

POLS 114. International Security in a Changing World¹

“Clause-whaaaaa:” A Cheat Sheet to Clausewitz’s “On War”

1 FAQs

What are we reading?

Karl Clausewitz’s “On War.” Written sometime between 1816-1832 after the Napoleonic Wars. (And finished posthumously by his wife!)

And why are we reading this?

It’s considered a quintessential piece of writing on the psychological and political aspects of war including its causes (“war is a continuation of politics by other means”) and its conduct (“the fog of war”).²

What’s quintessential about writing on the psychological and political aspects of war?

The context in which Clausewitz wrote it! Throughout most of Western history and up until the Napoleonic Wars, most people believed war was purely about power and military capabilities like the number of soldiers you had or the tactical movements you employed. This prevailing view is best summarized in Jomini’s “Principles of War” and Waltz’s “The Origin of War in Neorealist Theory.” Clausewitz thus revolutionized how we think about and understand war by arguing that it’s not just about military capabilities, but that war is *also* heavily shaped by psychology, politics, and its’ inherent unpredictability.³

Sure, but how does this relate to POLS 114/HIST 104D? Why are we reading it?

Jomini, the political scientist, and Clausewitz, the historian, present two competing ways to understand and study war. Jomini stresses a calculated, quantitative approach similar to how many political scientists use statistics and game theory to model the specific causes and conduct of war. Jomini has what we might call a “forward-looking approach;” he is interested in predicting what future wars may look like. Clausewitz, conversely, uses historical case studies from the Napoleonic Wars (although many of them are pretty obscure to the modern reader) to model the causes and conduct of war. Clausewitz thus has a “backward-looking approach;” he is interested in learning why previous wars happened. There are advantages and disadvantages to either approach; we will outline some in class.

Disclaimer: Different translations of Clausewitz produce different interpretations of his work. Further, Clausewitz purposely employs a ‘dialectical’ writing style which produces apparent contradictions in his work as he presents a thesis, an antithesis which contradicts it, and then finally his synthesized conclusions. Therefore, this summary of his main ideas does not fully supplant the need to read and work through his writing on your own.

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²One could argue that Sun Tzu’s seminal work *The Art of War* had presented a viewpoint as revolutionary, if not moreso, decades earlier.

³To better understand what Clausewitz means by the unpredictability of war, consider this fun anecdote about how the U.S. winning the Revolutionary War may have hinged on a single British officer’s refusal to disrupt his poker game: http://www.cracked.com/article_18868_5-minor-screw-ups-that-created-modern-world.html

2 Main Ideas

2.1 What is war?

“War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” (Book 1, Part 2, p. 75)

Translation: This refers to the political science concept of *coercion* which you can best grasp by imaging any fight between an older sibling and her younger brother. Because the older sibling is older, bigger, and stronger, she can compel her adversary, the younger sibling, to submit to her request by threatening to use force or actually using force. In particular, Clausewitz’s definition implies that war does not lead to the total destruction of the enemy (or annihilation), but rather the survival of the enemy to “do our will”.

2.2 Absolute War versus Real War

Clausewitz differentiates between what war looks like in theory (“absolute war,” Book 1, Parts 3-5) and what war actually looks like in practice (“real war,” Book 1, Parts 6-9). By comparing this theoretical version of war with reality, Clausewitz aims to identify how and why these two types of war differ.

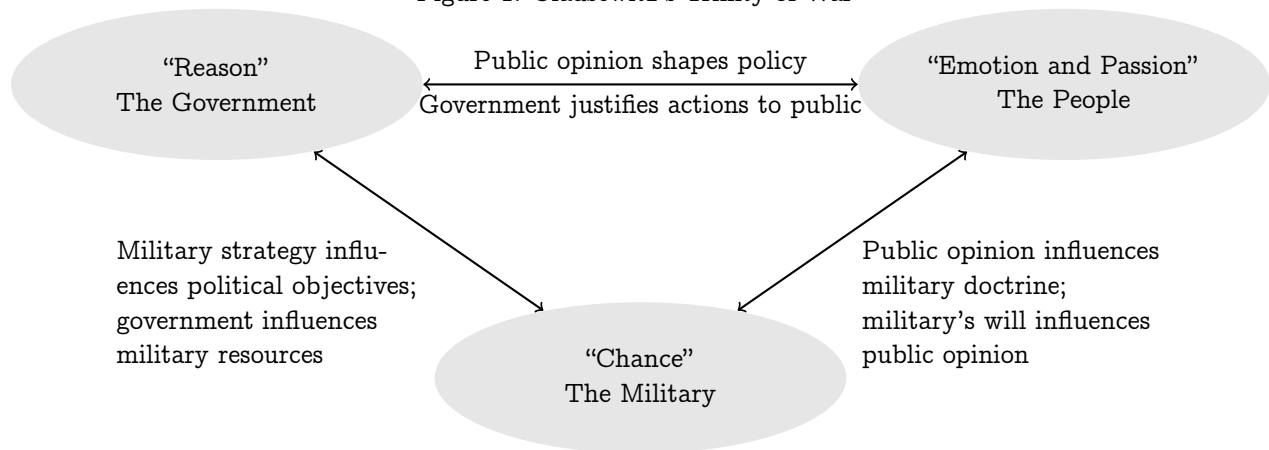
War in Theory versus War in Reality		
	War in Theory	War in Reality
Translation:	This is what war looks like if people sit down and plan out a war with hypothetical opponents, e.g. Star Trek’s Kobayashi Maru exercise.	This is what war actually looks like; it’s messy, unexpected, and difficult to control, e.g. the Revolution in the Hunger Games trilogy
Conduct:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● maximum use of force ● total and zero-sum; fight until the other side is completely destroyed ● devote all resources necessary to win ● war is unpredictable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● war is not always fought until one side wins, ex. U.S. Revolutionary War ● war is frequently interrupted and never final, ex. Israel-Palestine ● only use the minimum amount resources necessary to win ● war is never accidental
Limits:	None; conduct leads to “escalation of the extreme”	Political leaders define limited war objectives and control the military
Conclusion:	War is <i>apolitical</i> and <i>irrational</i>	War is <i>political</i> and <i>rational</i>

2.3 The Trinity of War

How do we get from war in theory to war in reality?

Answer: The set of factors governing the conduct of war known as the “trinity of war” (Book 1, Part

Figure 1: Clausewitz's Trinity of War



28). It is often translated in one of two ways. Even though a state's ability to wage war depends on these three factors, these factors are heavily shaped by country and time-dependent circumstances. As a result, "war is like a chameleon" (Book 1, Part 28).

Translation 1: The Trinity of War

- **Emotion:** human nature, "primordial violence, hatred, and enmity"
- **Chance:** uncertainty about each other's intentions and motivations, probabilistic nature of war, luck
- **Reason:** policy and use of war as a tool for politics

Translation 2: The Trinity of War

- **People:** their motivation, dedication, and support of the government
- **Military:** their competence, obedience, and organization
- **Government:** their pragmatism, leadership, and ability to mobilize the people's support for war

Check your understanding below.⁴ How did each of these groups influence the conduct of war?

Example. United States and the Iraq War (2003 - 2011)

- **People:** What was their motivation for war? Did they support the government and for how long?
- **Military:** Did the U.S. military develop a suitable doctrine? Was the doctrine effectively adapted to changing circumstances on the battlefield? Did they give the government their best possible advice?
- **Government:** Did the U.S. government define clear objectives for the war? Did it effectively mobilize the support of the American people?

2.4 Offense versus Defense Capabilities

Motivation. Recall that one difference between war in theory and war in reality is that the former is fought until the enemy is completely disarmed, but, in reality, war is often frequently interrupted and ends without

⁴Adapted from "In Search of High Ground," Lt Col David Edmonds, USAF, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj98/spr98/edmonds.html>

completely defeating the enemy.⁵ In order to fight the enemy, Clausewitz argues armies can choose either *offensive* or *defensive* strategies of combat. What are the advantages to each?

Translation: Think back to our earlier example about an older sibling trying to coerce her younger brother to do something for him. We saw that because the older sibling is older, bigger, and stronger, she has an *offensive superiority* against the younger sibling because, in a fight, she is more likely to win. We say then that the *balance of power* between the two siblings lies in favor of the older sibling.

In this scenario, what can the younger sibling do to defeat his older sister? If he takes an *offensive strategy*, he might choose to fight his sister and hope that pulling her hair will be sufficient to make her back down. If he takes a *defensive strategy*, he might choose to retreat to his room and wait until his parents get home at which point his parents will dismiss the sister's asinine request.

Main Idea: In reality, war ends without completely defeating the enemy because defensive strategies work. It is easier to prevent the other side from getting what you already have than to acquire something new. This is why, in the context of civil wars, insurgencies, and terrorists, non-state actors predominantly engage in defensive strategies that stretch out the length of the war until the state eventually capitulates; continuing the war for a long time is unpopular, costly, and not worth the risk, e.g. the Vietnam War.⁶ Offensive strategies are a good way to increase your power or gain territory, but require a lot of resources and risk higher costs (e.g. military casualties) to win.

Relevance?

For hundreds of years, most wars involved offensive strategies because states wanted to acquire territory, overthrow a regime, or enact some other kind of political change that required them to take the initiative and fight. Today, the advent of nuclear weapons and the increase in "irregular warfare" (or warfare between non-state actors and states) has led to a subsequent increase in wars involving defensive strategies. Some people argue that these events moot Clausewitz's main arguments about the conduct of war.

3 Additional Resources

- Frequently Asked Questions about Clausewitz <http://www.clausewitz.com/mobile/faqs.htm#What>
- Who is afraid of Carl von Clausewitz? A Guide to the Perplexed <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Handel/Handlart.htm>
- National War College's Guide to Teaching and Understanding Clausewitz <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/NWC/ClausewitzNotesAY2008.html>



"I'm sure your friends back home will be very impressed, sir."

⁵Clausewitz labels this complete disarmament of the enemy as the "principle of continuity."

⁶We'll talk in class about why such attrition strategies work when we talk about insurgency and terrorism later in the quarter. For now, you might just be interested to know that a large part of Mao Zedong's writings on guerrilla warfare (people's war) can be found, in essence, in Book 6, Section 26.