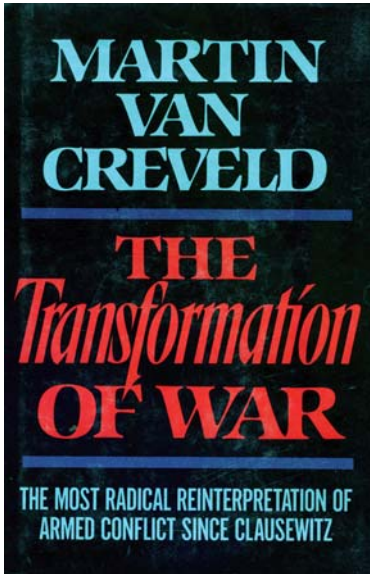


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## NOTE TO FILE—ON “NON-TRINITARIAN” CONFLICT

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Mr. Vincent J. Curtis



Books that bear titles like *The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict Since Clausewitz* are often written by authors who will make you read to the end of the book to deliver the punch line to the joke; or they really don't know what they are talking about.<sup>1</sup> While the book with that title is entertaining to read, the title is not an inside joke. And it didn't take long for author Martin van Creveld to get a comeuppance.

The book was written in 1990, and even before it hit the presses, Operation DESERT STORM demonstrated that the grand, old Napoleonic smash 'em up still held sway, contrary to van Creveld's thesis. Since then, we've seen Gulf War II, and the conquest of Afghanistan by the Northern Alliance, both of which looked suspiciously Napoleonic in character. As this is being written, the battle between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon also features a great deal of noise and smoke.

Nevertheless, this writer finally did read the book in preparation for a forthcoming paper on the Three Block War. Both Martin van Creveld and William S. Lind are forecasting the demise of the state, and as Three Block wars tend to occur in states that are suffering demise, this writer thought it would be prudent to read what these two famous military theoreticians had to say on the subject.

The thesis and the argument of van Creveld's book are as bad as the grandiosity of the title suggests. Much as this writer hates to hit a guy when he's down, it is useful to review the thesis and the arguments made in support of “Non-Trinitarian” war and the “transformation of war” because they illustrate the kinds of errors that some modern military theoreticians are prone to make.

The term “Trinitarian” is said to refer to a doctrine that Clausewitz held about war. It is alleged, and not by van Creveld alone, that Clausewitzian war has three vital elements: the people, the army, and the government. It is van Creveld's purpose: to overthrow the Trinitarian doctrine; to show that war does not require the Clausewitzian trinity; and because of the emergence of low-intensity conflict that wars of the future will be “non-Trinitarian.” That change from Trinitarian to non-Trinitarian is the transformation of war that van Creveld refers to.

Except that Clausewitz held no such doctrine.<sup>2</sup> This is what Clausewitz actually wrote in Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 28, entitled:

“The Consequences for Theory.”

*War 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 paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity....of the play of chance and probability....of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.*

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The paradoxical trinity of war plainly are: primordial violence, chance, and being an instrument of policy. The reason why Clausewitz calls them paradoxical is that primordial violence is irrational; that, as an instrument of policy, the use of war is rational; and that chance is partly subject to rationality but is also irrational. The theoreticians make their mistake by getting hung up on the subsequent paragraph that Clausewitz wrote:

*The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government.*

The sentence declares whom the elements of the paradoxical trinity ought mainly to concern; it does not say that those who ought to be concerned are the paradoxical trinity.

This is a fatal error to the argument. The error is the substitution of three things accidentally related to the crucial three properties for the three properties themselves.

Somehow this fatal misattribution has received wide currency in military literature. It is upon this misattribution that van Creveld bases much of this book. Right about now, based upon the following logic, the mathematician would append his Q.E.D. (*quod erat demonstrandum*), having destroyed the central premise of the book briefly and with elegance, and move on to another to another problem.

Clausewitz wrote that the paradoxical trinity consisted of elements A, B, C. Van Creveld, by a mistaken impression, or by sleight of hand, wrote that the Clausewitzian trinity consisted of elements X, Y, Z. If the relationship between A, B, C and X, Y, Z were of necessity, then indeed by showing that the relationship between war and X, Y, Z did not always obtain, it would mean that the relationship between war and A, B, and C would not always obtain. War indeed could be non-Trinitarian in the sense that Clausewitz mistakenly thought that it should be.

But the relationship between A, B, C and X, Y, Z is declared by Clausewitz to be by accident, a happenstance of the structure of the modern state and the way it organized for war at the time he wrote. If the relationship between war and A, B, C is of necessity, and that between A, B, C and X, Y, Z obtains by accident, then the relationship between war and X, Y, Z obtains by accident and therefore cases can be found in which a relationship between war and X, Y, Z does not obtain. That such cases can be found is the pith of van Creveld's argument for non-Trinitarianism.

Because he fails to secure the premise that a relationship between A, B, C and X, Y, Z occurs by necessity, his argument about war and X, Y, Z is futile. He would have better off trying to prove his point using propositions A, B, C in the first place.

The relationship between A, B, C and X, Y, Z is strong, however; and that is one reason why van Creveld has such difficulty establishing that war is non-Trinitarian in the sense of not possessing properties X, Y, Z.

Despite the fact that the central thesis of van Creveld's book is destroyed by the mistake demonstrated above, it is useful to pursue further the errors in reasoning contained in van Creveld's book, because they are symptomatic and representative of other prominent military writers today.

Elsewhere this writer has said that it is the job of the theoretician to establish definitions and to draw distinctions.<sup>3</sup> One of the most important concepts in van Creveld's book is war. Yet this fundamental conception—war—van Creveld never bothers to define. So broad is his conception of what constitutes war that at one point he refers to the level of crime in the United States as a kind of war (p. 61). To bring order

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to this intellectual chaos, consider as a working definition of war the following: "organized violence aimed at a political end." This definition contains explicitly two of the three elements of Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity: violence and subordination to policy. The third element, chance, is contained in the facts related to the acts of violence.

As defined, war is a species of the genus 'organized violence,' and it is distinguished from all other species of the genus 'organized violence' by the fact that war is that form of organized violence aimed at a *political* end. Now, a species is populated by individuals all of whom share the properties of the species, and some individuals of the species exemplify to an extraordinary degree the qualities of the species. Aristotle said, if you are going to show an example of the species horse, you are going to show a good horse. Some individual wars exemplify the qualities of the species 'war' better than others. Some individuals exhibit the qualities of their species poorly, yet still must be classified as members of that species.

For example, Plato was fond of defining man as a "featherless biped." The only other kinds of bipeds on earth are birds, and so by calling man a featherless biped, Plato clearly and sharply differentiated man from all other kinds of animal on earth. Now, man by nature is a biped, but there are individuals who by accident have only one leg. Losing a leg or being born without a leg does not mean that that individual ceases to be human. It merely means that that individual does not exemplify to an extraordinary degree the qualities of the featherless biped.

Van Creveld offers up cripples in his effort to overthrow what he says is Clausewitz's Trinitarian doctrine. He reaches into the middle ages, before the modern state came to be, offering up the mercenary armies of the 16th century, those of ancient Greece, and to pre-Columbus America to show that the trinity of "people, the army, and the state" did not obtain in the wars fought then. These primitive wars are held by van Creveld to overthrow the Clausewitzian trinity, and furthermore provide a basis for non-Trinitarian war in the future, those he calls low-intensity conflict. Low-intensity conflict is important to van Creveld because not only is it to be the way of the future, but that it will lead to the dissolution of the state.

Van Creveld is mistaken in thinking he has overthrown any kind of trinity, the true Clausewitzian or his own, because he fails to understand the difference between the existential and the analytical. Let us grant for the sake of argument that the trinity is "the people, the commander, and the government." and let us consider the specific cases of Frederick the Great and Napoleon and the wars they fought. Both Frederick and Napoleon were simultaneously the commanders and the executive heads of government of their states and were able to make war, conduct diplomacy, and conclude treaties without reference to anyone else in the state. The commanders and the governments of Prussia and France are *existentially inseparable* in the cases of Frederick and Napoleon, as I am certain Clausewitz was aware. This situation is as muddled in respect of the trinity as van Creveld can hope for. There are only two legs of the trinity extant in these examples. And the wars fought by Frederick and Napoleon exemplify to an extraordinary degree the qualities of the species war.

Yet we can still think of Frederick as commander and Frederick as the executive king, and likewise Napoleon as commander and emperor. Their respective functions as the commanders of their armies and as the executive heads of governments of Prussia and France are *analytically distinct* even if the commander of the army and the head of government are existentially inseparable, being one and the same person. The wars of Frederick and of Napoleon were the primary material from which Clausewitz drew his

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theory, and because he understood the analytical distinction between commander and government Clausewitz was able to keep separate in his mind the association of chance with commander and of policy with government. In primitive societies and primitive wars, the clear and sharp distinction that can be made nowadays among people, commander, and government may not obtain, but an intelligent application of the *controlling insights of the theory* will reveal the elements to which Clausewitz refers.

The title of van Creveld's book is the *Transformation of War*. His purpose is two-fold: to overthrow Clausewitz's theory which he says is founded upon the Trinitarian concept, substituting a new theory, which shows that non-Trinitarian war is the way of the future; and to say that low intensity conflict will see the disappearance of the state as a political entity. Not having defined war, and not understanding the philosophical implications of transformation, van Creveld gets lost in a forest of entertaining, pessimistic prolixity.

Let us discuss here the problem of transformation. When he presents his collection of one-legged men, van Creveld never makes it clear whether he means that this group of cripples constitutes the disproof that species 'featherless biped' has by nature two legs, or whether the group represents a different species entirely, a species having by nature fewer than two legs. Van Creveld appears to want it both ways, and thus he uses the word "transformation." War is going to transform from a three-legged to a two-legged variety, he forecasts.

The problem van Creveld makes for himself is that species don't transform into something else, and neither do individual members of a species. An individual born a monkey does not grow up to be a man. And a species may come to be and go extinct, but a species is what it is. If a species goes extinct and something else rises in its place, then that something else is something else, not a member of the thing that went extinct and was replaced. Thus, a transformation of the kind van Creveld has in mind is impossible. If war is by nature Trinitarian, then the extinction of Trinitarian conflict means that war is extinct, and that new thing that rises in its place is something else, something we cannot call war.

Van Creveld writes of wars undertaken for reasons of justice and religion and even lust. But this is sloppy reasoning, even tendentious reasoning. If war is organized violence aimed at a political end, then other members of the genus parallel to war must be organized violence aimed at obtaining justice, aimed at imposing a religion, and aimed at gratifying lust, where it must be stipulated that obtaining justice, imposing a religion, and gratifying lust contain no element of politics at all. Van Creveld needs to give names other than war to these other species of the genus 'organized violence' that are parallel to war in the genus 'organized violence'. His use of the word 'war' to cover all species of the genus 'organized violence' is worse than, but akin to, our use of the word 'man' to cover the species *homo habilis*, *homo erectus*, *homo sapiens neanderthalis*, and *homo sapiens sapiens*, which are the four known members of the genus *homo*. 'Man' names the genus *homo*. It is forgivably broad to use the appellation 'man' when referring only to the species *homo sapiens sapiens* because all the species of the genus *homo* except *homo sapiens sapiens* are presently extinct; but in a proper discussion of the different qualities of the four species mentioned, it makes no sense to use the word 'man' indiscriminately when one means one species of the genus *homo* and not any of the others. If Van Creveld wants to say that species war with its Trinitarian character is going extinct and another species of organized violence with a non-Trinitarian character is going to rise and replace it, he ought to give the new species a

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new name, something other than war; otherwise he simply sows confusion. He means something else, and he should call it something else. (The words crusade and predation come to mind, but even these acts bear political consequences.)

Could van Creveld save the structure of his reasoning if war was deemed to be a genus in which Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian were two species? He cannot. We defined war as organized violence aimed at a political end. Any sub-species of this would have to append further differentia: the sub-species would have to have aim at a political end and have further qualifying criteria. (For example, the reference above to 'Napoleonic war.' The differentia 'Napoleonic' refers to wars that are large in scale, prolonged, and high in casualties. Clausewitz believed that Napoleonic kinds of war exemplified to an extraordinary degree the qualities of war.)

Van Creveld argues that war need not be aimed at a political end. This would preclude a non-Trinitarian species from belonging to the genus war, which is organized violence aimed at a political end. The genus to which van Creveld refers and needs to employ is 'organized violence', and war is one species of that genus.

Other factors which lead van Creveld away from a proper handling of Clausewitz are: his habit of thinking in terms of philosophical systems, his philosophical pessimism, and his innocence of political philosophy. Van Creveld refers to "Clausewitzian thought" and the "Clausewitzian universe" as in this passage from p. 155: "Ordinary Clausewitzian thought is incapable of coming to grips with what in some ways is the most important form of war, namely, one whose purpose is existence."

The folly of philosophical system-building is that the schools of philosophy merely name their errors. Clausewitz himself was no system builder, and he ridiculed those in his day who were, specifically von Bulow, and also to some extent Jomini. Van Creveld tries to cast Clausewitz's thinking into a kind of system, and hence employs expression such as the Clausewitzian universe, Clausewitzian thought, and Trinitarian doctrine—expressions that are characteristic of philosophical systems. Philosophical systems begin by dogmatically laying down supposedly irrefutable premises in imitation of mathematical physics and Euclidean geometry, and are supposed to be more intellectually impressive thereby. His false belief that Clausewitz's work constitutes a system is why van Creveld tries to undermine the Trinitarian principle, for systems can only be accepted or rejected wholesale, and if one of the pillars can be knocked down then the whole edifice of thought collapses. But Clausewitz offers no system. He sifts evidence for nuggets of truth and he has so many caveats to the rules he discovered that many readers despair of finding a consistent picture within the body of his work.

The passage quoted above reveals van Creveld's innocence of political philosophy. The very existence of a society is one of the bedrock principles of its policy, just as the continuance of our own lives constitutes a bedrock principle of what we do with our lives. Van Creveld offers as proof that wars are not undertaken for political ends an example that shows that wars are undertaken for the most profound and basic of the political ends of society: its existence, its independence, and the freedom of its people. Van Creveld's philosophical pessimism leads him to believe that a political end is constituted as the seizure of a province or the creation of an empire, and are based upon a cost-benefit analysis (p. 155). Somehow, that "people will be driven to defend their ideals and way of life." (p. 214) and "troops who do not believe their cause to be good will end up by refusing to fight." (p. 176) are statements that fail to impress van Creveld with their overwhelming political nature, so innocent is he of political philosophy.

Other examples of a fundamental pessimism are betrayed in his reference to the weapons industry supporting itself through exporting its own uselessness (p. 210), in the

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passage "as states collapse, leaders and warmaking organizations will merge into each other" (p 216), his belief that wars will be fought in the future because we like it for its thrills (p. 218)(cf. pp. 161-171), and his belief that war is an activity, not a means to an end, as he says "it is not necessary to postulate the existence of any ulterior objectives other than war itself." (p. 220). His whole theory that states as we know them will collapse in a welter of low-intensity conflict is an expression of a pessimism worthy of Ludendorff, whose 1936 work *van Creveld* is not in basic disagreement with.

Van Creveld's work demonstrates his wide knowledge of the history of war. His pessimism renders his prolixity entertaining, even if it lacks the rigor necessary to establish the truth of his propositions. His basic theses are offered as expressions of pessimism and without proof. His prediction of the rise of low-intensity conflict and of religious-based conflict were not predictions at all, for when the book was written (in 1990) radical Islam was already prevalent in the Middle East, Hezbollah had been eight years established in Lebanon, and Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon was then eight years old and destined to last for a further ten years. His belief in the effectiveness of low-intensity conflict is being disproved even now as the battle between Hezbollah and Israel is taking on mid-intensity proportions in order that some decision in the conflict be reached. His description of the "Clausewitzian Trinity" is fatally wrong.

Finally, his belief that the state will dissolve will be demonstrated to be absurd in a forthcoming paper on the Three Block War.

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## Endnotes

1. Martin van Creveld: *The Transformation of War*. Collier Macmillan Canada, Toronto, 1991.
2. Carl von Clausewitz: *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Everyman's, 1993.
3. Vincent J. Curtis, "The Theory of Fourth Generation Warfare," *CAJ*, Vol 8 No. 4 pp 17-34.



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