



Rebooting Clausewitz: “On War” in the Twenty-First Century

by Christopher Coker.

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As we learn in chapter 1, “Historical Analogies and the Logic of History,” Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz (1780–1831) was a Prussian general whose military career spanned the Napoleonic wars. Early on, he fought against Napoleon. When the Prussian government later allied itself with Napoleon, he resigned from the army and fought against the French emperor in Russia, only to rejoin the Prussian army in time to play an important role in the Battle of Waterloo. After Waterloo, he retired from military service and devoted his final years to his classic work of military theory: *Vom Kriege* (On War), published by his wife the year after his death. It is one of, if not *the*, most read study of military theory ever written. It is not easy reading, even for military specialists. After nearly two centuries of technological and other advances in the military realm, the question arises: is Clausewitz still relevant?

Political scientist Christopher Coker (London School of Economics) answers in the affirmative, and uses “fictional interludes” to evoke “Clausewitz as he was known to his circle of friends” (xxiv). More specifically, he aims

to bring Clausewitz to life for a modern student audience largely through scripts of the great man’s invented conversations with modern Anglo-American audiences.... This book is written for students who like a challenge; it engages them in a language that they might find more appealing because it breaks with convention. (21–22)

These imaginary events involve General Clausewitz traveling through time to attend meetings where others challenge his time-bound mental processes: “Clausewitz at West Point: the Importance of Theory” (chap. 2), “An Evening Discussion at the Center for the American Century after Next: Clausewitz and the Importance of Strategy” (chap. 4), and “On Military History: Clausewitz at the Military History Circle, London” (chap. 5). In the West Point vignette, Clausewitz has completed a stint as visiting fellow and is about to return to his Academy in Berlin. Before leaving, he spends an evening taking questions from a group of cadets and their instructor. The topics of this freewheeling discussion include several of Clausewitz’s key concepts (e.g., his love of trinities) as well as post-Clausewitz matters like the role of emotions and psychology in general in war. Also considered is the idea of absolute war (31, 41–42, 142), which appears in *On War* book 8, but almost nowhere else, because Clausewitz decided it is unachievable.¹ One cadet suggests that zombies, as in *World War Z*,² will achieve absolute war. Clausewitz agrees (58–60).³

1. See, e.g., *On War* 1.9, “The Result in War Is Never Absolute,” and 1.10, “The Probabilities of Real Life Take the Place of the Conceptions of the Extreme and the Absolute.” *On War*, trans. J.J. Graham [1873], rev. ed. F.N. Maude (London: Kegan Paul, 1911). (Not Coker’s source, for he never cites a translation directly.)

2. Dir. Marc Forster (2013).

At the Center for the American Century after Next, Clausewitz speaks with an American journalist and US military leaders who participated in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. It becomes apparent that US forces failed in both conflicts because they planned poorly and ignored Clausewitz's insistence on the importance of strategy. Instead they foolishly disbanded the military in Iraq and deployed too few "just in time" troops to Afghanistan, trusting in erroneous predictions that left them unprepared for what Clausewitz called "the fog of war." Lacking knowledge of the local cultures (a term not yet established in Clausewitz's day), they mistakenly assumed the newly conquered people would welcome their transformation into a modern society. Lacking clear political directives, the invaders fought missions, but not campaigns (118).

At the gathering of military historians at their London club, the members portray Clausewitz as irrelevant, while the great man himself makes only pro forma defenses of his allegedly obsolete ideas. A high point is his remark that "the unexpected when it impacts on strategy can be catastrophic" (142); he also convinces his interlocutors that an American visitor is unduly optimistic about the potential of Big Data. Then they engage in some inconclusive assessments of the importance of military technology and the validity of war-related ethics.

Coker devotes his sixth and final chapter, "If not Clausewitz, then Who?" to a defense of the Prussian thinker's place among other great writers on war theory. After inviting his readers to select history's greatest war theorist, he nominates Thucydides, because he was the first historian to talk about strategy and tactics and offer clinical analyses of victory and defeat. He also approached war as a morality tale, and thus could comprehend the motives of modern-day jihadists (150–55).

Coker contends in chapter 3, "Strategic Narratives and the Logic of Strategy," that a knowledge of Darwin might have improved Clausewitz's theorizing about war. He cites over thirty-six modern books (most published since 1989), even though few of them are, strictly speaking, Darwinian in outlook. At one point, however, he claims to be "still using the evolutionary metaphor" (74). He identifies a number of pertinent, potentially illuminating topics that Clausewitz could not have known about. Since evolutionary thinking was yet to come, he had little to say about the "material mechanisms" used to constrain soldiers, for instance, stimulants, coercion, rewards (once loot, now medals), and agency (fulfillment of the human desire to be used). Also the non-evolutionary outlooks of nationalism and Eurocentrism are at work in Clausewitz's writings (74–77).

Serious scholars may value Coker's discussion of "Darwinian" thought vis-à-vis military theory, but they are unlikely to embrace his "what if" time-travel approach to elucidating Clausewitz's masterpiece. Coker's envisioned "modern student audience," however, may be more responsive to his novel and engaging approach to a complicated subject.

3. This is historically unlikely, since the genre of science fiction barely existed during his lifetime, e.g. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Jane Loudon's *The Mummy!* (1827). But, of course, it is a premise of Coker's book that Clausewitz is transported out of his own time.