on nobility; and he opposed the arbitrary discipline and mind-numbing practices used on the enlisted force. He also criticized his society for regarding war as a matter for the army alone. In the political and diplomatic realm, he believed that the Prussian government allowed itself to be isolated from prospective allies and then gave the soldiers impossible tasks.

Partly because of his criticisms of the existing authorities, Clausewitz was not promoted. In fact, he and others resigned their commissions when the king surrendered territory to the French to stage their invasion of Russia. These resignations sent the revolutionary message that an officer's conscience took priority over his oath to the king. Clausewitz also designed a plan to raise provincial militias against the French—another act of revolutionary military and political importance in Prussia.

Later, when Clausewitz regained his commission, he was able to make significant contributions at the new Prussian war college, where he lectured on strategy and insurgency. He also put considerable brain power into the immediate needs, the intellectual, technical, organizational and political problems, of rebuilding a defeated army. At the same

time, Clausewitz was still committed to developing a theory of war. A theory would help his students develop their own ideas, drawing on their experience, a study of professional subjects, and an intense study of history. Their studies would not generate doctrine, rules, or laws of action. Clausewitz wrote, “While history may yield no formulae, it does provide an exercise for judgment.” His students should not memorize tactics and strategy. Instead Clausewitz sought to refine his students’ judgment for future leadership.

In addition to all this, Clausewitz continued his own studies. He attended lectures on science, on logic, and on ethics. He read books on mathematics, philosophy and aesthetics. He constantly read more history to test his ideas as they emerged. He knew his theory had to be comprehensive, it had to be logical, it had to represent reality, and it had to be historically defensible. It had to account for things that could not be measured. And it had to be flexible enough to be further refined. He hoped there would be people just like our field grade officers who would continue to refine his ideas through their experience and their own ideas to create new syntheses.

In his pursuit of theory, Clausewitz decided there were certain constants. These would be organizing principles for thinking about war and strategy. These constants were war’s social and political nature and the duality of war—its two forms, “total” and “limited.” Of course the latter consisted of two ends of a spectrum that would never be reached in reality. Absolute total war would be mutual suicide and therefore an end to policy rather than its continuation. And the ultimate in limited war would be a war not fought.

The long version of Clausewitz’s most famous quote is, “War is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means.” Our Nation is learning again that military actions cannot be abstracted from their political, diplomatic, economic, social or cultural contexts or consequences. This is true in fighting the Global War on Terrorism and an Iraqi insurgency. It is true in our diplomatic efforts to

sway Iran’s leadership and in convincing our allies to support nonproliferation. And it is true in debating the decision to send the National Guard to our southern border to stem illegal immigration.

We learn—repeatedly, it seems—that before taking action, we should know what we’re getting into. When we talk about the use of force or the threat of force, or when we use military forces for non-violent purposes, we should not imagine a bright line where political or diplomatic activity ceases. We cannot think that when diplomacy or policy fails, war or military operations begin, military victory is won, and then political and economic activity simply resumes. We must use all the instruments of national power in constant, simultaneous and parallel action in peacetime, and in war, to support our national security objectives. We have

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to recognize this timeless constant and move beyond military jointness to truly integrated interagency planning and operations. So the second postgraduate assignment is: Find and institute better ways of working with your counterparts in civilian agencies, including non-traditional partners, rather

than just proposing ways in which they can work better with you.

But what of war’s essential nature? Clausewitz wrote that war is a violent clash, a collision of two living forces. But, the paradox is that war’s violence must be disciplined and limited in order for it to express a political purpose in a rational, utilitarian manner. War’s violence must not obliterate the political purpose. Therefore, political leaders should control the conduct of war, but not displace soldiers in the planning and conduct of operations. Nor should political leaders ask the impossible of the military. At the same time, military leaders must remember that armed forces do not exist for their own sake. As Clausewitz noted, “There can be no question of a purely military evaluation of a great strategic issue, nor of a purely military scheme to solve it.”

So of what use is theory? It is not of any use if it does not account for war’s reality. So Clausewitz added concepts that he thought were essential parts

Five Postgraduate Assignments

1. Reread Clausewitz with his historical context in mind.
2. Find and institute better ways of working with your counterparts in civilian agencies, including non-traditional partners, rather than just proposing ways in which they can work better with you.
3. Think about how to better tie the means we use to the ends we seek, whether you are on staff or in combat.
4. No matter how much you want to be in the field, you must continue your education.
5. Our leaders, our officers, must honor their family and their Nation by speaking truth to power. We all must tell and live the truth as well as we can.

of real war. In history and his experience, war's timeless elements were *friction* and *chance*.

Friction is the sum total of all the impediments in war to achieving one's goals. It is all the errors, accidents, and technical and human difficulties that affect military decisions and actions. Friction cannot be planned out of operations or tactics with mathematical formulae. It cannot be eradicated with transformation through improved technology or science. Friction is in the very nature of war, and actually all human endeavors. In real war, Clausewitz observed, there is also always uncertainty. He said, "War is the province of chance. In no other sphere of human activity must such a margin be left for this intruder. It increases the uncertainty of every circumstance and deranges the course of events."

Since friction and chance could not be planned away or overcome by technology or better tactics, they would dominate war were it not for creative intellectual and emotional energy. One had to strive then to understand and exploit war's unquantifiable elements to best advantage. Clausewitz called this ability "genius." To him though, genius was not just in the exceptional individual, but also could be found in the abilities and feelings on which the behavior of ordinary people, including the lowest

ranking soldiers, was based. Clausewitz lived in the age of Napoleon, so this is significant. He said, "We cannot restrict our discussion to genius proper, as a superlative degree of talent . . . What we must do is survey all those gifts of mind and temperament that in combination bear on military activity. These, taken together, constitute the essence of military genius." It is the intellectual and psychological strengths of the commander and his subordinates; the morale, spirit, and self-confidence of the army; as well as the traits and values of whole societies as reflected in their soldiers, all taken together. Clausewitz believed that extraordinary originality, initiative, and creativity could be present in every human being; in each of us.

So, to what purpose should we put genius? Finally, we come to strategy. Many do not really know what it is—but I am sure it is not a plan on PowerPoint® slides. Strategy is the relationship between war's purpose, objective, and means. The political purpose defines the means, the degree of effort or force, and the extent of resources to be expended. These should determine the military objective. Since war is a clash of two forces, strategy must also account for the adversary's political and military purpose. We cannot assess these simply by mirror-imaging our own.

The ends and the means and our assessment of the enemy must always be connected. This is the essence of strategy. Clausewitz wrote, "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking." And he added, "No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it." Unfortunately, we have had to learn again, in Iraq and Afghanistan, that how we conduct military operations, and how our forces conduct themselves, have effects far beyond the battlefield, roads, checkpoints, or detention facility. They have strategic importance. Our leaders at every level are responsible for both operations and the discipline and conduct of their personnel; they must be held accountable for both.⁹

This is the reason why rules of engagement or rules for the use of force should not be considered a nuisance. They are not separate from war. They must

be part of the strategy. They must be constructed in a way that shows we understand the essence of war and the purpose of using military forces. They should prevent us from losing a war, despite winning all the battles. They protect us from losing the hearts of the people whom we seek to liberate, those whom we support in building democracy. They are meant to insure that we do not lose ourselves or betray the ideals of the people and the Nation we represent. So the third postgraduate assignment is: Think about how to better tie the means we use to the ends we seek, whether you are on staff or in combat. Never assume the connection; be conscious about establishing the relationship between the two.

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As I prepared these thoughts on Clausewitz, I reflected on the reason people prefer to get their ideas on war from Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and Jomini. Their works are relatively short, they are easy, they embody common sense, they give you the list or the formula, you could even fit them in your rucksack. But our military's profession is not easy, so I have a fourth postgraduate assignment for our field grade officers: No matter how much you want to be in the field, you must continue your education.

Clausewitz is a role model. Our officers must not shy away from the tough questions; they must keep their minds open when they ponder these. They must study history, not to find the "Holy Grail" of strategy, but to fully understand what strategy is and who we are as a Nation. They must strive for wisdom, rather than knowledge for its own sake. They should take a teaching assignment if they can. And, perhaps most important, they must mentor their subordinates to continue their education.

Finally, there's one last assignment. Our leaders, our officers, must honor their families and their Nation by speaking truth to power. We all must tell and live the truth as well as we can. Congressmen and others in leadership positions depend upon our officer corps for this. And, I would promise all, if they would be punished for telling the truth, those who

would punish them are not worthy of their loyalty.

If our officers maintain their integrity, their soldiers will fight for them as they fight for each other. As they trust their officers, their leaders should always remind them that they are also fighting for a larger purpose. The result will be that they will use better judgment and take right action to return home to their families with honor, rather than in shame.

We know our military officers fight for the young men and women in their charge, and they fight for their own families and this Nation and its ideals. We entrust them with this. They are given grave responsibility and significant authority. They must be accountable. They must remember that honorable ends cannot ever justify dishonorable means, because these two are not separate. Ends and means are inseparable parts of a whole, in ethics as well as in strategy. Our military officers must be able to look in the mirror each day and say, "I was honest with myself, my leaders, my Soldiers and my family; I acted with integrity today." And if sometimes, like the rest of us, they make a mistake, they must admit it and try their best to make it right. I have every bit of confidence that our field grade officers can do this, that they can complete the five assignments I want to give them.

I congratulate all our professional military education graduates on their achievements. We should all celebrate them at this time when they recommit to their profession and our Nation's security. I wish them all Godspeed as they and their families face the challenges of the future. **MR**

NOTES

1. Remarks of Congressman Ike Skelton, 1 May 2006. "The Next 125 Years –Celebrating the Past and Present While We Journey Back to the Future with Sun Tzu" on the occasion of the Command and General Staff College 125th Anniversary celebration, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

2. Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq," *Military Review* (Jan-Feb 2006), 2-12; George Packer, "Letter from Iraq: The Lesson of Tal Afar," <www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/060410fa_fact2>.

3. Based on a reading of "Clausewitz" by Peter Paret in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret, (Princeton, 1986), 186-213.

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, rev. ed. (Princeton, 1984).

5. *Ibid.*

6. Howard and Paret point out that it is telling that Clausewitz chose Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* as a model.

7. Howard and Paret write about this in an extensive discussion in their edition of *On War*, 1984. In addition, at the National War College at Fort Leslie J. McNair, Washington DC, Strategy instructors advise students to read the chapters of *On War* in the order that Clausewitz wrote them rather than the order in which he refined them, to better understand the evolution of his dialectical thinking as dialectic.

8. Among the 18th century revolutions were the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. These thinkers include the French officer Antoine-Henri Jomini and Dietrich von Bülow. John Shy "rehabilitates" Jomini in his essay in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 143-185.

9. On command responsibility see the Tokoyo Tribunals (1946-1948) and the Supreme Court decision, *In re Yamashita*, 327 U.S. 1, 11 (1946).