

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret

Notes for Chapter 1 (being the chapter read for Gov 2710)

After the introductory element, I divided the notes into two sections generally dealing with the nature of war, and the relations of war and politics. Relevant section numbers appear in parenthesis after notes.

Fundamentally war is “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.” To do so one must put the enemy in a situation that is worse than the concessions on demands. The worst situation is one of defenselessness. Therefore the ultimate goal of war is to make your enemy powerless. By force, Clausewitz refers only to physical force, discounting the existence of moral force outside the state, a view that would connect him with the realists. (2, 4)

On War

War tends towards extremes, caused by the interaction of the two sides. The first comes about because whoever is more ruthless in their use of force gains the advantage, and their opponents are forced to match, and attempt to surpass them. Thus while states may limit war with social convention, (a possibility that is reminiscent of Bull) there is no limit inherent in war. The second arises because each side must fear being defeated and therefore neither side controls events and both must match what their opponents do and what they might do. The third arises because both states will try to gauge their enemies power of resistance (the combination of the means at their disposal and the strength of their will), and try to surpass it, thus causing both sides to reach toward their actual maximum force. (3-5)

In theory, for the above reasons, war always tends to extremes, and logic should dictate that maximum force be used from the beginning. This is not done because: it would often waste resources; the enemy is never wholly unknown, and therefore his level of resistance may be predicted; mankind, by nature, will never attain the absolute best possible; war is not a single act, but rather a sequence of actions, which means that immediate results are not decisive and may be reversed; all resources cannot simultaneously be brought to use (e.g. fortresses, favorable terrain); human nature dictates that extreme effort not be made; even the result of a war is not itself final, but may be viewed as a temporary evil. (6-9)

Periods of inaction also moderates the intensity of warfare. It would seem that delay would always benefit one side only, and therefore should not exist. It does, however, for two reasons. First, an army gains a great advantage by fighting on the defensive, and thus may be better served by remaining on the defensive even if it allows their opponent to gain strength before an assault. Second, information is always limited, and the tendency is to overestimate the strength of ones opponent. Thus both sides may feel that they are gaining by the delay, even though only one (or neither) of them are. (12-19)

Without extreme force being demanded or feared, a calculation of the opponents probable actions helps determine a nations course of action. While this is a logical calculation, war is bound by chance, which does not allow for mathematical calculations of strength and predictions of

outcome. Rather it resembles a game of cards. This is why courage and self-confidence, which allow one to act in the face of uncertainty are the greatest military virtues. (10, 20-22)

War and Politics

Men fight one another for two reasons: hostile feelings and hostile intentions. But war always entails hostile intentions. Savages are more likely to fight for passion, while civilized people tend to fight for gain. Emotions always become involved in conflict, with their degree varying on the interests involved and the length of the conflict. (3)

War is always a means to some political end. While the political aim remains the primary consideration, it must adapt itself to the chosen means, however. Thus "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means." This suggests a complex interplay, in which war must always be considered in light of its political aim, but the political aim must adapt to the chosen means of war. (23-24)

In general, the smaller the political object demanded, the less resistance can be expected. Still, one must remember that the political objects are valued differently by different people at different times. When popular passions are involved, resistance will be greater and the military position must be far worse than the desired political outcome to make the enemy yield. (11)

Two rules to understand history and theory:

1. War is never autonomous. Rather, it is always an instrument of policy.
2. This shows "how wars must vary with the nature of their motives and of the situations which give rise to them." (27)

War is "a paradoxical trinity" composed of:

1. "primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force;" this mainly concerns the people.
2. "the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam;" this concerns the commander and the army.
3. "its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone." this concerns the government. (28)