Christopher Coker: Rebooting Clausewitz: On War in the 21st Century


Reviewed by Dr Claire Yorke
Yale University, New Haven, US

‘On War’ by Carl von Clausewitz is the definitive academic text for students, teachers, and practitioners in warfare and strategy. In this thought-provoking and innovative book by Professor Christopher Coker, Clausewitz’s classic text is revisited and reimagined to bring greater insights into the enduring contribution of his works for a wide and contemporary audience.

Written with students in mind, this book is intended to challenge those who question why the works and thinking of a Prussian General and scholar who lived over 180 years ago are still so central to the study of war and military strategy. From the outset, Coker makes his case for their importance and continued relevance, and how, in many ways, Clausewitz’ ideas were more prescient than he realised (p. xiv). Addressing a perceived tendency of people to reduce Clausewitz to memorable catchphrases, this book explores how the nuances of his insights have often been lost over time, and then applies them to contemporary thinking about war and security.

Christopher Coker has an inimitable and engaging style. His writing is erudite, with a dry sense of humour that is often hard to achieve in works on military strategy. He weaves together history, politics, and philosophy with ease and situates his ideas within the broader academic literature. Indeed, it is extensive in its use of diverse references to make the argument, incorporating and reflecting on the Classics, science fiction, and popular culture among other areas, alongside the key texts on strategy, warfare, and conflict. It is this combination of past and present that helps forge the connection between Clausewitz’s legacy and current debates.

The book begins by situating Clausewitz in his time and context. It is, as Coker argues, by understanding the man, his life, and his experiences that one gains a greater appreciation of the importance of his work and its origins. And it is a useful approach. By detailing the progression of his career, the intellectual influences on his work and how he built on the ideas of his precursors (including Machiavelli), as well as the political and social context in which he wrote, it becomes clearer not only how ‘On War’ emerged but also how significant it is as a piece of scholarship.

The book’s principle innovation is the use of imagined dialogue and scenarios in three chapters (Two, Four, and Five) where Clausewitz attends a seminar of military cadets at West Point, a think tank debate in Washington DC, and a dinner at a military members club in London. Although Coker points out that he is not the first to use such a technique to reimagine the contribution of philosophers and theorists to the modern day, the use of such dialogues facilitates a re-examination of the arguments...
Claire Yorke: Review of ‘Rebooting Clausewitz: On War in the 21st Century’

and counterarguments for some of the key ideas of Clausewitz’s works. Audience members, panellists, and students are deployed in imagined conversations to engage with and develop criticisms of, and support for, Clausewitz’s ideas.

Through these scenarios the contemporary relevance of Clausewitzian thought is explored. Fictional discussions regarding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are framed through the lens of ‘On War’ and his other works. What would he have thought? What was it that strategists and policy-makers missed in their approaches? Suggestions and responses are imagined in response. This creative device further serves as a useful means for constructive engagement with emerging research areas in military thought and conflict. There is an interesting critique, for example, revealed through the scenario of the dinner in a military club that challenges those who argue that big data and mathematics will make warfare more accurate and reduce the need for strategic thought in the Clausewitzian tradition (pp. 128–131). It offers an occasion for both the author’s own cynicism of big data, and a reassertion of the continued relevance of Clausewitz’s works despite such developments in the discipline.

Moreover, it is interesting to see the book discuss areas of work in strategy and warfare that are gaining currency at present, such as emotions and the role of leaders and genius. In so doing, Coker demonstrates how Clausewitz was ahead of his time in many ways. In particular, attention is given to his emphasis on passions, and emotions within warfare, an area currently receiving greater attention in international relations as interdisciplinary approaches incorporate social psychology and other behavioural disciplines into military and strategic thought. Given past and present emphasis on the ability of strong or gifted leaders to bring victory and realise change, another useful discussion surrounds ideas of leadership and genius, defined as that inimitable ability of someone to be ‘larger than the situation he inherits’ (p. 52).

Although an admirer of Clausewitz and his contribution to scholarship and strategic thought, Christopher Coker does critique and reflect on the incompleteness of his works. There were many things that Clausewitz did not sufficiently capture. He did not, for example, manage to explain the origins of warfare or its mechanics: topics explored in Chapter Three. In addition, despite his reference to the grammar of war, Clausewitz was probably not a Constructivist and gave little consideration to the ways in which language might define and influence warfare or its appeal. Furthermore, in light of recent emphasis on the role of culture, literature, and the arts and their relationship to war, Clausewitz’s failure to recognise their significance may be considered by his detractors as diminishing his current relevance. It is through this chapter that Coker posits questions about how Clausewitz might have developed his thinking had he had access to subsequent ideas, such as Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. It poses interesting questions and considerations. Recognition of these possible shortcomings in his works serve, however, to question contemporary expectations of a work written in a different age.

As Coker acknowledges, Clausewitz’s strengths come from his appreciation for history and the life-cycle and functions of war. Although Clausewitz could not predict the advent of the tank or the latest technological developments, for example, the value in his work is that he understood the complexity of conflict and the politics around it.

In his penultimate chapter, Coker reflects further on why Clausewitz is so important and examines the alternative texts or rivals to Clausewitz’s work, pointing to Thucydides as the primary contender. Whilst the two are not mutually exclusive,
and both inform the study and practice of strategy and conflict, Clausewitz is distinct, he argues in the conclusion, as he grasped not only the difficulties and dynamics of warfare, but also its unquantifiable nature (p. 157).

This book is extensive in the ideas it covers. It raises questions about how a more detailed grasp of the ideas of ‘On War’ might inform how modern conflict should be understood and makes a convincing case for returning to the original texts. It is not without some issues, however. And despite the breadth of topics covered, there are some small omissions and areas that leave a reader wanting to know more. Indeed, although it touches on them briefly (pp. 45–46) it does not go into great depth on Clausewitz’s first or second trinities, and how, if at all, these should be updated or expanded for a modern audience.

Equally having been introduced to Clausewitz as a conservative and supporter of French revolutionaries, the reader is left wondering where he might situate himself within contemporary politics. If war is an extension of politics by other means, then what might Clausewitz say about the politics and rise of nationalism that is currently evident in European and American societies, and the current nature of security developments, defence postures, and the use of military threats? Coker touches on some of these ideas, questioning whether Clausewitz might have embraced social Darwinism given his nationalism and the age in which he lived (pp. 68–69), and referencing how he might have thought of jihadis and ISIS in the modern Middle East. Yet it would have been interesting to see how this might be developed further through the creative approach he uses.

At times the coverage of such diverse themes and approaches can feel slightly disconnected, though it works when viewed as a creative excursion intentionally designed to re-examine Clausewitz’s ideas and prompt new thinking. Finally, the Conclusion feels slightly short at only two pages. After such a tour of Clausewitz and his works there is arguably little more that could be added, but it would have been interesting to see a concluding synthesis of how scholarship could be taken further and how incorporating the many contributions and ideas that Coker reveals might change the way war and conflict is not only studied but practised, particularly given technological and operational developments in this space.

Despite these minor critiques, this book is an accessible, and engaging addition to the existing literature on Clausewitz. As this book is written to speak primarily to students it provides a useful point of entry to the work of the Prussian General for those new to his ideas and highlights the enduring relevance of his work. Beyond students, it is relevant for policy-makers and military practitioners, who sometimes invoke the ideas of Clausewitz in their bite-sized form. For them it speaks to the importance of reflecting further on the depth and complexity of his insights into the frictions, passions, and dynamics of warfare and the relationship with politics.

Finally, for seasoned scholars of warfare and strategy it offers a reassessment and re-imagination of Clausewitz that should encourage his work to be revisited and understood further within a contemporary context. In particular, it will serve as a valuable resource for those who wish to convince younger generations of the significance of his thinking. Clausewitz is deserving of a reboot, and this book is a worthwhile and insightful place to start.