

# Clausewitz: War, Peace and Politics

Written by Jordan Lindell

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Clausewitz: War, Peace and Politics

<https://www.e-ir.info/2009/11/26/clausewitz-war-peace-and-politics/>

JORDAN LINDELL, NOV 26 2009

According to Albert Einstein, “You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war.” (Think/Exist 2009) In a constant state of preparation for war, Carl von Clausewitz penned *Vom Kriege*. Heavily influenced by Clausewitz’s experiences in the Napoleonic wars and the French Revolution, an era in which Clausewitz believed ‘... war itself had been lecturing,’ *Vom Kriege* has become one of the most influential pieces of literature to date on matters of war and politics. (Earle 1973: 97) While Clausewitz’s work has been read widely around the world and said to have had profound influence on not only Nazi Germany but also current United States’ foreign policy and military tactics, *Vom Kriege*, an unfinished work, is often times difficult to interpret and contradictory in nature. (Bassford 2008) However, with sometimes-controversial theories on war, peace, and politics throughout *Vom Kriege*, Clausewitz provides a thoroughly unique perspective by which to interpret the world that is, arguably, still highly relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, over 150 years since the conception of *Vom Kriege*. Carl von Clausewitz: a theorist of war itself. (Elshtain 1995: 77)

In order to assess the way in which Clausewitz understands the relationship between war, peace, and politics in their entirety, it is first crucial to define war by Clausewitzian standards and to distinguish between absolute war and total war, as at least a vague understanding of each is certainly necessary in the interpretation of *Vom Kriege*. Next, Clausewitz’s theories on war and peace must be evaluated separately from that of politics. While politics is unquestionably linked to matters of both war and peace, it is imperative that each be understood individually before one can fully grasp the concepts that Clausewitz puts forth and assess the strengths and weaknesses in his arguments. While many critics have argued against the validity of Clausewitz’s theories in the modern world, after assessment of the relationship of war, peace, and politics, it will become clear that Clausewitz’s lessons are still highly relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Defining War: The Absolute Versus Reality

To Clausewitz, ‘War is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale... an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will,’ directed by political motives and morality. (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. I) War is neither a scientific game nor an international sport; it is an act of violence, characterized by destruction. (Clausewitz 1940: Book IV, Ch. XI) Whereas Clausewitz submits that war is a natural part of human life, he begins to digress from reality in Book 1 into a state of fantasy, which considers the existence of absolute, or ideal, warfare. In its ideal form, war must be evaluated as ‘pure concept,’ meaning that war has timeless elements such as ‘violence, political impact, and the vagaries of the play of human intelligence, will and emotions.’ A state of absolute war would not consider the political and moral limits that hold significant in real, or total, war. (Elshtain 1995: 77) There are two motives that lead men to war in the absolute and total sense, instinctive hostility and hostile intention. In terms of absolute war, Clausewitz discusses three characteristics that make it unique. First, the utmost use of force is necessary. Second, the aim is to disarm the enemy. Lastly, absolute war calls for the utmost exertion of powers. However, absolute war only exists in the abstract, and every requirement changes in shape when shifting to reality. For instance, while Clausewitz argues as to the impossibility of absolute war, he lists three requirements for it to occur in the real world. War would become a completely isolated act in no way motivated by the previous history of a state or politics, limited to a single solution (or to several concurrent solutions), and would contain within itself the perfect solution. The probabilities and chance that exist in reality prohibit an entirely absolute war from happening because the political will always enter the realm of war, even in its conclusion. (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. I)

# Clausewitz: War, Peace and Politics

Written by Jordan Lindell

At the conclusion of World War I, Clausewitz's theory of real war began to gain ground. Though often confused with absolute war, and even used interchangeably, real war is war as it exists in the real world. War, in its ideal form, cannot be waged in a limited way, though in reality a war without limits would be neither possible nor preferable. Though Clausewitz set out in search for the 'absolute,' and the 'regulative idea' of war in the international and national context, he concluded that war cannot be explained outside of the political context, and thus there never can be absolute war in reality. (Gat 1989: 215)

## Theories on War and Peace

As the threat of war was constant in his time, there is very little mention of peace in Carl Von Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*. Though, much like Niccoló Machiavelli's theory that peace should only be viewed as 'breathing time' to prepare for the next military plans, Clausewitz is of the opinion that long periods of peace may alter the state's ability to defend itself in the future, and that instances of peace should be well spent by exercising the military. In addition, allies that have recently been involved in war should be made during peacetime to share lessons and experiences from different types of warfare. (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. VIII) Whereas Michael Doyle, the author of *Ways of War and Peace*, criticizes Clausewitz for ruminating that war is a constant and never gives an explanation as to how to eliminate war entirely, it would seem that Clausewitz never set out to eradicate war but to theorize on how to be successful in war. To Clausewitz, there are no special tactics for peace. War is a never-ending cycle, and as Clausewitz notoriously wrote, 'To secure peace is to prepare for war.' (Doyle 1997: 21-23)

In what Clausewitz refers to as the theoretical concept of war, he outlines three objectives for success. First, the armed forces of the opponent must be destroyed. Second, the country must be occupied. Third, the will of the enemy must be broken. (Cimbala 1991: 17) In theory, peace simply cannot be achieved until all three objectives are met, however, the complete defeat of an enemy would be a 'mere imaginative flight.' War, '... the hostile feeling and action of hostile agencies, cannot be considered at an end as long as the *will* of the enemy is not subdued.' In addition, the government and its allies must be forced to sign a peace treaty, for otherwise war could potentially start afresh with the assistance of the allies. Though Clausewitz admits that war could begin again directly after the peace, he argues that it only serves to prove that war does not carry in itself elements for a final settlement of peace. War, though not always constant, is continual. (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. II)

According to Clausewitz, war is always limited by 'friction' – uncertainty, chance, and inevitable logistical or organizational misfortunes. Also mentioned is the notion of 'rational calculus,' that states intrinsically use violence to achieve a desired end. The less controlled the use of violence is by one side, the lengthier the war. (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. I) Throughout *Vom Kriege*, Carl von Clausewitz, continually refers to a 'remarkable' or 'paradoxical' trinity which drives real war, composed of 1) primordial violence, enmity, and hatred 2) chance and probability, and 3) the element of war of subordination to rational policy. The trinity serves as a magnet to balance the three forces of war – the people, the military, and the statesmen. Clausewitz argues that the passions that kindle war must be innate in the people, the courage and talent of the commander and army plays into the realm of probability and chance, but the political aims are only the business of the government alone. Though, without the three branches working in harmony, war cannot be successfully waged. (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. I) (Bassford 2008)

Above all, Clausewitz emphasizes that war exists in the realm of chance. The most certain idea about war lies in the uncertainty of it. Chance acts in a way that makes all of the elements of war more uncertain and can ultimately alter the course of events. (Cimbala 1991: 101) 'Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.' (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. VII)

## The Role of Politics and its Interaction with Peace and Politics

Considered *the* theorist of modern warfare, focused mainly on military tactics and the like, Clausewitz's use of the political throughout *Vom Kriege* as a central issue for war cannot be ignored. According to Jean Bethke Elshtain, a prominent just war theorist, 'In the discourse of Clausewitz, we enter the world of war as politics, politics as war that helped to feed the most bellicist of all centuries, the nineteenth.' In its entirety, prevalent is the dictum that political

# Clausewitz: War, Peace and Politics

Written by Jordan Lindell

ends must be dominant over military means. (Elshtain 1995: 77)

To Clausewitz, 'War is only a branch of political activity... it is in no sense autonomous.' Military events progress and are restricted on the political lines that continue through war and through peace. (Clausewitz 1940: Book 8, Ch. 6) However, '... the influence of politics on war do not belong to the nature of war, but, on the contrary, contradict it.' The policies that give rise to war are the same that 'circumscribe and moderate it.' Thus, politics places itself above war and modifies it to suit its needs. (Gat 1989: 224) 'What Clausewitz meant is that war... is not an autonomous game produced by fixed external or internal constraints; it is instead a matter of political choice, reflecting all the variety of political purposes that make wars into exterminations.' (Doyle 1997: 23)

While Clausewitz warns that politicians must not attempt to use war as an instrument through which to achieve purposes for which it is unsuited, it is evident that war is a tool of policy and that state policy is truly '... the womb in which war develops.' (Clausewitz 1940: Book II, Ch III) It has been claimed that Clausewitz contends for the superiority and self-sufficiency of the military, and to some extent this is true as he insisted that the general should be both independent of political decisions and in a position to influence them. (Earle 1973: 105)

As Clausewitz famously wrote, 'War is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means... For political aims are the end and war is the means, and the means can never be conceived without the end.' The greater the motives for war, the more the existence of the entire nation is concerned, and the more violent the tension will be which precedes the war. War then seems to be approaching its abstract form, and appears to be purely military and less political. (Book I, Ch. I)

War is not an act of 'blind passion.' It is dominated by the political object, and the value of that object is what 'determines the measure of sacrifices by which it is to be purchased. When the '... required outlay becomes so great that political object is no longer equal in value, the object must be given up, and peace will be the result. In wars where one side cannot disarm the other side entirely, the motives towards peace will rise and fall on each side depending on the probability of future success. (Clausewitz 1940: Book I, Ch. II) While war clearly provides the foundations for *Vom Kriege*, it is evident that politics holds together the space between war and politics.

## Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses

In the way that Clausewitz understands the relationship between war, peace, and politics, his work remains the most comprehensive and, in some instances, modern contribution to political, military, and strategic thought as it stands. The main strength in *Vom Kriege* lies in that Clausewitz never attempts to impose a set solution. Clausewitz's theory is descriptive of 'human-on-human strategic problems,' and endeavors to 'develop human capital... to help the reader develop his... own strategic judgment in order to deal with the ever-changing strategic environment. (Bassford 1994)

The most significant weakness in Carl von Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* is not an issue with the subject of the text itself, but that, because of the premature death of Clausewitz, much of the work has been left unedited and the book was not finished. While the intent of the author is always debatable anyway, the unfinished status of the book leaves perhaps too much to the readers' imagination, and there are many inconsistencies that make *Vom Kriege* difficult to interpret. Among interpretations is that of Liddell Hart, one of Clausewitz's leading opponents. Hart portrayed Clausewitz as 'the apostle of total war,' criticizing him for identifying war with images of the utmost violence. Hart even went so far as to suggest that Clausewitz had inadvertently caused the bloodbath on the Western Front from 1914-1918, with the great misinterpretation of his theories by his disciples. (Bassford 1994)

Another weakness in Clausewitz's work can be seen in his case for the aforementioned three imperatives of war (the destruction of the armed forces, occupying forces, and the broken spirit of the enemy). While Clausewitz himself recognized that these standards were next to impossible to meet in reality, both the possibility and the impossibility have increased exponentially with new technology. First, though Clausewitz could not have foreseen the possibility of nuclear weapons whilst living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of nuclear bombs and the like, his theory of absolute war could, in fact become a reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, in the present day, an opponent cannot feasibly disarm a nuclear-armed superpower, as mutually assured destruction (MAD) ensures this. (Bassford 2008)

# Clausewitz: War, Peace and Politics

Written by Jordan Lindell

On the other hand, while war in itself was no longer a playable option due to deterrence during the Cold War, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of more regional and world powers, the international arena began to transform into one ruled by the political will of the nation-states. While Clausewitz was considered obsolete in the context of the bi-polar Cold War, the resurgence of world and regional powers in a multi-polar world reaffirmed the lessons of Clausewitz. Though the modern state is still classified as a nuclear age, with nuclear weapons available for some countries, the majority of states that make up the international system do not have access to them and still must rely on Clausewitz's strategy and tactics, no to mention less advanced weapons. The change back to multipolarity shows that Clausewitz is even more relevant today than his work was for the better half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and there is strength in that *Vom Kriege* has, in fact, withstood the test of time.

While the issue of whether much of Carl von Clausewitz's work is obsolete with the advent of nuclear weapons is still highly debatable, and it is evident that the text of *Vom Kriege* is not relevant in the exact context in which it was written, the tactics and the relationship between war, peace and politics promoted throughout the literature has influenced warfare and politics alike since its conception. With tactics from *Vom Kriege* used widely as military doctrine and foreign policy around the world based on Clausewitzian theories such as the paradoxical trinity and the center of gravity, it is apparent that Clausewitz's lessons live on. Because of this continued application to the modern world, even over 150 years later, it is difficult to disagree with Clausewitz and the concepts of war, peace, and politics set forth in his work. Though there are clearly some contextual issues, given that he gained influence from the political atmosphere of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the end, Carl von Clausewitz is *the* war theorist to consult when advice is necessary on war, peace, and politics. As US President George Washington declared, 'If we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war,' demonstrating Clausewitz's sentiments exactly. (Think/Exist 2009)

## Bibliography

Aron, R. *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1983)

Bassford, C. 2008. Clausewitz and His Works [Online]. <http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/CWZSUMM/CWORKHOL.htm> [Accessed 21 April 2009]

Bassford, C. *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

Bassford, C. 2009. John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz [Online]. Clausewitz.com. Available at: <http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Keegan/KEEGWHOL.htm> [Accessed 21 April 2009]

Bristow, T. February 2007. Debunking Clausewitz: Why there is no global War on Terror [Online]. American Chronicle. Available at: <http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/view/19998> [Accessed 22 April 2009]

Cimbala, S. *Clausewitz and Escalation: Classical Perspective on Nuclear Strategy*. (New York: Routledge, 1991)

Clausewitz, C.V. *On War*. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., LTD., 1940)

Doyle, M.W. *Ways of War and Peace*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc, 1997)

Earle, E.M., ed. *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973)

Elshtain, J.B. *Women and War*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

Gat, A. *The Origins of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

## **Clausewitz: War, Peace and Politics**

Written by Jordan Lindell

Howard, M. *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Think/Exist. 2009. George Washington Quotes [Online]. [http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/Albert\\_Einstein/](http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/Albert_Einstein/) [Accessed 21 April 2009]

Think/Exist. 2009. George Washington Quotes [Online]. [http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/George\\_Washington/](http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/George_Washington/) [Accessed 21 April 2009]

---

*Written by: Jordan Lindell*

*Written at: University of St Andrews*

*Written for: Professor Rengger Date Written: April 2009*