



Essay

Reading Clausewitz, reimagining the practice of strategy

Strategic Organization

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Abstract

Strategy and organization theory enjoy a reawakening interest in historical analysis. In this essay, we suggest that this engagement should include strategy's linkage to the history of military strategy. We develop our argument through an exegesis of Carl von Clausewitz' treatise *On War*. We claim that Clausewitz' theorization of strategy advances the ongoing scholarly conversation on the practice of strategy in three specific ways. First, he defines a distinctive locus for the notion of strategy as the bridge between policy and tactics; in so doing, he addresses what has been criticized as strategy's conceptual drift. Second, with Clausewitz, we can pose the question of strategy's effectiveness in a critical, reflexive way. This opens up a way to answer the "so-what" question that has hampered strategy as practice research. Third, as an educator in military affairs of the Crown Prince, Clausewitz invites reflection on strategy's pedagogy. Following Clausewitz, strategy may not want to concern itself with distilling the next practice from past history but immerse strategy students in great detail in history in order to develop their critical faculties.

Keywords

Clausewitz, history, policy, strategy as practice, tactics, war

Introduction

Frequently cited, rarely read, and even less engaged with, such is Clausewitz' fate in studies of strategy and organization. Yet, we currently witness a revival of historical analysis in strategy and organization theory. Broadening this agenda in this essay, we discuss strategy's own history of thought focusing on its relationship with military strategy. We contribute to such an endeavor by engaging with the work of the Prussian General and writer Carl von Clausewitz. Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) noted the fundamental closeness of the two fields:

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Rather than comparing [war] to art we could more accurately compare it to commerce, which is also a conflict of human interests and activities; and it is still closer to politics, which in turn may be considered as a kind of commerce on a larger scale. (p. 149)

It is surprising that while both organizational and military strategy share Clausewitz as their founding (grand-)father, there is currently not much cross-fertilization of the two traditions.

Why might such a conversation matter? Clausewitz' treatise *On War*—"the most important book on strategy ever written" (Strachan, 2007: 244)—provides three lessons for organizational strategy. First, Clausewitz delimits the role of strategy in the face of the truly disruptive Napoleonic wars, inviting us to rethink the possibility of strategy in times of disruptive change (a theme usually attributed exclusively to our present). In so doing, he investigates strategy's relation to policy on the one hand and tactics on the other, thus theorizing the practice of strategy as a bridge between the overarching purpose of war and actual conduct on the battlefield. For strategy as practice scholarship in particular (see Vaara and Whittington, 2012, for a review), this means shifting the focus of analysis toward bridging work between policy (i.e. purpose and identity) and tactics (i.e. operations). Second, General Clausewitz was concerned with strategy's effectiveness and, of course, victory. But he experienced the difficult relationship between winning and losing: the stronger army may win battles only to lose the war. This puzzle invites reflection on the intricate nature of strategy's effectiveness which we (with Freedman, 2013, 2017) define as strategy's ability to "create power." Again, for strategy as practice scholarship, this provides an interesting extension of its vocabulary, allowing engagement with important questions of effectiveness without falling back into either purely critical or overly normative positions. Finally, as an educator, Clausewitz was deeply concerned with how strategy could be taught in the classroom. He focused on the importance of training the strategist's own judgment which represents an interesting pedagogical alternative to theory-light, often normative case study teaching and critical approaches.

Thus, and in short, our aim with this essay is to advance the research agenda on the practice of organizational strategy by drawing on Clausewitz. Of course, given that Clausewitz wrote his oeuvre almost 200 years ago, he does not provide straightforward answers for problems of today, but what Clausewitz can do is help us to problematize the present way of thinking strategy, to pose different questions, and to propose an alternative analytical vocabulary.

Our essay is structured as follows. First, we describe the status quo of military strategy and its radical disruption through Napoleonic warfare. We then turn to Clausewitz' theory of strategy as the search for new guiding principles in the midst of this radical disruption. We conclude with a discussion of how our reading of Clausewitz might challenge and change ongoing conversations in strategy and organization theory.

Napoleonic disruptions

Before Clausewitz: the quest for formalization of strategy

Clausewitz (1780–1831) traced his ideas over the course of several decades, collecting them in his unfinished manuscript *On War* which was published posthumously in 1832 by his wife. Clausewitz was actively engaged on the battlefield and, later on, in charge of instructing the Prussian Prince in the conduct of war. Thus, for him, strategy was primarily a practical concern that needed to be answered through experience: "Just as some plants bear fruit only if they don't shoot up too high, so in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned and the plant kept close to its proper soil—experience" (Clausewitz, [1832]1989: 61).

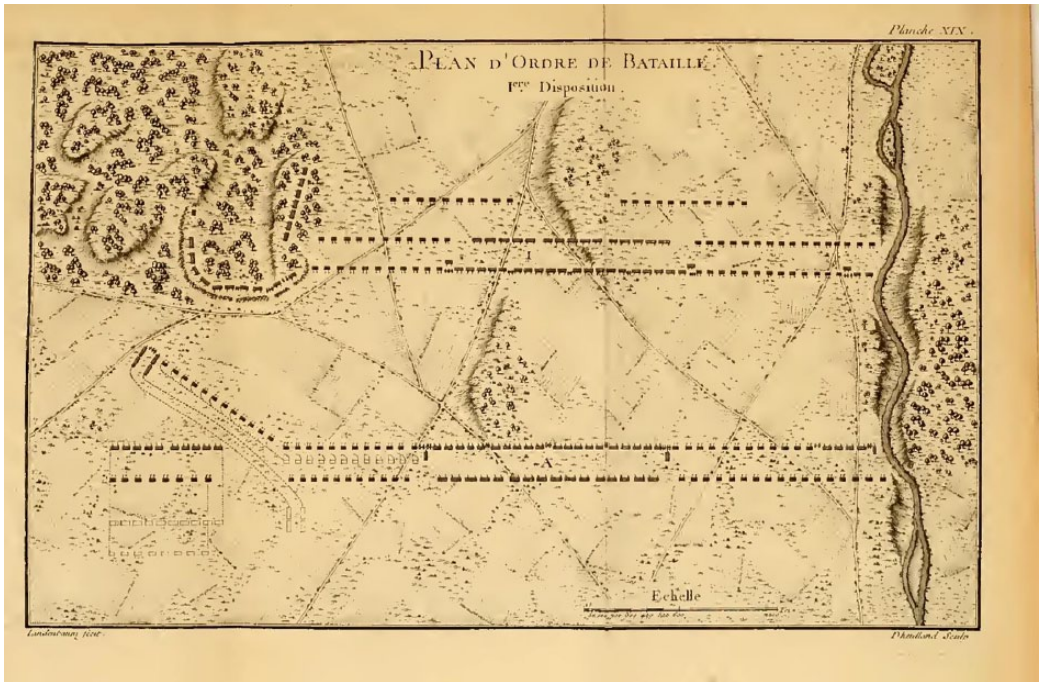


Figure 1. Map of battlefield, following principles of geometry.

The soil in which Clausewitz grew his ideas was one of radical disruption. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars from 1792 to 1815 expanded military efforts vastly in both scope and intensity. When Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, for instance, his *Grande Armée* counted almost half a million men, while the Battle of Leipzig the following year was fought over 4 days, involving 600,000 soldiers on both sides. In the 18th century, war had been contained to smaller battles that were limited in time, space, and intensity. This more contained form of warfare was guided by a military theory that was modeled on geometry. Around 1750, for instance, the French theorists of war Jacques-François de Chastenet de Puysegur and Lancelot Turpin de Crissé translated the design of material defense structures to the arrangement of soldiers, shaping “human material” according to the same laws of geometry (Figure 1).

The result of such formalized warfare was a strict choreography, perhaps best embodied in the maneuvers of Frederick the Great, King of Prussia from 1740 until 1786.

Napoleonic warfare, distinguished by its unprecedented scale, dynamic, and destructive force, posed a serious challenge to this logic of strategy based on geometry. As the *Grande Armée* swept through Europe (Napoleon reportedly stated that the best soldier is not so much the one who fights as the one who marches), military strategy theory had to retreat and find new ground from where to formulate propositions that could provide a sound basis for action. Strategy based on geometry became obsolete as Clausewitz ([1809] 1992) lamented in his letter to the German philosopher Fichte: “I have seen all the traditional opinions and forms of military power among which I grew up come apart like rotten timber and collapse in the swift stream of events” (p. 280).

War's radical contingency

In response to the “rotten timber” that the disruptive Napoleonic Wars left behind, Clausewitz developed a concept of strategy that addressed the contingencies on the battlefield. The new warfare was riddled with elements beyond the control and comprehension of the decision maker, transforming war into an “empire of chance” (Engberg-Pedersen, 2015). Hence, war was not a geometric puzzle or a chess game—the favorite metaphor of 18th century military theory. Rather, Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) argued, “in the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards” (p. 86). The conditions and context for strategy had become shrouded in a “fog of war” that defied logical analysis. Clausewitz defined three specific difficulties for the strategist.

First, the strategist faces what Nobel laureate Herbert Simon would describe much later as “bounded rationality”:

Since all information and assumptions are open to doubt, and with chance at work everywhere, the commander continually finds that things are not as he expected. [...] During an operation decisions have usually to be made at once: there may be no time to review the situation or even to think it through. Usually, of course, new information and reevaluation are not enough to make us give up our intentions: they only call them in question. *We now know more, but this makes us more, not less uncertain.* (Clausewitz, [1832] 1989: 102; added emphasis).

This is a remarkably contemporary analysis: Clausewitz suggests that information is difficult to gather and process in the midst of the fog of war, but even if these obstacles are overcome, the strategist’s uncertainty about what to do increases with the amount of information at hand.

A second major difficulty is friction. Clausewitz ([1812] 2003) elaborates in his memorandum for the Crown Prince that the “basic principles of warfare” are “within the reach of any well-organized mind”:

Even the application of these principles on maps or on paper presents no difficulty, and to have devised a good plan of operations is no great masterpiece. The great difficulty is this: *to remain faithful throughout to the principles we have laid down for ourselves.* [...] The conduct of war resembles the workings of an intricate machine with tremendous friction, so that combinations which are easily planned on paper can be executed only with great effort. (pp. 60–61).

Friction is what makes the difference between war on paper and war on the battlefield, as Clausewitz warns. Warfare is like “walking in water”: what looks effortless and simple on land becomes difficult, says Clausewitz ([1832] 1989):

Friction is the only concept that more or less corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper. [...] In theory it sounds reasonable enough: a battalion commander’s duty is to carry out his orders; discipline welds the battalion together, its commander must be a man of tested capacity, and so the great beam turns on its iron pivot with a minimum of friction. In fact, it is different, and every fault and exaggeration of the theory is instantly exposed in war. A battalion is made up of individuals, the least important of whom may chance to delay things or somehow make them go wrong. [...] This tremendous friction, which cannot, as in mechanics, be reduced to a few points, is everywhere in contact with chance, and brings about effects that cannot be measured, just because they are largely due to chance. (pp. 119–120)

Thus Clausewitz ([1812] 2003) posits that the only thing one can be sure of is that “an army will never be in the condition supposed by someone following its operations from an armchair” (p. 65).

There is an unbridgeable gulf between war on paper and war in the field, between our capacity to plan and the contingency of events. This point is echoed in research on business strategy: for instance, MacKay and Chia (2013) analyzed friction as a result of the unintended consequences of decisions and unowned processes.

The third major difficulty for the development of a theory of strategy derives from the fact that war is not an isolated act; rather, it is constituted through *Wechselwirkung*, that is, psychological and combat forces that feed back on and act upon each other. While both of these forces are decisive in battle, especially the former evade quantification and hence calculation. Moreover, war is shaped by how actors imagine possible future outcomes (for instance, the threat of annihilation might motivate a small army to defeat a larger one). If the present is contingent upon principally open futures, war defies logical analysis. Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) concludes, war could be solved like an equation only if

(a) war were a wholly isolated act, occurring suddenly and not produced by previous events in the political world; (b) it consisted of a single decisive act or a set of simultaneous ones; (c) the decision achieved was complete and perfect in itself, uninfluenced by any previous estimate of the political situation it would bring about. (p. 78)

But because the future feeds back on the present, a linear approach to strategy development is necessarily insufficient. Echoing this insight, strategy research has explored the nonlinearity of time in strategy and its resulting performative effects (see Kornberger and Clegg, 2011).

In sum, while Napoleon crushed armies, his disruptive warfare also crushed the established logic of military strategy: information uncertainty and bounded rationality, the friction of the military apparatus, and the complex interplay of qualitative and quantitative forces make war the empire of chance. Facing such disruption, what are the conditions of possibility for a theory of strategy? Or closer to Clausewitz' pragmatic concern: how should the Prince be taught strategy—without presenting him with laws that will not withstand the encounter with reality nor leaving him with a sense that it is luck and chance that prevail?

The possibility of strategy in the age of disruption

What is strategy (not)?

Clausewitz' project is a critical project in that it explores the limitations of the possibility of strategy in the age of disruption. As we have seen, he criticizes strategy models based on untenable formalizations of a process that is inherently contingent. *On War* features a short chapter devoted to strategy which begins with a conventional analytical move:

The strategic elements that affect the use of engagements may be classified into various types: moral, physical, mathematical, geographical, and statistical (Clausewitz, [1832] 1989: 183).

But Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) quickly changes course:

It would however be disastrous to try to develop our understanding of strategy by analyzing these factors in isolation, since they are usually interconnected in each military action in manifold and intricate ways. A dreary analytical labyrinth would result, a nightmare in which one tried in vain to bridge the gulf between this abstract basis and the facts of life. Heaven protect the theorist from such an undertaking! (p. 183).

This stance runs through Clausewitz' oeuvre: for him, it is impossible to define a theory of strategy or a model of strategy that could encompass the contingencies on the battlefield. There is

no “algebra of action” (Clausewitz, [1832] 1989: 75) to guide the strategist. Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) refers to Kant’s dictum that there can be no “Newton of the blade of grass” for Newton needed a fixed, stable world for articulating his laws. War is a “conflict of living forces” (p. 149); through its uncertainties, its friction, and its reactivity, it defies calculation and prediction. Thus the art of war is “most at home with those societies who do not seem to have one, rather than with those who exhaust themselves in war-related inventions” (Clausewitz, [1809] 1992). In other words, formalization subverts the art of war. It leads to the “deterioration of the art of war in petty craftsmanship,” which destroys the “spirit” of war and drives out any “entrepreneurial spirit.” Research in business strategy resonates with this critique at an overly formalized, static and rational approach (e.g. Chia and Holt, 2009).

Strategy as interface between policy and tactics

Given this critical stance, how to think strategy? Clausewitz’ ([1832] 1989) strategy concept is narrow and precise. He defines strategy as the “use of the engagement for the goal of the war” (p. 128). Clausewitz packs three important cues into this deceptively simple definition. First, strategy is concerned with the *use* of the engagement—neither its preparation nor its actual conduct. Rather, he suggests that victory (or defeat) do not speak for themselves but need to be interpreted, and their consequences need to be enacted in order to become effective. Second, the reference for strategy is the engagement—in other words, the battle itself. But the battle is not directed by strategy; rather, strategy is concerned with the use of the battle for the purpose set by policy,¹ which leads to the third point: the goal of war. This goal is strategy’s horizon but again Clausewitz suggests that the goal is outside of strategy’s domain.

This reading opens up an understanding of strategy as one element in a triangle: strategy does not consist in fighting battles nor in making policy, but as the mediating element between them. Policy and tactics envelop strategy; or put differently: strategy is the bridge between policy and tactics (Gray, 2010). Policy itself is concerned with the objectives of war—it is about setting the ends to which war might be one possible means. This defines the domain of politics and diplomacy, of national interests and alliances. Its locus is the ruler’s desk or the salon where guests, foreign and local, discuss the state of affairs. In policy, war is but one possible instrument to achieve its objectives. The primacy of policy over war is restated in a different way in Clausewitz’ famous dictum that “war is politics by other means.” War “has to be treated as a part of some other whole; the name of which is policy” (Clausewitz, [1832] 1989: 606):

Once again: war is an instrument of policy. It must necessarily bear the character of policy and measure by its standards. The conduct of war, in its great outlines, is therefore policy itself, which takes up the sword in place of the pen, but does not on that account cease to think according to its own laws. (Clausewitz, [1832] 1989: 610)

Tactics constitutes the third point of the triangle with its own, specific locus: the battlefield. For Clausewitz, tactics describes the actual use of the armed forces in the engagement. In this domain, practices differ substantially from those in the realm of policy. Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) captures the ability to make the appropriate decisions on the battlefield as “the tact of judgment”:

War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. Here, then, above all a fine and penetrating mind is called for, to feel out the truth by the tact of its judgment. (p. 101)²

For Clausewitz ([1832] 1989), the tact of judgment is characterized by “two qualities” that are indispensable “for the mind to emerge unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen” (p. 102). He described these qualities as *coup d’oeil* defined as the ability to make sense of a given situation without being able to fully analyze it, and as *courage d’esprit* understood as the determination and incisiveness to act despite the lack of certainty (see Kornberger et al., 2019). For Clausewitz ([1832] 1989), tactics is something that can be learned and, at least to some extent, be generalized in rules of thumb: it “is that part of war in which theory can develop most fully into a positive doctrine” (p. 152).

Strategy’s relation between policy and tactics is crucial as Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) argues, “According to our classification, then, tactics *teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement*; strategy, *the use of engagements for the object of the war*” (p. 128). Strategy has to follow tactics onto the battlefield:

[...] it follows, as a matter of course, that strategy must go with the army to the field in order to arrange particulars on the spot, and to make the modifications in the general plan which incessantly become necessary in war. Strategy can therefore never take its hand from the work for a moment. (Clausewitz, [1832] 1989: 177)³

Strategy, in other words, cannot think of passing over to “implementation” of its propositions; rather, strategy must move with the army onto the battlefield and constantly modify itself. Clausewitz ([1832] 1989) goes even further when he suggests that strategy “draws near to tactics in order to receive the completed assignment from it” (p. 267). This is an important formulation: strategy receives its assignment—its task—from tactics; not the other way round. Clausewitz suggests that tactics drive strategy, a reading supported by Strachan (2007: 116) who argued that tactics shape, lead, and even dominate strategy. Strachan (2007: 45) describes the Battle of Jena as one of the decisive battles in history because of the “strategic exploitation of tactical triumph.” What happened on the battlefield was determined by tactics; but what to make of the battle—how to use the battle for the objective of war—was a matter of strategy: “Strategy was what gave fighting significance; it exploited success on the battlefield and it created the conditions for the next battle, while victory itself was gained through combat and therefore was a matter of tactics” (Strachan, 2007: 107).

What is strategy for Clausewitz, then? Strategy is the interface between policy and tactics: on the battlefield, it is the General’s tactics that make the difference; on the conference table, political leadership defines the “bigger whole” that envelops strategy. Strategy is suspended between tactics and policy. Without a space proper, strategy is constantly on the move between the conference table and the battlefield. Strategy is the orchestration of the dialogue between the politician and the military leader—the harmonization of the two logics, not the subordination of one to the other. Indeed, Clausewitz is highly aware of the competition between these two logics. At times, this may lead to an internecine warfare between the two spheres—the military and the political—and strategy must step in as the peacemaker to bring them to terms with one another. Therein lies the reason why Clausewitz does not define strategy as all-encompassing endeavor: war and policy follow different logics and practices; the strategist’s task is to bridge both, military power and political prowess (Gray, 2010).

Implications, applications

The stress test for our exegesis is this, then: how does our engagement with Clausewitz alter the conversation in strategy and organization research? With Clausewitz, we can critically interrogate

the formalizations via model building of much mainstream strategy such as Porter's Five Forces, the VRIN model, the Blue Ocean model, or others. They represent formalized approaches that supposedly draw on the laws of competition and promise superior performance. With Clausewitz, these efforts resemble pre-Napoleonic warfare: they are formalizations that lead into a "dreary analytical labyrinth." Since there is no algebra of action, the search for a law of war or a model-based strategy is doomed to fail.

Instead Clausewitz suggested that strategy is an ongoing activity that "must go with the army to the field in order to arrange particulars on the spot"; the modifications of the "general plan" is "incessantly necessary in war" and that strategy "can therefore never take its hand from the work for a moment." Thus a Clausewitzian reading of strategy contributes to the strategy as practice tradition (for excellent reviews, see Burgelman et al., 2018; Cabantous et al., 2018; Carter and Whittle, 2018; Vaara and Whittington, 2012) adding three distinct insights to the conversation.

Redefining strategy practice

Clausewitz offers an alternative understanding of the practice of strategy. For him, strategy needs to be read in the context of two separate, yet related spheres—that is, policy and tactics. Policy is about setting goals; tactics is concerned with the actual conduct on the battlefield. Strategy is the interface between these two domains: its function is to make sense of war and use fighting's results for meaningful policy objectives. Setting policy and conduct on the battlefield are for Clausewitz guided by different logics and practices, yet the crucial linkage between both—the use of the engagement for the objective of the war—is what the strategist is concerned with. Thus, strategy is the bridge between policy and tactics (Gray, 2010). Consequently, the locus of strategy shifts toward the interface that structures the interaction between what is desirable (policy) and what is possible (tactics). At its core, Clausewitz proposes, the practice of strategy is concerned with the organization of the interface between the two, how that which is possible shapes action and how action delimits what is imagined as possible. This entails a constant tinkering with both short-term means and long-term possibilities along a time axis. Put differently, means and ends, tactics and policy need to co-evolve in constant feedback loops. For Clausewitz, this perpetual exchange between the rapid *coup d'oeil* and *courage d'esprit* on one hand and policy's *longue durée* on the other hand marks strategy's complex temporality.

We argue that this conceptualization of strategy is useful for future research on the practice of organizational strategy as well. To date, strategy as practice scholarship has studied meetings, sensemaking, discourse, and other micro-aspects of strategy work; but in so doing, it has often lost sight of the connection between situated, embodied, and local practice *and* big picture issues or what Clausewitz calls policy (Suddaby et al., 2013). Clausewitz' conceptualization of strategy overcomes current tendencies toward such "micro-isolationism" (Seidl and Whittington, 2014: 1408) as it defines the relationship between policy and tactics as the locus of strategizing. Put differently, strategizing is fundamentally a relational activity that spans modes of engagement (sword and pen), spaces (battlefield and conference table), and temporalities (ad hoc of tactics and *longue durée*). Thus, Clausewitz remedies what has been criticized as conceptual drift in strategy as practice scholarship (Carter et al., 2008; Mantere, 2005): he defines a locus proper for strategy practice as the bridge between policy and tactics; while both domains follow their own logic, both are held together by strategy.

How can Clausewitz' triangle be translated into ongoing conversations in strategy as practice scholarship? And why is his seemingly narrow definition of strategy as bridging a potentially useful tool for thinking? Prior to the disruptive Napoleonic Wars, strategy was indeed applied geometry connecting policy with conduct on the battlefield through a straight line. Clausewitz witnessed

this order to “come apart like rotten timber and collapse in the swift stream of events.” This diagnosis foreshadows the loss of faith in large-scale strategic planning as Mintzberg and others have discussed it. In response, Clausewitz develops an innovative analysis: on the one hand, there is the realm of tactics, encompassing that which concerns the conduct of business on an everyday level; on the other hand, there is setting of policy, that is, defining an organization’s identity and purpose (Mayer, 2018; see forthcoming SI in *SO!* on *Exploring the strategy-identity nexus*). With Clausewitz, we argue that it is the strategist’s first and foremost task to mediate between these two functionally differentiated domains. What matters here is that in both military and business strategy, there is a strong mutual dependency between tactics and policy: long-term plans and goals are conditioned by tactical possibilities and constraints, and vice versa. To provide more of a heuristic than an example, under Steve Jobs, Apple’s strategy effectively used a series of successes on the initially tactical level (i.e. iPod, iPad, iPhone) to reshape the purpose and identity of the organization. Indeed, what was remarkable about Jobs as strategist was his ability to drive hands-on product development workshops while not losing sight of big picture issues (Isaacson, 2011). With Clausewitz, we propose a shift in the locus of analysis from the micro of everyday strategizing toward an analysis of the ongoing bridging work between tactical possibilities and constraints on one hand and overarching organizational purpose and identity on the other hand. Studying interfaces, temporalities, and practices that structure this bridging work points toward an inspiring future research agenda.

Rethinking strategy’s effectiveness

Not surprisingly, as an experienced general, Clausewitz understood strategy as directed against an enemy with the aim to achieve victory. He could not accept chance, coincidence, or luck to decide outcomes of battles. But victory itself is a complex phenomenon, as Clausewitz cautions: military history knows of many generals who won battles and lost wars. Business history knows of many organizations that introduced break-through innovations but ultimately failed (see Christensen, 1997).

Addressing this somehow paradoxical relationship, Clausewitz argues that an effective strategy is one that relentlessly calibrates and re-calibrates conduct on the battlefield with policy objectives. Strategy moves onto the battlefield, not to direct action but to understand and use the outcome of the battle for the purpose of war. In other words, strategy’s measure of effectiveness is not the execution of a plan but its ability to use the result of fighting for policy ends. On the other side of the bridge, strategic effectiveness means informing policymakers about attainable and desirable purposes given tactical realities. Superior results are an outcome of this bridging function.

Clausewitz’s conceptualization of strategy’s effectiveness has potentially interesting implications for strategy as practice research. The strategy as practice perspective has indeed been criticized for dodging the question of effectiveness or “doing merely the equivalent of observing individuals ‘flipping burgers’” (Burgelman et al., 2018: 540; Mantere, 2005). Clausewitz helps to rethink the relation between strategy and effectiveness, avoiding a perhaps overoptimistic picture of organizational plasticity and the hopeful idea of organizational adaptability. Clausewitz proposes focusing on the relation between actual fighting and policy. Effectiveness, he argues, lies in relating one domain to the other, ensuring that tactical success, perhaps even a heroic loss, contributes positively to accomplishing policy objectives. Thus, effective strategy, to use the ingenious definition of military historian Sir Lawrence Freedman (2013), becomes “the art of creating power.”

Military history provides many examples: Lawrence of Arabia’s (1926) strategy of guerilla warfare, Hart’s (1941) indirect approach or bloodier, wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and most recently Iraq all show that a stronger opponent may lose a war because of its inability to relate

superior strength and resulting tactical success on the battlefield to desired policy outcomes. With Clausewitz, we can frame the question of strategy's effectiveness in a critical, reflexive way. This opens possibilities to address the "so-what" question that has often hampered strategy as practice research. Questions guiding such an inquiry could include: How does a weaker opponent manage to create power and use it effectively against a stronger opponent? Through which means does tactical success in a competitive battle become meaningful beyond the moment? Translated into an organizational language: how can a challenger (such as a start-up or a movement) gain power in a marketplace dominated by established players? And how can such a challenger use a tactical success (in a specific product category, for instance) to buttress its strategic position in the longer term? Research on start-ups that beat incumbents at their own game (Cusumano and Yoffie, 1999) or renegade organizations that change the rules of the game (Durand and Vergne, 2012) are good examples for such strategic effectiveness.

Strategy's pedagogy

Clausewitz was deeply concerned with the pedagogy of strategy—after all Clausewitz was responsible for the military education of the Prussian Crown Prince. Clausewitz asked, if strategy is based on experience, how could it be taught in the classroom, far from the theater of war? Clausewitz suggests that it is important for students to immerse themselves in case studies that are as historically accurate as possible in order to train their judgment. The tact of judgment is a skill that is at once more abstract and at the same time more concrete than the specific tactical or strategic lessons drawn from the case study: more abstract because judgment cannot be reduced to the lesson that emerged from the case, and more concrete because it shifts the focus from purely cognitive enlightenment (if this happens, then one should do that . . .) to an embodied, intuitive praxis. Knowledge must become capability, Clausewitz ([1832] 1989: 147) insists. And in lieu of actual combat experience, the best way to develop such embodied knowledge is through the in-depth study of history.

For strategy as practice scholarship, this concern with teaching strategy is pivotal given its aim to be close to and useful for practitioners (Whittington, 1996). Clausewitz' use of strategy history differs from common case study approaches that offer templates in the form of best practice, toolkits, or models. Clausewitz attributes a distinct pedagogy to historical case studies. Engagement with *coup d'oeil* and *courage d'esprit* in the battlefield can result in a "positive doctrine." In this sense, detailed historical studies may guide the future leader in "self-education." But—and this is an important critical injunction—theory "should not accompany him to the battlefield" (Clausewitz, [1832] 1989: 141). In other words, the study of history is the most apt way to prepare the strategist's mind for future war, but only if it does not entertain "any absurd claim to communicate the secret of victory" (Aron, 1983: viii). Transferred into the classroom, this means that strategy should not concern itself with distilling next practice from past history. Rather, it should immerse students in history rich in detail and complexity (going beyond the typical case study approach) and utilize this engagement to train the critical faculties of students of strategy. For instance, studying the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) and Athens' fatal decision to invade Sicily still provides invaluable lessons for contemporary strategic challenges, as Gaddis (2018) showed magisterially.

Conclusion: some shared concerns between military and organizational strategy

Our concluding remarks highlight some of the shared concerns that could inspire future engagement between military and organization strategy scholars (Kornberger, 2013).

First, history matters. As the door to the future opens inwards, to go through, one has to take a step back. When stepping back, we find a rich repository of themes that might foster future dialogue. One of the most eminent examples is cold war rationality and its focus on game theory that inspired much of early business strategy (Erickson et al., 2013). More recently, “netwar” describes warfare conducted by networked forms of organization that rely heavily on information technology and strong narratives that are usually associated with social movements (Freedman, 2017: 27). Or to mention a third example, in his noteworthy account of leading the Joint Special Operations Task Force in the second Iraq war, General Stanley McChrystal (2015) argued that the biggest “limiting factor” for military success was “the mundane art of management” (p. 32). In order to overcome this “limfac,” he re-organized his unit’s strategy-making practices with the aim that their “structure” would “become their strategy” (McChrystal, 2015: 103). The three examples that stretch across the 20th century and beyond offer a shared epistemic space between military and organizational strategy that future research could explore. For organizational strategists, this would be a valuable opportunity to learn from the perhaps most complex and high-stakes context of strategy practice (e.g. Grint, 2014).

Second, dialogue could help understanding strategic change. For instance, in both fields, there is a strong reliance on technological innovation as the engine of change and a source of competitive advantage. Proponents of the Revolution in Military Affairs argued that soon “war will become an essentially frictionless engineering exercise” (Singer, 2009: 185). Critical military strategy cautions against such optimism arguing that “[e]ven for modern Western forces, technology encouraged a fantasy of a war that was fast, easy, and decisive: yet, they still found themselves facing ‘slow, bitter and indecisive war’” (Freedman, 2017: 279). A deeper engagement with the history of military strategy may prevent strategists from placing too much faith in the power of technology. Indeed, as Freedman (2017) notes, some of the most effective attacks of the 21st century were conducted by terrorists armed with knives, guns, or trucks. This serves as a stark reminder that what matters strategically is the *use* of the battle for the pursuit of the larger objective. For organizational strategists, work on indirect strategy (Hart, 1941) and guerilla warfare (Lawrence, 1926) mentioned above can help to understand how strategy actually creates power to change the state of affairs, rather than how it supposedly just uses the means handed to it by technological advances.

A third theme for future interdisciplinary work is the growing convergence between military and civil operations and the important question of governance of emerging military–civilian networks. Since World War II, military strategy has observed, and in some cases instigated, a shift from contained conflicts between state actors to more widespread non-combat conflicts including crisis management or responses to natural disasters. In response scholars have developed novel concepts such as network centric warfare (Alberts et al., 1999), network strategy (Slaughter, 2017), or civil–military strategies to hybrid threats (Cusumano and Corbe, 2018). Organizational strategists who focus on open strategy (Hautz et al., 2017), wicked problems and grand challenges may be interested in these well-documented strategies for networked collective action.

In sum, we hope our essay provides a starting point for further conversation between military and organization strategy, and albeit finishing it duly with a full stop, we heed the historian’s wisdom that in history every full stop is a comma in waiting.

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Notes

1. In the German original, Clausewitz uses the concept of *Politik* which means both policy and politics. We will use policy as translation as we focus on the goal-oriented aspects of *Politik* rather than its adversarial making (politics).
2. We differ here from Howard and Paret who omit the important word “tact” in their translation.
3. We differ again from Howard and Paret’s translation who write that “the strategist must maintain control throughout”; in our view, this is quite an interpretative stretch.

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