

Clausewitz is Dead

Clausewitz's definitions and conceptions of war pervade U.S. military doctrine and thinking. It is understandable why, but as the U.S. faces new adversaries in new eras, it risks doing itself a great disservice if it fails to consider all theories of war and conflict, especially as U.S. competitors—becoming potential adversaries, employ drastically different approaches to competition and conflict. Merely studying a theorist, like Sun Tzu, is not the same as reconsidering deeply held beliefs, deconstructing beliefs, then rebuilding new beliefs and understanding based on the realities of the world one lives in at that precise moment. It is not an easy task to question the philosophy of one's rearing. Clausewitz is Dead (CiD) is meant to provoke readers into such a state of open-mindedness, maybe making the task slightly easier by showing them starting points. Dr. Keith Dickson, Professor Emeritus at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School, will respond to submitted questions, conduct interviews, and sometimes do both, assuming the identity of Clausewitz. Readers are encouraged to submit their questions to Campaigning@ndu.edu.

Dear Clausewitz,

I recently read an article in War on the Rocks. It focused on the role of emotions in strategy. I don't recall much explicit discussion of the subject of emotions in On War. What role does emotion play according to your theory?

—Anxious for your Answer

Dear Anxious,

Anyone contacting the Master who begins with the sentence “I recently read an article in War on the Rocks” would normally have great wrath brought on the supplicant's head. In fact, it might be more appropriate to suggest great wrath upon that individual's neck since the head has likely rotted off from disuse. Those articles are valued less for the quality of their thinking and more for the number of insipid hyperlinks an author can cram into the text. Have you seen the links associated with my name? Mein Gott! Now, having got that unpleasantness out of the way, my fingers steepled, let us calmly consider the question about emotions in strategy.

Although On War does not use the term “strategy” in the same context as today, I do imply strategic thinking with the term Politik, which, variously translated and Jesuitically debated, can be associated with policy as it is currently used. It seems to correspond best to your contemporary conceptions of statecraft and the role of policy in shaping strategy. So, let us start with the basics before addressing emotions.

First things first: “Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it.” The political object of war, determined by what I call “the intercourse of governments and peoples,” is based on the higher logic and influence of policy. I assert that war “moves on its goal with varying speeds,” but because “war springs from some political purpose,” it remains “subject to the action of a superior intelligence.” Today, you say that the political object is translated into strategy and that strategy then guides and directs the conduct and outcome of military operations. As your doctrine states: “National strategic direction is governed by . . . the national interest as represented by national security policy.” So here we have it. War cannot be anything lesser or greater than the political object and direction provided by the logic of the superior intelligence governing it.

Second point second: I ask—rhetorically, mind you, not bothering to take a breath: “Is war not just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.” In referring to “their thoughts,” I, of course, mean policymakers, those who develop and define the political object that governs war. Note how I describe elsewhere the relationship between passion and intellect: “in the absence of great forces and passions it is indeed simpler for ingenuity to function; but is not guiding great forces, navigation through storms and surging waves, a higher exercise of the intellect?”

The relationship of logic to thinking and the expression of policy with the grammar of war allows us now to address the question of emotions, or passions, as I call it. Logic’s relationship to grammar reflects language’s relationship to thought (“another form of speech and writing”); logic is the art of thinking—the formulation of policy—and the grammar, which is directly related to logic, is the relation of the words (policy) to the realities of war—its violence, danger, and uncertainty.

My labyrinth of language functions as a constrictor knot helping us define precisely the thing as it is. In my concept, emotions are necessarily banished both in the formulation and execution of policy. Only pure intellect governed by logic can reign, for it must and it cannot be otherwise. Without this domination of the emotionless intellect, war will devolve into chaos. “War can never be separated from political intercourse,” I write, “and if, in the consideration of the matter, this is done in any way, all the threads of the different relations are, to a certain extent, broken, and we have before us a senseless thing without an object.”

Of course, my concept reflects the reality of European politics in the nineteenth century. At that time, policy and political intercourse were the purview and the ultimate responsibility of the king and magistrate. All decisions about peace and war were in the autocrat’s hands and the logic of statecraft was governed by his own intellect, which I refer to as “the qualities of mind and character of the men making the decisions.” In 1914, the crowned heads of Europe lacked the intellect and character necessary to avoid war. They did not read my book—obviously. Emotions played little role, but it was the inability of the logic of policy to avoid the default to the standard grammar of war that brought about the monumental tragedy of the Great War. In the twenty-first century, the relationship of the logic of policy to the grammar of war is easier to employ in the hands of the tyrant and the dictator—Saddam Hussein and Vladimir Putin come immediately to mind—this is because modern autocrats, like those of my own time, can define the logic of policy any way they wish and use the military instrument, whose grammar then must conform to the warped logic of the leader.

In contrast, the United States in the post-Cold War strategic environment has gone to war, arguably, without a guiding policy shaped by either intellect or logic, because emotion overran everything. “The Global War on Terror” or the “Long War,” as it became known, reflected an illogical, inarticulate, nearly meaningless expression of policy, from which the grammar of war could not function, except through endless repetitions of violence. As I clearly state: “policy is the guiding intelligence, and war only the instrument. . . . No other possibility exists.” So, perhaps your question about strategy should not be related to the role of emotions as much as to the role of intellect and character. I make it clear that without logic devoid of emotion conveying the ideas from which the grammar of war is exercised, war is senseless. The logic of politics to employ the grammar of war, as I emphasize, is based on intellect devoid of emotion.

Emotions or passions must always be controlled by intellect, otherwise the complexities of policy, statecraft, and strategy formulation will become overwhelming and lead to a failure of the logic so crucial to allowing the grammar of war to function effectively.

Now, return to your studies and get serious about preparing yourself intellectually for the questions of war and policy.

—Dead Carl

Keith Dickson, PhD writes as Dead Carl for “Clausewitz is Dead.”¹ Dr. Dickson is a renowned expert on theories of war and Professor Emeritus of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School at Joint Forces Staff College. The goal of the column is to generate educated, in-depth discourse on content often treated casually and superficially. Readers may pose their own questions for response by emailing Campaigning@ndu.edu.

¹ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.