For nearly two centuries, On War, by Carl Phillip Gottfried von Clausewitz (1780-1831), has been the bible for statesmen and military professionals, strategists, theorists, and historians concerned about armed conflict. The source of the famous aphorism that war is an extension of politics by other means, it has been widely read and debated. But, as Jon Sumida shows in this daring new look at Clausewitz’s magnum opus, its full meaning has eluded most readers—until now. Approaching Clausewitz’s classic as if it were an encoded text, Sumida deciphers this cryptic masterwork and offers a more productive way of looking at the sources and evolution of its authors thought. Sumida argues that On War should be viewed as far more complete and coherent than has been supposed. Moreover, he challenges the notion that On War is an attempt to explain the nature of armed conflict through the formulation of abstract theories. Clausewitz’s primary concern, Sumida contends, was practical instruction of the military and political leadership of his country. To achieve this end, Clausewitz invented a method of reenacting the psychological difficulties of high command in order to promote the powers of intuition that he believed were essential to effective strategic decision-making. In addition, Sumida argues that Clausewitz’s primary strategic proposition is that the defense is a stronger form of war than the offense. This concept, Sumida maintains, must be understood in order to make sense of Clausewitz’s positions on absolute and real war, guerrilla warfare, and the relationship of war and policy/politics. Sumida’s pathbreaking critique is supported by examination of the Prussian officers experience during the Napoleonic Wars, previous major theoretical and historical scholarship on Clausewitz and his writing, and modern philosophical and scientific works that have much in common with Clausewitz’s creative guide to the consideration of strategic practice. A major study of intellectual and military history, Sumida’s book provides a provocative and above all readily comprehensible treatment of a previously inaccessible classic. It will surely become essential reading for all military professionals and serious students of military thought.

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Sumida begins with the observation that Clausewitz has remained inscrutable to most readers in spite of the fact that he is more widely read today than ever before, especially within the U.S. military. Modern understanding of Clausewitz is plagued by "faulty preconceptions," ignorance of history, a failure to grasp Clausewitz's philosophical sophistication, and the complexity of his presentation—to paraphrase Sumida. These difficulties make On War generally inaccessible because in a sense Clausewitz, the man, has to be understood before his book can be understood. Sumida suggests On War has the characteristics of an "enciphered text" that has to be "decoded." Sumida engages this decoding by examining what other theorists and scholars have said about Clausewitz, the history behind the writing of On War, and the philosophical and scientific aspects of the writing itself. He confines himself mainly to Clausewitz's general method as revealed in books I, II, VI, VII and VIII of On War. Sumida sees Clausewitz as philosophically inventive, not a slave to the thought of Kant and Hegel as much past analysis has ascribed to him. In that sense Clausewitz anticipates later philosophers of cognitive science and mathematics. To my mind, though Sumida claims he presents Clausewitz as theorizing about the practice of war rather than the phenomenon of war, this book intimates that Clausewitz's thinking engages in a phenomenology of war. As such, and I think Sumida would agree, On War provides generalities (or abstractions) that allow one to better discern the particulars—that it never pretends to prescribe, only to describe the nature of war (as a phenomenon) so that the perspectives that lead to that understanding can help in recognizing the particularities of experience. Sumida's last chapter (4) is an examination of how On War can do this for "high command" and "strategic choice." Sumida reaffirms the genius and the quality of On War and thus also asserts its lasting relevance. Highly recommended.

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