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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

CLAUSEWITZ AND COUNTERTERRORISM:
THE RELEVANCE OF HIS THEORY TO POLICY OPTIONS AND FORCE DOCTRINE IN DEALING WITH TERRORIST ACTS

CORE COURSE 5602 ESSAY

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FUNDAMENTALS OF MILITARY THOUGHT AND STRATEGY
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. in no realm of conflict today is the asymmetry between American capability and sophistication on the one hand and the crude, even primitive, ability of an adversary to inflict pain on the other perhaps as salient or possibly portentous as with terrorism.

<div align="right">Bruce Hoffman[1]</div>

With the passing of the Cold War and superpower confrontation, the United States has become challenged anew by widespread low-level violence and conflict Of the types of conflict in this category, none is perhaps more vexing and frightening than international terrorism. Because of its furtive and random nature, international terrorism presents the US with unique problems in the use of force as a tool of policy Chief among these is how to sort out anger and revulsion from cool-headed response when dealing with terrorist acts On the one hand, traditional means of diplomacy may be difficult to employ against an enemy who prefers not to be seen, on the other, sophisticated weapons systems and the doctrines of force extant in the US armed forces may be of limited effectiveness against terrorism in general, even if public opinion demands a show of American power

Karl von Clausewitz wrote in the 19th century when international terrorist acts were few (there were occasional assassinations of political leaders) However, incorporated into his theory on war are principles that should guide selection of sensible policy options to deal with terrorism and help us choose a course that restrains our collective anger while choosing tools appropriate to the threat His theory suggests a framework for integrating the political, diplomatic and military means at our disposal in varying measure to address terrorist acts, and specifically how to begin developing a doctrine on use of force in responding to such acts.

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[1] Bruce Hoffman, "Responding to Terrorism Across the Technological Spectrum." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6, no 3 (1994) 367

This paper will explore those aspects of Clausewitz's theory that, I believe, are relevant to US counterrorist policy by examining the continuum of policy options ranging from response to retaliation to pre-emption. It will posit a thesis that an effective counterrorist policy is one that contains and marginalizes the impact of terrorist acts Applying the principle of proportionality, that is, calibrating the use of force (and other tools available to senior decision makers) in a strict, discriminating way to contain and drain terrorist organizations of their power, even if we cannot annihilate them, may be the optimal approach. This paper will begin by examining the characteristics of contemporary international terrorism It will then discuss principles of Clausewitzian theory that appear most relevant to the issue, as well as analyze the range of counterrorist policy options using those principles as a guide This paper will conclude with suggestions for a new force doctrine for counterterrorism

What is Terrorism? What are the Trends?

This essay focuses on terrorist acts perpetrated across borders as opposed to strictly domestic violence aimed at domestic institutions (e.g , guerrilla insurgencies, KKK, militias, etc). This distinction notwithstanding, all terrorist acts have common characteristics.

- They are acts of seeming random, unpredictable and indiscriminate violence against "innocents", carried out with stealth and intense, localized violence,[2]

- The randomness and stealth are intended to augment the relatively limited violence employed to achieve their objectives,

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[2] "What is Terrorism? ' *Economist,* March 2, 1996, 23-25

- Terrorist acts base their power on an ability to strike at will on any front of their choosing, their objective is to engender fear and undermine morale They seek to stimulate passionate reactions from their victims rather than rational responses

Terrorist groups tend to be relatively small organizations (often the military arm of a larger political movement) with no capital or territory to defend While they sometimes have allies (such as state-sponsored terrorism from Sudan, Syria, Libya and Iran), the actual alliances may be suspect and transitory. For this reason, it is sometimes difficult to predict that an attack on a state allegedly sponsoring terrorist groups (but does not admit doing so) will have the desired effect Terrorist groups often defend loosely articulated ideas and ideology by concentrating their limited means of deadly force against a superior foe [3] The durability of their power and its sustained use over time relies on the nature and intensity of response by those they attack. As we shall see below, often the sharper, more violent the response to a terrorist act, the more likely that such acts will be repeated at ever increasing levels of violence.

While these characteristics may make a terrorist act recognizable, they carry little predictive value about what to expect In this regard, studies by the Rand Corporation of patterns in international terrorism over the past few years are instructive Basically, the trend has been for ideological groups to be increasingly eclipsed by extremist religious organizations with little definable ideology other than violence against "infidels." Islamic extremism falls into this category. However, it is also worth noting that after a twenty year period (1968-1988) when there was a steady increase in the number of international terrorist incidents, the period 1988-1994 saw both the numbers of incidents and the

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[3] Ibid

numbers of fatalities decline sharply Whereas a decade ago, it was common for a terrorist

act to claim five or more victims, today about three-fourths of terrorist incidents claim two

or fewer victims Geographically, the focus of terrorist acts has shifted to the Middle East

from Asia and Latin America, with the target of such acts shifting dramatically from

diplomats, businessmen and military personnel, to citizens and tourists. Of all major

nationalities targeted for attack, the US is still the largest, although with only half the

fatalities of a decade ago. The means of attack, though, have remained fairly constant--

guns and bombs being the preferred methods Hijackings are slowly receding as a

preferred tactic Most significant, though, is the dramatic change in the roster of terrorist

groups claiming responsibility for attacks. Virtually none of the major Middle East, Asian

or European groups accounting for the plurality of incidents in the mid-1980s could claim

more than a handful of incidents in the mid-1990's This may tell us something about the

durability and cohesion of terrorist organizations (e g , Japanese Red Army faction and

Baader-Meinhoff, who were virtually absent from the scene in 1994) [4]

Clausewitz and how to think about Terrorism

Because Clausewitz wrote about conflict as driving itself to total war and

emphasized the principle of mass on mass force, it is easy to think his theories have little

relevance to low-level conflict After all, much of what he wrote about assumed attacks

on exterior lines (which terrorist groups do not have) and he deprecated surprise and

stealth as being tactical, not strategic devices Where centers of gravity are difficult to

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[4] See Bruce Hoffman and Karen Gardela, *The Rand Chronology of International Terrorism for 1988*
(Santa Monica Rand Corporation 1992), 83-87, and Bruce Hoffman and Donna Kim Hoffman "The
Rand-St. Andrews Chronology of International Terrorism. 1994." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no
4 (1995) 225-229

identify (if at all) and irrationality characterizes both the cause and conduct of conflict, we may think it a stretch to see any relevance between his approach to war and counterterrorism

However, three principles in Clausewitz are relevant to counterterrorist policy, including how and when to apply force. These are: war as the continuation of politics by other means, the principle of proportionality or being sure of the kind of war/conflict we are embarking on so that it is not turned into something alien to its nature; and the importance of moral will. Of course, one might point to other parts of Clausewitz's work to refute its relevance to counterterrorism policy, but it is important to remember that Clausewitz composed an eclectic treatise about how to think about conflict and its conduct. In that spirit, it is important to seek out what is relevant, not what is irrelevant

The first principle, "war is the continuation of policy by other means"[5], tells us that conflict is a means to a political end. Although he wrote about relations between governments, his basic principle that war is another tool to make the enemy do our will is applicable in conflicts involving non-sovereign entities as well. The idea that military and political leaders must collaborate to ensure that political objectives and military means remain congruent is critical in a terrorist situation where there is no territory to conquer, no capital to occupy and no population to subject. The assertion that "its character and scope should be determined on the basis of the political probabilities,"[6] and the imperative "not to take the first step without considering the last"[7] puts counterterrorist policy and

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[5] Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*, ed and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton Princeton University Press 1976) 75
[6] Ibid, p 584
[7] Ibid

strategy, in particular, at greater risk of miscalculation than conventional war planning.

Ends/means analysis is most critical when developing counterterrorist options, that is,

forceful response should not be viewed as the linear next step resulting from the failure of

diplomatic, political and economic tools to achieve the desired end-state Rather, force

may be an intermediate tool that leverages or restores the efficacy of the other tools As

Clausewitz says, "To discover how much of our resources must be mobilized for war, we

must first examine our political aim and that of the enemy "[8]

The second principle, proportionality, closely links to the first Clausewitz warned

about the problem of political and military objectives becoming disconnected "No one

starts a war without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war

and how he intends to conduct it."[9] Further, "Only if statesmen look to certain military

moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature do political decisions

influence operations for the worse."[10] Clausewitz continues.

> War is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the
> value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude
> and also duration Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political
> object the object must be renounced and peace must follow [11]

> Thus, the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the
> statesman must make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking,
> neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its
> nature. This is the first of all strategic questions [12]

> Here, Clausewitz is perhaps more relevant to US policy makers than to the

terrorist perpetrators themselves In the latter case, the enigma of their cause and conduct

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[8] Ibid , 585
[9] Ibid . 579
[10] Ibid , 508
[11] Ibid . 92
[12] Ibid , 88-89

is their source of power Attempts to evaluate their motivation and ideology in the

aftermath of a violent attack may create a smoke-screen making a proportional response

difficult to determine It may be more important for the US to evaluate its own political

objectives and the purposes for which it will employ force than to evaluate the goals of its

terrorist adversary

The third principle, moral factors, seems obvious Superiority in numbers and

technology have little relevance in terrorist conflict. Moral and psychological factors are

great force multipliers for the terrorist organization and detract from our ability to

respond As a force multiplier, moral will within a terrorist group is less internally

generated than it is fed by our response as successive rounds of attack and response

occur The challenge, as Clausewitz explains:

> In the dreadful presence of suffering and danger, emotion can easily overwhelm
> intellectual conviction, and in this psychological fog it is so hard to form clear and
> complete insights that changes of view become more understandable and
> excusable ...[13]

Boldness and clear vision rather than passion and anger are the frames of mind that

can ensure proper selection of options at both the strategic and operational levels in

dealing with terrorist acts As a recent study of Israeli responses to terrorism

demonstrates, rationality and predictability of response may be of greater value to

deterring and containing terrorism than responding in-kind with a more terrible, irrational

violent act aimed at a terrorist group.[14] There is a strong synergy between the concepts of

moral will and proportionality of response

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[13] Ibid , 108

[14] Bryan Brophy-Baermann and John A C Conybeare "Retaliating against Terrorism Rational
Expectations and the Optimality of Rules versus Discretion," *American Journal of Political Science* 38,
no 1 (1994) 196-21C

Counterrorist Policy Options: From Response to Pre-emption

The US political objectives in responding to terrorism should be to contain the ability of terrorist groups to act, and to marginalize the impact of their acts in order to remove them as political actors. We cannot annihilate terrorist organizations any more than we can annihilate the concept of terrorism, and it would be unwise to employ our resources (including force) to do so

Accepting containment and marginalization as our political objectives suggest a range of policy options from limited response to pre-emption, with the principle of proportionality being the primary criterion for selecting the appropriate option.

Limited response options should focus on immediate actions that are feasible, suitable and acceptable, both to our abilities and to domestic and international public opinion--e.g., the rescue of hostages. Force used in these situations is the most easily justified since the objective is limited and clear Domestic and international public opinion is also likely to be supportive, although it may depend upon perceptions whether the use of force has violated another nation's sovereignty. Its advantage, therefore, is that it is self-limiting and generally appropriate to the tactical and strategic offensive nature of our weapons systems.

Retaliation is often viewed as the "middle ground" response, fraught with both acceptable and unacceptable risks It is the arena where proportionality and means/ends congruency are most critical When considering retaliation decision-makers should remember that terrorist acts by themselves usually have limited political impact.[15] The nature and extent of that impact directly relate to how we as a nation define our vital

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[15] Walter Laqueur "Postmodern Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 1996) 29

national interests. Viewed this way, the option of retaliation becomes a flexible tool

Terrorist acts can be catalysts to larger conflict only when the political material is already

flammable [16] If we remember that terrorists are, in Michael Walzer's words. "pursuing

(their own brand) of war by political means,"[17] we can view retaliation in its broadest

application----that is, use of diplomatic, political, economic and military tools in

appropriate sequence and measure As the study on Israeli responses to terrorism referred

to earlier demonstrates, excessive retaliation will often backfire. fanning the flames of a

terrorist organization's cause and the enhancing its institutional stature and following.

Excessive retaliation can easily lead to what Clausewitz described as force

becoming detached from political objectives, compromising them and turning them into

something they were not intended to be Excessive force actually works to limit our

flexibility, and its consequences can subsume the political aim it purports to support Even

if force is not excessively applied, the problem with retaliation as a policy option is that it

may assume that a certain level of immoral or illegal action is justified to match or deter

the terrorist act That, as Micheael McClintock suggests, is an exercise in quantum

ethics [18] One may argue that success and speed will overcome moral concerns, but once

we head down that road our actions may limit or even obviate our ability later on to rely

on the tools of international law, economic sanctions and diplomacy to contain and

marginalize terrorist groups. This is because of changes in how our allies (and even the

US public) may see our actions as a government If force is employed, it must be clearly

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[16] Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism", 30

[17] Michael Walzer *Just and Unjust Wars A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York Basic Books 1992) 198

[18] Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft US Guerilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940-1990* (New York Pantheon Books, 1992) 424

subordinate to a political objective----not viewed as an act of revenge. In fact, lesser

application of force relative to the act perpetrated on us, and applied in a just manner,

would not likely detract from our political objective and could even enhance its

acceptability by allies and the public. The key to employing retaliation as a response is to

be "predictable" since unpredictability will impel terrorist groups to counteract with

greater levels of retribution. The latter is a war we cannot win As McClintlock asserts,

> .hunter-killer commando raids or assassinations that achieve minor objectives
> may well torpedo any reasonable expectation of winning over the people. The
> sphere of direct action can open the door to atrocity as policy, however selectively
> we implement it [19]

Pre-emption is the most dangerous option and one that we cannot justify except in

cases of obvious and immediate knowledge of a terrorist group possessing weapons of

mass destruction (WMD) and having the knowledge, the will and capacity to use them. In

this instance, use of military force is extremely effective (as in response), but must be more

surgical, driven by better intelligence and willing to bear the greater risks of death and

destruction that failure would imply [20] No matter what the rationale for preemptive use of

force (be it WMD, or knowledge where a terrorist leader may be hiding) part of the

political objective calculus must be that we are willing to live with the political fallout of

both success and failure. Neither success nor failure will deter or destroy a terrorist

organization's capacity to try it again On the other hand, there is evidence that states

which are likely to be the source of WMD may be reluctant to pass these means onto

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[19] Ibid , 425 434

[20] Barry R Schneider *Radical Responses to Radical Regimes Evaluating Preemptive Counter-Proliferation*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, McNair Paper 41 (Washington National Defense University, 1995) 21, 38

terrorist groups over which it may have limited long-term control [21] Such states may also

not want to risk US reprisals.

Toward a new Force Doctrine for Counterterrorism

Considering the above discussion, I offer four principles that should guide the use

of force as a tool of US counterterrorism policy, applying Clausewitz's principles of

proportionality and the primacy of political objectives

1. The use of force should assume that it will not result in a counter-force

response greater than that which we employ It should be clear why force is necessary to

make political and diplomatic measures more effective, not substitute for them. In this

regard, we should consider the use of force only when vital national interests are at stake

When important or major interests are at stake, the choice to use force is more difficult

and, likewise, the issue of proportionality more critical Thus, defining what type of

interest we are defending is the first step

2 Once there is a decision to use force, its application must be dispassionate and

controlled, its rapid success imperative, and its end-state clearly defined to specify what

constitutes a successful operation These conditions are also essential for sustaining

domestic and international support. Even when all these conditions are met, as Colin

Powell reminds us, military strategists must accept that a successful operation may not be

sufficient to ensure a long-term solution to the problem [22]

3. Maximizing the use of proxies (other states' police forces, groups linked to or

competitive with terrorist groups, etc) as a means to contain and deter terrorist acts can

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[21] Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism", 31
[22] See discussion of the Powell Doctrine in Charles A Stevenson, 'The Evolving Clinton Doctrine on the Use of Force", in *Armed Forces & Society* 22, no 4 (1996) 517

be an effective indirect application of force. When doing this, however, we must be careful not to advocate measures that would not pass tests of international law, our own legal principles or a general sense of public international morality. The use of stealth and secrecy need not imply immorality or illegality.

4. In rare instances where we employ US special forces in direct operations, commanders should give specific guidance as to types and actual use of force appropriate to the mission. Use of strategic weapons systems will be largely irrelevant, except where we can use these assets for transport of men and materiel and gathering of intelligence Planning for tactical offense is essential, but with heavy reliance on limited destruction and the use of human assets We must recognize that Clausewitz's "fog and friction" dictum comes into play *in extremis* when we use US forces in such volatile circumstances For that reason we must be willing to live with both the successes and mistakes when operations proceed along unpredicted paths.

Conclusion

Many observers believe the 1990's is witnessing a change in the nature of terrorist organizations, with a trend away from state-sponsored, ideological acts to ethnic-traditional-separatist acts. However, as Hoffman observes, the methods terrorists use have remained remarkably constant: a limited arsenal (guns and bombs) conservatively applied to create a maximum of terror with a minimum of destruction.[23] Terrorists recognize that success of an operation dictates modesty of goals. Thus, they will avoid hardened targets and seek softer ones. These trends support the primacy of political,

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[23] Bruce Hoffman, "Responding to Terrorism Across the Technological Spectrum", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6, no 3 (1994) 367

counter-intelligence, technological, diplomatic and economic tools over force in containing and deterring terrorism

Still, the emergence of religious terrorism whose primary aim goes no further than perpetrating a violent act, and its access to sophisticated on-the-shelf technology, could erode some of the self-imposed constraints of secular, political terrorist movements, such as the IRA. The propensity for increased lethality would be great, particularly with no state allies to restrain them. In such a circumstance, it is difficult to know how to employ the mix of tools available to preserve the Clausewitzian principle of proportionality and serve our objective of containing not stoking terrorism   That is the core of the debate within US policy circles at this very moment.[24]

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[24] See David B. Ottaway "U S Considers Slugging it Out with International Terrorists " *Washington Post*, October 17, 1996, p A32

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