One of the most fascinating parts of Book 1 is the notion of the “trinity”, a much misunderstood concept, and one that deserves a few words in examination. It occurred to me that one of the most prominent scholars to have misrepresented this most elegant formulation of Clausewitz is Martin van Creveld, and I will look at the trinity in response to van Creveld’s thesis.

In 1991, Martin van Creveld’s *On Future War* [aka *The Transformation of War*] was published, eliciting critical responses on a variety of levels. One of van Creveld’s most contentious claims in a treatise clearly intended to trump the “self opinionated” Prussian was that Clausewitz’s ideas of ‘trinitarian’ warfare were outmoded in the modern era. Subsequent analyses have shown that van Creveld’s reading of Clausewitz was itself faulty and secondly that contemporary conflict in most cases still conforms to Clausewitz’s model. There is still no overwhelming consensus on the latter point, mainly as theorising about the present is innately difficult, but most commentators agree that ‘trinitarian’ warfare persists, despite protestations to the contrary by van Creveld and others.

The first section of this probably overlong post will examine van Creveld’s thesis as delineated in *On Future War* and its correct relationship with the writings of Clausewitz. Van Creveld may have been awry in his analysis of Clausewitz but this does not determine that his ideas are without worth, so in the second section we will briefly examine the nature of contemporary conflict and whether van Creveld’s trinity illuminates its evolutionary trajectory.

It is crucial to note that ‘trinitarian’ as an adjective is not used at any point by Clausewitz in *On War* and its coinage by van Creveld is based on an erroneous reading of what is variously translated
as war’s ‘paradoxical’, ‘wonderful’, ‘remarkable’ or ‘fascinating’ trinity. Clausewitz used the trinity model to describe the interplay of three principal energies inherent to the conduct of war and together constituting the fundamental nature of war. The first is irrational: ‘primordial violence, hatred and enmity’, in other words, passion; the second non-rational, ‘the play of chance and probability’, including the crucial notion of ‘friction’, as experienced or created by combatants; the third is rational, war as an ‘instrument of policy’ subordinated to human reason. These three factors interact in unpredictable and non-repeatable ways, meaning that they are not amenable to crude prediction or anticipation. They also occur on all sides in a conflict, increasing the chaotic interplay between opposing forces.

Clausewitz associated these aspects loosely with three physical factors: the irrational with the ‘people’, the non-rational with the armed forces, and the rational with the government. This secondary trinity did not correspond exactly with his ‘remarkable’ trinity, mainly because each part of the former contained elements of the latter. Also, he enjoined, ‘to fix an arbitrary relationship between [these tendencies] would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless’. Unfortunately, van Creveld, perhaps following the successful lead of Harry Summers two decades before, chose to misrepresent the relationship between the primary and secondary trinities, and reified the latter, with its consequent misrepresentation of the fluid balance at the heart of Clausewitz’s theory of war. It should be recorded that more recent observers, including the much-fêted Rupert Smith, have also erroneously conflated these two concepts.

So, van Crefeld defines Clausewitz’s trinity as a simplistic relationship between the people, the armed forces and the government, with scant regard for the subtle trinity that lies beneath this. Consequently, he regards ‘trinitarian’ warfare based on his revisionist model as only one type of historical warfare and therefore Clausewitz’s theories are, if not obsolete, then at least incapable of explaining the full spectrum of warfare either past or present. His argument hinges principally on a
consideration of ‘low-intensity conflicts’ (LICs), which he believes to constitute the bulk of contemporary conflicts.

Low-intensity conflicts depart from the supposed trinitarian nature of conflict as they do ‘not distinguish between governments, armies and peoples’ thereby violating the trinitarian principles. Whether civil wars, insurgency, organised crime or terrorism, van Creveld maintains that these forms of conflict are nontrinitarian and cannot therefore be examined through the lens of Clausewitzian theory. His insistence that Clausewitz was preoccupied with the role of the state, post-Westphalia, is used to bolster his argument that Clausewitz cannot anymore be used to understand warfare in which sub-state and non-state actors are prevalent. Van Creveld is not the only significant thinker to have proposed this, with luminaries such as John Keegan, Edward Luttwak and Mary Kaldor also proposing the need for a post-Clausewitzian analytical framework that reflects actual conflict in the modern world. Where van Creveld differs is in his assertion that the state will cease to exist because of its inability to protect either its own interests or its citizens. As the prevalence of LICs increases, war as ‘perhaps the most imitative activity known to man’ will cause the spread of irregular wars across the globe, ultimately perhaps to the United States itself. Steven Metz suggests that this process will begin on the peripheries of the modern world and progress towards its centre, as a contemporary analogue of the historic flows of military innovation.

Given that the label ‘nontrinitarian’ is the result of a misreading of Clausewitz, in a sense it is devoid of proper analytical meaning. There can be no nontrinitarian war if trinitarian war did not exist to begin with. This is a problem for critiquing van Creveld’s thesis. It would be hard to argue that the ‘remarkable’ trinity of passion, chance and reason has no relevance to LICs and it is unfortunate that van Creveld did not see fit to choose the primary trinity as a starting point for his analysis of contemporary conflict. Clausewitz’s description of the secondary trinity was undoubtedly employed for illustrative rather than prescriptive purposes, and assertions of the latter have masked our ability
to really determine if Clausewitz is still applicable. As John Stone suggests, replacing the terms people, military and government with less state-centric labels such as supporters, fighters and leaders would instantly appear more applicable to LICs, and the primary trinity would be ‘back in business’.

The argument could end there, but we should examine whether van Creveld’s ideas are useful in analysing the modern era in which, as he predicted, LICs are the predominant form of conflict. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, the threat and prosecution of interstate conflict have receded in a world increasingly characterised by intra-state and transnational violence. We shall leave aside for a moment the fact that the international system is still founded on a community of states and that the terms we employ reflect this, as they did for Clausewitz and for van Creveld. Also, non-state actors are defined with reference to, or in opposition to, the state. We could take this to be a harbinger of a future world in which states cease to be of primary importance in the world system, but also as an inherent problem in conceptualising the current situation. We could also suggest that this evolution is taking us back to a pre-Westphalian or tribal world in which states are the exception rather than the rule, a dystopian possibility but not one of the near future. Instead, we must look at each factor in van Creveld’s tripartite system – the people, the military and the government – and determine if these terms are applicable.

Warfare, even the most technologically deterministic supporters of a Revolution in Military Affairs would agree, is instigated and undertaken by people. Clausewitz’s secondary trinity, van Creveld’s only trinity, takes account of this and divides humans in warfare into three camps, essentially politicians, military, and the non-uniformed population. The interplay between these is what determines the conduct of a war. Van Creveld is undoubtedly correct when he proposes that these components have undergone a great deal of change in the modern period, such that Clausewitz might not immediately recognise them in the forms he conceptualised.
In a classic sense, politicians start wars in pursuit of political objectives. The classic Clausewitzian dictum ‘[w]ar is merely a continuation of policy by other means’ is often coupled with his definition of war as ‘an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will’. Both statements still apply, a conclusion that van Creveld acknowledges in his criticism that many modern wars have not been labelled wars. Curious then that he should compound this apparent error by employing the term ‘low-intensity conflict’, one he may have derived ultimately from Frank Kitson, a man who knew a thing or two about ‘small wars’. LICs are often, although by no means always, prosecuted by sub-state or non-state actors, be they warlords, irredentists, secessionists, insurgents or terrorists. The leaders of these groups may not be politicians in the liberal democratic sense – an important consideration in evaluating van Creveld’s own ideological standpoint – but they are opinion-formers and coercive agents. They also have a mandate, albeit often a weak one, to take decisions on the behalf of others, including taking steps to declare and prosecute conflict. On the state side, it is a decidedly nasty turn of international affairs in the late 20th century that state-sponsored violence against one’s own people, particularly in the form of genocide, has become a valid expression of policy for many elites. And, least we forget, this is not always a function of weak or failed states. The best example of this is the Rwandan genocide of 1994 which was instigated by a very strong state and was incredibly successful as a result.

The fact that those who start wars might not be traditional politicians or elites is largely irrelevant in the current context – war is still an extension of policy, from wherever that derives, and however dubious its legitimacy. There are issues of mandate, of course. One must ask from whence Osama bin Laden gains his mandate to act on behalf of the global ummah, and the answer is not likely to come from the Qu’ran. Neither the global jihad nor the ‘War on Terror’ constitute traditional wars yet both are propelled by policy, however confusingly it may sometimes be articulated by both ‘sides’. It may be true that the jihad is heading into the realm of post-political ethics, but whether
that heralds a new form of truly post-Clausewitzian warfare is unknowable. Equally, there are problems with unclaimed terrorist acts, which thereby display little political derivation. From the vantage point of 2009, we must accept that van Creveld was writing before the momentous events of 9/11 and its aftermath. Unfortunately, given the opportunity to take these developments on board in a 2002 article, he did not see fit either to revise the thesis he outlined in On Future War or properly address his many critics since its publication.

The second part of van Creveld’s trinity is the military, traditionally the army, but which also includes airborne and naval services as appropriate. Van Creveld is correct again to assert that there has been a rise in the occurrence of conflicts in which sub-state or non-state armed forces play a critical role. This includes warring factions within a state military, that is, the behaviour of one side is unlikely to be sanctioned by the state, a situation that exists in many civil wars. Alternatively, in other civil wars one or more groups might be exogenous to the state apparatus, such as clan militias, warlords, etc. The extreme example is transnational terrorism or global insurgency, in which the protagonists appear to act with little reference to the state at all. This is not entirely true, as international actors like these still require sanctuary, and may operate against a state, such as ‘al-Qaeda’’s explicit war on the United States. In these cases, even if funded by foreign states or acting as their proxies, these groups are effectively non-state as they are not condoned or recognised as official actors by the states in which they operate. International organisations like NATO and the United Nations are also relevant here, as they project military power through peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations into states that have effectively relinquished control over portions of their territories and populations.

But for van Creveld to deny these military groups legitimacy is to ignore the fundamental crux of Clausewitz’s argument. It is true that these groups will not, for example, occupy seats at the United Nations nor be recognised by the international community, but they do fulfil the role of military
within the trinity and as such must be considered within that framework. Again, whether they are state-sponsored or not does not exclude them from warfare in the sense of Clausewitz, despite his writing from the distance of a European theatre obsessed with the power struggles of established and nascent states. Nor does it, it must be added, exonerate them from the responsibilities of combatants everywhere as regards international conventions on human rights, although one could be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

Perhaps the most important element of van Creveld’s trinity is the people, traditionally those in whose name war is fought and who are usually defined as non-combatants. Again, van Creveld is right to draw attention to the changes that have occurred over the last part of the twentieth century but it is again mysterious why this disqualifies the people from the trinity of his own making. It is true that in many LICs the distinction between combatant and non-combatant has become blurred to say the least, with mass killings of innocent persons being commonplace and crimes such as rape being used systematically as weapons of war. But these are not uniquely late 20th century phenomena. For example, genocide is not a new strategy, as the Armenians and Hereros will attest. Rape of an enemy’s women has a long and undistinguished history also. Clausewitz himself recognised in Book 6 that the concept of ‘the people in arms’, such as in a revolutionary republican situation, would leave much of the citizenry of a country open to attack as combatants. Also, both sides in both World Wars drew little distinction between the militaries and publics of countries whose cities they were carpet-bombing – to be part of the military-industrial complex was sufficient to qualify an unarmed civilian as the legitimate target of aggression and neutralisation. In the contemporary climate, it is enough to be a citizen of a Western democracy to be considered an appropriate objective of terrorist attacks by global jihadists, due to the perceived complicity of voters in the worldwide oppression and murder of Muslims. Even proponents of ‘just war theory’ accept that deaths of non-combatants might be acceptable if pre-emptive strikes would prevent greater casualties further down the line. Whatever the moral dimensions of any of these situations,
it does not seem entirely accurate to insist, as does van Creveld, that modern LICs mark that much of a departure from the pattern of many past wars, even if their prevalence is increasing. Once again, his misreading fails to account for the true nature of Clausewitz’s trinity.

It is perhaps mildly misrepresentative to split the three elements of van Creveld’s trinity thus. After all, he does understand that there is interplay between them on many levels – indeed, it is part of his thesis: that the strict tripartite division breaks down in the context of low-intensity conflict. However, the division that he makes is itself artificial and not based, as he claims, on Clausewitz; rather it is of his own making. It is unfortunate that he should have done this, as his undoubted energies might have further illuminated the truly ‘remarkable’ trinity at the heart of Clausewitz’s theory of war, that of the irrational, non-rational and rational: passion, chance and reason. There seems as yet no good reason to reject this more fundamental trinity in an age in which van Creveld is entirely correct to maintain that warfare is changing. Van Creveld may be right to contend that LICs bring about political change in ways that inter-state warfare has failed to do since 1945, but this is disingenuous, not least because many of these conflicts arose with the pure intention of achieving statehood. Also, the outcome of a war is very different from that which is circumscribed by the real trinity, i.e. the conduct and nature of war. On one level, van Creveld’s entire argument is disingenuous and unnecessary: Clausewitz was all too aware of the types of ‘irregular’ activities which comprise low-intensity conflicts and he attempted to include these in his theories of the nature of warfare.

In a very real sense, Clausewitz captured the nonlinearity of warfare in a way van Creveld failed to do. A proper appreciation of Clausewitz’s trinity may actually help redress the failures of modern states to counter the low-intensity conflicts which van Creveld describes. As Clausewitz intended, the ‘remarkable’ trinity looks set to continue to transcend history; regrettably, Martin van Creveld’s interpretation is unlikely to do so.