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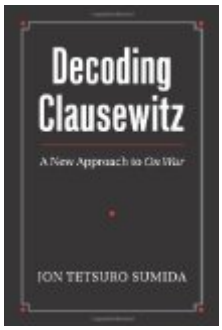
Jon Tetsuro Sumida. *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War (Modern War Studies).* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. xix + 234 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1616-9.



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Carl von Clausewitz's mammoth *On War*, published posthumously by his widow in 1832, is one of those books that is more widely known than read, let alone understood. Running to several hundred pages and including chapters on abstruse subjects such as the defense of forests and swamps, *On War* can be a hard slog. Nevertheless, Clausewitz's book continues to attract and to perplex readers. Jon Tetsuro Sumida has written a work that he hopes will "establish a viable point of departure for intelligent reading of this great work by ordinary civilians, military professionals, and serious scholars" (p. 188). Sumida offers an original interpretation of Clausewitz that decenters what has traditionally attracted attention, namely the famous dictum that war is the continuation of policy by other means. Sumida instead focuses on what he sees as two more important aspects of *On War* that have hitherto been largely ignored. First, Sumida insists that Clausewitz aimed to create "a theory of practice" (p. 2) of how one learns to command in war, not a theory of the phenomenon of war. That is, *On War*, in Sumida's reading, did not lay out a set of maxims on how to fight a war but rather "proposed a novel form of studying the conduct of war" (p. 176). Second, Sumida emphasizes that Clausewitz's work is a sustained argument in support of the view that "the defense is the stronger form of war" (p. 188). Unlike most readers of *On War*, Sumida believes that Clausewitz substantially completed the work before his death and it thus represents a coherent statement of a sophisticated thinker's ideas. *Decoding Clausewitz* argues for the continuing relevance of *On War* to contemporary educators, strategists, and the general public.

Although Sumida begins conventionally with an introduction that spells out his argument, his book has an unusual structure and approach. The first chapter analyzes the ways in which three thinkers read and misread Clausewitz's *On War* for their own purposes. Sumida first considers Clausewitz's contemporary rival theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini's critique before moving to the British naval historian Julian Stafford Corbett, who engaged with Clausewitz's ideas as he re-

counted British naval operations and formulated principles of naval strategy. Although it is unclear why these two figures deserve the attention they get from Sumida among the many commentators on Clausewitz, the case is stronger for the third reader, Basil Liddell Hart. Reading Clausewitz from a perspective shaped by the First World War, Liddell Hart blamed adherence by generals such as Alfred von Schlieffen and Ferdinand Foch to only partially understood Clausewitzian principles for the slaughter. Liddell Hart shows that readers' interpretations of *On War,* especially given the complexity and size of the book, can be as powerfully shaped by their own priorities as by Clausewitz's sometimes fairly obscure intended meaning.

In the next chapter, Sumida considers the scholarly analyses of Clausewitz by three later writers, Raymond Aron, Peter Paret, and W. B. Gallie. Sumida then recounts the historical context in which Clausewitz developed his ideas, describing Clausewitz's experiences in the Napoleonic Wars, especially the Prussian defeat at Jena and Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia in 1812, both of which made a deep impression on Clausewitz's thought. This historical exploration of Clausewitz's experiences is not original, but it amply demonstrates how he developed a concern with military education and a profound appreciation for the advantages of defensive strategies.

Sumida's analysis takes an idiosyncratic turn with a consideration of how some of the same issues that Clausewitz wrestled with in *On War* occupied such divergent subsequent thinkers as Charles Peirce, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and R. G. Collingwood. Sumida states that just as Clausewitz aimed to illuminate the "psychology of supreme command," Peirce, Wittgenstein, and Collingwood subsequently "focused on the nature of man as an actor in a social universe" (p. 112). The links between Clausewitz and these later thinkers, none of whom concerned themselves with military strategy, appear fairly tenuous, however, and do not offer any interpretive benefits in this philosophical detour. When Sumida next follows the lead of the historian Alan Beyerchen in considering Clausewitz's views in light of chaos theory, the intentions of Clausewitz in his text are not significantly illuminated.

Sumida closes his third chapter by pointing to the work of cognitive scientist Guy Claxton as support for Clausewitz's ideas on the importance of intuition in military genius. In *On War*, Clausewitz claimed that the successful general must act on the basis of instinct and intuition in forming an instantaneous grasp of any situation. Sumida finds validation of that view in Claxton's research, which claims that the seat of real wisdom, the ability to make difficult decisions on the basis of fragmentary evidence, is to be found in the "undermind," the realm of the "intelligent unconscious," which produces intuition (p. 118). The training of military leadership, Sumida suggests, thus entails the development of "a person's unconscious mind by having him grapple with the emotional challenge of having to formulate action while in a state of extreme doubt and in spite of fear of failure" (p. 120). Exactly how this process is supposed to work is fairly hazy. It is enough to produce some anxiety about whether it would be wise to train military commanders to trust their own intuition when confronted with difficult questions of strategy.

The real meat of Sumida's analysis comes in the book's fourth chapter, where he provides a close reading of *On War*, proceeding in detail through Books 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8. Sumida discerns in Clausewitz's writing a central concern with fostering the growth of military genius in a commander. Clausewitz believed that the most fruitful mthod of military education was to engage in "historical reenactment of strategic and tactical decision-making experience, which is to be followed by reflection on that experience" (p. 136). Sumida, following Clausewitz, believes that the student of war can approximate the experience of prior

commanders through careful study of history and the application of theory. *On War*, in Sumida's reading, thus does not offer prescriptions covering every aspect of war that a commander might face, but suggests a method by which a commander could prepare to make the sort of decisions faced in war. Sumida acknowledges that Clausewitz did not provide the clearest exposition of his understanding of the role of "historical reenactment" (p. 184) in nurturing the development of military genius.

The second principal theme that Sumida draws from *On War* is Clausewitz's argument that "the defense is a stronger form of war than the attack" (p. 1). There is some inconsistency between Sumida's first point, that Clausewitz did not intend to offer "an explanation of the general dynamics of armed conflict" (p. 1), and his highlighting of Clausewitz's argument that defense was generally more advantageous than offense, which looks very much like a claim about the nature of war. In an interpretive move that is likely to resonate with many readers today, Sumida stresses that Clausewitz discerned that part of the strength of defensive war lies in the opportunities it affords to engage in popular insurrection and guerrilla warfare. Clausewitz, according to Sumida, regarded the defender as less subject to political considerations in the conduct of hostilities than the attacker. Accordingly, if a defender can wait out an attacker, political considerations will tend to undermine the attacking power's willingness to continue a campaign on the defender's territory. The longer the campaign, the more difficult it becomes for the attacker to sustain an offensive policy. Effective defensive action involves "the interplay between military performance and a variety of internal and external political dynamics" (p. 180). Sumida believes that these advantages of fighting defensively were "probably what Clausewitz had foremost in his mind when he stated that 'war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means'" (p. 180). Sumida's interpretation thus emphasizes Clausewitz's teachings on the virtues of defensive strategies, subordinating the dictum about war and policy to a supporting prop for that argument.

The popular audience that Sumida hopes to enlighten likely will be most struck by the book's stress on the difficulties even a very powerful attacking state faces in sustaining a war against a patient defender willing to engage in guerrilla warfare. Sumida's idiosyncratic approach and the challenging quality of the analysis, however, present formidable obstacles to non-specialists, including undergraduates, trying to follow him to that conclusion. When, late in the book, Sumida cites the examples of Vietnam and Afghanistan as conflicts that illustrate the soundness of Clausewitz's teachings, those cases do as much to illuminate the contemporary context informing Sumida's reading as they do to bolster Clausewitz's arguments. *Decoding Clausewitz* does little to deepen our understanding of the historical context of Clausewitz's book, but it certainly offers an innovative interpretation, one that scholars of *On War* will need to consider.

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