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Phillip S. Meilinger’s recent collection of essays, *Thoughts on War*, offers an unusually coherent critique of the Western—in particular the American—way of war, and it leverages Meilinger’s seasoned expertise in professional military education to offer recommendations for a new way forward. For those who grapple with the changes in the character and nature of modern war, it is a useful and thought-provoking read, challenging key assumptions.

As a retired USAF colonel and former dean of the School for Advanced Airpower Studies at Air University, and as professor at the Naval War College and the Air Force Academy—not to mention Pentagon and industry experience—Meilinger has spent a lifetime grappling with the nexus between theory of war and its practice. The fourteen essays here have largely appeared in abbreviated form in specialist publications such as *Joint Force Quarterly* and the *Air and Space Journal*. The book afforded him the opportunity to delve into topics he had addressed over the past twenty years in more detail but more importantly, he used the opportunity to select, revise, and expand essays that fit a coherent theme—how changes in the nature and practice of warfare necessitate our moving beyond Clausewitzian, attritional, land warfare-centric ideas about war to embrace what is new.

There is a sense of urgency in Meilinger’s text, a sense that we are on the edge of a technological transformation, that the old ways of thinking that sufficed—however correct or distorted—will not serve us well in the new age. Technology is changing fast.

As Meilinger is an unapologetic advocate for airpower and critic of the US Army, Army officers will find much they will object to. Not only does Meilinger take on the patron saint of land warfare, the nineteenth-century Prussian Karl von Clausewitz, but he attacks also notions that seem rooted in the “battle-centric” view of war, where “boots on the ground are what war is all about” (p. 43). This seems to accord with both Chinese and Russian approaches to warfare, where the idea of conflict has been expanded to include in particular informational and economic lines of effort, as well as diplomatic, in addition to the more purely military.

Meilinger opens provocatively with “Busting the Icon: Restoring Balance to the Influence of Clausewitz.” Within professional military education circles, the debates that surround Clausewitz are titanic, and Meilinger shows no lack of courage wading into shark- and peer-infested waters, boldly challenging even aspects of the accepted English translation by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. His purpose in challenging the central place
Clausewitz holds in Western military thought is telling: “I fear the average American ground officer still believes that the key to war is a major battle, and that such engagements are both necessary and desirable” (p. 21). Indeed, while he later defends the concept of the “decisive battle,” it is with the caveat that the result must be durable and irreversible—hardly the stuff of most battles exercised in most land domain officer training. He argues not so much that Clausewitz is no longer useful in the era of operations against the jihadi, but rather that Clausewitz is selectively read and misunderstood, that he had a far more nuanced notion of war than the battle-centric view he is often credited with, but Clausewitz still provides ample fodder to support a battle-centric viewpoint.

In “Is War an Instrument of Policy?” and “The Mutable Nature of War,” the author takes on cherished ideas about Clausewitz’s war theories. If casual students of war know one Clausewitzian tenet, it is that “war is an instrument of policy [or politics] by other means,” variously phrased in the several translations. Meilinger is hardly shy in taking on this most sacred tenet, observing that “for much of the world and for much of its history, ‘policy’—however one defines it—was not the prime motive for going to war. To most humans over the past 3,000 years, war has been a distinctly biological or cultural phenomenon” (p. 34) and “in warrior societies—Cossacks, Samurai, Vikings, and Plains Indians to name some—war was a virtual constant that continued from generation to generation. Thus, the Clausewitzian aphorism regarding war being a political instrument is a modern, Western phenomenon that is out of place in many societies” (p. 38).

In the second essay, he provocatively notes that “where the above generals and historians most seriously err is in equating land warfare, and specifically conventional battle as it once practiced, with war. This reflects both institutional bias as well as downplaying the role of technology” (p. 43). To be sure, over the last twenty years in particular, with CENTCOM taking the leading role, the US Army has taken an outsized role in the study and conduct of war. However, as Meilinger suggests, it may be time for a critical reevaluation of this human, service, and theater-based perspective, given the threshold we find ourselves upon with ubiquitous sensor omnipresence; quantum, cloud, and edge computing; big data and machine learning—all of which compress decision time and may even shape perception in entirely new ways.

“Second Fronts: Success, Failures, and Implications” is a clear response to the “long wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan, an appeal through historical analysis to avoid potentially costly and debilitating ground deployments in favor of a multidomain approach that leverages air and sea. This essay will challenge land component thinkers, who often argue that only land occupation is decisive. Meilinger challenges this notion, arguing that “the dominant reason for opening a second front is to avoid enemy strength” (p. 81). This piece would make an excellent concurrent read along with the work of Basil Liddell Hart, who, as an interwar thinker of renown, reinjected the concept of the indirect approach into Western military thought in response to World War I’s carnage on the western front. Similarly, Meilinger seems to respond to Iraq and Afghanistan, concluding the short section with the idea, “we should take a page from the successful second front operations of the past: we should maximize the attributes of our sea and air forces that can project enormous but discrete power over great distances while doing so at a relatively low cost and considerably less risk” (p. 86).

This idea of multiple fronts placing the enemy on the horn of a dilemma is continued later in the book with “Unity of Command in the Pacific during World War II,” a short piece that challenges the oft-heard assertion that “unity of command” would have brought the Pacific war to a quicker conclusion. Instead, Meilinger concludes—per-
haps provocatively—that “indecision became the key to flexibility. Because US political and military leaders refused to decide on a supreme commander in the vast Pacific region, they unwittingly introduced enormous flexibility into Allied planning—and consternation into Japanese defensive problems” (p. 165). Thus, “in such a view, redundancy is the true American way of war.” It is an interesting notion; rather than decide upon investing in battleships or the new aircraft carriers in the interwar period, the United States built both, maintaining flexibility. By building a variety of tactical aircraft during the 1980s, the F-15, the F-16, and the A-10, air component commanders had similar flexibility in air missions. The United States’ enormous resource advantage is thus translated into operational flexibility. This short piece offers a great deal of bang for the buck.

In “Decisive Battles and What They Mean,” Meilinger puts up a spirited and considered defense of the concept of “decisive” battles, an idea challenged by many in today’s field of military history. For Meilinger, the term “decisive battle” is overused, but it applies when certain criteria are met: the battle “achieves one’s goals” and the “victory [is not] reversible except in the long term,” (e.g., Cannae). This time factor, the durability of the victory or better peace won, is for Meilinger a determinant point. After establishing his thesis in a few introductory pages, he goes on to survey eleven key battles in support of his point. The essay as produced here could be extremely useful in a classroom discussion of the utility of battle, since the United States in particular has been often accused of being battle-centric in its view on warfare.[1]

In “Time in War,” the author argues, primarily though not exclusively from the air perspective, that a deeper understanding of time’s role in war is crucial. He notes that it is speed that makes time important, because “speed often grants surprise, which contains both physical and psychological elements, and most would argue the psychological impact is more powerful” (p. 111). He notes also that time contributes importantly to the concepts of flexibility and mobility, concluding that “time has been a key factor in war since antiquity, and commanders have repeatedly tried to harness it to their advantage. Great commanders were those most adept at conquering time” (p. 113). While it is a slam dunk to discuss time’s importance in war, it remains a slippery concept in theory as well as practice; John Boyd famously shifted America’s operational emphasis from mass to tempo, while Dr. Jeffrey M. Reilly has seen time as a dimension of war, affecting all domains. But some of our opponents view time differently; insurgents famously argue that they need only to remain alive once an expeditionary force leaves, placing them outside the force’s OODA (observe, orient, decide, act) loop, while China as a near-peer competitor/opponent tends to consider time on a longer scale than do corresponding American planners and strategists. Meilinger’s contribution to the time discussion will hopefully awaken more defense thinkers to the concept’s importance, rather than taking it for granted, as is often the case.

“Soldiers and Politics: Exposing a Myth” challenges the current cultural belief that, traditionally and historically, American officers eschewed and remained apart from politics. While he notes that “theater commanders today have no more power than did Winfield Scott in Mexico in 1847,” he also notes that “it may be true that such involvement is no longer desirable” (p. 158). But he provides copious historical examples illustrating that, as a matter of history, this has only recently become the case.

In the last two essays, Meilinger deals with the bombing aspect of airpower, a subject of some import to students at Air University, where he long taught. Surveying mainly the World War II European bombing effort in “Analysis, Intelligence and Targeting in Strategic Air Operations,” he concludes that “air strategy remains an argument over targeting” (p. 184), and he illuminates not
only the difficulties present in the campaigns to bring down the Nazi regime, but some similar issues in the wake of the war. He notes that precision munitions have largely solved the targeting issue, but “complex challenges remain: the need for adequate intelligence and cultural sensitivity regarding adversaries and the need for simulations that adequately account for cognitive, cultural, political, and social factors” (p. 185). Meilinger’s points here echo similar calls for cultural understanding in our “long wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan, but if he is right, the need remains even in a near-peer environment.

Meilinger’s Thoughts on War is a useful compendium of challenging ideas, especially for military and policy professionals. His ideas are articulated for graduate-level consumption, and they never fail to provoke that most precious and rare commodity, critical thought.

Note

[1]. See Adrian R. Lewis, The American Culture of War (New York: Routledge, 2007), 22, for a useful summary to pair with Meilinger’s work.

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