Ron Paul and Lost Lessons of War

Neocon dominance has grown so strong in Official Washington that old lessons about the hazards of ill-considered wars are forgotten and must be painfully relearned, a message from Ron Paul’s new book, Swords into Plowshares, as described by retired JAG Major Todd E. Pierce.

By Todd E. Pierce

Former U.S. Rep. Ron Paul lays out a national security strategy for the United States in his book, Swords into Plowshares, which Carl von Clausewitz, the author of On War, would have approved. Clausewitz, a Prussian general in the early Nineteenth Century, is considered perhaps the West’s most insightful strategist, and On War is his classic work on the inter-relationship between politics and war.

A close reading of On War reveals a book far more on the strategy of statecraft, that is Grand Strategy, than it is on the mere strategy of warfare. Unfortunately, very few readers have understood that. Indeed, Clausewitz’s target audience may have been principally civilian policy makers with his view that the political perspective must remain dominant over the military point of view in the conduct of war.

Whether or not Ron Paul ever read Clausewitz, Swords into Plowshare restores a proper understanding of statecraft as Clausewitz understood it and today’s American leaders fail to.

Helmuth von Moltke, who became Chief of the Prussian General Staff in 1857, almost immediately misappropriated and reinterpreted On War for his own militaristic purposes. (Clausewitz died in 1831.) Moltke was followed in this in 1883, when Prussian General Count Colmar von der Goltz, later known as the Butcher of Belgium in World War I, while paying homage to Clausewitz, wrote The Nation in Arms, a revision of Clausewitz’s On War and its complete opposite.

Moltke and Goltz twisted Clausewitz’s arguments in the interests of the Prussian military class that had come into full flower after Clausewitz’s time. For one, they self-servingly distorted On War by reversing the principle of civilian control to argue civilians must not interfere with military decisions. Also, their reinterpretations of Clausewitz as an advocate for total war became the stereotype which most people then accepted as Clausewitz’s thinking.

Most odiously, U.S. Colonel Harry S. Summers, Jr. would later present to a post-Vietnam War audience Goltz’s version of Clausewitz. In doing so, Summers reversed Clausewitz’s position, which was that defense was stronger than attack,
an argument against engaging in aggressive war. But Summers was collaborating
with neoconservative Norman Podhoretz who shared Goltz’s militarism.

These distortions of Clausewitz’s principles – and that of America’s Founders
who even earlier had established the idea of civilian control over the military
– continue to the present day with U.S. civilian policy makers now regularly
deferring to the narrowly focused point of view of military leaders to the
detriment of a sound national security strategy.

In *Swords into Plowshares*, Ron Paul offers a correction to this and a return to
a civilian-directed national security strategy for the U.S. to adopt which would
restore a proper understanding of national interests and would be consistent
with Clausewitz’s own strategic theory.

**Peace as a Goal**

Clausewitz would have heartily agreed with Ron Paul that “Having peace as a goal
is both a key component of sensible foreign policy and crucial to economic
prosperity and equal protection of all people’s liberty.”

Clausewitz would also have agreed with Paul that it is not sound national
strategy when the result of having the most powerful military in history means
to have “Americans continue to die in a series of wars, the treasury is bare,
and the US is the most hated nation in the world.”

Clausewitz made his bones, so to speak, in fighting Napoleonic France which had
a similar foreign policy in the early 1800s as the U.S. has in the Twenty-first
Century – using warfare and other means to achieve “regime change” – with the
same negative results. France finally met its Waterloo (the original Waterloo
coming to mean a decisive defeat) in 1815.

The question for the U.S. isn’t if it will reach its own Waterloo, but when.
Military solutions to geopolitical problems will inevitably exhaust even the
most powerful nation, depleting its resources and manpower. Only by reversing
imperial overreach and achieving peace can a sustainable prosperity become
possible.

Clausewitz fully understood that reality, which is why he was an advocate of
diplomacy and of restoring peace as soon as costs exceeded the benefit of
whatever political object the war was being fought over. Clausewitz would be
aghast at arguments that a war must be continued to “show resolve” or other such
nonsensical purposes.

An expert on Clausewitz, Michael Howard, wrote that Clausewitz was a scholar as
well as a Field General and knew and respected the works of political
philosopher Immanuel Kant. Accordingly, Clausewitz would no doubt have been aware of and influenced by Kant’s 1795 tract entitled *Perpetual Peace*. Paul’s *Swords Into Plowshares* is in that tradition and applies the lessons to today.

**Defense, Not Offense**

In Clausewitz’s time and place, he had to fight a war of national survival against Napoleon, who could be viewed as the predecessor of today’s American neoconservative idea of using war as the means of imposing political change on other countries.

Clausewitz first fought France for his native country, Prussia, and when Prussia was defeated, he volunteered his services to Russia, serving until Napoleon’s final defeat. Clausewitz then began compiling what he had learned of statecraft and warfare with the experience he had gained.

But this was not for the purpose of encouraging aggressive war but only as recognition that “war” was used as a political tool which had to be addressed in a book of statecraft. “Subordinating the political point of view to the military would be absurd, for it is policy that has created war,” he wrote.

Ron Paul demonstrates a full understanding of that principle as he challenges the neoconservative euphoria for what they claim is now a “perpetual war.” But Paul does not write as a pacifist and *Swords into Plowshares* is not a pacifist tract.

As Paul writes, “When a people are determined to defend their homeland, regardless of the size of the threat, they are quite capable. Americans can do the same if the unlikely need arises.” That is not the voice of a pacifist but rather of one who has drawn the same lesson as Clausewitz had.

Clausewitz was surely not a pacifist either. His profession was the military. But he wasn’t a militarist, unlike what the Prussian officer class would later become. Clausewitz would not have called for civilian control over military decision-making if he had been a militarist. That was a key point that von Moltke would later repudiate (or ignore) as he ushered in German militarism.

But the purpose of Clausewitz’s profession as a soldier in the early 1800s in central Europe was to defend his native land, Prussia, against a foreign attacker. When he later joined with Russia to fight Napoleon, it was to fight a common enemy, France, which was not a prospective enemy but an actual foreign invader on their respective territories.

Along those lines, Ron Paul suggests that the U.S. model its foreign policy after Switzerland, which has a military to defend itself but not one to wage
offensive war outside its borders.

“Switzerland has done rather well with its streak of independence,” Paul writes. “Reasonable fiscal and monetary policy, along with the rejection of foreign intervention, have been beneficial to her.”

**Perpetual War and Militarism**

The only flaw in Clausewitz’s view that civilian policymakers must prevail over the military is that Clausewitz did not foresee the development of hyper-militarism, or what was called Fascism in the last century. Under Fascism, a sufficiently large number of militaristic civilians took over policy in Germany and Japan in the 1930s, paving the way to World War II.

An analysis of militarism prepared for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services in 1942 by Hans Ernest Fried, entitled “The Guilt of the German Army,” describes three types of militarism which had developed in Germany. They were characterized as glorification of the army, glorification of war, and the militarization of civilian life. Fried’s book is disturbing because it could be describing the United States of today with the prevalence of the same three features.

Clausewitz did not anticipate the rise of a civilian political class in the 1930s which was as narrowly militaristic in its attitudes as was the military, another pattern that is repeating itself in the United States of the Twenty-first Century. We are seeing the political dominance of neoconservatives and like-minded “progressive” interventionists who are eager to advocate war, often more so than the U.S. military.

One reason for this reality is that many of these ideological advocates for “perpetual war” are far removed from the actual killing and dying, i.e., they are “chicken hawks” generally from privileged classes and don’t even know many real soldiers.

These “chicken hawks” follow in the footsteps of former Vice President Dick Cheney whose physical safety was sheltered by five deferments from the draft but who still celebrated when other men of his generation were marched off to the Vietnam War. Cheney was again eager to send a new generation of men and women off to the strategically catastrophic Iraq War on the basis of lies that he and President George W. Bush spread.

**A Wider Audience**

Gaining an understanding of U.S. foreign policy and American militarism by reading *Swords into Plowshares* is important for the future of the United States
and should not be confined to Ron Paul’s usual “libertarian” audience. Instead, it should be studied by those seeking to understand why it is that the more wars we fight and the more Muslims we kill, the more attraction groups like ISIS have.

ISIS and similar militant groups maintain their ability to recruit because they are resisting what they call U.S. imperialism, a war against Islam. This appeal is even reaching into the U.S. and Western Europe as the continuing bloodshed in the Middle East increases the anger and enmity of its victims and their sympathizers. Killing more Muslims does not resolve these hatreds, it exacerbates them, strengthening the political will to resist, as Clausewitz would have understood.

Similarly, Paul understands that U.S. policy is a “combat multiplier” for groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda.

And, as if ISIS and Al Qaeda aren’t trouble enough, the U.S. has now identified a new enemy, nuclear-armed Russia. Neoconservative militarists led by Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and her war enthusiast Kagan family in-laws have revived the Cold War through their nefarious machinations in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Furthermore, foolish U.S. Generals such as NATO Commander Philip Breedlove, with a name and military policy suggesting he is a real-life character straight out of “Dr. Strangelove,” seems to be doing all in his power to create a hot war with Russia, even at the risk of a nuclear exchange.

But Paul explains that this “incitement to perpetual war has been achieved without an actual threat to our security. We have not engaged in hostilities with any nation since 1945 that was capable of doing harm to us . . . . Our obsession with expanding our sphere of influence around the world was designed to promote an empire. It was never for true national security purposes. To keep hatred and thus war alive, the propagandists must stay active."

Resisting Interventions

Clausewitz would have understood Ron Paul’s reasoning as expressed here: “The more US interventions caused deaths, incited and multiplied our enemies, imposed extreme costs, and jeopardized our security, the greater my conviction became that all foreign intervention not related to our direct security should cease as quickly as possible. The neoconservatives want an open license to go anywhere, anytime to force our ‘goodness’ on others, even though such actions are resented and the ‘beneficiaries’ want no part of it.”

Clausewitz not only theorized against interventions of that type; he helped
defeat Napoleon, who practiced the Nineteenth Century equivalent. Knowing how
Napoleon’s wars ended, Ron Paul sees the U.S. as on the wrong side of history.

Paul, consciously or not, has drawn on the strategic insight of Clausewitz,
which should be no surprise as it was a frequently expressed truism in the
military before 2001, echoing Clausewitz, that wars were so expensive and
unpredictable that they were to be avoided if possible. And if unavoidable, they
were best kept short.

Cheney and other neocon hawks of the Bush-43 administration threw that wisdom
overboard even before 2001. But 9/11 created so much hysteria in today’s
military officers, who never had to experience how wars can go sour, that those
bitter lessons are being relearned the hard way by a new generation of officers.
They would serve the military well by reading *Swords into Plowshares* and
reacquiring that wisdom.

What might turn out to be the tragedy of this book is that its readers will be
limited to self-identified “libertarians.” But Paul has shown himself capable of
joining liberals such as Democrat Dennis Kucinich in opposing the transformation
of the U.S. into an advanced form of militaristic state and resisting the wars
which make that possible.

But every attempt at forming antiwar coalitions between libertarians and other
political groupings or even co-sponsored forums, in the experience of this
writer, go no further than about five minutes before one side or the other
insists that before militarism is discussed, the other side has to concede to
their respective economics ideology. More times than not, that comes from the
libertarians who insist that any taxation is as repressive as military rule.
It’s reminiscent of the early 1930s when the Nazis’ political opponents were
happiest squabbling amongst themselves, while the Nazis were preparing Dachau
and other prisons for members of each of the non-Nazi political parties.

Consequently, American militarists probably need not fear that *Swords into
Plowshares* will interfere with their militaristic plans and war profiteers need
have no concerns for their future profits. But perhaps my prognostication is
incorrect. Maybe Americans will realize that our militarists are leading us to
the strategic abyss and that we’re already close to the edge.

Americans should find that Paul’s national security strategy is sound regardless
of whether they agree with other aspects of his libertarian ideology. There is
surely common ground among Americans who recognize that perpetual wars will also
mean the suppression of constitutional rights and other encroachments on
liberty.
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