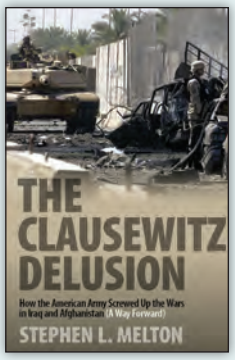

The Clausewitz Delusion: How the American Army Screwed Up the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (A Way Forward)
By Stephen L. Melton
Zenith Press, 2009
306 pp., $30
ISBN: 978–0–760–33713–4

Reviewed by
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Stephen L. Melton teaches in the Tactics Department at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). His book joins a number of other recent publications on the reigning philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz, including Jon T. Sumida's *Decoding Clausewitz* and Antulio J. Echevarria's *Clausewitz and Contemporary War.* Melton's purpose, though, is not to reinterpret Clausewitz but to use his masterpiece *On War* as the basis for criticizing the U.S. Army and American ("neoconservative") foreign policy (p. 3).

Of these three targets—Clausewitz, the Army, and foreign policy—Clausewitz gets the least amount of serious time. However, Melton's title is accurate insofar as his first criticism is directed at the "specious theories" of "a nineteenth-century German philosopher" (pp. 15, 18). Melton's rather superficial discussion and critique of Clausewitz are intrinsically linked to his criticism of what he sees as the U.S. Army's illogical and puzzling fascination with Clausewitz's ideas. Melton makes the same mistake that he in some sense is criticizing in the institutional Army: he conflates another theorist of war, Antoine-Henri Jomini, with Clausewitz and then dresses up his criticisms of what are actually Jominian concepts (for example, decisive points) in Clausewitzian language (p. 17). He then makes a second and greater error in conflation when he confuses Clausewitz's ideas in *On War* with the entire modern Prussian-German military tradition of short, decisive wars. The two are not interchangeable.

Finally, Melton attributes conceptual influences to Clausewitz that had nothing to do with the man or his writings. For example, he identifies the Army's embrace of the concept of operational art and then incorrectly blames Clausewitz as its progenitor (p. 17). To the contrary, operational art is a Soviet theoretical construct by V.K. Triandifilov, M.N. Tukhachevsky, and A.A. Svechin. The Army focused on operational art because of its doctrinal success as practiced by the Red Army against the presumably Clausewitzian Wehrmacht in World War II. Army intellectuals were studying the doctrine of their *most likely adversary* and found much in it of value, not because of a misguided fixation on Clausewitz. What a muddle.

Melton's next targets, already mentioned, are the Army's intellectual and senior leaders (who are not always the same people). Here the book makes some valid points, but for precisely the reason stated earlier—Clausewitz's words and concepts were misunderstood and misapplied. A common saying at CGSC goes, "They talk Clausewitz but they walk Jomini." Melton identifies the defensive nature of the Cold War and the U.S. defeat in Vietnam as having contributed in a negative way to the inclusion of mistaken "Clausewitzian" ideas into Army and joint doctrine and into the professional military education curriculum. Some of his evidence on this point is ludicrous. For example, he points to the 1,000 copies of *On War* in the CGSC library as prima facie evidence of the Army's obsession with Clausewitz. In fact, the library has as many copies as CGCS does students simply to save money on copyright costs for paper and rights to key passages; it is not a reflection of Clausewitz's domination of Army doctrine (p. 16). Affording student officers the opportunity to forgo buying *On War* will probably lessen the influence of Clausewitz, not increase it.

Melton recommends a different framework of analysis as a remedy for Clausewitzian/flawed thinking. It involves looking at war using very much the taxonomy described in *On War.* He is especially concerned with what he calls "offensive wars" and uses "governance" as a criterion for success. He then proceeds to look at America's military tradition through this lens, creating an entire taxonomy of his own for American wars and summarizing it in an extensive table (pp. 22–23). Much of this model focuses on the concept of attrition (as opposed to "neo-Clausewitzian" annihilation) (p. 68). This is all well and good, except it has already been done, and thoroughly, by another German theorist named Hans Delbruck. Other extended discussions of the U.S. Army as a strategic institution, such as Russell Weigley's *American Way of War* and Brian M. Linn's *Echoes of Battle*, are either mentioned in passing or missing from Melton's survey—contradictory evidence, perhaps?

The account is one of triumph and celebration of a successful American approach to war from colonial times to the Cold War—until the unfortunate rise of Clausewitzianism after Vietnam. Melton is trying to come to terms with how this approach could have gone so wrong in our own day, and he seems to be positing a new approach at the grand strategy level—a new exceptionalist American "way of war." However, his critiques of the Army institutionally, and of foreign policy more broadly, have already been done better—in Andrew Bacevich's several volumes, for example.

In other words, Melton has confused the cure for the disease, and the disease itself is better described elsewhere. What this equates to is a book whose main efforts are focused on military and foreign policy recommendations that the author presumes run counter to current trends. Paradoxically, these recommendations, and the methods used to achieve them, are well grounded in Clausewitzian principles. It is worth emphasizing just a couple of points of contact in the book with these principles: defense as the stronger form of war (pp. 72, 87, 211–213, 246), the utility of viewing war as the interaction and result of rational policy factors (pp. 115, 244), irrational and primordial forces such as nationalism and tribalism (pp. 72, 142), and the randomness and chaos in the sphere of combat (pp. 118, 158, 244).

Certainly, a superficial or reductionist reading of Clausewitz can cause damage; Melton is right to criticize the crazy taxonomy with respect to center of gravity that has been foisted upon the U.S. military through both Service and joint doctrine (p. 18). What is needed, however, is a more honest study of *On War*, not the implementation of an exceptionalist approach to war that has little utility given the commitments the United States has made and its position of global leadership. This book succeeds in igniting debate; however, it ultimately fails to convince or offer anything new or original. JFQ

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