CRISIS, ESCALATION, AND WAR

Rutgers University  PS 395:01  Fall 2013
Political Science Seminar

Professor Jack S. Levy
304 Hickman Hall; 732 932 1073; jacklevy@rci.rutgers.edu
Office Hours: after class and by appointment
http://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/levy/

States in the international system have numerous conflicts of interest. Most states, most of the time, are able to manage these conflicts, gain the benefits of mutual cooperation, and avoid the costs of conflict. Sometimes, however, conflicts lead to crises. These crises are often resolved, or at least ended without war, but sometimes they are not, and instead they escalate to war. Most of us would like to see an end to war, or, if that is not possible, at least a reduction in its frequency and severity. This requires that we first understand why crises occur (because most wars emerge through crises), and why some crises escalate to war while others do not. Our primary aim in this course is to gain a better understanding of why some crises escalate to war. We do this by examining some of the leading theories of foreign policy decision-making and war and by applying those theories to a number of important historical cases through student research projects and oral presentations. This is a research seminar, and each student undertakes a major research project.

In this class we focus on crises and war between states. Interstate war has been the most prominent form of war in the last five centuries, and it has shaped the evolution of the modern world. It is true that interstate crises and wars (and most notably wars between great powers) have declined in frequency, while civil wars, insurgency, and terrorism have increased in frequency. Still, interstate war is still usually the most destructive form of war. Although some argue that interstate war is a thing of the past, there are enough danger spots in the world – the Middle East, the Indian-Pakistani rivalry, the Korean peninsula, and the rise of China – to warrant a continued concern about the potential for future interstate crises and wars. There will almost certainly be a great power crisis in your lifetime. A better understanding of crisis, escalation, and war will give you a useful perspective on the future.

The study of the origins and escalation of crises raises a number of questions about how states make foreign policy, and security policy in particular. Can state actions in international relations best be described as a rational response to the constraints and opportunities existing in their external environments? Or do factors internal to the state – the mindsets and psychological predispositions of political leaders, public opinion,
economic interest groups, political culture, political structures, bureaucratic conflicts, and other factors – play a significant role? How do external and internal factors interact in the processes leading to the foreign policy actions of states? Is the foreign policy-making process different in times of crisis than at other times? These theoretical questions are central to the course.

A key question in the study of war – and of when and why crises escalate to war – is why wars occur at some times rather than other times, between some states rather than between other states, under some conditions (diplomatic, military, economic, social, political) rather than other conditions, under some leaders rather than other leaders. Although in some respects war is a constant feature of world politics, it makes more sense to think of war as a variable. The task is then to explain variations in war and peace over time and space. State behavior and state interactions during crises go far in explaining when wars occur and when they do not. This forces us to go beyond a single historical case and think about theories of escalation and war, since it is only through theory that we are able to generalize about the conditions under which war is most likely to occur.

Theorizing about crisis, escalation, and war, however, is only part of our task. Given multiple theories, we need some way to assess which theories provide the best explanations of the most crises and wars, which theories are most consistent with historical reality. This concern with empirical validity leads us to an interest in history. History is important not only because explaining the past is a valuable end in itself, and because history is a fertile source of theoretical ideas, but also because history provides an essential means of testing our theories, adjudicating among competing theories, modifying our theories, and ultimately helping us construct better theories. In addition, one of the best ways to understand theories of crises and war is to try to apply them in actual historical cases.

One can identify countless theories of foreign policy decision-making and crisis escalation, and one way to make sense of these various theories is to categorize them. One useful way to organize theories of foreign policy and international relations is the “levels-of-analysis” framework. With that in mind, we begin the course with a discussion of that framework, which we illustrate by applying it to some current issues.

We then go on to examine a number of theories of crisis, decision-making, and war from a levels-of-analysis perspective. After summarizing the “unitary rational actor model,” we look at system level realist theory. We give specific attention here to the concepts of international anarchy and the security dilemma, and to balance of power theories. We next turn to the “dyadic” level and look at strategic interaction, with special attention to
spiral models of escalation, the “bargaining model of war,” and theories of crisis management. We then look at economic and societal-level theories, including diversionary theory. We next look at decision-making theories at the levels of both individual psychology and the bureaucratic organization. We analyze how factors at each of these levels contribute to escalatory processes, and how they interact with each other to produce complex causal patterns. We illustrate each of the main theoretical arguments with examples from a wide range of historical cases – American and non-American, past and more recent, Western and non-Western, great power and small power. In the process, we will talk about some of the analytic complexities involved in the study of crisis, escalation, and war. We end the first part of the course with a general discussion of the July Crisis (1914) and the outbreak and escalation of the First World War.

The second half of the course will be centered around individual student research projects, which students will begin working on early in the term. Each student will undertake a major research project on a particular crisis or war and present the analysis to the class for discussion. The aim is for each student to come out of the class with a detailed understanding of a particular crisis or war along with more generalized knowledge about a larger number of crises and wars. Although the aim of individual research projects is to explain the outcome of a particular historical case, taken together these research projects provide an informal “test” of various theories. If a particular theory appears to “fit” most of our cases, we can gain confidence in its validity. If a theory does not fit many cases, we lose confidence in its general validity, though it may fit a particular case quite well.

With a class enrollment exceeding 25, and a limited number of sessions for presentations, we do not have enough time to allow students to select any crisis or war they want. Instead, I am giving you a choice of eight different cases. Most involve crises that escalate to war, but some involve crises that do not escalate to war (the Munich crisis of 1938, and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962). That should provide you with plenty of choice, so you can find something that will interest you for your research project. With several students working on each case, the oral presentations will be in a panel format. This will facilitate discussion and debate about alternative interpretations of each war. These discussions are important – in fact, more important than the presentations themselves, which is why I keep the presentations fairly short. This format has worked very well in the past.
List of cases:
War of 1812
World War I – American Intervention (1917)
Munich Crisis (1938)
Pacific War (U.S.-Japan, 1941)
Cuban Missile Crisis
1967 Arab-Israeli War
1990/91 Persian Gulf War
2003 Iraq War

We can have up to five, but no more, students working on a particular case. We do not have to cover all of these cases. If no one selects a particular case, we will simply drop it. In fact, even if just one person selects a case, we will have to drop it, because we need a broader dialogue. If we drop cases I might need to rearrange the schedule a little. I would like to make that decision by the third week of class, if possible. This requires you to do some background reading early in the term to help you select a case. I keep the reading modest to give you a little extra time to do that. I say more about case selection later in the syllabus.

READINGS

There are four sets of required reading for the seminar:
1) Theoretical reading for part I of the course
2) Historical reading for week 8
3) Background reading for each of our historical cases in part II of the course.
4) Reading for your specific research project.

All theoretical readings except the book are available in section 1 of my Sakai site. The required historical readings (#2&3 above) are available in section 2 of my Sakai site. In section 4-9 of my Sakai site I include a few additional readings for each student research project, along with a bibliography containing additional sources for each case.

The theoretical reading, which includes a book and several articles, is designed to provide a brief survey of the leading theories of decision-making and of the causes of war. That is important as an end in itself. It is also essential for your two papers for the class. An understanding of the leading theories will help you identify and summarize the alternative interpretations of the historical case you are studying, which is the focus of your first paper for the course. A theoretical understanding also helps you to organize your research paper on the escalation or non-escalation of your crisis and to interpret the massive amount of historical information on your case. If you are familiar with theories of balance
of power, conflict spirals, diversionary behavior, and decision-making, you will be quicker to identify those patterns from your historical readings and to interpret the connections among historical events.

The background historical reading, which consists of one article-length piece per war, provides a historical description of the causes of each of the cases that we will study in this seminar. This serves several purposes. First, if you are not sure which case you want to choose as your research project, a quick reading of some of these essays provides the best way for you to get a sense of each of the wars. (I say more about case selection in the section on “Selecting a Paper Topic,” on p. 11 of this syllabus.) Second, the background reading also allows us to assume, for the purposes of student presentations, that the members of the class have some familiarity with the case, so presenters can focus primarily on interpretive issues rather than on summarizing the history. Third, the background reading will be useful in understanding the presentations, asking good questions, and generally participating in the discussions (which is part of your grade).

To give you a sense of what my expectations are, and hopefully to reduce the level of uncertainty and anxiety, I include as recommended reading (in section 3 of my Sakai site) a few sample papers from my previous undergraduate research seminars, though they had a slightly different focus.

I will also provide some guidance on the reading for your particular research project. I will provide a list of references, along with a sense of which sources are particularly important. If a good paper on a particular case requires you to engage a particular author or historical interpretation, I will make that clear.

**Book** (available at New Jersey Books, 37 Easton Avenue; 732 253 7666), on the internet, and on reserve at Alexander Library):

**Articles and Book Chapters** (available on my Sakai site, www.sakai.rutgers.edu)

**Theories of Crisis, Decision-making, and War**

Historical Background for week 8 on the July Crisis and the First World War

Historical Background for Class Presentations (Note: Pay attention to page numbers; in some cases it is not necessary to read the entire article).


**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

There is one interrelated set of formal requirements for the course, centered around your research project on the causes of a particular war and coming in three parts:

1) a 2-3 page paper (single space) that summarizes alternative interpretations of your historical case and that includes a preliminary bibliography of sources used;
2) an oral presentation to the class summarizing your provisional interpretation of the causes of your war, followed by discussion;
3) a 11-15 page (single space) research paper on your crisis or war.

There is no mid-term or final examination.

Your final grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first paper</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oral presentation and discussion</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research paper</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general contributions to class discussion</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note the last item: my judgment of your contribution (quantity and quality) to class discussion, both during our survey of theoretical approaches and in the discussions of presentations of other members of the seminar, will be important in the evaluation of all borderline cases. This gives you a strong incentive to complete all required readings prior to class meetings. Also, I expect you to attend every meeting of the seminar. Grades in borderline cases can be affected by poor attendance. It is particularly inexcusable for students to be absent during other students’ presentations.

Students should submit their papers as an attachment under the “Assignments” tab on Sakai. Papers should be in a Word document format. A pdf format is also acceptable. For those who prefer other processing programs, please convert your papers to a Word (.doc or .docx) or PDF format before submitting. Please do not submit your papers in an .odt or other format. Your paper will be automatically be run through the “Turnitin” program, which identifies long passages in a paper that match passages in the “Turnitin” database, which includes the internet.
Paper #1: Alternative interpretations of your historical case.
2-3 pages single space, with extra space between paragraphs; includes bibliography, due October 22, midnight.

Historians often vary in their interpretations of particular historical events or episodes. Crises and wars are no exception. One thing that motivates professional historians and political scientists is the ambition to demonstrate than an existing interpretation is wrong or at least incomplete, to suggest a new interpretation, and to support it with evidence from documents or from other sources. If one accepts the conventional wisdom about a particular episode, then there is not much point to doing yet another study. This norm is if anything more pronounced in political science. Political scientists who want to test their own theory against the historical evidence identify several alternative theories and then try to demonstrate, based on the evidence, that their preferred theory is superior to the alternatives.

Sometimes it is fairly easy to identify alternative interpretations of a particular crisis or war. Take the U.S. decision for war against Iraq in 2003 as an example. Some argue that it was “all about oil.” Others emphasize the ideological aim of overthrowing an evil dictator and bringing democracy to Iraq and to the region, the fear (however misplaced) of Iraq’s nuclear weapons program, the role of neoconservatives in the U.S. decision-making process, or the world view and personality of U.S. President George W. Bush. Alternative interpretations are sometimes evident in the title of books and articles. The subtitle of Herbert Bass’s book on American Entry into World War I (1964), for example, is Submarines, Sentiment, or Security. This suggests that American motivations were either the German submarine threat to U.S. commerce or to the principle of freedom of the seas, the ideological commitment to liberal democracies in Europe, or the aim to maintain the balance of power. To take another example, in my study of the Crimean War that I wrote with a student who took this seminar fifteen years ago, my coauthor and I used the title "Crisis Mismanagement or Conflict of Interests? A Case Study of the Crimean War." We framed the study as a debate between the argument that the wars was due to the mismanagement of the crisis by political leaders, and the argument that the primary cause of the war was a conflict of vital interests between the two parties.

Identifying alternative interpretations is often complicated by the fact that it is usually possible to identify one or two variations of each alternative interpretation. You have to use your own judgment as to whether a given variation is important enough to qualify as a separate alternative interpretation. The more you read about theories about war and about historical cases, the better the feel you have for the cases and the easier it is to make these judgments. I am generally looking for three to five alternative interpretations for a particular crisis or war.
If alternative explanations do not “emerge” from debates among historians, you can suggest some yourself based on your understanding of theories of decision-making and war. One easy approach would be to adopt an approach based on the levels of analysis framework. This might lead to the identification of an international system level (or realist) interpretation, a domestic political interpretation, and an individual level interpretation. Some might want to add a bureaucratic politics interpretation. Others might want to suggest two domestic interpretations – for example, one based on the diversionary theory of war, and another based on the pressure from powerful domestic economic interests.

One of my aims in assigning this first paper is to help you write a better second paper. One thing that separates many excellent research papers from merely good papers (in my classes, at least) is that an excellent paper often includes a discussion of why a given interpretation is better than the leading alternative explanations. Your shorter paper, or ideally a revised version of it, can and should be incorporated into your final research paper for the course.

**Paper # 2: Research Paper** (11-16 pages, single space, due Monday, December 16, noon, at the “Assignments” tab on my Sakai site).

The paper should focus on the causes of the particular crisis or war that you select for investigation. I will circulate additional guidelines about the paper later, and we will talk more about it on and off throughout the course. In addition, we should have plenty of extra time to talk about the papers at our October 15 class meeting. Let me briefly describe the paper here, however, because it is a major project that requires a major commitment on your part, and you should take this seminar only if the paper is something that you would enjoy doing.

Your basic task in the paper is to select a crisis or war from the list of interstate wars provided and to analyze its causes. The paper must be more than a historical chronology of the origins of your war. It must be analytically focused and guided by some of the theoretical concepts that we develop in the class. That is, you should use some of the theoretical concepts from the first part of the course to help explain the outbreak of your war. The paper must include an evaluation of the relative importance of different causal factors at different levels of analysis in the processes leading to the outbreak and escalation of the war. I do not want a laundry list of ten or twenty causes of the war. You need to prioritize among the many causes, and identify primary and secondary causes of the war.
I want to emphasize that although your main aim is to provide a causal interpretation of the outbreak of your war, it is not just an interpretive essay. It is a piece of historical research that must be well grounded in and supported by the available historical evidence. This requires extensive research and extensive footnoting. In your first paper – on alternative interpretations of your war – you should include a list of sources that you have consulted. If something critical is missing I will let you know. If I recommend additional sources that you have omitted, you would be wise to follow up on my suggestions.

The Oral Presentation

You will have 5-6 minutes each for your oral presentations, as part of a group panel on each case. This is not a whole lot of time, and it will go by very quickly. Half of your time should be summarizing part of the historical background of the case, and that should be done in coordination with the other students working on that case, to minimize overlap. The other half is summarizing your interpretation of the crisis, and why it did or did not escalate to war. That part does not need to be coordinated with others. You should identify the primary and secondary causes of the war (or non-escalation of the crisis) and explain how they helped bring the war about. You will have more opportunity to elaborate on your interpretation and on the evidence that supports your view in the lengthy discussion period, in response to questions that arise. What will probably work best is for each person to spend three minutes on the history, in sequence, and then for each person to speak again for three minutes about his/her presentation.

In the question and answer session, other students and I will raise questions of interpretation, the theoretical coherence of your argument, the strength and validity of your supporting evidence, and other topics. Some of these questions will be relevant for your final paper. In fact, you should think of the presentation as a rough draft of your final research paper and as a means of getting feedback to help you improve the paper. With this in mind, I strongly recommend that after your presentation you take the time to write down all the useful ideas and any responses that come to mind while things are still fresh. I might add that the more focused and coherent your presentation on the causes of your war, the more useful feedback will be. This provides an additional incentive to do as much research on your case as possible before your presentation.

Among the various theoretical questions we will attempt to answer in our historical cases are the following: What is the relative importance of causal factors from different levels of analysis on each state’s behavior? Or, to ask the same question in a slightly different way, what is the relative importance of strategic, ideological, economic, and domestic political motivations in political leaders’ decisions on whether or not to escalate a crisis? Do states go to war primarily to increase their power and security, to promote certain
principles of justice or forms of socio-political organization, to increase their wealth, or to consolidate the domestic positions of key elites? How important are conflicts of interests over tangible issues, like territorial disputes, as opposed to concerns over power, reputation, and internal politics? Do individual decision-makers make a difference, or would policy choices have been similar if someone else was in power? To what extent are decisions for war made through careful cost-benefit calculations based on state interests and on international and domestic constraints, and to what extent are they driven by flawed information processing and other departures from a rational decision-making calculus?

Selecting a Paper Topic
It is important that you move as quickly as possible to select a war (from the list mentioned above) to serve as the topic of your research paper for the class. The deadline for selecting a topic is September 24. After that, a topic will be assigned to you. Selecting a topic early is important so you can get the topic you want while it is still available. It is also important so that you can begin collecting research materials. A fair amount of material will be available on the internet, especially in the form of journal articles, but other material is available only in books. Hopefully most books will be available in Rutgers libraries. If not, you might have to go through EZ Borrow or Interlibrary Loan (if these are unfamiliar, ask the librarian at the Alexander Library Reference Desk for details). These are efficient systems, but they do not work overnight, so please do not put off your collection of research materials until the last minute.

Some of you might already be familiar with some of these cases and know what war you want to study. Most of you are probably less familiar with these cases, so let me suggest a reasonably quick way of gaining enough familiarity with them to help you make an informed decision.

Although internet sources like Wikipedia generally focus more on the history of particular wars and what led up to them than on causal explanations for the war, and hence are of limited value for your research paper, such sources are probably more useful for getting a basic sense of the war. So reading about a few wars on Wikipedia would be one useful place to start. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that this class focuses on crises and the causes of the war, not how the war is fought. I suggest that – for the purposes of this class, at least – that you stop reading when the fighting starts.

In addition, on my Sakai site I have posted some additional material for each war. In section two of my Sakai site I post the essay that I have assigned for each historical case as common background reading. If you want a little more information about a case, I have posted a few more readings on each case in sections 4-9 of my Sakai site. (Note: the
numbers of the sections on my Sakai site do not correspond with weeks of the term.) Reading through the required background reading and an additional essay or two would be an efficient way of getting a sense of the various wars – much more efficient that randomly selecting a book on “The Origins of xxx War” from the library shelves.

A final word on case selection is in order. Please do not hesitate to pick one of the early cases just because you would be in the first or second presentation groups. For one thing, my expectations are lower for the first few presentations, given both the more restricted time to do your background research and also the lesser familiarity with how things will work. In addition, one advantage to presenting early is that you receive early feedback and have more time to do more research and fine-tune the final research paper.

One final note: You will not be the only person working on your particular case. Although articles and book chapters available on my Sakai site or on the internet can be used by all, there may be limited copies of some important books. Everyone will be better off if you share those materials. Please coordinate with others working on the same case. If a book has been checked out, check with others working on the same case before you recall the book.
COURSE OUTLINE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Number indicates the week of the term, beginning Sept. 3; letters represent multiple topics each week.

Part I: Theories of Crises, Decision-making, and War

1a. Course Introduction (September 3)
focus, aims, organization, requirements
preliminary discussion of research project

1b. What is a Crisis? What is a War?

1c. The Levels of Analysis Framework
Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, chap. 1

2a. The Rational-Unitary Actor Model (September 10)

2b. The System Level: Realist Theory and Balance of Power Theory
John Mearsheimer, “Anarchy and the Struggle for Power”
Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, chap. 2
Levy, “Preventive War: Concepts and Propositions”

3a. The Dyadic Level: Strategic Interaction (September 17)
Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, chap. 3

3b. Deterrence and the Spiral Model
Robert Jervis, “Deterrence, the Spiral Model, and the Intentions of the Adversary”

3c. A Bargaining Perspective: Why Can’t They Settle?
Blainey, “The Abacus of Power”

3d. Crisis Management
Alexander L. George, “A Provisional Theory of Crisis Management”

4. Economic and Societal Theories (September 24)
Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, chap. 4.
5a. **The Decision-Making Approach** (October 1)

5b. **Psychology of Decision-making**
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, chap. 5
Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception"

---

6a. **Bureaucratic Politics and Organizational Processes** (October 8)
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, chap. 6
Allison and Halperin, “Bureaucratic Politics”

6b. **Group Dynamics**

---

7a. **Crisis Decision-Making** (October 15)

7b. **Theoretical Summary**

**Discussion of paper #1 & #2**

---

** October 22 Paper #1 due (“Assignments tab” on Sakai, by 11:59pm)

8. **July 1914 Crisis and the First World War** (October 22)
Note: Professor Levy will make a presentation and guide discussion.

---

9. **Individual consultations on research papers** (October 29)
Part II

Student Presentations
(and required background reading)
Dates are tentative and depend on student selections of cases.

10. November 5  The War of 1812
    Perkins, "Introduction" to The Causes of the War of 1812.

World War I – U.S. Intervention (1917)

11. November 12  The Munich Crisis (1938)
    Caputi, Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement, chap. 8.

Pacific War (U.S.-Japan, 1941-45)
Sagan, “The Origins of the Pacific War”

12. November 19  Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)
    George, “The Cuban Missile Crisis: Peaceful Resolution through Coercive Diplomacy.”

The 1967 Arab-Israeli Crisis (November 19)

13. December 3  1990/91 Persian Gulf War
    Freedman & Karsh, “How Kuwait Was Won: Strategy in the Gulf War”

2003 Iraq War
Duelfer and Dyson, “Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraqi Experience.”

14. December 10  Theoretical Comparisons of Historical Cases
LIST OF DEADLINES
October 22 (midnight) paper #1
December 16, noon paper #2
submit each paper to Sakai site, “Assignments” tab (Word or pdf)

NOTE #1: Please turn off your cell phones before class begins. If you need to have your cell phone on for medical or other reasons, please get a note from your dean. You are free to use laptop computers, iPADs, or other devices to take notes, to look at the syllabus or reading material online, or to look up other factual material relating to the course, but not for any other purpose – texting or emailing is not permitted.

NOTE #2: ACADEMIC INTEGRITY. The University, the Political Science Department, and I each take academic integrity very seriously. The University imposes heavy penalties for plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. If the meanings of plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty are not clear, please see the Rutgers website on academic integrity: http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/.

NOTE #3: ABSENCES. Attendance is required at all sessions.