The Causes of War

Rutgers University, Political Science 324, Spring 2012

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War has been a plague on humanity for thousands of years, from early hunter-gatherers, to tribes and chiefdoms, to empires and early states, to the contemporary international system. War takes place between states, within states, and between other kinds of political organizations. Most of us would like to see an end to war, or, at a minimum, a reduction in the horrible destructiveness of war. Despite the intellectual energy devoted to the questions of what causes war and how to control it – by philosophers, historians, political scientists, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, biologists, primatologists, and others – little consensus has emerged regarding what the causes of war are or how best to identify those causes. It is perhaps not surprising that debates persist between various disciplines, given their different assumptions and methodologies. But debate persists within disciplines as well. No consensus has emerged among political scientists as to the best theory of war, how we might construct or validate such a theory, or even the appropriate criteria for evaluating competing theories of war. Historians, who are generally quite skeptical about the possibility of constructing general theories about anything as complex and context-dependent as war, rarely agree among themselves about the causes of particular wars. This is true even in cases such as the First World War, where most of the documents pertaining to the war are now available.

Our aim in this course is to gain a better understanding of the conditions, processes, and events which lead to the outbreak and escalation of war. War – defined generally as sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations – comes in enormous varieties, including tribal wars, imperial wars, interstate wars, great power wars, revolutionary wars, civil wars, insurgencies, and terrorism. Although different kinds of war may exhibit some common themes – pursuit of interests and fears of insecurity, for example – many of the more specific causes of war differ for different kinds of wars. A theory of great power war (like the First or Second World Wars) will probably not provide a very good explanation for the insurgencies in Iraq or Afghanistan. A general theory of all war would be too general and too watered down to provide useful explanations of particular kinds of wars. For that reason we limit our focus in this course to the causes of interstate wars.
True, interstate war is no longer the dominant form of warfare, as it was for most of the last five centuries of the modern international system. Great power wars (between the leading states in the system), which have done much to shape the nature of the state system during the last half millennium, have disappeared since World War II (or at least since the Korean War), and interstate wars in general have declined over that period. Meanwhile, civil wars exploded in number since the 1960s before reaching a peak in the 1980s, and civil war, insurgency, and terrorism continues to be the most frequent form of armed conflict in the world. Nevertheless, interstate war is still the most destructive form of war and the one that has the greatest potential for fundamentally reshaping the structure and evolution of world politics and the lives of many peoples. In addition, there are enough danger spots in the world – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the prospective emergence of a nuclear Iran, the Indo-Pakistani rivalry, the Korean peninsula, and the rise of China as a rival to the United States – to warrant a continued concern with the phenomenon of interstate war.

Our primary aim is to understand the conditions under which interstate wars are most likely to occur, to answer the question of “Who Fights Whom, Where, When, and Why?” (as the late Stuart Bremer once asked). These are theoretical questions, and much of the focus in the lectures and readings are theoretical in nature. We supplement our theoretical analyses with a large number of historical illustrations, both in lecture and in readings on particular wars, from the Peloponnesian War that engulfed the Greek world from 431-404BCE to the 2003 Iraq War. These historical case studies will serve several purposes. Individual wars are important in and of themselves, and are worth studying for their historical value. I am also convinced that the best way to understand general theories of war is to see how they work in particular cases. Theories are useful in abstracting from a mass of detail in order to identify the underlying causal processes, but actual wars are often quite complex, as historical studies will show. Understanding the causes of war requires both theoretical knowledge and historical knowledge.

The course begins with an historical and theoretical introduction. We classify different kinds of war and examine the evolution of interstate warfare over the last half millennium and some significant changes in patterns of warfare during the last half century. We then analyze the Clausewitzian conception of war as an instrument of state policy. Next, we turn to the "levels-of-analysis" framework, which will serve as an organizing concept for our theoretical survey of the causes of war. We consider "human nature" explanations for war and ask what we mean by the question of "what causes war?"

We then turn to system-level "realist" explanations for war, beginning with a brief review of realist theories of international politics. We give particular attention to balance of power theory, power transition theory, and preventive war. Moving to the "dyadic" level of analysis, we examine the deterrence model and spiral models of conflict, and then analyze
"Prisoner's dilemma" models. We next turn our attention to the "bargaining model of war" and theories of crisis management. Our next subject is economic theories of war, which cut across system and societal (domestic) levels. Our main focus here is on Marxist-Leninist theories of imperialism, the liberal "trade promotes peace" hypothesis, and realist critiques of the liberal view. Turning to the societal level, we examine the "democratic peace" (the fact that democratic states rarely if ever go to war with each other). After looking at the possible links between both ideology and religion and war, we then turn to the diversionary theory of war and to the argument that the process of democratization might actually make war more likely.

After a review of system, dyad, and societal-level theories of war (and the first exam), we turn to the individual level and examine the belief systems and psychology of leaders. We lay out a rational model of decision-making and then examine various ways in which actual decision-making deviates from a rational decision calculus. Specific topics include misperceptions and war and the psychology of threat perception and intelligence failure. We also look at prospect theory, which emphasizes loss aversion and the high-risk behavior it sometimes generates. We end our theoretical discussions with a look at bureaucratic and organizational theories of war.

We finish up the course with more detailed explorations of the causes of World War I, the "seminal conflict" of the 20th century, which is now approaching its 100th anniversary and which will get a lot of attention in the next few years; World War II, the most destructive war in history; and the Cuban Missile Crisis, which is the closest the world has come to a nuclear war and which will be observing its 50th anniversary this year.

READINGS

I have done my best to minimize your expenses for the class by limiting the number of books to one and selecting the rest of the reading materials in the form of journal articles and book chapters that are available for free on my Sakai site for the course.

Book

The book is available for purchase at New Jersey Books (37 Easton Avenue; 732 253 7666) and on the internet. Kindle and Nook editions are also available. I have also asked Alexander library to place copies of the book on reserve. The book will not be available on my Sakai site.
Articles and Book Chapters (available on the course Sakai site, www.sakai.rutgers.edu)

In the order of appearance on the syllabus:


COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Student performance in the course will be evaluated on the basis of an in-class mid-term examination and a paper. The mid-term exam, which will take place on Thursday March 8, will include both true/false & multiple choice questions and an essay. For the essay, you will select one question from a choice of two. The paper is a cross between a paper and a take-home exam. You will choose one question from a choice of two, and write a 5-6 page single space answer. The paper topics will be posted on my Sakai site on the first day of Spring, March 20. Papers will be due April 16. There will be a two-week penalty-free extension in the deadline on the paper (to April 30) for those who need it. Papers should be submitted on my Sakai site (“Assignments” tab). They will be processed through the “Turnitin” program, which detects plagiarism from internet sources and from the Turnitin database of papers.

The exams and paper will be weighted approximately as follows for the purposes of determining your final grade:

- midterm exam - 40%
- paper - 60%

I will give some additional consideration to those who make important contributions to class discussion, but this will only affect grades in borderline situations. There will be no opportunities for extra credit through additional work.

Regarding the paper: I will ask two very general questions, from which you will answer one. The questions will draw on material from both the first and second half of the course. You will be expected to understand the various theories of war and be able to illustrate the theories with historical examples from the course reading and from lectures (and from previous course work and reading if you want, but that is not necessary). You are responsible for the readings during the last two weeks of the term (after the formal April 16 due date for the papers), in the sense that you should incorporate relevant materials from the readings into your paper if that material is relevant. You are not responsible for the lecture material during the last two weeks of the term, but you are free to use that material if you think it is appropriate.

You must take the exam as scheduled on Thursday, March 8. I will give make-up exams only in cases medical illness or family emergency. If for any reason you are not able to take the exam, you must inform me by email at jacklevy@rci.rutgers.edu on the day of the exam or before. Otherwise a penalty will be assessed on the make-up exam. I will ask for written verification of the reason for your absence.
I will send out a few announcements during the course by way of email from my Sakai site to your Rutgers email. If you normally use a different email, please arrange for your Rutgers email to be forwarded to your other account.

**Some Rules**

1) **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 you do not understand what plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty are, please see the Rutgers website on academic integrity: [http://teachx.rutgers.edu/integrity/policy.html](http://teachx.rutgers.edu/integrity/policy.html)

2) **Electronic Devices**
   
   Please turn off your cell phones before entering the classroom. If you need to have your cell phone on for medical or other reasons, please come and see me. 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. No phones or other electronic devices are permitted during the exam.

3) **Attendance.** I will not take attendance. Nor will I provide a summary of my lectures or class discussion for those who miss class.
COURSE OUTLINE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

number indicates the week of the term beginning January 17; letters a & b represent the first and second lectures each week; -- indicates multiple topics in a class period. complete citations are listed earlier in the syllabus under "Readings"

1a. Course Introduction (Tuesday, January 17)
course description, aims, organization, expectations, requirements, etc.

1b. Theoretical Introduction (Thursday, January 19)
Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, chap. 1

-- Historical Evolution of War
   Alternatively, watch the video at http://edge.org/conversation/mc2011-history-violence-pinker, focusing on the section on "The Long Peace," about a sixth of the way in, starting just before figure on “The 100 Worst Wars & Atrocities.”

-- The Politics of War
Clausewitz, On War, book I, chap. 1
Thomas Schelling, "The Diplomacy of Violence"

2a. The Levels of Analysis Framework (Tuesday, January 24)
Kenneth N. Waltz, Man, the State, and War, chap. 1

-- Human Aggression
Greg Cashman, "The Individual Level of Analysis: Human Aggression"
Margaret Mead, "Warfare Is Only an Invention – Not a Biological Necessity"

-- What Do We Mean by the Question “What Causes War?”

2b. Realist Theories of International Relations (Thursday, January 26)
John J. Mearsheimer, “Anarchy and the Struggle for Power”
Stephen M. Walt, “The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition”
Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, chap. 2
3a. **Balance of Power Theory** (Tuesday, January 31)
Edward Vose Gulick, "The Aims of Europe's Classical Balance of Power"
Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning"

*Case Study: World War I*

3b. **Balance of Power Theory** (continued) (Thursday, February 2)
Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design"

4a. **Power Transition Theory** (Tuesday, February 7)

*Case study: The Rise of China*

**Preventive War**
Jack S. Levy, “Preventive War and Democratic Politics”

4b. **The Dyadic Level** (Thursday, February 9)

**The Deterrence Model and the Spiral Model**
Robert Jervis, "Deterrence, the Spiral Model, and the Intentions of the Adversary"
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, pp. 55-63

*Case Study: The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*
Janice Gross Stein, "The Arab-Israeli War of 1967: Inadvertent War Through Miscalculated Escalation"

5a. **The Prisoner's Dilemma Model** (Tuesday, February 14)
Bruce Russett, *The Prisoners of Insecurity*, chap. 5-6

5b. **The Bargaining Model of War** (February 16)
Geoffrey Blainey, "The Abacus of Power"
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, pp. 63-70

**Crisis Management**
Alexander L. George, "A Provisional Theory of Crisis Management"
6a. **Economic Causes of War: Marxist-Leninist Theories of Imperialism**  
(Tuesday, February 21)  

Case Study: American Entry into World War I  
Charles Callan Tansill, “War Profits and Unneutrality”

6b. **Liberal Theories of Interdependence and Peace**  
(Thursday, February 23)  
Doyle, “Commercial Pacifism: Smith and Schumpeter”  
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, pp. 70-77

7a. **The Societal Level**  
(Tuesday, February 28)  
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, chap. 4

-- **The Democratic Peace**  
John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace"

-- **Ideology and Religion**  
Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?"

7b. **The Diversionary Theory of War**

Case Studies: The Falklands/Malvinas War and the Yugoslav Wars  
Jack S. Levy and Lily I. Vakili, "Diversionary Action by Authoritarian Regimes: Argentina in the Falklands/Malvinas Case" (skip pp. 125-27)  
V.P. Gagnon, Jr., "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia"

**Democratization and Conflict**  
Jack Snyder, "Transitions to Democracy and the Rise of Nationalist Conflict"

8a. **Review**  
(Tuesday, March 6)

8b. **Exam #1**  
(Thursday, March 8, in class)
9a. **Return Exams** (Tuesday, March 20)

-- **Individual Level Psychological Theories**

**The Rational Model**
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, pp. 128-33

9b. **The Psychology of Threat Perception** (Thursday, March 22)
Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, pp. 133-61
Janice Gross Stein, “Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat.”

10a. **Misperception and War** (Tuesday, March 27)
Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception"

**The Politics and Psychology of Intelligence Failure**
Avi Shlaim, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War"

10b. **Prospect Theory** (Thursday, March 29)
Jack S. Levy, "Loss Aversion, Framing Effects, and International Conflict."

11ab. **Historical Case Studies in the Causes of War** (April 3 & 5)
Scott D. Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War"
John G. Stoessinger, “In the Name of God: Hindus and Moslems in India and Pakistan”
John G. Stoessinger, “The Sixty Years’ War in the Holy Land: Israel and the Arabs”
Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, "How Kuwait Was Won: Strategy in the Gulf War"
Steve A. Yetiv, “The Iraq War of 2003”
12a. **Bureaucratic/Organizational Theories** (Tuesday, April 10)

Case Study: The United States in Vietnam

12b. **Theoretical Summary** (Thursday, April 12)

**Discussion of Papers**

** April 16 (Monday) - papers due (I will accept papers without penalty until April 30)

13a. **World War I** (Tuesday, April 17)
James Joll, "The July Crisis 1914"
Geoffrey P. Megargee, "Chronology" and "Dramatis Personae"
No need to read, but use as a reference.
Optional: Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914"

13b. **World War II (Europe)** (Thursday, April 19)
Allan Bullock, "Hitler and the Origins of the Second World War"

14a. **The Cuban Missile Crisis** (Tuesday, April 24)
Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, chap. 2
Alexander L. George, “The Cuban Missile Crisis”

14b. **A Reassessment of Theories of War** (Thursday, April 26)