

The Clausewitzian Trinity in the Information Age: A Just War Approach

by

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ABSTRACT

Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity" has long been a touchstone for discourse on the military's strategic position relative to other essential elements of Western society. Similarly, the just war tradition has long been a touchstone for moral discourse on war. Although these touchstones represent two intellectual traditions which may appear to have little or nothing in common, the 21st-century strategist or policymaker must take into account the imperatives of both traditions. This is so because, in the Information Age, public reactions to perceived moral shortcomings associated with the decision to go to war, or with perceived moral lapses on the battlefield, can significantly disrupt the balance which the "remarkable trinity" requires. Accordingly, this study takes as its task to propose a model which accommodates the concerns of both traditions. It first examines both formulations of Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity" and then proposes a revised model of the "remarkable trinity" which accommodates just war concerns. It concludes with some reflections on contemporary applications of the model, especially as it relates to the instruments of national power.

Key words (for indexing): Clausewitz, trinity, just war, information age

The Clausewitzian Trinity in the Information Age: A Just War Approach

Ever since the late 19th century, Carl von Clausewitz's classic work, *On War*,¹ has factored significantly in virtually all Anglo-American articulations of a philosophy of war. In particular, his well-known trinitarian model of war has constituted a touchstone for discourse on the military's strategic position relative to that of other essential elements of Western society. In a separate but equally prominent line of development, one finds the just war tradition, which has served (certainly for a much longer period) as the touchstone in the West for moral discourse on war.

At first blush, one might be tempted to view these two lines of thought as having nothing whatsoever in common. However, further reflection reveals that, certainly in the Anglo-American world and perhaps in larger circles, strategic decisions about whether to go to war and, once engaged, how to fight the war, almost invariably involve considerations associated with both Clausewitz—and in particular, his well-known “remarkable trinity”—and with the just war tradition². In generations past, comparatively few members of Western society have been in a position, (or perhaps more accurately, have felt themselves to be in a position)³, to consider the ramifications of the nexus between these two touchstones. Indeed, until the advent of mass communication, adjudications of the role of morality in warfare were left either to the military or to the political leadership, or both; and in any case, the view that such adjudications did *not* belong to the public at large was not uncommon.

However, the Information Age has changed all of that. The free flow of information from the battlefield and from the deliberative chambers of government to the television screens, the laptops, the cell phones, and the iPods of private citizens has forever transformed into a thing of the past the willingness of lay persons to accept uncritically moral valuations about war. Thus, while, in earlier eras, the lack of information from the battlefield may have afforded strategists and policymakers the supposed leeway to conduct war without regard to public reaction over issues with obvious moral implications, that day is forever gone.

The access to information, which now enables the public to form moral judgments (accurate or not) of political and military decisions has important implications for Clausewitz's trinity. Specifically it invites the following questions:

- To what extent does the "remarkable trinity" accommodate the concerns of the just war tradition?
- What might the "remarkable trinity" look like if it were overtly to illustrate the strategic effect of moral considerations on military or political decisions about war?

Accordingly, we shall:

- review Clausewitz's two formulations of his "remarkable trinity" which issue from his (equally remarkable) reductionist account of the same;
- consider the role that Information Age imperatives for just war theory play in each formulation; and

- propose and evaluate a revised model of the “remarkable trinity” that takes these imperatives into account.

Clausewitz’s “Remarkable Trinity”

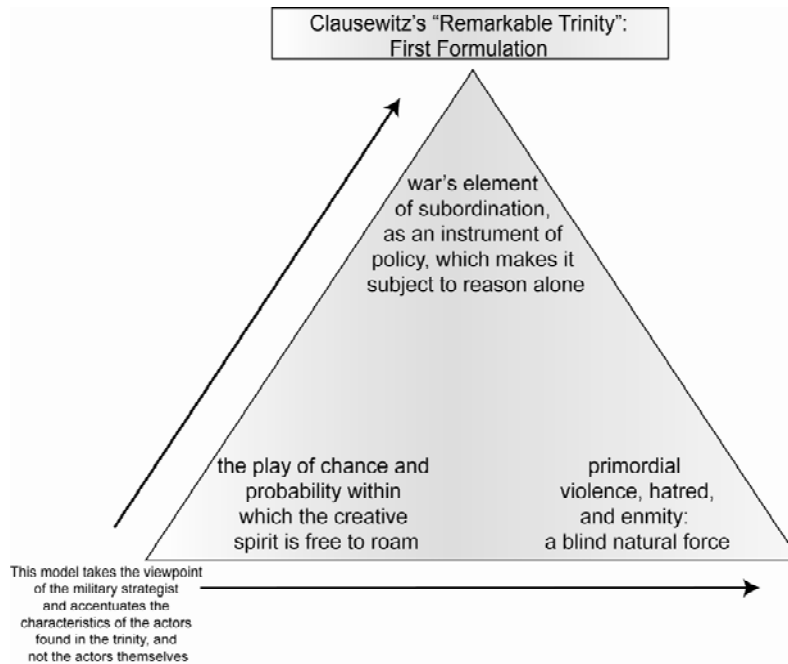


Figure 1.

Clausewitz’s “remarkable trinity” is set forth in one of the most widely read (if not most widely misunderstood) passages in *On War*. (Punctuation in the following quotation has been modified in order to make more perspicuous the distinctions which concern the present study): “War,” says Clausewitz, “is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a remarkable trinity—composed [in this first formulation of the trinity (see Figure 1)]:

- “of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force;
- “of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam;
- “and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.”⁴

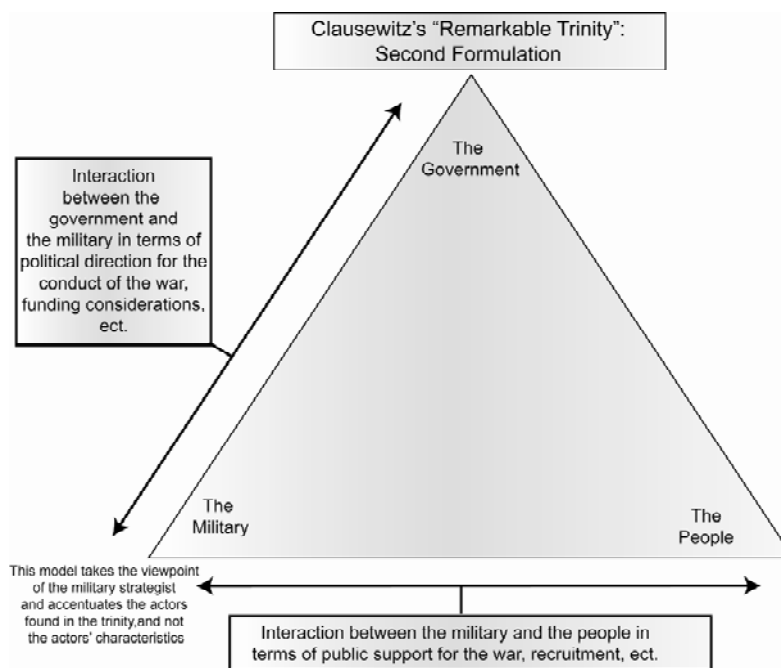


Figure 2.

Clausewitz then advances a second formulation (Figure 2) of the trinity as follows:

- “The first of these three aspects [set forth in the first formulation of the trinity] mainly concerns the people;
- “the second, the commander and his army;
- “the third the government.”⁵

(Note that the first formulation of the trinity focuses upon the *characteristics* of circumstances in which actors function rather than upon the actors themselves.)

He then associates these two formulations as follows:

“First, the passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people [and we might add that these passions are certain to be inflamed or attenuated based on the amount of information available to the people];

“Second, the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander of the army;

“But [third], the political aims are the business of government alone.”⁶

Clearly, Clausewitz intends these two formulations to constitute two sides of the same coin. And, indeed, both formulations must be considered in tandem in order to appreciate the richness of the trinity; and both will prove useful in the quest to understand the place of moral considerations in general, and of just war considerations specifically, in Clausewitz’s world view.

While both formulations seem to give primacy to a world view taken from the perspective of a military general charged with the responsibility to assure victory on the battlefield, it nevertheless remains the case that all three actors in the trinity possess unique and equally valid perspectives. What is more, the Information Age takes ample notice of all of these perspectives. Thus, it is not the case that one can fully appreciate the complexities of war and simultaneously ignore the reality that, in addition to the military general’s perspective, there

exists also a governmental perspective and a popular perspective which must be taken into consideration in the formulation of the general's strategic calculus. Clausewitz, more than some of his interpreters seem to have given him credit for, appreciated this reality, and he stated as much in his own brief analysis:

These three tendencies [as alluded to in the first formulation of the trinity] are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.⁷

The complex interrelationship which Clausewitz describes has, in fact, assumed heightened significance in the Information Age— “heightened,” because the military and the government must now take more seriously public sentiments about war—and especially about the moral issues of war—than they previously have had to do. Although Clausewitz could not have foreseen this particular development, he nevertheless acknowledges that finding the right interrelational balance among the trinitarian components is a dynamic problem that requires periodic (perhaps even constant) reevaluation. Thus, he says: “Our task therefore is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.”⁸

The “Remarkable Trinity” and Morality

The “remarkable trinity” is not itself a moral-theoretical construct. Indeed, let us clearly note that moral considerations as embodied in the just war tradition do not receive explicit treatment in *On War*. While, for example, Clausewitz is concerned that the general who fights should have a reasonable probability of victory (a traditional *jus ad bellum* notion), his concern appears to be founded on strictly pragmatic, rather than moral, concerns. This may surprise the casual reader of *On War*, since Clausewitz uses word “moralisch” or grammatical variations of it no fewer than 60 times.⁹ However, when Clausewitz uses the word “moralisch,” he appears to mean things like “courage,” “tenacity,” “force of will,” or other similar traditional soldierly virtues. What he does *not* appear to mean is “moral” in the sense of choosing to act in a way that accords with an objective standard of right and consciously refusing to do that which, by the same objective standard, is wrong or blameworthy. However, the fact that Clausewitz does not deal with moral issues per se does not mean that he considered “morality,” as understood in the context of the just war tradition, to have no place in strategic discourse. Moreover, the fact that Clausewitz does not deal with moral considerations as understood by the just war tradition does not imply that no place exists, or should exist, for them in his model.

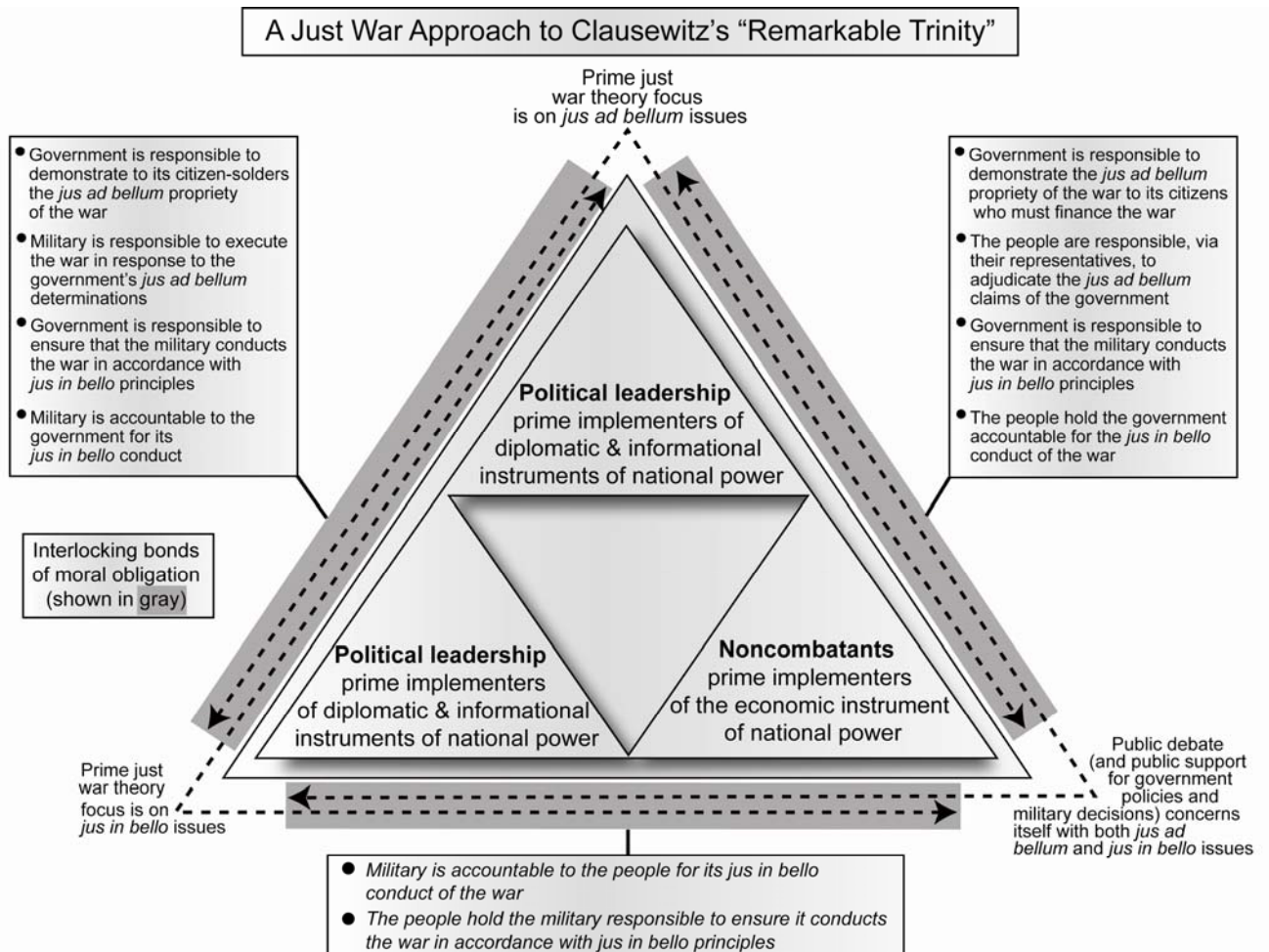
One might even go so far as to note that it does not really matter that Clausewitz himself may not have intended for his “remarkable trinity” to illustrate the place of morality in the world of war in general, much less the specific place of the just war tradition within that world. Indeed, truly elegant models often

possess explanatory capacity beyond that recognized—or even intended—by those who conceived them. Moreover, nothing in Clausewitz’s work requires that the decision to continue policy by other means¹⁰ exclude moral considerations as understood in just war theory. Similarly, Clausewitz gives no appearance of advocating that soldiers should (or must) disregard *jus in bello* considerations. Even Clausewitz’s famous claim that “[t]o introduce the principle of moderation into the theory of war itself would always lead to a logical absurdity”¹¹ can be understood as a descriptive rather than a prescriptive claim. In fact, it may be that just war theory owes its existence to a descriptive claim of this very kind. In an important way, just war theory constitutes the counterbalance to the tendency toward absolutism described (but not necessarily embraced)¹² by Clausewitz. To that extent, just war concerns can be seen as moderating influences calculated to help maintain the equilibrium necessary to keep “an object suspended between [the] three magnets”¹³ which characterize the trinitarian elements.

The “Remarkable Trinity” and Just War Theory

On the face of it, the first formulation of the “remarkable trinity” appears rather *unremarkable* in applied ethics terms. This is so because the forces of “chance” and “subordination” loosely associated with the military and the government, respectively, are themselves morally neutral concepts. The only concepts concerning which moral judgment is warranted are those concerning the hatred and enmity loosely associated with the people at large. Nevertheless, the first formulation of the trinity still merits the ethicist’s attention inasmuch as it

reveals the otherwise largely hidden undercurrents—chance, subordination, and hatred and enmity—which serve as the backdrop against which the rational actors identified in the second formulation of the trinity make their moral choices.



Moreover, that backdrop highlights the actors' respective moral obligations: The general, tossed to and fro by the forces of chance, still is responsible to act not only in a way that accomplishes his assigned military task, but also in a morally responsible way. The politician, in the course of subordinating the war-making forces to the greater political good also must ensure that subordination occurs in a way which serves the greater moral good. The people, afflicted though they

may be with the twin vices of hatred and enmity, must, if they are to meet the demands of morality, constrain the emotions which flow from these vices and resolve to direct their energies in morally acceptable ways, even if those ways entail violent action.

In contrast, the second formulation of the trinity is profoundly significant, for present purposes, because it highlights the interrelationships among moral agents: members of the military, members of the government, and members of the population at large. Notice, for example, what happens when just war considerations are imposed upon the model (Figure 3). On the most immediate level, the military, government, and people interact as moral agents in response to the forces identified in the first formulation of the trinity. However, they also interact in terms of the roles that each plays as a locus for the various instruments of national power, to include not only military power, but also diplomatic, informational, and economic power. Consider for example, the following interactions, which identify the military, the government, and the people, respectively, as agents unavoidably faced with just war theoretical decisions as they wield the instruments of national power:

- The *government's* use of the diplomatic instrument points directly to the just war claim that all remedies short of war must be exhausted prior to unleashing the violence of the *military* instrument.
- The informational instrument is the means by which *public* consideration is given to the question of whether or not to go to war or, once war is decided

- The economic instrument largely determines *jus ad bellum* evaluations, made by both *military* and *government*, of whether a war can be fought with a reasonable chance of success.
- Although the *military* instrument of national power resides squarely in the combatants' realm (and hence, in the realm of *jus in bello*), still it is the case that war fighters can, by their moral conduct, effectively either validate or refute the *jus ad bellum* claims made by the *government* to the effect that, for example, the war is underwritten by the right moral intentions.
- In a similar vein, moral missteps can have a profound effect on *popular* support for a war effort.

These are merely a small sample of the wide range of possible interactions resulting from this juxtaposition. What even this small sample attests to, however, is that the government, the people, and the military are inextricably bound to each other in the trinity, and that the degree of synergy they can obtain as they wield the instruments of national power in the war-making enterprise inevitably will be either enhanced or degraded, depending upon the care they take with respect to just war considerations. As a result, it becomes possible to identify *bonds of interlocking moral obligation* that connect the various components of the trinity. That is to say, it is no longer sufficient, as the realist would have it, to insist that the components of the trinity must interact in a way that merely optimizes military, political, or popular outcomes; they also must

interact in a way that optimizes *moral* outcomes for the entire war-making enterprise that the trinity portrays.

Applications to Information Age Just Warfare

Clausewitz's claim that an adequate theory of war must maintain a balance among the trinitarian components¹⁴ invites the suggestion that periodic (perhaps continuous) adjustments must occur to account not only for the dynamic nature of the trinitarian actors but also for the dynamic nature of the environment in which they operate. Thus, for present purposes, the central question becomes, "What role does morality play in the Information Age in maintaining the balance to which Clausewitz refers?" Although Clausewitz does not provide a direct answer to this question, it seems fair to accord to Clausewitz the understanding that when one considers the trinity as a whole and, simultaneously, the individual perspectives of its actors, the magnetic suspension of the trinitarian elements becomes nigh unto impossible when attempted without due regard for moral considerations of the kind set forth in just war theory. The influence of just war considerations upon warfare is sometimes subtle, sometimes prominent, but always present. However, the Information Age practically mandates the inclusion of just war considerations in the calculus required to bring balance to the trinitarian elements. This is so because the real-time and near real-time mass communication mechanisms of the Information Age have facilitated public debate of the moral merits of wartime decisions which militaries and governments have subsequently been called upon to justify and

which, in earlier eras, were more economically accounted for—sometimes perhaps too dismissively—merely as matters of “military necessity”¹⁵ without additional justification in public fora.

Although the realist might continue to insist that moral discourse has no place in the politics of war, the facts of the Information Age clearly seem to contradict that position. The current conflict in southwest Asia serves as a striking illustration of how public access to information of moral import (whether or not the information reported is accurate, presented in proper context, etc.) affects the nexus between the Clausewitzian trinity and perceptions as to how effectively just war principles are being applied—a question which affects *all* actors in the trinity.

For example, prior to the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. government argued extensively in an effort to establish the full range of *jus ad bellum* principles, to wit:

- that the invasion of Iraq would be both just and comparatively just,
- that it was undertaken with right intention and as a last resort,
- that proper authority was sought (if not obtained) from competent assemblies (i.e., U.S. Congress or the United Nations),
- that there was reason to expect that outcomes would be successful,
- that the moral good that could be expected to result would outweigh other considerations, and
- that peace could be realized.

While this list of examples suggest a particular conception of just war principles (specifically, *jus ad bellum* principles) which might not be universally embraced, it should be understood that these are merely examples. Other examples illustrating other conceptions of just war theory could be offered with similar effect and without doing damage to the central argument of this study. Thus, while the question of whether the government met its burden of proof may remain open, the fact is that the government presented its case in unmistakably just war terms; and by so doing, the government sought to confer upon the military the moral authority to conduct war. At the same time, the government sought to marshal public opinion as to the moral propriety of the war. Both military and public gave tacit assent to the moral arguments, as evidenced by the fact that the military went to war and U.S. Congress—the constituent assemblage of the American people—did not obstruct the military by legislative means.

Similar interrelationships exist in terms of *jus in bello* principles, as seen in the case of the treatment of prisoners of war. For example, the perception of moral misconduct on the part of the military at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere invited both public and government scrutiny concerning the suggestion that the military or its members had violated the bond of moral trust between it and the government and between it and the people.

Conclusion

All of this points to the conclusion that the actors in Clausewitz's trinity not only exert a profound influence upon one another in the calculus of war, but also

that their interactions are permeated with moral considerations of the kind enshrined by the just war tradition. That is to say, in spite of Clausewitz's ostensibly realist rhetoric, it appears that the trinity is useful as, among other things, an explanatory device for matters of moral import, as set forth by the just war tradition.

If ever there was a time, before or after Clausewitz, when military realists should have believed that they could afford the "luxury" of undertaking war without respect to moral considerations, that time certainly is past. As the United States faces the increasingly ominous prospect of a "Long War" in southwest Asia without any certain terminus, it becomes crucial for that nation to reflect carefully upon the nature of the moral considerations that connect the elements of the trinity. This is so because, if for no other reason, the Information Age has so facilitated real-time and near-real-time reporting of political deliberations and battlefield events that the private citizen no longer can be considered shrouded in "invincible ignorance"¹⁶ such that only government or military leaders can be regarded as occupying a sufficiently informed position from which to reflect upon just war considerations. On the contrary, just war considerations are now part of the public debate across the entire social spectrum--that is to say, throughout the entirety of Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity." Indeed, all three actors in the trinity have a vested interest—not only in the political and economic outcomes of a war, but—also in the moral outcomes of war. For example, if justifications for going to war are questionable or difficult to demonstrate (as some would argue was the case in the U.S. attempt to justify the invasion of Iraq on the basis of alleged

evidence of the presence of weapons of mass destruction),¹⁷ the continual availability of news reports effectively places the people in a position, along with government and military, to opine upon the moral propriety of war thus justified. Similarly, if morally outrageous behavior is manifest on or near the battlefield (as in the case at Abu Ghraib prison),¹⁸ modern telecommunications will ensure that that behavior is impossible to hide.

In sum, the world of the 21st century can ill afford conceptual compartmentalization and, accordingly, should consider seriously the interrelationship among the components of the just war tradition and the components of Clausewitz's trinity." One ignores the political connections among the elements of the trinity at the risk of losing on the battlefield. One ignores the moral connections among the elements of the trinity at the risk of corroding the bonds of moral obligation which bind together the actors in the trinity—and, at worst, at the risk of breaking those bonds altogether.¹⁹ Indeed, the Information Age has laid open to the plain view of all—the military, the government, and the people—the moral implications of war-making decisions by government and the violent execution of "policy . . . carried on by other means"²⁰ by the military; and in the Information Age, that nexus no longer can be ignored.

¹ This study takes its citations in English translation from Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

² Note that the claim here is not that all wars are fought in strict accordance with the just war tradition, but merely that contesting parties almost invariably weigh just war-theoretical considerations when making strategic decisions about going to war or about conducting wars already begun.

³ The spirit of pre-Information Age views on the role of public opinion in matters involving the intersection of morality and military strategy are captured in the famous conversation, as imagined by Shakespeare, of King Henry V, who, incognito, discusses with two common soldiers

the merits of the claim that the cause for which the king prosecutes his war with France is indeed a just cause. "That's more than we know" responds one. "Ay, or more than we should seek after," responds another; "for we know enough, if we know we are the king's subjects: if his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us." Then the first rejoins, "But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make." For, if those soldiers led by the king "do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it; whom to disobey were against all proportion of subjection" (See William Shakespeare, "Henry V"; available online at <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/mirror/classics.mit.edu/Shakespeare/henryv/full.html>, internet, accessed 3 January 2008). The point of the conversation is succinctly encapsulated in the words of Franciscus de Victoria, who argues, "if in a doubtful matter a man has taken counsel with the wise and has accepted their ruling that the thing is lawful, he is safe in conscience—at any rate until he receives a second opinion and is driven to doubt or to believe the contrary by a person of such authority, or by reasons of such cogency, as ought to affect his judgment. This is notorious, for he does all that in him lies and so his ignorance is invincible" (See Franciscus de Victoria, "The First Relectio, Of The Reverend Father, Brother Franciscus De Victoria, On The Indians Lately Discovered," available online at http://www.constitution.org/victoria/victoria_4.htm).

⁴ Clausewitz, 89.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 75, 85-86, 91, 93, 97, 100, 102, 104, 110-111, 127, 136-138, 177-178, 183-186, 188-189, 201, 206, 217, 231-232, 234, 242, 245, 250, 253-254, 256, 261, 271, 331, 333, 363, 366, 372, 415, 466, 470-471, 475, 477, 483, 528, 530, 532, 545, 549, 595, 597, 601, 604, 606, and 620. Compare with the original German in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (München: Ullstein Verlag, 2003). Note that Howard and Paret correctly translate "moralisch" and its variations into English as "moral" or its variations, or as "morale")

¹⁰ Clausewitz, 87.

¹¹ Ibid., 76.

¹² Although to deal with this issue at length would take us afield from the present task, it should be noted, in passing at least, that Clausewitz may not have been the thorough-going realist that he often is portrayed to be. Janeen Klinger notes: "Not only was Clausewitz not the Prussian aggressor or proponent of total war as he is sometimes caricatured, but he was a genuine voice of moderation among Prussian military leaders. An example of his moderation can be found in his discussion of the balance of power in Book 6, Chapter 6. His analysis suggests that common effort and common interest ultimately maintained the balance of power rather than sheer military might—a view that in contemporary social science places his ideas closer to liberal international relations theory than to realism. After Napoleon's final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo, many of Clausewitz's contemporaries were urging revenge against France while Clausewitz resisted this temptation. Ultimately, Clausewitz's moderation meant that he had a better grasp of the requisite conditions for a lasting peace agreement. He expressed his views in a candid letter to his wife: 'My dearest wish now is that this aftermath should soon be finished. I dislike this position of having my foot upon someone's neck, and the endless conflicts of interests and parties are something I do not understand. Historically, the English will play a better role in this catastrophe, because they do not seem to have come here with a passion for revenge and for settling old

scores, but rather like a master who wishes to discipline with proud coldness and immaculate purity; in brief, with greater distinction than ourselves.” See Janeen Klinger, “The Social Science of Carl von Clausewitz, *Parameters*, Spring 2006, 81-82.

¹³ Clausewitz, 89.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Department of the Army, *Law of Land Warfare*, Field Manual 27-10 (Washington: Government Printing Office, July, 1956), 4.

¹⁶ See Paul Christopher, *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction to Legal and Moral Issues* 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 57 ff.

¹⁷ Angus Reid Global Monitor: Polls & Research, “Americans Still Peeved at Iraq WMD Reports;” available online at <http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/index.cfm/fuseaction/viewItem/itemID/13423>; Internet; accessed 28 October 2006.

¹⁸ Global Policy Forum, Occupation and Rule in Iraq: Torture and Prison Abuse; available online at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/tortureindex.htm>; Internet; accessed 28 October 2006.

¹⁹ John Mark Mattox, “The Moral Foundations of Army Officership,” Chapter 17 in *The Future of the Army Profession*, 2d ed., ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 387-408.

²⁰ Clausewitz, 87.