

# Burke and Clausewitz on the limitation of war

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## Abstract

Restraining the violence of war is difficult under the best of circumstances. In their observations on the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, Edmund Burke and Carl von Clausewitz consider the peculiar violence of wars fought for abstract and world-transformative goals. While the beliefs that animated those wars have faded, in this essay we argue that Burke and Clausewitz offer insight into the ways that modern political violence becomes unmoored from limitation and restraint and that their arguments show a surprising unity between the concerns of realists and just war theorists about the limitation of war.

## Keywords

Burke, Clausewitz, just war, realism, restraint of war

## Introduction

In 1793, the French National Assembly announced its intentions to defend their revolution with total mobilization in the starkest possible terms:

[T]he entire French nation is permanently called to the colors. The young men will go into battle; married men will forge weapons and transport supplies; women will make tents and uniforms, and serve in the hospitals; children will make old cloth into bandages; old men will have themselves carried to the public squares to rouse the courage of the warriors and preach hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic. (Knox and Murray, 2001: 8)

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This national sacrifice led to one of the most destructive series of wars in human history. Because the revolution sought extreme ends, it was willing to accept extreme measures. Of these measures, perhaps the most dangerous was the purposeful abandonment of the traditional restraints on the ends and means of war (Whitman, 2012: 215–216). Without those restraints, the Napoleonic Wars returned Europe to levels of violence and political unrest that had not existed since the end of the Thirty Years' War.

This essay focuses on using Edmund Burke and Carl von Clausewitz to help us understand this abandonment of restraint and draw from them lessons concerning the limitation of war in the present. Despite numerous attempts to impose limits on the horrors of war, the world remains a regrettably violent place, in no small part because of the destruction of the established limits of warfare that in modern times began with the French Revolutionaries and continued up to the present day. A focus on the restraint of violence resonates clearly with three branches of the contemporary literature on moral problems and international relations and shows some of the concerns that contemporary realists, constructivists, and just war theorists share.

Scholars in these traditions differ considerably in emphasis. Realists typically minimize the importance of any form of morality to their scholarship and instead focus on structural or institutional mechanisms that restrain war's violence. Constructivists understand the importance of norms, but with few exceptions generally deny that there is any fixed human nature or structural imperative that stands in the way of restraining war's violence. Just war theorists come to the subject matter with a set of explicitly moral standards and criteria, but often lack an explanation of how to practically convince military and political authorities that their theoretical restraints are the ones worth enshrining in law and policy.

We turn to Burke and Clausewitz for two main reasons: first, they serve as a bridge between two traditions of thinking that largely disagree. Burke is commonly labeled a just war (or even holy war) thinker, while Clausewitz falls squarely in the realist tradition (Armitage, 2000; Paret, 1992; Welsh, 1995). We hope to show one of the principal ways that just war and realist thinkers historically align—on the virtues, character traits, and institutions necessary for the restraint of war's conduct (Coates, 1997: 33–37). Second, Burke and Clausewitz agree that the French Revolution's ideas and institutions undermined restraint in great power war. Although these authors differed somewhat in their diagnosis of how democratic styles of thinking and practice affect the nature of war, they concurred in their wariness of the consequences mass mobilization would bring without proper limits on war and human passions. The troubling tendency among mass revolutionary movements was and remains the difficulty of restraining them. This lack of restraint, if combined with mass mobilization, could lead to tremendous violence.

The escalation of political rhetoric embodied by the French Revolution was exacerbated by parallel technological and bureaucratic advancements such as the *leveé-en-mass*, standardization of weaponry, and improvements in food and medical care. For Burke and Clausewitz, these mass armies were more durable and destructive killing machines. This abandonment of the traditional limits meant that these mass armies served the interests of revolutionary leaders and could be used to achieve their increasingly ambitious ends. Whereas a tyrant from ages past would ultimately lose favor or be

limited by practical constraints, these new armies, backed by the rhetoric of a revolution, might endure and disrupt the international system.

We also think a focus on where Burke and Clausewitz align on moral concerns surrounding the limitation of war provides a much-needed corrective to the literature surrounding both thinkers. International theorists have interpreted Burke's response to the threat posed by the French Revolution as an invitation to crusade with the unbounded violence that suggests (Harle, 1990; Welsh, 1995). But we argue this interpretation rests on a flawed reading of Burke's fears concerning where the revolution might lead. Scholars commonly focus on the moral element in Clausewitz's thought with reference to the maintenance of a nation's will to fight, and little else.<sup>1</sup> To cite a prominent example, Liddell Hart (1991) reduces Clausewitz's project to an exercise in pure military calculation. He demonstrates little appreciation for the principle of restraint that we argue is at the heart of Clausewitz's teaching concerning war. We hope to refocus attention in Clausewitz onto the implicit morality of his teachings about the restraint of war.

Despite these different experiences and emphases, both thinkers came to similar conclusions regarding the increased destruction of unlimited war and the causal mechanism of this new form of war—the departure from well-established social constraints on the use of power. We will examine the ways both Burke and Clausewitz understood these ideas to connect together with the mass participation in the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, respectively. They also suggest some important ways that modern militaries might—and already do—conceive of how to restrain the violence of war.

First, we explore how Burke and Clausewitz saw new social ideas as changing in the conduct of war. Second, we examine how these two thinkers believed in the need for professional restraint and well-developed character to impose limits on war's violence. Third, we compare these two authors' views on clearly defined war aims as a necessary check on the tendencies of revolutionary movements to perpetually expand their goals. Finally, we discuss how the contemporary literature on the restraint of war might benefit from the insights these two thinkers present.

## War and the power of ideas

Burke and Clausewitz grappled with defining and understanding the ways that their enemies' ambitions worked to loosen the restrictions on war's conduct. Even before England's entry into the war against the French Revolution, Burke argued that the French clearly demonstrated the expansiveness and indeterminacy of their war aims—two characteristics that make a limited war, one restrained by balanced political judgments and containing definite and realizable goals, nearly impossible. In a 1791 letter to Henry Dundas, Burke (1984) claimed that the revolutionaries'

Object is avowedly to abolish all national distinctions and local interests and prejudices, and to merge them all in one Interest and one cause, which they call the rights of man. They wish to break down all Barriers which tend to separate [*sic*] them from the Counsels, designs, and assistance, of the republican, atheistical, faction of fanaticks in France. (1984: 307–308)

Burke consistently claimed that this combination of goals would transform the politics of the Western world.<sup>2</sup>

The ambition to transform European regimes through revolutionary violence made a mockery of the concept of limited war. Burke emphasized the revolutionaries' radically egalitarian and anti-religious ideals, as well as their ambitions to spread them regardless of local opposition or the particular traditions of local culture.<sup>3</sup> Alongside this ambition to transform the internal affairs of other nations, the revolutionaries further aimed at disrupting the normal conduct of international affairs as a whole. These two principles worked together to undermine the limitations on the practice of war.<sup>4</sup>

Burke saw the revolution's "atheism" as "the great political evil of the time" because he believed Europe's religious institutions served as the bedrock of its social order (Burke, 1887: 451). If this were not enough, Burke believed these revolutionaries would prove incapable of tolerating religion *anywhere* they advanced.<sup>5</sup> While many argue that Burke overestimated the threat the French Revolution posed to Europe,<sup>6</sup> the essential point for international relations remains that total systems of thought allow no conflicting worldviews—they either crowd out or seek to destroy their competition (Bull, 1995: 235–240). Burke's (1887) letters and writings all emphasize that this new French regime's public philosophy bore more resemblance to a fanatical religion than a constitutional order:

We cannot, if we would, delude ourselves about the true state of this dreadful contest. *It is a religious war.* It includes in its object, undoubtedly, every other interest of society as well as this; but this is the principal and leading feature. (1887: 449–450)

Rather than serve as a calculated act of statecraft, Burke believed that these new democratic wars would be waged to recast the social order and fought by enthusiastic proponents of the new order, and as a result, target civilians as much as combatants.

While describing the confusions in Parliament about what might constitute victory for England, Burke (1887) argued that without clarity about war aims, "everything will move in a preposterous order, and nothing but confusion and destruction will follow" (1887: 425).<sup>7</sup> This concern must apply even more strongly to the French case because their goals aimed at the end of monarchy as a legitimate political form and the establishment of equality in its place. For Burke, the revolution was a unique and dangerous political upheaval precisely because it wanted to transform the very nature of European politics.

Clausewitz gave less attention to the normative elements of the revolution, but he similarly emphasized the ways that the ideology of the French Revolution ended that recent tradition of wars fought for limited political objectives (Paret, 1992: 167–177; Weigley, 1991). He contended that what distinguished these prior conflicts lay in that:

[G]overnments and commanders have always tried to find ways of avoiding a decisive battle and of reaching their goal by other means or of quietly abandoning it. Historians and theorists have taken great pains, when describing such campaigns and conflicts, to point out that other means not only served the purpose as well as a battle that was never fought, but were indeed evidence of higher skill ... Recent history has scattered such nonsense to the winds. (Clausewitz, 1976: 259)

According to Clausewitz, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars were far more transformative than simply the destruction of monarchy. These struggles portended

the death of the established order's form of limited warfighting and a return to the widespread violence which Europe had not seen since the Thirty Years' War (Bell, 2007; Wilson, 2009).

For Clausewitz, this increased ability and willingness to inflict destruction on the whole social order were frightening because it separated violence from its limited political purpose. Both he and Burke agreed that war is only justifiable as a political act, and in order to remain within the bounds of politics, nations must always place their violent actions in service of limited political goals (Clausewitz, 1976: 90–100). Violence devoid of a clear political rationale and a tangible measure of victory stood as little more than irrational butchery that any true statesman or general would avoid at all costs.

One major difference between Burke and Clausewitz deserves mention. For Burke (1999), clear moral purpose matters because the

blood of man should never be shed but to redeem the blood of man. It is well shed for our family, for our friends, for our God, for our country, for our kind. The rest is vanity; the rest is crime. (1999: 121)

Clausewitz did not endorse this effort to place a moral understanding of war at the very center of the analysis, and instead saw war as a regrettable but legitimate tool of politics. His rhetoric emphasizes utility rather than any appeal to a higher moral law. However, they agreed that these new conflicts were fought not for achieving a measured political settlement through combat but rather for destroying Europe's traditional balance of power and exporting the ideals of France across the globe in a new type of conflict that "begged all imagination" (Clausewitz, 1976: 592). In our next section, we will trace how each of these authors came to similar conclusion as to the cause of this escalation of violence by examining each author's specific claims about the removal of professional restraint on the conduct of war.

## **The effects of "People's" wars on eliminating institutional restraint on violence**

Burke and Clausewitz viewed the French Revolution as a radical break from the conflicts that had occurred since the Thirty Years' War. While these conflicts were not peaceable affairs, they were typically fought by professional armies with relatively limited goals (Starkey, 2003). The French Revolution signaled both an expansion of the military class and a return to a more primal form of political violence fought for, among, and by the people. War was no longer the sport of monarchs but rather a more total contest for national existence (Whitman, 2012: 246). Burke and Clausewitz believed the French Revolution was frightening and destructive because it involved an increasingly wide section of the population. Part of this stemmed from the violence of the revolt, leaving the revolutionaries themselves "surrounded by an army not raised either by the authority of their crown or by their command, and which, if they should order it to dissolve itself, would instantly dissolve them" (Burke, 1987: 59). This mass participation eliminated the traditional controls and the exercise of power and made the goals of the revolution more ambitious and less predictable.

For Burke, the revolutionaries could not help but embrace the natural means of accomplishing their lofty goals, in a terror designed to place citizens “under the domination of no awe, but that of their committee of research, and of their lantern.” The depth of this new wave of public participation meant that the caprices of public opinion ruled. The revolutionaries aimed at suspending normal politics, where “[w]hoever opposes any of their proceedings, or is suspected of a design to oppose them, is to answer it with his life, or the lives of his wife and children” (Burke, 1992: 55). This conduct applied as equally to the revolution’s enemies at home as well as abroad.

The consequences of these political changes would only fall imperfectly on each participant in the mob violence and mass warfare that the revolution spawned. Having stripped away all the old mediating institutions that limited their freedom of action, little remains to restrain politics. The people themselves *are* the sole restraining force:

They are themselves, in a great measure, their own instruments. They are nearer to their objects. Besides, they are less under responsibility to one of the greatest controlling powers on the earth, the sense of fame and estimation. The share of infamy that is likely to fall to the lot of each individual in public acts is small indeed ... Their own approbation of their own acts has to them the appearance of a public judgment in their favor. A perfect democracy is, therefore, the most shameless in the world. (Burke, 1987: 82)

The egalitarian politics of the revolution destroyed vital sources of restraint, which in turn opened up possibilities that were previously unthinkable. This presents difficulties for anyone concerned about limiting wars in an age of mass participation.

Burke believed this spirit could only lead to increasingly total war. After excoriating the revolution’s early violence, as the “cowardly practice of assassination,” he continues to remark on the consequences of the French having pursued their internal struggles with that spirit for the outside world: “The mode of civilized war will not be practiced: nor are the French who act on the present system entitled to expect it” (Burke, 1992: 55). Burke depicts the consequences of mass violence extended to battle with the revolution’s enemies quite starkly (Boucher, 1998: 323–326; Harle, 1990: 71–76; Welsh, 1995: 157–160). If the French continue down their course, any enemy must rightly fear their captured officers or loyal soldiers will be sent to the guillotine and in turn will abandon any attempt to fight with mercy:

All war, which is not battle, will be military execution. This will beget acts of retaliation from you; and every retaliation will beget a new revenge. The hell-hounds of war, on all sides, will be uncoupled and unmuzzled. This new school of murder and barbarianism ... having destroyed (so far as in it lies) all the other manners and principles which have hitherto civilized Europe, will destroy also the mode of civilized war, which, more than any thing [sic] else, has distinguished the Christian world. (Burke, 1992: 55–56)

The French style of war, then, unleashes an uncivilizing process on both sides that the French initiated but that the rest of Europe will follow, if only to defeat the revolutionary menace. In their focus on the pointed moralism of Burke’s thinking, today’s international theorists often ignore the nuance in this position and fail to appreciate the focus on limitations that defines Burke’s thoughts on strategies to oppose Revolutionary France.<sup>8</sup>

Clausewitz echoes Burke in arguing that the extreme violence of the Napoleonic era could only emerge after the outbreak of a popular revolution: “a popular uprising should, in general, be considered as an outgrowth of the way in which conventional barriers have been swept away in our lifetime by the elemental violence of war” (Clausewitz, 1976: 479). Clausewitz (1976) notes that mass participation is “a broadening and intensification of the fermentation process known as war” (1976: 479). This sweep of human energy fed the expansion of war aims and violence, for when

policy becomes more ambitious and vigorous, so will war, and this may reach the point where war attains its absolute form. If we look at war in this light, we do not need to lose sight of this absolute: on the contrary, we must constantly bear it in mind. (Clausewitz, 1976: 606)

Because political purposes shape the nature of war, the deeper and more ambitious the political agenda, the more energy and violence these goals must summon to complete the task, a process which Clausewitz (1976) thought could unleash a “vortex of destruction” (1976: 584). Absent realistic political control, acts of war become little more than meaningless violence—a practical waste if not a moral abomination.

In the wake of the French Revolution, Napoleon personified a new type of leader who could use his military genius and the power of the egalitarian modern state to disrupt the military, political, and social order. Clausewitz believed that Napoleon’s actions would be repeated by others—that it would establish a pattern of horror for years to come (Paret, 1992: 75–84). This transformation of political affairs challenged Clausewitz to reconsider traditional notions of strategy and politics and to provide a systematized explanation of these developments into his larger body of work, as well as address the profound social changes that the French Revolution brought to fruition (Levinger, 2000: 42–70; Paret, 2009).

For Clausewitz, the outcomes of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars were profoundly different from past experiences precisely because they were fought outside of a traditional understanding of limited political ends (Keegan, 1987: 4). The decisions that led Europe to this point unleashed a chain of unanticipated consequences and instituted “a state of legalized anarchy that is as much of a threat to the social order at home as it is to the enemy” (Clausewitz, 1976: 479).

Clausewitz desired a theory to describe the mechanism for how a military figure like Napoleon could subvert the typical political process governing war for his own purposes. To develop one, Clausewitz turned to the absence of authority and restraint created by a mass political movement such as the French Revolution. Under normal circumstances, no leader or government would risk all-out war because they would be limited by a myriad of political constraints such as popular support for the war, economic considerations, domestic opposition groups, balancing behaviors in the international system, or a host of other factors that would ultimately stop a nation from fully committing to fight (Clausewitz, 1976: 479). The typical political constraints failed to limit military action, and the established order fell away.

Burke and Clausewitz provide remarkably similar visions of how the changes to the political order occurred. While both authors clearly asserted that this broad social upheaval was the root cause of the horrors of the French Revolution, they expanded upon

this insight by providing a more specific explanation why this societal change created a self-perpetuating cycle of violence: extreme, vague, and shifting war aims. In our next section, we discuss how Burke and Clausewitz linked their general observation regarding the dangers of popular revolutions with their prediction that these movements created insatiable war aims that perpetuated violence beyond rational limits.

## On cultivating restraint in war through clear and calculated war aims

In place of the Machiavellian but restrained international relations of European monarchies between the Peace of Westphalia and 1789, the revolution sought much more (Meinecke, 1998). Mass participation aided the revolution, but was by itself insufficient for disrupting the international system. Clausewitz focuses on the need for a return to professionalization and the importance of well-led armies, on the one hand, and for political leadership to understand war in a practical, non-ideological manner as the continuation of *normal* politics—that is, contests over vitally important national interests, rather than the desire to transform the world. Normal politics allow for generals to fight limited wars, rather than absolute ones. Burke focuses on the moral consequences of fighting revolutions, and he continually returns his readers to two central fears: first, that without habits of restraint, soldiers will return home as monsters and, second, that a war waged unjustly will undermine the moral legitimacy of any cause.

Despite Burke's uncompromising claims regarding the French Revolution's evil, he maintained the assumption that any war against the revolution should remain limited—and expressed grave fears that a war like this might nonetheless slip the bounds of restraint. Many of his contemporary interpreters fail to note that he never *endorses* this descent into madness and insisted that England's leaders must ensure that they fight wars within the bounds of mercy and discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

Burke argued that the revolutionaries' strength came from their "energy," derived from the strength of their convictions in favor of equality, their material interest in plundering Europe, and a general boldness. England must proceed with something more than "trivial maxims" or "a languid uncertain hesitation." He suggests that because "virtue is limited in its resources, we are doubly bound to use all that in the circle drawn about us by our morals we are able to command" (Burke, 1887: 443). Europe's safety required defeating the revolution and that "the force opposed to it should be made to bear some analogy and resemblance to the force and spirit which that system exerts" (Burke, 1999: 184). But a need for something "resembling" the strength and energy of the French forces did not obviate his insistence that England act *within a moral framework*. This is not part of a call to expediency or reason of state but rather a plea for restraint and honorable conduct. After all, without such restraint, would not the terror of reciprocal violence grow worse still?

These considerations about what to do with defeated revolutionaries place significant limits on the conduct of the war. One might say they establish exactly those sorts of restraints that scholars who frame Burke's thought in terms of Manichean opposition seem to doubt he endorsed—and that they disbelieve are even possible in the face of

claiming an enemy is evil.<sup>10</sup> But Burke saw no contradiction between recognizing the existence of evil and restraint in fighting it. The character-driven principle of political and military leadership he envisions opposes unlimited violence:

It is a cool, steady, deliberate principle, always present, always equable; having no connexion with anger; tempering honor with prudence ... and proving it's [*sic*] title to every other command, by the first and most difficult command, that of the bosom in which it resides ... Different stations of command may call for different modifications of this fortitude, but the character ought to be the same in all. (Burke, 1999: 269–270)

Far from depicting a war where “gentlemen have no place” at all, Burke suggests that in this struggle, virtuous military leaders become all the more important because only they can keep the specter of reciprocal, inhuman violence at bay (Welsh, 1995: 159–160).

Clausewitz observed that in the context of the revolution, Napoleon became a particularly dangerous figure because of his ability to harness that moment and unconcern with the sort of moral restraint Burke so clearly emphasized. Napoleon combined the appearance of revolutionary fervor with his personal ambitions to continually push for empire—an end that demanded recourse to extraordinary military means. The spirit of Revolutionary France and the policy of mass conscription provided a steady levée of cannon fodder for Napoleon to fight in a long series of battles and campaigns.<sup>11</sup> Napoleon restored France to order and in doing so harnessed the tremendous military power the revolution made possible.

In both the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, Clausewitz believed that violence beget violence but to no clear strategic or political end. This revision of war aims resulted in an inability to achieve a total victory in such an extreme age contradicts Clausewitz’s notion of the “culminating point of victory” as a logical end to any conflict. According to this theory, once one side had achieved their war aims, and the other side had recognized their defeat, then war should be ended as swiftly as possible (Clausewitz, 1976: 566–573). However, Clausewitz believed that a figure like Napoleon would never be satisfied with a limited victory and would continually seek further conquests, thus propagating perpetual violence. The fundamental difficulty Napoleon encountered lay in his inability to distinguish success on the battlefield from a limited set of strategic objectives as a whole.

Describing the aftermath of Waterloo, Clausewitz (2010) again reiterates that Napoleon’s destructiveness was primarily attributable to extreme political forces rather than tactical or strategic considerations:

Yet as far as the consequences of the total destruction of this army were concerned, political factors generally—such as the state of the nation and government, their relations with other nations, and so on—played a greater role, as do the forces, effects, means, and ends of strategy generally affect politics ever more deeply the greater and more comprehensive they become. War can never be regarded as an independent action, but rather simply as a modification of political activity and the implementation of political plans and interests by military means. (2010: 174)

The great difficulty the French Revolution and Napoleon's empire created stemmed from the ways that these regimes' foundational beliefs made limited political activity impossible. This began internally, with the behavior Burke describes with horror, transitioned abroad with the many wars of Revolutionary France, and ended with Napoleon's mania for expansion. Movements such as these may eventually die out from exhaustion; in the meantime, the costs they impose in terms of blood and treasure make them a terrifying possibility in any age—particularly in a world with nuclear weapons.

Clausewitz cites Napoleon's behavior during the 1812 Russian Campaign and his actions during the 100 days as key moments for understanding the necessity of limiting violence. In both of these campaigns, Napoleon had little chance of achieving the total victory that he sought, yet he relentlessly pushed for the ultimate destruction of his opponents (Lievan, 2010). Clausewitz (1976) was particularly adamant that Napoleon was engaged in an almost Sisyphean task in the Russian Campaign of 1812, stating that

When in 1812 Bonaparte advanced on Moscow the critical question was whether the capture of the capital ... would induce Czar Alexander to make peace ... If, however, peace was not made at Moscow, Bonaparte would have no choice but to turn back ... no matter how much more successful the advance on Moscow might have been, it would still have been uncertain whether it could have frightened the Czar into suing for peace. And even if the retreat had not led to the annihilation of the army, it could never have been anything but a major strategic defeat. (1976: 166)

Clausewitz's (1992) analysis points to the notion that the very structure of French politics—inaugurated by the revolution and continued by Napoleon—rendered its leadership incapable of limiting themselves to attainable objectives (1992: 100).

Clausewitz (2010) describes Napoleon's decision to accept battle under extremely unfavorable conditions at Waterloo as a necessary consequence of his unchecked ambitions:

How could Bonaparte be blamed for not avoiding a battle ... that was the only way to attain his objective: to cling to his last hope, to try to hold on to fortune's weakest threads ... Should he have let mere danger scare him into this certainty? No, there are situations in which the greatest caution could only be found in the greatest boldness, and Bonaparte's was one of them. (2010: 159–160)

Napoleon's desire for unlimited power could only find full expression in a society that already unmoored politics from any concrete limits. A polity accustomed to limited government, one that restricts itself to tangible, moderate aims in both war and peace would not prove an easy vehicle for ambitions of world conquest.<sup>12</sup>

Napoleon's military genius combined with the increased size, mobility, and fighting power of the *Grand Armée* created some truly disturbing outcomes, but again Clausewitz (1976) claims that these successes were primarily attributable to political and personal rather than technical factors:

[T]hese changes did not come about because the French government freed itself, so to speak, from the harness of policy; they were caused by the new political conditions which the French

Revolution created both in France and in Europe as a whole, conditions that set in motion new means and new forces, and have thus made possible a degree of energy in war that otherwise would have been inconceivable. It follows that the transformation of the art of war resulted from the transformation of politics. (1976: 610)

The difficulty with these “new means and new forces” rested in the way they destroyed any incentive nations might have for keeping wars limited. While Western militaries to some degree have moderated the intensity and spread of war’s violence, this does not obviate the danger of unlimited war. The new methods of war that Napoleon and his immediate predecessors brought into the world demonstrated that total mobilization for essentially unlimited ends could prove a viable means of making war against combatants and non-combatants alike.

Clausewitz identified the dangers of war in a radical age and did his best to describe how the absence of political constraints could create deadly consequences. Burke’s assessment of the French Revolution’s effects focused largely on the political and social change they sought, but as we have shown, he also carried this concern over into the effects the revolution might have on war and peace. His concerns remained moral throughout, and to the extent his ideas addressed specifically military affairs, these were primarily concerns about grand strategy.

## **Incorporating Burke and Clausewitz into our contemporary understanding of war in the international system**

Burke and Clausewitz suggest a danger that stems from the interplay between democracy and war: democratic armies fight more intensely, often for more ambiguous stakes, and frequently with greater ruthlessness than in some previous eras. Burke and Clausewitz’s writings can provide intellectual leverage on three critical issues: first, the disproportionate influence of individual leaders as a disruptive force in international security; second, the need for clearly defined war aims as both a measure of victory and a check on the expansion of violence; and third, the necessity of professional, morally restrained militaries. We examine each of these points in order and will show how some contemporary thinkers have incorporated similar themes into their study of modern war.

First, Burke and Clausewitz provide today’s readers a still-realistic way of understanding radical popular movements and their dangers for international politics. While neither of these authors predicts the rise of a leader in the mold of Hitler or Stalin, they are accurate in their description of how such a figure or movement can break with the established order and reshape the world. The prescription that flows from their insight is simple: we must recognize that such figures exert disproportionate influence on global affairs and to take direct steps toward limiting their capabilities or ending their reign.

While few contemporary theorists deny the ability of individuals to exert disproportionate and disruptive influence on world affairs, they typically exclude leadership variables from their analysis (Byman and Pollack, 2001; Daniel and Smith, 2010; Samuels, 2003). The notion that “evil” leaders cause conflict does not fit with the modern realist and liberal institutionalist view of nations rationally calculating their own interests and

working within the limits of theories that attempt to explain the international system. Still less does this moral view sit easily with a social constructivist model. Burke and Clausewitz would caution against such approaches because they would claim that despite their rarity, wars waged by such figures will never be limited and that they are often fought with the explicit purpose of eliminating the existing global order.

Some current work in international security scholarship has attempted to account for the role of leaders in perpetuating these conflicts; we argue that these approaches do not go far enough. Indeed, psychological analysis of leaders, the spoiling effects of corrupt leaders, and the preoccupation of leaders with their post-conflict fates are potentially fruitful avenues for scholars to pursue as they hope to gain insight into extreme outcomes within the international system (Chiozza and Goemans, 2011; Goemans, 2000). While these approaches often lack the parsimony and predictive value of more traditional international relations theories, we argue that they are entirely consistent with the general observations made by Burke and Clausewitz. The fact is that leadership during war matters a great deal because of the ability of individuals to exert disproportionate influence over world events—as Samuels (2003) puts it, they “stretch” systemic constraints (2003: 5–7). A prudent scholar or practitioner of international security will internalize the wisdom of Burke and Clausewitz and make allowances for impact of such figures and their ability to induce chaos on world order.

Second, one way to potentially limit the impact of individuals is to attempt to impose limits on the scale of war. Although Burke and Clausewitz would argue that it is never possible to fully eliminate the impact of a figure like Napoleon, they recognize the grave dangers in war without limits. Although Burke and Clausewitz wrote at the beginning of the industrialized age, they desire to impose political and moral limits on the increasing lethality of modern war. In more recent years, scholarship on this general point has diverged in a number of interesting ways. One group has focused on the need to limit war because of the increasing lethality of modern war. This strain of thought melds Burke and Clausewitz’s views of the danger of mass armies with the technical observation that increased firepower, mobility, and bureaucratic structure of military forces have made them so lethal that traditional conventional war is largely an exercise in suicidal anachronism (Mueller, 1990, 2004). For these thinkers, not only is war self-defeating but it is so clearly self-defeating that it has become almost unthinkable. Despite the appeal of this logic, neither Burke nor Clausewitz would endorse the idea that we should feel secure simply because war has been made unthinkable due to the rationalist mechanism of deterrence and instead suggest that the character of actual soldiers matters far more (Mueller, 2004: 50–65).

Although Burke and Clausewitz would support these logics of self-interest and moral restraint, it is unlikely that they would fully trust them to end the potential for militaristic figures to emerge or to eradicate violence as a tool of statecraft. Both thinkers also suggest we remain skeptical toward the idea that the social transformations democracy and equality brought about in the last two centuries will lessen the risk of wars large and small. Their near-contemporary Alexis De Tocqueville (1969) claimed this would emerge as the most important consequence of equality—that men’s love of comfort and well-being would keep us from engaging in violence (1969: 647–648). But this says nothing about those who, for ideological reasons, fail to accept the materialist way of life the

West largely embraces. They may see the risk of death and deprivation as no such barrier to violence. While we suspect thinkers like Tocqueville would share Burke and Clausewitz's skepticism of the idea of "enlightenment" as sparing us from war, they would certainly also betray severe doubts about the promise of international organizations, or the spread of human rights doctrines, to save us (Mearsheimer, 1994/1995).

Rather than pin their hopes on the end of tyrants or the end of war, Burke and Clausewitz provide prudential advice for future statesmen. According to their views, it is essential to wage wars with a clear view of specific war aims and end goals precisely because of the temptation to escalate the use of violence or confuse the very means of war with its ends. In doing so, well-intentioned military actors might become the very same type of tyrant they seek to defeat. Clausewitz in particular believed that wars should be fought to achieve specific ends, and once those ends were achieved or became unattainable, they should be rapidly ended. Napoleon's great error, according to Clausewitz, was to myopically pursue tactical success and to lose focus on the culminating point of victory on many of his campaigns. These repeated failures to achieve political ends forced him to refight an ultimately self-defeating series of "glorious" wars devoid of lasting political purpose.

The danger of vague war aims has been widely discussed in the academic literature. According to one of the early deterrence theorists, Thomas Schelling (1960), it is precisely the ability to have clearly defined goals to bargain for that distinguishes conflict from absolute war:

If war to the finish has become inevitable, there is nothing left but pure conflict; but if there is any possibility of avoiding a mutually damaging war, of conducting war in a way that minimizes damage, or of coercing an adversary by threatening war rather than waging it, the possibility of mutual accommodation is as important and dramatic as the element of conflict. (1960: 5)

Many scholars have added to this point, but Burke and Clausewitz emphasize these points as well, with a greater attention to the moral and intellectual dimensions of this problem. They avoid Schelling's rationalism and in doing so provide an account of restraint in war that might more directly appeal to soldiers and policymakers.<sup>13</sup>

One of the modern declarations of such limited war aims is the Weinburger/Powell Doctrine which embraces fighting in limited conflicts only when there is a clearly defined national interest, the prospect for a clean victory, and the ability to exit the conflict quickly once the political objectives are met. Far from being a relic of the past, the need to define national war aims remains important in the modern age where a greater number of low-intensity conflicts are waged (Simpson, 2013). While winning wars necessitates the use of preponderant military power to neutralize a foe, each of these authors urges restraint and prudence to limit the scope of war to serve a broader political purpose.

Third, Burke and Clausewitz consistently turn to the idea that professional militaries—unlike armies of conscripts or ill-disciplined revolutionaries—retain a greater potential of being able to cultivate a kind of discipline to their violence as a result of their training. While by no means a foolproof-measure (consider the Nazi regime's highly aristocratic office corps), this measure can serve as a significant restraint because professionals develop codes of honor that at least bear the potential for mutual respect between

adversaries and restraint in battle, especially toward civilians. The suggestions Burke and Clausewitz make in this respect find curious echoes in today's discussions of professional military ethics. Their arguments on this point bear a striking resemblance to the works of Vice Admiral James Stockdale, who turned to a kind of stoic virtue ethics as a way of inculcating moral restraint in a pluralistic liberal democracy (Sherman, 2005; Stockdale, 1995).

While genuinely aristocratic leadership and restraint no longer remains an option in political orders such as ours, we argue that Burke and Clausewitz's emphasis on the nature of national principle and honor as a basis for moderating conflict forms the strongest available basis for cultivating restraint. Richard Ned Lebow (2008) suggests something similar: his claim that international relations scholars consistently underappreciate the power of "spiritedness" or the love of honor as a way of establishing these norms echoes those of Burke and Clausewitz. This renewed attention to the place of honor as a source of moral restraint in international relations suggests that Burke and Clausewitz's ideas remain important for limiting violence in war.

## Conclusion

Both Burke and Clausewitz can still teach international relations scholars much about the conduct of war and diplomacy. Their ideas may better dispose us to action in a complicated world. They emphasize the art of political decision-making and the dangers of attempting to make scientific generalizations about the nature of war. Perhaps, their most important lessons come in their treatment of ideologically driven leadership, and these ideas serve as a potent reminder of the dangers of fanatical beliefs married to martial ambition. Both insist on a strict adherence to clarity of purpose in war—and it is this focus that may allow us to see and avoid the destructive effects of future militant ideologies.

Many contemporary scholars of security politics dismiss the influence of ideas in shaping the way states conduct themselves during times of war. One exception to this overall rule is the constructivist paradigm. The broad tradition of constructivist scholarship differs greatly from the neo-realist and liberal traditions because it explicitly claims that rules, norms, and other cultural preferences have a profound impact on security competitions and the conduct of war.<sup>14</sup> However, a long tradition of writing contradicts many of these claims regarding the causal nature of ideas as the primary determinant of outcomes in international relations. Some examples of scholars who place more emphasis on systemic, materialistic self-interest as the main cause of war include the majority of thinkers from the neo-realist and liberal institutionalist paradigms. Although these thinkers are careful to hedge their claims and allow for the possibility that ideas can be very important, they generally believe that ideational variables are less generalizable across the international system and are thus less useful for creating predictive, parsimonious, and replicable theories.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to Burke and Clausewitz might suggest a different path than most contemporary scholars take. Rather than pinning our hope on a single branch of academic scholarship, we suggest thinking about the problems of modern conflict from a more theoretical perspective aimed at cultivating good judgment may be valuable. By reminding us of the

dangerous spiral of violence that comes from ideological commitment in war, we can remain alert to the ways that ideologists sometimes defy the expectations of conventional realist and liberal accounts of how states conduct themselves. In terms of the conduct of war itself, their focus on the clear articulation of concrete political objectives may aid Western political authorities. The reminder that without clear purpose, the simple deployment of troops to regions for abstract aims often results in a creeping expansion of mission and targets of the kind we have seen over the last decade.

Using the perspective of Burke and Clausewitz, we hope to convince our readers that these problems are not entirely new and that they have a consistent intellectual lineage that is useful for thinkers in our current era. While the troubles of the moment may appear different in their specific details, the problems of mass violence and seemingly limitless war aims are old and enduring. The ripples of the French Revolution are with us today, and it is important to understand the wisdom of the past to better navigate the dangers of the present.

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### Notes

1. For an alternative view, see Aron (1986).
2. For one major example of what Burke had in mind, see Robspierre (2007).
3. In France, this revolutionary zeal extended to some of the most revered religious and cultural icons. The monastery of Mont St. Michael was seized and turned into a prison for political enemies of the revolution and remained dilapidated for nearly a century (Adshead, 1845: 286–290). Similarly, the Bayeux Tapestry was twice nearly destroyed by revolutionary forces. In 1792, it was torn down from the Bayeux Cathedral to be used to cover a wagon belonging to the French Army. Similarly, in 1794 it was nearly cut into pieces to decorate floats and signs for the “Goddess of Reason” parade in Paris (Bridgefod, 2004: 32–33).
4. On the notion that a limited war requires limited objectives and restrained ambitions, see Coates (1997: 42–44).
5. Indeed, Burke (1987) noted that the seizure of Church property was one of the first truly radical acts, an act which they compounded by using these lands as collateral for a new paper currency (1987: 205–209). See also Ferguson (2011: 152).
6. Pocock (1985) argues that Burke’s later writings on the French Revolution represent little more than a “wild jeremiad of a mind at the end of its tether” (1985: 205). For examples of scholars who interpret Burke’s writings as a disproportionate response to the French Revolution, see Kramnick (1977), Smith (1985), O’Neill (2007), and Herzog (1991).
7. For a recent analysis of the importance of victory in war, and the necessity of having a clear goal to direct one’s means well, see Codevilla and Seabury (2006: 234–235).
8. In her analysis of Burke’s argument, Welsh (1995) argues that “gentlemen have no place in the battle of the European Commonwealth against the Revolutionary menace” (1995: 159–160). In her interpretation, Burke’s argument seems starker and less concerned with the unleashing of terrible violence. For an account of the “uncivilizing” effects of French ideology in Burke, see O’Neill (2007: 125–156).
9. Harle (1990) and Welsh (1995) place particular emphasis on this claim that Burke’s strategic vision was immoderate.

10. Although anachronistic, “Manichean” is Harle’s (1990) preferred term to describe Burke.
11. Clausewitz (2010) notes that many of the French population that were mobilized late in the war were of marginal quality; he claimed that they still could perform valuable garrison and rear echelon duties that would relieve pressure on Napoleon’s front line troops (2010: 40–41).
12. In this vein, consider George Washington’s Farewell Address of 1796 as a model of strategic thinking of the sort we think Clausewitz and Burke endorse.
13. On the necessity of clearly defined war aims, see Ikle (2005), Kecskemeti (1958), Reiter (2009), and Rose (2010).
14. For constructivist scholarship relevant to this project, see Hopf (2002), Johnson (1995), Finnemore (1996), Legro (1995), Tannenwald (2007), and Barkin (2010).
15. An enormous literature follows these assumptions. For some prominent examples, see Waltz (1979), Ikenberry (2000), Mearsheimer (2001), and Glaser (2010).

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