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What Happened to Clausewitz? The Case Against Drone Wars and Other Military Misadventures

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What Happened to Clausewitz?
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The United States Army has a deep and enduring admiration for the nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. His philosophical approach to war, with its acknowledgement that wars are acts of force used to compel an enemy to do one's will, has served it well in such major conflicts as the Civil War and World War II. However, since 1945 the United States has made an evident shift away from applying Clausewitzian theory in its numerous post-World War II military operations. The increasing use of drone aircraft to conduct limited strikes against the nation's adversaries is but the latest manifestation of this trend. The result has been a series of inconclusive or even failed campaigns despite the fact that the U.S. military has enjoyed unrivaled overmatch against every adversary it has fought during this period. To solve this conundrum, the U.S. Army must make fundamental changes to its doctrine, training, and force structure based on a reapplication of Clausewitzian principles. With the reemergence of peer-nation rivals possessing capabilities to challenge U.S. military dominance, these reforms are urgent. Clausewitz, not drones, offers the U.S. Army the more reliable way to approach the uncertain threats of the twenty-first century and beyond.

What Happened to Clausewitz? The Case Against Drone Wars and Other Military Misadventures

Since the end of World War II the United States has been the reluctant hegemonic power.¹ Victory in the Cold War further entrenched it in this role, leaving the U.S. at the helm of a stable international system some refer to as the *Pax Americana*.² Although no single state has been able to challenge U.S. military or economic supremacy during this period, the United States nevertheless has engaged in numerous limited military operations for the express purpose of preserving the world order and of defending its national interests. Yet, most of these uses of armed force have ended either inconclusively or disastrously because of a misguided strategic philosophy not based on core Clausewitzian principles. This has been costly. These military misadventures have needlessly destroyed lives, consumed resources, emboldened enemies, and tarnished the U.S. “brand” globally without advancing long-term improvement to the international order or national interests. The U.S. Army must reacquaint itself with Clausewitzian theory and operate with an understanding that war distilled to its most elemental form is a harsh act of compulsion directed against an adversary’s populace, military, and government. This approach will advance U.S. national interests and secure lasting peace in the uncertain future that awaits for the balance of the twenty-first century and beyond.

Clausewitz Revisited

Carl von Clausewitz, the famed nineteenth-century Prussian theorist, remains a preeminent “spiritual father” of U.S. Army doctrine. Attend any Army school that trains mid-level and senior officers, and there will be the almost obligatory reference to some aspect of his theory, typically his most popular axioms.³ His continuing significance is

even visibly evident by the strategic placement of his bust just outside of the U.S. Army War College's legendary Bliss Hall where senior policymakers, theorists, and academics interact with the next generation of Army leaders who will determine the future of its doctrine. No American or any other theorist shares this place of honor with him, implicitly suggesting his unparalleled intellectual legacy. In the U.S. Army's most recent statement of its operating concept, *Win in a Complex World, 2020-2040*, Clausewitz's shadow is clearly evident, with its references about war as fundamentally a contest of wills that seeks to place an adversary under compulsion.⁴ However, in reality his influence remains more superficial than substantive. Few Army officers, including those who write its doctrine, likely have studied in depth Clausewitz's seminal work, *On War*, and understand its most important insights for conducting armed conflict.

Additionally, recent history has muted the influence of Clausewitzian ideas on Army doctrine and practice. With the advent of the nuclear age there has been a dramatic increase in limited wars, marked most noticeably by the avoidance of conventional conflict between industrialized countries.⁵ Numerous modern theorists assert that Clausewitz has become obsolete in the process. Wars no longer are predicated on the state-on-state conflicts upon which he built his theory.⁶ Among this new crop of post-Clausewitzian theorists, Martin van Creveld stands out with particular prominence, if only because his book, *The Transformation of War*, has been hailed as the most fundamental reconsideration of war since Clausewitz himself.⁷ In his study van Creveld posits that, with the advent of low-intensity conflict as the norm for the future, conventional war will necessarily become obsolete along with its attendant strategy and force structures that correspond with classical theorists like Clausewitz.⁸

The U.S. Army has not been completely immune to these “progressive” ideas. Since the Persian Gulf War of 1991 it has significantly altered its force structure, shedding heavy formations in favor of lighter, more modular units that can be deployed rapidly to fight specifically in low-intensity conflicts. In concert with this, its doctrine has shifted to emphasize counterinsurgency and stability operations, which its recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq have encouraged.⁹ Now over two decades into this radical transformation, the Army in its present form is no longer capable of fighting a conventional conflict and prevailing against a peer-nation adversary. In other words it cannot achieve what always should be its primary mission, even as Russia and China are emerging as resurgent powers that can threaten U.S. interests in Eastern Europe and Asia-Pacific, respectively.¹⁰

While it might be provocative to pose the question of what happened to Clausewitz, the answer on the theoretical level is that nothing about which he wrote has really changed. His fundamental ideas remain as valid today in an age of nuclear, space, and cyber weapons as in his own day of bayonets, horse cavalry, and grapeshot cannon. The great value in studying Clausewitz is his ability to look beyond the tactics, equipment, and organizations of a specific era to identify war’s enduring nature and purpose.¹¹ Clausewitz’s most repeated insight among Army leaders is probably his timeless observation that war is the continuation of politics by other means.¹² There is good reason for this, as it validates the proper civil-military relationship out of which all uses of armed force should flow in a Western democracy. He also understood that wars are waged at three levels, specifically those relating to tactics, strategy, and policy.¹³ This schema continues to inform Army doctrine that defines the three levels of

war as the tactical, operational, and strategic or national levels. His thoughts about concentration, center of gravity, mass, synchronization, lines of communication, offensive battle, and defensive battle all remain hallmarks in Army thinking and planning as well.¹⁴

Where Army doctrine and practice have failed in recent decades is understanding Clausewitz's philosophical thoughts about war. This is not totally surprising since no state or military has ever fully implemented his ideas in this area.¹⁵ The core of Clausewitz's thought is encapsulated in his definition of war itself, which appears at the beginning of Book 1: "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."¹⁶ This philosophically rich definition serves as the catalyst and foundation for all that is discussed in the remainder of his treatise. While it might sound harsh to state this, war is never essentially about "winning hearts and minds," the great fallacy that was borne out of the nation's difficult experiences in Vietnam and which continues to infect Army doctrine and practice to this day.¹⁷ War by its nature is always fundamentally about compulsion. In war hearts and minds are commanded, not won.¹⁸

In the same spirit of Thucydides who many centuries earlier identified a trinity of causes that underlie all wars—namely fear, honor, and interests—Clausewitz in the nineteenth century revealed war's three core elements—what is now known as the Clausewitzian Trinity: violence, chance, and rational purpose.¹⁹ Translating from the abstract to the tangible, he argues that these three elements correlate to the people, the military, and the government.²⁰ Hence, in any military operation there exists a vital linkage among the adversary's populace, military, and political leadership.²¹ It follows from him that victory in any war ultimately requires the exploitation and domination of all

three elements.²² Hence, even if a belligerent can bring two of the three into submission, it likely will fail to obtain ultimate victory. The reason lies in how Clausewitz defines an adversary's power of resistance. He envisions it to be comprised of two factors, the total means that the opponent possesses to fight and the strength of his will to resist.²³ Reducing his thoughts to a simple matrix, victory in war at its most basic level is determined as follows:

War Elements	People	Military	Government
Resistance Factors			
Means			
Will			

Conceptually, final victory remains elusive in most cases since it is not always possible to destroy both the means and will to resist for each element in this trinity. Thus, Clausewitz concludes that typically there are no final results in war.²⁴ The “splendid little wars” the U.S. Army has participated in over the last seven decades certainly bear this out.²⁵

On this point, Clausewitz correctly deduced that not all wars are fought with a view toward annihilation of the enemy, as theory would advocate, but instead for limited aims driven by concerns about the improbability of success or the unacceptable cost that arise from continuing the war effort.²⁶ However, this is merely an acknowledgement on his part regarding the reality of war as it truly exists rather than an endorsement for how war should be practiced. Since war is merely an instrument of policy, artificial constraints may be placed upon its inherent nature, which lead to limited outcomes, but

he clearly is no apologist for conducting war in this manner. Such practice contradicts war's very nature to force submission upon an adversary, which remains at the core of Clausewitz's entire conception of war. As he soberly observes, the reason wars end inconclusively is "the half-hearted manner in which [they] are usually waged."²⁷

A key purpose in writing his treatise on war is precisely to advocate against such practice, which is why Clausewitz stresses points such as war is a serious business, that there can be no kindheartedness in its application, that destruction of an enemy's means and will to resist remains war's true purpose, and that it should be conducted using all of one's available resources.²⁸ After identifying the reasons why wars are fought short of the theoretical, Clausewitz immediately returns to his main line of thought, noting the means by which the architect of a limited campaign can increase the probability of success: the destruction of the opposing army, the occupation of the opponent's territory, or disintegration of his political strength. The cohesion and symmetry of his thought is unmistakable. Here again is the Clausewitzian Matrix that prompts the war planner to focus on the adversary's military; his people as represented by the occupation of territory; and the government as represented by attacks aimed at the political sources of strength.

Hence, even as Clausewitz concedes that wars in the real world may be fought for limited aims, it is clear that such use of this tool of national policy violates its very nature and can be justified only if it deprives the enemy of some advantage or bides one time for future decisive action.²⁹ Yet, waging war in this limited manner comes at a cost. Its outcome is not final, leaving the defeated party to seek future redress and thus making endless war an unavoidable reality.³⁰ The solution to this grim reality is to wage

war in conformity with the Clausewitzian Matrix in something that approaches the theoretical.

In sum, Clausewitz argues that war distilled to its most elemental form is a struggle of wills, or more precisely a trinity of wills as expressed by the people, its military, and its government. Both sides in a conflict seek to impose or force its will upon the other, and theoretically this effort to compel knows no limitations.³¹ In its absolute, i.e. purely theoretical, form war seeks the complete destruction of the enemy's military, the total occupation of his territory, and the complete submission of its government and populace.³² To fight this type of conflict can be very bloody, which is why Clausewitz concluded that "[w]ar is no pastime; it is no mere joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts. It is a serious means to a serious end."³³ In his view there is no such thing as a "splendid little war." Of course, in the real world he understood that absolute wars, or wars in this theoretical form, are never fought since other factors, mainly those of a political nature, intervene to impose limitations on war's natural tendency toward the extreme.³⁴ Hence, even when total annihilation of the enemy is not possible, such as during an insurrection, victory in a "limited war" still requires breaking the adversary's will to persist.³⁵ Ultimately, it is in this shadowy ground between theory and practice, between absolute and limited war, where victory resides. The side that can impose its will across the Clausewitzian Trinity in this contested ground between theory and practice is the one that prevails.

The Good Wars vs. the Not-So-Good Wars

Over the last seven plus decades the U.S. Army has conducted numerous military operations. Aside from its participation in the Persian Gulf War, the last "good war" it fought dates back to World War II, even though it has been the world's premiere

land force during this time. The remainder of its operations should be categorized as a series of “not-so-good wars” or military misadventures. The root cause for the disjunction between its capabilities and its performance rests largely with the Army’s failure to properly implement Clausewitzian philosophical principles.

Throughout its history, the United States has engaged in scores of military conflicts, with the number accelerating since the end of the Vietnam War.³⁶ Among these, the Civil War and World War II stand out particularly as “good wars.” In these conflicts the U.S. fought something that approached Clausewitz’s idea of absolute or theoretical war—annihilating the enemy’s military, occupying his territory, dismantling his government, and breaking the will of the people to resist.³⁷ In both cases it took four years of heavy fighting and even more years in post-conflict occupation to bring about the desired end states for which the wars had been waged. However, the painful investment of human, material, and temporal resources was not wasted; the results have endured, confirming Clausewitz’s thoughts about the decisive application of force across all elements of his trinity.

Far more numerous have been the “not-so-good wars.” Of these, the Vietnam War remains the most prominent, casting a long shadow that continues to affect strategic thinking among senior political and Army leaders.³⁸ U.S. involvement in Vietnam quickly evolved from preserving South Vietnam as a viable noncommunist state to preventing a domino-theory spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Yet, at no time was the objective the direct overthrow of the North Vietnamese government centered in Hanoi.³⁹ In this the U.S. fought a classic limited war. Not surprisingly, not

only was Vietnam ultimately lost because of this failure to follow Clausewitzian theory but all of Indochina as well.⁴⁰

What the experience in Vietnam did accomplish was to leave a permanent imprint on national policymaking and on Army doctrine as it relates to using military force and to fighting counterinsurgencies.⁴¹ The legacy has been an ineffectual recipe for victory involving the tailored use of superior U.S. firepower and technology to achieve a body-count metric for success against an elusive adversary coupled with a “hearts and minds” program to win over the populace.⁴² Notably absent from this recipe is the key ingredient of Clausewitzian philosophical theory. In the Vietnam War the enemy’s power of resistance was never broken, and its war elements comprised of its military, government, and people never forced into compulsion. This happened not because the U.S. was incapable of accomplishing these objectives but because it ultimately elected not to pursue them. During the course of the conflict, North Vietnam is thought to have lost at least 1.1 million dead and another half million missing out of a total population of 20 million.⁴³ Despite such staggering losses of nearly ten percent of its population, the enemy’s will showed no signs of waning when the U.S. removed the last of its combat ground forces in 1973.⁴⁴ The reason is that the U.S. approach to the war was to fight a limited, ill-focused conflict reliant upon aerial bombing with self-imposed restrictions that enabled the North to retain the means to continue its war effort. Additionally, the U.S. refused to occupy North Vietnamese territory that would have denied its enemy of both the means and will to resist.⁴⁵ On top of this for much of the conflict the initiative was ceded to the enemy, as the majority of combat in the war was initiated by communist forces.⁴⁶

Despite the failed outcome, remarkably this recipe has been carried over into most of the post-Vietnam operations in which the U.S. Army has participated, with predictably disappointing results. In 1992 the U.S. joined an international effort to provide humanitarian relief to war-torn and drought-stricken Somalia.⁴⁷ The intervention quickly evolved into a *de facto* nation-building endeavor.⁴⁸ Inexplicably, the U.S. military found itself operating in a war zone but without the full authority to conduct operations to destroy the means and will of the armed warlords that surrounded it. When the Clinton administration finally made the decision to use military force to resolve the crisis, it pursued a version of what Ian Shaw terms a “manhunting” strategy that had failed to produce favorable results in Vietnam. As in that earlier conflict, the approach relied upon the limited use of superior firepower and technology to achieve success by tallying up some version of a body count that was presumed to be a center of gravity for the enemy.⁴⁹

The culmination point came on October 3, 1993 when U.S. Army Rangers suffered losses not seen since the Vietnam War in trying to capture one of Somalia’s most troublesome warlords.⁵⁰ Like the Vietnam War, the tailored use of superior firepower and technology proved insufficient to defeat an adversary willing to fight with comparatively crude weapons and to suffer disproportionately heavy casualties.⁵¹ As one Army officer later noted, the ill-fated raid was an attempt to find a quick and easy way to victory.⁵² In other words, it represented a failure to conduct a military operation in conformity with Clausewitzian principles, which offer no painless solutions to war. Because this disastrous firefight signaled to the Clinton administration that the mission

had become too costly, it eventually withdrew U.S. forces from Somalia in what had all the appearances of a defeat.⁵³

The same spirit animates the approach the U.S. has followed in its wars in Afghanistan, beginning in 2001, and in Iraq, beginning in 2003. In terms of the former, the United States used its now familiar formula of tailored superior firepower, including special operations forces, to topple the Taliban government in less than three months at the cost of only 12 service members killed in action.⁵⁴ However, as it has experienced elsewhere, regime change in weak states through military intervention is the easy task. The nation-building that comes as part of the bill for dismantling a sovereign government and accelerating a country's collapse into chaos is the real challenge.⁵⁵ In Clausewitzian terms the hard part is compelling what happens in this society once the major combat operations cease.

Since its ousting, the Taliban has returned as an insurgency, drawing upon the Afghan heritage and culture that traditionally oppose outside interference in their local affairs.⁵⁶ In areas it controls or influences the Taliban uses a classic carrot-and-stick approach within local villages. It promises rewards in the form of protection and government services or reprisals in the form of denial of services or the use of outright violence, based on whether villagers give them support or not. In response the U.S. lacks sufficient manpower to effectively counteract this, leading to something of a stalemate, which for the U.S. is unsustainable.⁵⁷ Furthermore, U.S. nation-building efforts have yet to change significantly Afghanistan as one of the world's poorest states and largest narcotics producers.⁵⁸ This stalemate ultimately favors the insurgents, since Western tolerance to support distant and costly military interventions has its limits.⁵⁹

Despite overwhelming military superiority, the U.S. inexplicably finds itself in such a predicament, unable to bring under compulsion a poorly armed and loosely organized adversary, and so the uncomfortable question persists: where is Clausewitz?

In the case of Iraq in 2003 the Bush administration settled on a war plan using only 150,000 service members, about one-third of the force the U.S. employed to dislodge the Iraqi army from Kuwait 12 years earlier.⁶⁰ The relative ease of its victory in that previous conflict as well as more recently in Afghanistan, coupled with overly optimistic assessments that the Iraqi people would greet the Americans as liberators, heavily influenced the war planners. The result was insufficient forces to occupy and subdue the country despite warnings to the contrary by those who objected to the plan, including notable figures as Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki and Secretary of the Army Tom White.⁶¹ When an insurgency erupted after the collapse of the Hussein regime, the United States. had inadequate resources and an inappropriate plan to defeat it. Unwilling to impose its will in conformity with Clausewitzian principles in order to build and sustain a friendly and stable democracy, the U.S. chose to depart Iraq at the end of 2011, leaving behind a messy situation in the heart of the Middle East that persists into the present.⁶² This outcome proved the axiom: “[B]y definition, limited wars achieve limited results. ‘Murky endings’ have been the rule rather than the exception in modern warfare.”⁶³

Rebutting the "Bremer Presumption"

It is now tantamount to an article of faith among Western political and military leaders that, to achieve success in a war or in a counterinsurgency operation, it is necessary to establish as quickly as possible a native governing authority which the

indigenous population perceives as legitimate.⁶⁴ This is supposedly how “hearts and minds” are won and maintained. In fact it now has become so much a part of the conventional wisdom that it actually has been enshrined in Army counterinsurgency doctrine, which asserts as a core operational objective the establishment of a legitimate, i.e. indigenous, government in order to win the hearts and minds of a local populace.⁶⁵ Because of this presumption, it is possible to attend an Army school training mid-grade officers for operational-level commands and listen to an instructor relate a wartime experience for the purpose of illustrating how to conduct counterinsurgency operations.⁶⁶ Using a hypothetical scenario based on actual events, the Intermediate Level Education (ILE) instructor presented the following counsel. After rolling into a village that has been cleared of enemy forces, the Army officer in charge should dismount from his M1 tank and ask the village leader what the U.S. Army can do for him and his community. While the sentiment is noble in its attempt to demonstrate both U.S. magnanimity as well as concern to win hearts and minds, it reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Clausewitz. He who sits upon the M1 tank that the local villagers cannot defeat is the one who commands the situation. It is the tank commander who should be compelling what happens next by informing the village leader what he needs him to do to facilitate the occupation. This is not a call for brutality, cruelty, or insensitivity to the indigenous people. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the hard business that war is and that the quickest path to restoring a lasting peace is to command the situation in concert with the nature of what war is, an act of force to compel.

In the vacuum left by the rapid defeat of the Iraqi military and the collapse of the Hussein government in early 2003, the United States with its Coalition partners used the hastily organized Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), an understaffed and under-resourced group, to administer Iraq in April.⁶⁷ The following month the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) replaced the ineffectual ORHA. The CPA remained in place until June 2004, at which point a sovereign Iraqi government resumed control of the country.⁶⁸ The Bush administration selected businessman and former U.S. diplomat, L. Paul “Jerry” Bremer, to lead the CPA.⁶⁹ He quickly became the face of the debacle that followed.

Despite growing discontent and an emerging insurrection, Bremer pressed ahead with the plan to return sovereignty to the Iraqi people as quickly as possible, even as he claimed publicly that the U.S. would impose its will during the occupation.⁷⁰ This presumption that peace and order could be achieved best by a rapid handing over of sovereignty directly contradicted Clausewitzian principles. Imposition of will does not align with prematurely handing power over voluntarily to some entity over which one will no longer be able to control. It also demonstrated poor understanding of human nature itself. Long ago Niccolo Machiavelli noted that in a choice between being feared and being loved, the ruler who wishes to remain in power must always choose the former.⁷¹ While he overstated the case, Machiavelli appreciated the fact that humans almost universally respond positively to leadership that is hard, firm, and demanding but at the same time fair and predictable, as long as it is perceived as serving a greater good. This is also true of other human endeavors, such as those led by drill instructors, teachers, and coaches, and it is certainly true in times of war. The Bremer Presumption

might make U.S. leaders feel good about their use of military force, but it cannot produce lasting, positive results. Misplaced leniency never engenders respect but quite the opposite.

Resisting the Drone War Sirens

Fighting wars for limited objectives using limited means ultimately does more harm than good. It actually has the opposite effect of demonstrating U.S. power and resolve to defend its national interests as well as preserve the international order. Nevertheless, it remains a seductive methodology for war planners because it offers the promise of an easy way to achieve one's objectives in war while at the same time claiming the mantle of being "benevolent." This approach squarely conflicts with Clausewitz, who contends that there are no easy answers in war: "[W]ar is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst. The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect. If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other refrains, the first will gain the upper hand."⁷²

The Vietnam War provides an excellent illustration of this. For three and a half years, for example, the United States executed a limited bombing campaign of North Vietnam, codenamed Rolling Thunder, to prod the North to the negotiating table while also showing the world U.S. benevolence.⁷³ "Instead, Hanoi read this (rightly) as a sign of the Johnson administration's weakness and irresolution."⁷⁴ As Henry Kissinger correctly assessed, the bombing strategy was aggressive "enough to mobilize world opinion against us but too half-hearted and gradual to be decisive."⁷⁵ Rolling Thunder not only violated Clausewitz's principle of denying the enemy its essential means and will to resist but it failed his most basic standard for war. As he noted, "[k]ind-hearted

people might of course think that there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine that is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy.”⁷⁶ Inexplicably, the Nixon Administration double-downed on the failed Rolling Thunder campaign by authorizing Operation Linebacker in 1972. While the operation was designed to destroy the North’s will to continue the war, it had the opposite effect. Hanoi assessed the bombing campaign as a sign of weakness and desperation.⁷⁷ In between these two aerial campaigns the U.S. resorted to the “Lightning Bug” unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) to conduct surveillance in the heavily contested airspace over North Vietnam in an effort to limit the loss of U.S. aircrews. These drones were the only U.S. aircraft operating over enemy airspace during these four years.⁷⁸ Whatever useful intelligence these flights produced, surveillance drones had no capacity to destroy North Vietnamese means and will to resist.

Even while the U.S. failed to take the war on the ground into North Vietnam where the locus of the communist effort resided, it inexplicably caused untold devastation in the very part of Vietnam it was trying to save. The U.S. conducted massive bombing campaigns in South Vietnam, leaving 21 million bomb craters and destroying a remarkable 60% of rural villages there.⁷⁹ Additionally, the U.S. implemented the Phoenix Program in order to pacify the South Vietnamese countryside through developing “blacklists” of insurgents that were maintained in computer databases and supported by aggressive interrogation efforts. While the program rolled up tens of thousands of individuals, it produced little of intelligence value at the cost of further antagonizing the very people the U.S. was seeking to win over. These ill-

conceived tailored uses of U.S. power certainly did not win “hearts and minds” and definitely did nothing to command them. Moreover, no amount of effort, ordinance, or devastation improperly focused can replace the critical importance of key terrain and center of gravity Clausewitz identifies as the necessary ways to bring an adversary to its knees.⁸⁰ As Clausewitz notes, battle “is a struggle for real victory, waged with all available strength.”⁸¹ The application of Clausewitzian theory that asserts there are no easy routes to victory in war would have prevented the futility that was the Vietnam War.⁸²

Much closer to home the lingering scars of September 11, 2001 remain as poignant reminders of the danger of heeding the siren call to take the easy way out of a fight. During the 1990s Osama bin Laden made the critical decision to refocus his al-Qaeda terrorist organization to confront the United States directly. He had come to the conclusion that beneath its appearance of strength the U.S. “was actually weak and cowardly.”⁸³ As evidence of this, he referenced its failed efforts in Vietnam, Lebanon, and more recently in Somali. In his estimation it would only take a couple of sharp blows against U.S. targets before the United States would retreat.⁸⁴ What these previous military misadventures taught him was that “[f]or all its wealth and resources, America lacks conviction.”⁸⁵ Inspired by this assessment, bin Laden ordered synchronized bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. His apparent goal was to prod the U.S. into an ill-fated invasion of Afghanistan, which has been a graveyard for invading imperial armies.⁸⁶ Instead, the Clinton administration responded with ineffectual cruise missile strikes on his base in Afghanistan. Not only did this confirm his belief that the U.S. lacked the conviction for a real fight, but it likely

inspired him to launch his far more audacious operation to strike the United States on its own soil with what became the infamous September 11, 2001 terrorist attack.⁸⁷

Perhaps the most revealing indictment of this mistaken strategy comes from Saddam Hussein himself. If there were anyone who might have been cowed by the threat of massive U.S. aerial firepower, surely he would be the one. After all, his army that invaded Kuwait in 1990 was practically annihilated by U.S. airpower during the very brief 1991 Gulf War.⁸⁸ Yet, over the next 12 years he became increasingly contemptuous about threats of and even the actual use of U.S. airstrikes to enforce the 1991 peace settlement. In his assessment, which revealingly parallels that of bin Laden, the U.S. exercise of military power in recent decades, including its stunning victory in the 1991 conflict against him, was actual evidence of U.S. weakness, not strength. It was a weakness driven by a paralyzing fear of casualties, which ultimately led the U.S. to use its military power in limited ways lacking decisive outcomes. As one senior Iraqi official brazenly stated, “No one is as good at absorbing U.S. precision munitions as Iraq. So if that’s all the Americans have got, it’s not a threat to our national survival.”⁸⁹ In other words limited use of military power, even in its most robust form as exercised in 1991, presented no real deterrent for Saddam Hussein to abandon the pursuit of his national strategy. Hence, viewed from the other side of such exercise of power, U.S. leaders should acknowledge that it offers no real promise as an effective means to achieve U.S. national strategy against a determined adversary. As John Keegan notes, “a defeat is only as bad as the victor chooses to make it. If the victor declines to press his advantage to the utmost, the vanquished retains room for manoeuvre, which may win back ground that appears lost.”⁹⁰

Following 9-11, the U.S. finally responded aggressively to the threat of international terrorism, first invading Afghanistan and then Iraq. At first glance these invasions seemed to disprove bin Laden's assessment of the willingness of the U.S. to engage in a fight. Yet, after over a decade and a half of fighting with at least no end in sight in Afghanistan, the U.S. increasingly has sought to shift more of its warfighting effort from Soldiers operating in the front lines to the use of pilotless drones hovering in the sky to carry the weight of the fight against the enemy. While there have been notable successes in killing some key insurgent and terrorist leaders, the effort has been ineffectual in ending the conflict. At the same time it has provided more fuel to anti-Western sentiments that exist in different parts of the world, a troubling reality if part of the U.S. objective in fighting in Afghanistan and other hot spots around the world using drones is to sustain the current Western-led world order.⁹¹

The ineffectiveness of drone strikes as a warfighting strategy becomes even more evident when compared to a traditional land campaign waged concurrently by the Pakistani government against internal militants. From 2004 to 2015 U.S. drone strikes killed only six of 24 high-value targets in Pakistan but also resulted in 874 civilian deaths as part of unintended collateral damage.⁹² In contrast for six months during 2014 the Pakistani government launched a huge ground offensive, codenamed Operation Zarb-e-Azb, against the Pakistani Taliban. The operation resulted in the deaths of 2,100 insurgents and the reclamation of 90% of the North Waziristan province.⁹³ The disparity in results is as stark as it is convincing that there is no substitute for hard blows to obtain real victory in war, as Clausewitz asserts. Tantalizing as it may seem, the truth is that "drone wars" are but the latest entry in the failed strategy of seeking some easy

technological answer for the grim business of war. No technological innovation will change the basic reality that “gadgets do not win or lose wars. Soldiers and nations do.”⁹⁴

There is also another troubling aspect to this recent emphasis on using airpower, drones, and other technological innovations as a substitute for real battle. It represents a radical departure from the successful Western practice of war that dates back to the ancient Greeks and was reaffirmed by Clausewitz with its emphasis on direct, overpowering assault upon the enemy’s center of gravity.⁹⁵ Historically, this could only be done by the infantry attack. Interestingly, in recent decades, the United States has adopted an approach to war preferred by ancient armies of the Middle East but despised by the ancient Greeks. It is an approach the Greeks considered the “most dangerous tendency in war: a wish to kill but not to die in the process.”⁹⁶ In other words, they found repugnant a willingness to fight in a way that caused death to one’s opponent at little or no risk to the attacker, who were archers, javelin throwers, and slingers fighting at a distance from the enemy.⁹⁷ “These were all men who could kill “good” infantry with a frightening randomness and little risk to themselves.”⁹⁸ The Greeks universally condemned this as a cowardly and effeminate way to fight.⁹⁹ In contrast the Greek style of fighting required Soldiers to fight at close quarters with spear, sword, and shield, victory being determined solely by force of will and strength.¹⁰⁰

While this ancient Greek approach to combat comes with the obvious disadvantage of risking one’s own troops in battle, it retains a critical and necessary human dimension of warfare beyond just that of heroism.¹⁰¹ To see the enemy at close range is to retain a sense of his humanity, which necessarily forces a combatant to

ponder the ethical justification of killing another human person.¹⁰² At the same time, a Soldier who fights at close range using conventional means “is more likely to ponder this duty, and ask whether a goal worth killing for is also a goal worth dying for. The operator of a drone need not ask this question.”¹⁰³ Equally important, political leaders who authorize the use of military force against an adversary need not ask this question either, which makes it easier and thus more likely for them to choose a recourse to violence to settle political disagreements with rival states and other international actors. Traditional combat also keeps open lines of communication with the enemy that drone warfare negates. Only when Soldiers are committed to battle is it possible to contact the opposing side at a personal level, which can lead to mutually beneficial negotiations or, in the case of taking prisoners, fruitful interrogations. “Antiseptic” killing from long-range cannot do the same.¹⁰⁴

As the Greeks came to despise their enemies from the East who fought from a distance, the enemies of the United States now express a similar contempt toward the U.S.¹⁰⁵ Such enmity feeds a will to resist that emboldens adversaries, thereby making airstrikes in lieu of infantry attack a counterproductive enterprise. Increasing recourse to drone strikes also will have the opposite effect upon the U.S. military. It promises to erode its warrior ethos, which will have disastrous effects on its ability to fight and win the future wars of the United States. Again, “gadgets do not win or lose wars. Soldiers and nations do.”¹⁰⁶ The final judgment against the ubiquitous use of drone warfare is the pragmatic realization that in war eventually the opposing side acquires the same means.¹⁰⁷ The continued reliance on this manner of fighting will legitimize the silent robotic death from above without warning that drones offer. It is a chilling future that

awaits civilized society everywhere once rogue nations and terrorist organizations acquire this capability and can claim the moral cover to use them because the U.S. has made it an acceptable way to wage war.¹⁰⁸

Practicing the DIME Without the "M" to Avoid Military Misadventures

Imperialism is understood to be the domination of stronger states over weaker states. When this dominance does not include outright colonization, it might more accurately be termed "hegemony."¹⁰⁹ While the United States is uncomfortable with either title, it is undeniable that it possesses a disproportionate influence on international affairs in the post-World War II era. Its global influence is facilitated by the acquisition of military bases around the world rather than the more traditional approach to empire that focuses on possessing foreign territory, but the end result remains.¹¹⁰ The U.S. is the primary architect and defender of the current global order, a role it assumed in the course of the Cold War in seeking to defend democracy and capitalism against the threat of international communism.¹¹¹ In any imperial or hegemonic system, the dominant state typically looks to its military power to underwrite and secure the structure for as long as it stands.¹¹²

In actuality the instruments of national power extend beyond just the military and include diplomatic, informational, and economic resources, in what is typically referred to as the 'DIME.'¹¹³ While U.S. political leaders might assert that they rely upon the other instruments of national power to influence world events and have recourse to the military only as a last resort, the reality is that the military option remains very tantalizing as an early intervention strategy. This has been especially true following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which removed the concern about smaller military operations sparking a war between great powers. In the absence of a perceived rival that can challenge the

U.S. military, the cost of using armed intervention to manage the global order seems relatively low and risk-free.¹¹⁴ At the same time in any presidential council that must deal with an international crisis, the only cabinet member who can offer unilateral action and immediate effects is the Secretary of Defense. Diplomatic, informational, and economic efforts take time, typically in the order of years. They often produce inconclusive effects and almost always require the participation of other willing international partners to give them any realistic chance for success. With the advent of “risk-free” technologies like UAVs, the temptation to go the military route well before a crisis reaches a “last resort” stage becomes even easier.

In a world where all-out war no longer seems advisable, the technologically superior U.S. military has the ability to conduct punitive strikes against its adversaries at relatively little human or economic cost to itself.¹¹⁵ However, the question remains what ultimate end do such military actions advance? Use-of-force apologists like Max Boot assert that limited strikes serve the same positive deterrent effect that the criminal justice system achieves through enforcing laws against criminals.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Boot goes so far to assert that the aggressive policing of small international crises has the positive effect of keeping the global order stable, similar to how Mayor Rudolph Giuliani brought a reduction in major crimes to New York City in the 1990s by targeting petty crime as a preemption strategy.¹¹⁷ What Boot fails to appreciate is that the situations are not similar. Unlike Mayor Giuliani who was chosen by the residents of New York City to clamp down on crime, the people of the world have not elected the United States to act as their global policeman. Furthermore, while very weak and irresolute adversaries might be deterred by the limited use of force, the determined enemies of the United

States, such as the Ho Chi Minhs, Saddam Husseins, and Osama bin Ladens, do not find such actions painful enough to yield their prerogative to act in ways counter to U.S. interests. The incomplete application of military power actually emboldens them to pursue their objectives through violent and aggressive means, convinced that the United States lacks the resolve to respond in kind.

Another cost to this approach is one of perception. The global image of the United States is not immune from the recurring use of its military around the world. Remarkably, since the end of World War II, the U.S. has resorted to more acts of coercion against weaker states than any other major power and as remarkably has more often failed than succeeded despite possessing unrivaled military superiority.¹¹⁸ The global community not surprisingly grows weary of this recurrent flexing of U.S. military might. For example, recent polling of the international community by the Pew Research Center found that aggressive U.S. international surveillance efforts and its drone operations are unpopular and cause resentment. Although a Pew poll in 2014 found that a majority in the world retained a favorable opinion of the United States, this was largely reflective of the Obama administration's publicly declared efforts to disengage the U.S. from some of its most prominent global military operations, namely Iraq and Afghanistan.¹¹⁹ Just a few years later, however, with the change of presidential administrations, the U.S. "brand" has suffered a significant erosion of favorability caused by a perception that President Donald Trump will lead the U.S. back toward an aggressive foreign policy that eschews working collectively with other nations.¹²⁰

Additionally, the inconclusive or even negative results from previous military interventions have required that the United States eventually manage the post-conflict

situation using its other instruments of national power. This, then, begs the question: if the stakes involved with intervening in places like Somalia, Iraq, and Vietnam were not of sufficient vital national interest to require a war effort that would compel the enemy to acquiesce to U.S. demands and if after the end of U.S. military operations the situations could be contained using diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of national power, why was the military ever used in the first place? In other words in situations where the U.S. eventually can disengage its military before a clear victory has been achieved and where it can content itself to manage the situation using instruments of national power other than the military, the application of limited armed force serves no constructive purpose. It emboldens enemies, erodes international support, and causes needless death and destruction. Not every world problem has a military solution lying at its foundation, which is why the U.S. should focus on managing the global order using the DIME without the “M.”

Recommendations and Conclusions

The first quarter of the twenty-first century confronts the United States with an interesting crossroad from which it can follow two very divergent paths into the future. Currently, there are no worldwide existential threats that demand a global champion to resist. While radical Islamic fundamentalism seemed poised to be the next virulent ideology bent on world domination, the toppling of the Taliban in 2003 and the crushing defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2017 leave the world stage free of such menaces. In its place is a return to the more traditional international playing field of great state rivalries predicated on advancing purely national interests. Such a global operating environment no longer divides the world into two great adversarial camps but leaves it a jumbled collection of independent actors seeking their own self-interests.

The U.S. must confront the question whether in such an operating environment its role as self-proclaimed global supervisor serves any beneficial purpose.

To be sure, being the dominant power in an imperial or hegemonic system can be intoxicating, all the more when such a role has not been chosen out of personal ambition but thrust upon it out of necessity. Such has been the story of the United States, the traditionally isolationist power that shook off its apprehension for foreign entanglements to become the reluctant hero that led the free world through the perilous periods of the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War.¹²¹ Yet, as J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* warns, possessing great power—symbolized in the story by the Ring that the reluctant hero Frodo must protect—brings with it unavoidable evils.¹²² Tolkien's fairytale-like saga is actually a powerful metaphor about “the classic corrupting quality of power in direct proportion to its approach to the absolute. Yet, of course, it is not simply power, in itself, that corrupts, but the pride which power may engender, which in turn produces the swift corruption of power.”¹²³

Nations throughout history have lusted after the “ring” of imperial power. Some, like the United States, convince themselves that they can hold that ring and use its awesome powers for the good without ultimately being corrupted or destroyed by it. While it is a tantalizing thought, empires always have been unsustainable because this cannot be done. It is hubris to think that somehow the U.S. can escape this recurring truth of history. Long ago the ancient Greeks reflected on the human predilection toward *hubris* after achieving some great success. As they came to realize, great achievement is always followed by *peripeteia*, the inevitable great fall.¹²⁴ Five strategies

can get the U.S. out of the Frodo-like trap in which it now finds itself as the world's hegemonic leader and prevent a disastrous demise.

Adopt Military Isolationism

Long ago George Washington wisely advised the nation to “avoid an entangling foreign policy.”¹²⁵ Hegemony represents the ultimate entanglement. It has sucked the U.S. into endless “little wars” fought with limited objectives and ending with “murky results.” These have failed to bring greater stability to the international order at the cost of tarnishing the global image of the United States. People around the globe grow wary of what they perceive to be a meddlesome superpower interjecting itself into one international dispute after another. Furthermore, adversaries learn not to fear U.S. military power when they witness its limited application that does not produce decisive effects. Peer-nation adversaries in turn gain easy intelligence about the latest techniques and tactics the U.S. military employs, allowing them to develop their own countermeasures for a potential future showdown.¹²⁶ Continual overseas operations also needlessly sap the will and resources of the American people. While an absolute isolationism is neither possible nor advisable, the United States should focus its engagement with the rest of the world in the areas of diplomacy, economics, and information, leaving the military at home except for crises that truly present an existential threat.

Incorporate Conservation of Strength as an Army Tenet of War

Fighting a continuous series of small wars is a sure recipe for eventual exhaustion of U.S. strength and for *peripeteia*.¹²⁷ Ancient Chinese wisdom encapsulated in the Thirty-Six Stratagems long ago warned against this error. Stratagem Four states: “Relax while the enemy exhausts himself.”¹²⁸ The irony is that the very activity that seems to connote

strength actually produces the opposite result: “Encourage your enemy to expend his energy in futile quests while you conserve your strength. When he is exhausted and confused, you attack with energy and purpose.”¹²⁹ The idea is that weakness is the fruit of exhaustion while strength is the fruit of conservation.¹³⁰ Prussian history teaches a similar lesson. Frederick William, the father of the modern German army, focused his reign on advancing his small country’s power in Europe. To do this, he avoided foreign adventures and instead committed his country to assembling the greatest army in Europe through constant drilling and through avoidance of unnecessary wars that would dissipate its strength.¹³¹ When finally the time came to use this finely-tuned fighting machine to advance the nation’s interests, his son Frederick the Great led it to decisive victory in the First Silesian War to the amazement of rival states.¹³²

The great weakness of post-World War II U.S. military intervention has been precisely its frenetic pace and reach, which on the surface has seemed to demonstrate its very strength. Yet, as Clausewitz presciently observed, stronger powers typically are thwarted by exhaustion.¹³³ Avoiding what Peter Huchthausen terms as “America’s splendid little wars” will actually strengthen, not weaken, its position in the world. The U.S. Army should find a lesson in here, too, and add the principle of “conservation” as one of its tenets for warfighting. Train hard, train often, and avoid a fight unless absolutely necessary, at which point unleash the full potency of a power that has been conserved like some mighty compressed spring.

Revise Army Doctrine Based on the Clausewitzian Matrix

When war does come, the United States must commit to the long game—decisive victory and lasting peace built on its terms. To this end, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) must incorporate the Clausewitzian Matrix¹³⁴ into the Course of

Action development stage of the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP). Every military operation conducted by the U.S. Army must incorporate actions to defeat the means and will to resist of an adversary's populace, military, and government in order to produce decisive victory.

TRADOC also must establish clear doctrine for what happens after decisive victory, typically the prolonged occupation of an adversary's territory. Furthermore, occupation operations should be termed just that. Euphemisms are counterproductive. In true Clausewitzian spirit, the defeated need to realize that they will be compelled to do the will of the United States. While that might sound harsh, it offers the quickest and most reliable way to restore order and peace.

To facilitate the art of occupation operations, TRADOC should resurrect and prepare a modernized form of the Lieber Code used by Union forces during the Civil War. While certainly stern, the Code judiciously balances military necessity against restrictions on war's propensity for cruelty and inhumanity.¹³⁵ While the Code might grate against modern sensibilities, war remains a brutally serious business which requires strict policies to manage it.¹³⁶ The riddle that irregular warfare has posed to the U.S. Army in recent decades reconfirms this uncomfortable truth. Misplaced benevolence causes conflicts to fester by not imposing compulsion on the enemy. The unfortunate and unavoidable truth is that "the more hardships the better, according to Lieber's views on war: 'The more vigorously wars are pursued the better it is for humanity. Sharp wars are brief.'"¹³⁷ Clausewitz could not have stated this better. This also comports well with the thoughts of Cicero, the ancient Roman statesman and philosopher who provided the origins of the Western concept of just war. Having

experienced war firsthand, he knew it to be an inherently inhuman activity that humans could only justify engaging in if it led to a better, more lasting peace: “The only excuse, therefore, for going to war is that we may live in peace unharmed.”¹³⁸ Paradoxically, it is harshness, not benevolence, that actually produces this enduring peace. TRADOC should provide the Army with doctrine that produces this end state, not assuages modern sensitivities.

Incorporate *On War* into Formal Army Leadership Education

To develop leaders who are committed to decisive action, the comprehensive study of Clausewitz’s *On War* needs to become a pillar of Army officer training at the intermediate and senior levels. To maximize effectiveness, the study must focus on three key components: Clausewitz’s philosophy about war, his thoughts about tactics, and his insights about strategy. While it is not realistic to have officers read the whole of this work, an “essential” *On War* with commentary that can capture the core of his ideas in 200 to 250 pages would suffice, as long as these three areas form the cornerstone of such a condensed critical edition. Since wars are ultimately contests of not just means but wills, the focused study of Clausewitz will help to reinvigorate the warrior ethos among Army leaders and provide them with an essential philosophical understanding of war that promotes decisive victory.

Increase End Strength

Over and above these reforms, the United States must restore the U.S. Army as the centerpiece of its military arm. The mass of humanity does not live at 30,000 feet or in the deep blue sea. The nature of war will never change, and hence air and naval forces will never be the decisive means for achieving victory because they cannot compel humans where they live. Only land forces can accomplish this. Whether the

United States decides to maintain the *Pax Americana* or return to some modified form of traditional isolationism, it will find no technological solution for the grim reality of war and the need for infantry to decide its outcome. Because of this, current Army end strength needs a 25% increase, both to prepare for as well as to deter possible conflict with peer rivals like China and Russia. Those potential future adversaries today boast land forces that number over 1.3 million and 430,000, respectively. U.S. leaders no longer can ignore or downplay such numbers when determining force levels required to support the national military strategy.¹³⁹

Certainly, modern technology can be a force multiplier. In the business world there is serious discussion now about actually leveraging the “economies of unscale” through the strategic use of technology as the new wave of the future.¹⁴⁰ Analogously, in military affairs technology has long proven under some circumstances to equalize for the disadvantages of scale. As just one example, European armies in the colonial wars of the nineteenth century often enjoyed success against numerically superior native forces precisely because of a distinct advantage in technology.¹⁴¹ The same has been true in the numerous military engagements involving U.S. forces since the end of World War II, almost all of which have been fought from a position of numerical inferiority. The two wars fought by the United States against Iraq, first in 1991 and then again in 2003, dramatically punctuate this point. Both conflicts witnessed rapid victory by an invading force that was significantly smaller than that of the defender in bold defiance of the typical ratios between invader and defender that have prevailed throughout much of the history of human warfare.¹⁴² One byproduct of these dramatic uses of undersized invading forces is a certain seductive belief among U.S. policymakers that technology is

the great equalizer, allowing the U.S. military to operate successfully, even almost effortlessly, despite having very lean force levels.¹⁴³

When dealing with rival nations who possess militaries with comparable levels of technology, however, scale still matters. The carnage of the World War I battlefields stands as a sober reminder of what happens when combatants with an overconfidence in their technological advantages encounter armies possessing similar advantages.¹⁴⁴ The losing side in that war ultimately succumbed to a disadvantage in scale. The Central Powers were unable to sustain sufficient force levels as the conflict dragged on into a fourth year.¹⁴⁵ To avoid a similar fate in a future conflict, U.S. policymakers must cease the current practice of sizing the nation's military primarily against technologically-inferior regional powers or international terrorist groups, which never presented an existential threat. In particular they must abandon the strategic outlook that sees the U.S. military as mainly a means to project U.S. power around the globe and return to the traditional valuation of the military as the primary instrument that protects the nation from defeat at the hands of a peer rival. In other words any effort to "right-size" the military must focus on prevailing against the large, technologically proficient nation-state rivals that have always posed the true existential threat.

In the contested future that lies ahead, the U.S. Army will need not just the philosophy of Clausewitz to inform its doctrine but the credible means to wage war in order to prevail in a major conflict against a great power that will inevitably come. The full-spectrum nature of such a war will not provide the luxury for the United States to ramp up its military arsenal, as it was able to do at the start of World War I and World War II.¹⁴⁶ Neither will a relative advantage in technology compensate for a comparative

disadvantage in numbers, especially as any future conflict with either China or Russia likely will be fought far from the shores of the United States. Going to war in such circumstances using a disproportionately inferior invader-to-defender ratio will end in disaster. Hence, if the U.S. Army must project power and win in a distant conflict against technologically competitive adversaries, it must have an active duty force of over 600,000 Soldiers who are ready and equipped to engage with peer rivals like China or Russia on short notice.

In the great struggle of wills that forms the battlefield, victory rests with the side that has the means and desire to meet the enemy where he lives and where he fights—whether it is the cave, foxhole, rice paddy, sewer system, apartment complex, jungle, or desert—and to hammer him into submission face to face. As Clausewitz, Cicero, and Lieber make clear, this is not a call for wanton cruelty and brutality in war but for the acceptance of the necessary sternness that leads to short, decisive conflicts and prolonged, deep-rooted peace. If the United States is unwilling to do this, it must cease its frequent recourse to arms, since to persist in its limited application will only result in more military misadventures. The future of the *Pax Americana* and the nation's defense will be determined primarily by the U.S. Army and whether it has the ethos, numbers, training, grit, and will to compel the nation's adversaries—wherever they may lurk—through the unapologetic use of force. Nations will always fight wars, and armies will always determine their outcome. The U.S. Army should take an Ephebic Oath to follow the Clausewitzian approach to war, lest after suffering defeat on the next great battlefield of the future the haunting question is asked: "What happened to the U.S. Army?"

Endnotes

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