



*Thoughts on War* by Phillip S. Meilinger.

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Former Air Force colonel and retired dean of the School of Advanced Airpower Studies Phillip Meilinger has written prolifically about the theory and history of airpower. *Thoughts on War* revisits common themes of his earlier work. It is pointless, he argues, to imagine that warfare reflects unchanging verities. Furthermore, the advent of airpower has fundamentally changed the traditional “boots on the ground” nature of warfare.

The four chapters in Part I, “Theories of War,” contain the weightiest reflections on war. The first of these, “Busting the Icon: Restoring Balance to the Influence of Clausewitz,” sets the tone for the rest. The Prussian philosopher of war (1780–1831) has long held an iconic status within the American military, despite the utter absence of contextual analysis of his signature work, *On War* (*Vom Kriege*). It is “a difficult read, partly because it has come down to us as a work in progress” (12). Of the book’s 125 chapters, Clausewitz himself completed, reviewed, and edited only the first chapter. The rest were compiled by other hands, notably those of his devoted wife, Marie, who believed her husband’s work should be printed “despite its unfinished status” and altered it “to ensure a more acceptable reception” (13). In the 1850s, anonymous German editors revised the original (now lost) manuscript of 1832. Shortly before his death, Clausewitz admitted he had “largely overlooked” two major themes that needed to be investigated: the dual nature of war (total vs. limited) and the inherently political nature of war (12–13).

Chapter 2 explores what Clausewitz meant in writing that war is “merely the continuation of politics.” That troublesome last word has been parsed in so many ways! Political commerce, political intercourse, political activity, politics, policy, political methods, diplomacy—which best expresses what Clausewitz really meant? (30) Given such ambiguity, it is too simplistic to put down wars that were patent foreign policy failures to politicians’ misapprehension of Clausewitz’s meaning. However one qualifies that nebulous word “politics,” you may “pick any side in those only to discover that “any and all of [the] belligerents thought they fulfilled Clausewitz’s requirements” (32). And, too, in the twenty-first century, the United States is engaged with enemies who “do not see war as an instrument of policy.” In today’s “forever wars,” jihadists are motivated chiefly by religion and culture: “They are not following the script of *On War*. They are not Clausewitzians” (40).

In chap. 3, “The Mutable Nature of War,” the author characterizes US military leaders (and military historians, too) as complacent disciples of Clausewitz, guilty of “equating land warfare, and specifically conventional battle as it was once practiced, with war” (43). Technology, he believes, has rendered such thinking obsolete: modern warfare eschews combat of the Western Front variety, having shifted the casualty burden onto civilian populations by means of airpower.

In chap. 4, “Starting with a Blank Sheet: Principles of War for a New Century,” Meilinger dismantles various early formulations of the principles of war by military theorists like Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779–1869) and J.F.C. Fuller (1878–1966), then identifies ten unobjectionable principles that matter in today’s aerospace realm. Buzzwords like “netcentricity” are invoked, and the

author's tenth principle—media awareness and initiative—indicates that the need to control the “narrative” early on is as essential to victory as more tangible factors like intelligence, mobility, or unity of command.

The chapters in Part II, “War through the Ages,” delve into key topics in need of further study. In chap. 5, “Second Fronts,” the author stipulates that the “indirect approach” (i.e., operations away from the main axis of combat) is most successful when it exploits air and naval superiority rather than boots on the ground. “Our experience in the Middle East over the last two decades is in contrast to the wisdom and economy of second front operations and their restraint” (85).

In chap. 6, “Decisive Victories,” Meilinger maintains that “Great victories are often of a negative variety ... assurance that the enemy cannot win ... [T]he victor therefore ensures his own survival” (87). He confesses “I shudder to make such a list” of decisive victories (89), knowing all too well that other knowledgeable military historians will second-guess his choices. Landmark battles left off his list include Cannae (216 BC) and Tannenberg (1914). His assertion that decisive victories should lead to “conclusive political objectives” (89) is a nod to the irrepressible Clausewitz.

Chapter 7, “Time in War,” concerns changes in the critical elements of speed and surprise in warfare, the hallmarks of great commanders throughout history. “This quest took on new vigor with the invention of the airplane” (113). The author adduces Rome’s deletion of Carthage (146 BC) only after three prolonged wars, while in 1945 Hiroshima was obliterated “instantaneously by one weapon.” This “conquest of time” (103) was a world-shattering event.

Chapter 8, “Jointness and the Norwegian Campaign,” examines a long-neglected episode in the Second World War. The German high command was famously dysfunctional throughout the Second World War. But at the operational/tactical level, its soldiers, sailors, and airmen instinctively cooperated to prevail against heavy odds. Meilinger stresses that, in Germany’s naval and ground operations, “Air superiority allowed the Luftwaffe to conduct interdiction, close air support, reconnaissance, resupply, and reinforcement with little interference” (123).

Part III, “American Military Experiences,” addresses (in six chapters) the military aspects of the American self-conception as a “city on a hill.” Chapter 9, “American Military Culture and Its Influence on Strategy,” discusses enduring themes as well as others long out of favor. Fear of standing armies and a national preference for isolationism, prevalent throughout the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, have faded from the scene. Massive mobilization of human and industrial resources to achieve annihilation of the enemy started with the Civil War and were fully on display in the two world wars, only to be scaled back to limited war after 1950. Measured use of military force proved, unsurprisingly, to be politically contentious; one thinks of Pres. Harry Truman and Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Korea, and Pres. Lyndon Johnson, Gen. William Westmoreland, and the “best and brightest” in Vietnam.

Each of the United States’ three military services has evolved parochial strategic concepts. A Clausewitzian Army still wants to put boots on the ground and close with the enemy. The Navy seeks maritime control of a planet whose oceans are far larger than its land masses. And the Air Force, the most technologically determined service, seeks to perfect precision strikes under an umbrella of air supremacy. As a consequence of such often incompatible priorities,

The US military today is far more attuned to the political, social, and cultural implications of its activities than ever before. It also relies more heavily on technology as a way to achieve objectives quickly and efficiently, with the least possible loss of life. (139)

In chap, 10, “Soldiers and Politics: Exposing a Myth,” the author dismisses any naïve belief that US military leadership is historically apolitical. Throughout America’s history, its generals have tried to elbow their way into high political office, often successfully.

Chapter 11 is an interesting case study of “unity of command” as practiced in the Pacific Theater during World War II. While historians typically highlight the innumerable command disputes of that campaign, Meilinger reminds us that, especially at the highest command levels, even in so vast and multifaceted a theater of operations, virtually all its subdivisions and every major operation featured unity of command.

Chapter 12, “Analysis, Intelligence, and Targeting in Strategic Air Operations,” examines how unanticipated difficulties complicated effective targeting by bombers before and during World War II. There was much trial and error, and the expected target-sets that would destroy Germany’s industrial economy remained elusive. But Meilinger is at pains to refute those who regard the Combined Bomber Offensive in Europe as a failure.

Chapter 13, “Determining the Effects of the Allied Air Offensive,” is aimed at skeptics of airpower. The Allied bomber generals never quite achieved what prewar theorists predicted, but the campaign had an undeniably devastating effect on German war-making potential. Doubters may consult the US Strategic Bombing Survey, that “overwhelming authority, ... too massive and detailed to refute” (207).

The fourteenth and final chapter, “Summation: The Emergence of a Paradigm,” begins with a harsh indictment: “The study of military history has largely been a study of land warfare” (208). This is a bit reductive, given the prominence of combined-arms warfare in much recent scholarship. In any case, Meilinger reviews the favorite Air Force success story of recent decades—Desert Storm (17 Jan.–28 Feb. 1991). This signature “big war” triumph came on the heels of the successful termination of the Cold War and featured the decisive role of coalition (mostly US) airpower.

The book concludes with a brief tour of current and possible future arenas of conflict: the Middle East and Africa. Meilinger believes US military involvement will range from peacekeeping missions to seemingly inescapable “forever wars,” however limited their goals. But what, precisely, is his emergent paradigm? He mostly ignores the US military’s increasing reliance on remotely piloted vehicles/drones and special operations forces using real-time intelligence and precision strikes. Meilinger’s failure to explore in any depth this obvious paradigm shift is disappointing. He leaves the reader hanging and his book closes not with a bang but a whimper.

Nevertheless, there is little else to criticize in these collected essays. In deconstructing Clausewitz, their author holds his own with the likes of Michael Howard and Peter Paret. With his skillful documentation of airpower as a “game changer” in twentieth-century warfare, Phillip Meilinger has performed an invaluable service for serious students of military history and theory.