

Yale Alumni College
"Cases from Clausewitz"
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"History is lived forward but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was like to know the beginning only."

C.V. Wedgwood*

Welcome

Welcome to "Cases from Clausewitz," a course that examines the life, times, and ideas of Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) through the lens of the events that informed his work as a soldier, teacher, historian, and theorists. In doing this, "Cases from Clausewitz" offers an uncommon perspective on the most important military thinker of the Western Tradition, a person who, over the course of the better part of two centuries, has been more often quoted than read, and more often read than understood.

Method

"Cases from Clausewitz" makes extensive use of the case method, a method of learning in which the definitive activity of each class meeting is an exercise known as a "decision forcing case." Long used in schools of business administration, and recently introduced to military staff colleges, the case method has little in common with the teaching methods used in most academic settings. In particular, the case method serves purposes, promotes perspectives, and employs procedures that differ greatly from their conventional counterparts.

*Cicely Veronica Wedgwood, William the Silent: William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, 1533–1584, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), p.35.

Purpose

The chief purpose of the case method is the fostering of virtues that help a person engage the challenges of life in a deliberate, thoughtful, and decisive way. These include:

- a bias for action
- intellectual self-reliance
- empathy (which is not to be confused with sympathy)
- the ability to communicate clearly and argue persuasively
- a capacity for creativity, cooperation, adaptability, and innovation
- interest in professional reading and, in particular, enthusiasm for military history
- the ability to quickly make sense of novel, dynamic, and fast-changing situations
- the ability to rapidly compose, propose, explain, defend, and modify workable courses of action

In the course of cultivating the aforementioned skills, attitudes, and habits, those who learn by means of the case method also acquire a great deal of understanding of the circumstances of the events in question. Indeed, because this knowledge has been applied to the solution of significant problems, it is more likely to find a permanent home in the minds of students than facts, figures, and concepts taught by other methods. (To put things another way, while designed to do other things, the case method is a particularly effective way of conveying information.)

Perspective

In conventional seminars, students engage arguments about various aspects of reality from the point of view of disinterested observers. In the discussion of decision-forcing cases, students engage real-world problems from the perspectives of the particular people who actually faced them. In other words, each decision-forcing case is a first-person exercise in which students take on the role of a historical person who, at some time in the past, needed to deal with a particularly challenging situation. (In the language of the case method, this person is known as "the protagonist of the case.")

Procedures

The procedures employed by students who are learning by means of the case method differ from those employed by students in other academic settings. In particular, students will prepare for, and participate in, class discussions in ways that are peculiar to the case method. Where preparation is concerned, students will engage, as individuals, relatively short reading assignments (known as "case materials") in a particularly purposeful way, treating what is written in much the same way as a detective treats evidence. In class, students will take part in a Socratic discussion, one characterized by such techniques as role play, cold calling, paraphrasing, and redirection. (These techniques are described on the following page.) After class, students should revisit the problem, comparing the solutions offered in the course of discussion with the decision made by the protagonist.

In examining the case materials, students will ask themselves a simple but powerful question: "What is going on here and what I am going to do about it?" In engaging this central conundrum, they may ask other questions. These include:

- "Who am I?"
- "What is important to me?"
- "What is my mission?"
- "What does my boss expect of me?"
- "What do I expect of myself?"
- "What are my goals (immediate, medium term, long term)?"
- "What do success and failure look like?"
- "What obstacles stand in my way?"
- "What resources are available to me?"
- "What is the best way to make use of available time?"
- "What is the greatest danger I face?"
- "What opportunities does the situation offer?"
- "What is the worst that might happen?"
- "What is the best that I can hope for?"
- "What are the possible side-effects of my plan?"
- "What are the ethical dimensions of my plan?"
- "Will my subordinates understand my plan?"
- "Can my subordinates execute my plan?"
- "How will I know if my plan is working?"
- "How will other people, whether enemies, allies, or third parties, react to my plan?"

The Socratic Conversation

The central event in every class meeting is the Socratic conversation. It begins when the case teacher asks a student to (1) describe the problem that he faces and (2) provide a workable solution to that problem. In doing this, the case teacher will address the student by the title and surname of the protagonist and ask him a question that resembles one of the following:

- "What is going on here?"
- "What is the problem are you trying to solve?"
- "What is your plan?"
- "What are your orders?"
- "What are you going to do?"

Once the selected student has described his problem and proposed a solution, the case teacher will paraphrase what the student just said, providing a synopsis that describes the essential features of his response. This done, the case teacher may "redirect." That is, he will ask follow-up questions to the selected student, asking him to expand upon one point or another. Alternatively, the case teacher may ask another student to offer a critique of the first solution or offer a solution of his own.

This "cycle of cold call and critique" will repeat itself several times in the course of the Socratic conversation. At times, the formal, teacher-led portion of the discussion will give way to a more natural interchange, with students jumping into the discussion without waiting to be called. When this happens, the teacher will watch the class to make prevent a small proportion of the students from dominating the discussion and to ensure that the discussion remains focused on the problem at the heart of the case. (If the teacher thinks that the discussion is become bogged down in some way, he will jump in and restart the "cycle of cold call and critique.")

The Socratic discussion may lead to a consensus concerning the best way to solve the problem faced by the protagonist. Alternatively, the class will end up with two or more reasonable courses of action, each of which has its champions. From the point of view of the benefit that the student derives from the experience, each of these outcomes is equally good. To put things another way, the point of the Socratic conversation is neither to achieve nor to prevent the achievement of a consensus. Rather, it is to give students the means of making the most of the last step in the engagement of a case, the revelation of the historical solution.

The Historical Solution

Also known as "the rest of the story" or "the reveal," the historical solution is a description of how the real-world protagonist solved the problem at the heart of the case. This can take the form of a verbal brief at the end of the Socratic discussion, a short reading handed out at the end of the class meeting, or the case materials (readings) for the next case in a series.

The historical solution is neither "the right answer" nor the "school solution" to the case. Rather, it is simply a description of what happened in the real world. As such, it provides students with a means of comparison that helps them evaluate their own solutions and those of their classmates. In many instances, the historical solution provides background to subsequent cases in the course. This is particularly true of those cases that relate to the campaign of 1814.

Case Materials

All required readings for "Cases from Clausewitz" will be provided, as an attachment to an e-mail message, by the instructor. As the materials for later cases often contain information that will "spoil" earlier cases, the materials for each case in the course will not be given out until after the previous case has been taught. To put things more simply, a student should expect to receive an e-mail with a set of case materials on Thursday, 25 September 2018 and on every Thursday in October 2018. (In the event that such case materials fail to arrive, please send an e-mail message to decision.forcing.case@gmail.com.)

Schedule of Cases

Thursday, 3 October 2018 "Into the Woods"

Thursday, 10 October 2018 "Lost in Yonkers"

Thursday, 17 October 2018 "Jersey Boys"

Thursday, 24 October 2018 "All in the Family"

Thursday, 31 October 2018 "The Old School Tie"

Thursday, 7 November 2018 "Bohemian Rhapsody."

Complementary Materials

The materials on this list are complementary to the course as a whole and thus independent of any particular class meeting. As enhancements to the cases that make up the course, they are also entirely optional.

Books

In Clausewitz: A Biography, Roger Parkinson reminds us that the person we now remember as the "philosopher of war," was, first and foremost, a man of action.

In Clausewitz and the State, Peter Paret describes the intellectual, political, and social milieu in which Clausewitz spent much of his adult life.

In telling the life story of Marie von Clausewitz: the Woman Behind the Making of On War, Vanya Eftimova Bellinger tells us much about the personal, professional, and cultural life of Carl von Clausewitz.

Video Programs

The Duelists (1977) provides an excellent introduction to the spirit of the age in which our cases take place. The first feature film to be directed by Ridley Scott, it is also a gorgeous tribute the visual aesthetic of the Napoleonic Era.

The most recent attempt to translate Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace into film, a television miniseries that made its debut in 2016, also does a splendid job of depicting the sights and sounds of the first decade or so of the nineteenth century.

Audio Programs

In Napoleon: The Man and the Myth (BBC 4), Andrew Roberts provides a five-episode overview of the protagonist of most of the cases in this course.

The Forgotten podcast has produced a series on the life and times of August von Gneisenau, one of the leaders of the great reform of the Prussian Army that took place during the Napoleonic Wars and chief of staff to Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher in the campaign of 1814.