War and Its Causes

Enduring question: Why is war a persistent feature of international relations?

President George Bush of the United States and Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain led a coalition of states in a war against Iraq in March 2003 because they believed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was trying to build nuclear weapons. Just before the US invasion, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz dismissed as ‘wildly off the mark’ an estimate by General Eric Shinseki, the US Army Chief of Staff, that, after the allies had defeated Saddam's military, hundreds of thousands of US troops might then be needed to occupy and pacify Iraq (Milbank 2005). As it turns out, there were no Iraqi nuclear weapons. The United States, Britain, and their allies did, as expected, readily defeat Iraq's military, but an insurgency soon threatened allied forces and the new Iraqi government, and the United States and its allies only achieved a modicum of stability in Iraq with a force that included 160,000 US troops. More than 4,400 American and almost 200 British military personnel were killed during the Iraq war and the subsequent insurgency. After the allied withdrawal in December 2011, Iraq's political future was highly uncertain.

Why does a war like that against Iraq occur? Why, more generally, do wars remain a persistent feature of the world around us? We devote this chapter to an exploration of that enduring question in international relations. In the chapter's first section, we establish a foundation of factual knowledge about international military conflict by identifying the main types of conflicts that occur between countries, and investigate how international military conflicts have varied across time in their incidence and severity. We then, in the chapter's second main section, discuss the kinds of disagreements between countries which can make them turn to military threats or violence. In the chapter's subsequent three main sections we examine the underlying causes
of war and other serious military conflicts between states, using the levels-of-analysis framework, with its emphasis on arguments pitched at the level of the individual, the internal characteristics of countries, and the inter-state system, to organize the discussion and the efforts by the main theoretical traditions in international relations to understand the causes of war.

We then, in the chapter’s last main section, shift our focus from war between states and toward war within states, or internal wars. In that section, we highlight the reasons why students of international relations must understand internal wars; discuss different types of internal wars, as well as their incidence and severity; and identify and examine the range of causes that may bring about such wars within countries.

**Learning Objectives**

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

→ Distinguish among and have a grasp of the different kinds of international military conflicts, including their frequency and lethality.

→ Understand the different kinds of conflicts of interest between countries that can be the immediate cause of war.

→ Compare and assess the different underlying causes of international military conflict at the individual level of analysis, with a focus on errors by national leaders arising from misperceptions, small-group dynamics, or a propensity toward over-confidence.

→ Recognize and analyze causes of conflicts at the state level of analysis, with a focus on domestic economic systems, political institutions, and governmental processes.

→ Evaluate the causes of military conflicts at the international level of analysis.

→ Identify the causes and effects of internal wars and understand their impact on the prospects for war and peace between states.

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Wars between Countries

Before we explore the immediate and underlying causes of international military conflicts, we first lay down three foundations: we define and examine different kinds of military conflicts that take place between countries, present information on the incidence of those different types of military conflicts that have taken place between countries over the past two centuries, and consider how lethal those conflicts have been in terms of deaths of combatants and civilians.

Types of Military Conflicts between Countries

We begin with **interstate war**, which occurs when two or more national governments direct military forces against each other in organized, sustained, and oftentimes deadly clashes.

There are many types of interstate war (Levy and Thompson 2011). For example, several that we examined in Chapter 2 – the Thirty Years War and the wars against Napoleonic France, Germany under William II and Hitler, and Imperial Japan – were **general wars** or **major wars** in the sense that they involved many or all of the most powerful states in their respective historical eras. Some, such as the Napoleonic wars and World War II were also **hegemonic wars**, that is, their outcomes determined which states would have predominant influence in the international system for years and even decades. World War I and especially World War II were instances of **total war**, where warring governments sought to mobilize as much of their human and economic resources as possible, and some or all of the main belligerents systematically sought to weaken or kill the civilian populations of their enemies as a part of their war strategies.

Since 1945, there has been no total war between or among the most powerful states, that is, the United States, the Soviet Union (now Russia), Britain, France, and China. With the exceptions of large-scale US–Chinese clashes during the Korean War of 1950–53, and minor skirmishes between Soviet and Chinese forces on their mutual border in 1969, the major powers since 1945 have avoided fighting each other directly. One important reason for the lapse in total war and in particular the absence of war between the major powers is the existence of nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States (and two US allies, Britain and France) possessed large arsenals of nuclear weapons, and as we will see in Chapter 7, the fear of nuclear war contributed greatly to the prevention of World War III. Moreover, Japan and Germany, which under authoritarian and dictatorial governments were highly aggressive states during the first half of the twentieth century, became stable democracies in the wake of World War II, and, as we will see below, democracies are unlikely to fight among themselves. At the same time, these states were less likely to fight each other because they all found it necessary to work together to resist (but, in the face of nuclear weapons, not to fight) the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

This does not mean that the major states since 1945 have avoided all forms of military conflicts with one another or with other states. As we saw in Chapter 2, during the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union fought proxy wars against each other. Moreover, we have witnessed what have been termed **limited wars** between one or more of the major states and less powerful countries, such as between China and India in 1962, or between less powerful states, including multiple wars between India and Pakistan and between Israel and Egypt and Syria.

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**Interstate war**: When two or more national governments direct military forces against each other in organized, sustained, and oftentimes deadly clashes.

**General war**: A war that involves many or all of the most powerful states in a particular historical era. Synonymous with major war.

**Major war**: A war that involves many or all of the most powerful states in a particular historical era. Synonymous with general war.

**Hegemonic war**: A war the outcome of which determines which states will have predominant influence in the international system in the coming years or even decades.

**Total war**: War in which belligerent states mobilize all resources and target civilians as part of their war strategy.

**Limited war**: Smaller war in which major powers avoid fighting each other directly, contrasted with general or major war.
There is in the field of international relations no universally agreed upon threshold of violence that must take place between governments before that violence is classified as an interstate war. Many scholars, however, utilize a threshold proposed by the Correlates of War (COW) project, a path-finding data-collection program on different kinds of armed violence within and between countries. The COW data project stipulates that interstate wars are those organized clashes between the military forces of states that result in at least 1,000 combat fatalities during a 12-month period (Sarkees and Wayman 2010).

Interstate wars comprise the first of three COW-identified categories of international military conflicts. The second type is that of militarized interstate disputes, or MIDs. An MID is an international conflict in which states seek to win a dispute through military coercion. The concept of an MID covers a broad range of state actions: from the issuing by states of threats of military force against one another; to the making of displays of military power against one another, such as moving troops up to a common border; to the actual use of force by a state against an adversary, which in turn can run the gamut from using forces to seize territory, declaring war, or engaging in violent clashes with the adversary at levels below that of full-scale war (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004). We presented a recent example of what will probably be classified by COW researchers as an MID in Chapter 4, namely, China’s announcement in July 2012 that, in reaction to the Vietnamese parliament’s claims to the South China Sea, it was undertaking ‘combat-ready’ naval patrols and dispatching troops to its administrative center in the Paracel Islands.

Extra-state wars represent the third COW category of international military conflicts. An extra-state war is a violent clash – resulting in at least 1,000 combat deaths – between the national government of a recognized state and an entity in a foreign territory that is not an internationally recognized state, or is a non-state actor located in a foreign state. The conquests that European states undertook against African tribal communities during the 1800s were extra-state wars, as were the wars for independence that colonies such as Algeria and Vietnam undertook against France after World War II. More recently, the United States has undertaken extra-state wars with remotely piloted armed drones against Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist personnel and bases in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan.

Modern international conflicts can often have both interstate and extra-state dimensions. For example, after the Al Qaeda attacks against the United States in September 2001, US forces destroyed the bases that terrorist organization had established in Afghanistan. The United States also helped indigenous Afghan groups topple the Afghan government, which was then under the control of the Taliban, an Islamist fundamentalist group that had given Al Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan. Two wars thus occurred at the same time during 2001 and 2002: that against Al Qaeda was an extra-state war, while that against Taliban-controlled Afghanistan was an interstate war. The Taliban soon recovered from their defeats in 2001–02, and utilizing bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan launched an insurgency against the US-backed government in Kabul. By consequence, since 2002 the United States, Britain, and a number of allied countries have fought an extra-state war against a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan and in neighboring Pakistan. Similarly, the Iraq war that began in March 2003 began as an interstate war, but an extra-state war soon developed in which the United States and its allies fought Iraqi opposition groups and outside fighters, including some affiliated with Al Qaeda.
Incidence of International Military Conflicts

Figure 5.1 employs COW data to explore the incidence of full-scale interstate wars from the end of the Napoleonic wars up through 2007. Each bar in the figure represents the average annual number of COW-level wars that began during the designated time period. The total number of wars that began during each time period is reported in parentheses below each bar. We can see by summing those figures that, between 1816 and 2007, there were 95 interstate wars using the COW coding rule, namely an interstate clash that produces at least 1,000 battlefield deaths in 12 months.

As can be observed in the figure, interstate wars increased in frequency over the course of most of modern history: from 0.2 new wars per year between 1816 and 1849 all the way up to almost 0.7 new wars per year between 1950 and 1999. However, the incidence of interstate wars has declined in recent years. In the last period we can analyze with COW data, the years between 2000 and 2007, only two COW-level interstate wars were launched (the war against Afghanistan beginning in 2001 and the war against Iraq beginning in 2003), which translates into an average annual incidence of about 0.25 wars per year.

Finally, particularly close attention should be paid to the two bars on the far right of Figure 5.1. The first bar represents the incidence of interstate wars during the Cold War era, that is, between 1946 and 1989, and the second represents the incidence of such wars in the immediate years of the post-Cold War period, that is, between 1990 and 2007. Notice that there is a modest decrease in the incidence of new international wars over the two periods, from a bit more than 0.6 wars per year to a bit less than that in the post-Cold War era. Hence, it is possible that after a constant, even relentless upward trend in the frequency of wars from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth century, with the end of the Cold War we are now seeing a reversal of that trend. We should be very careful in drawing an inference from less than two decades since the end of the Cold War, but, going back to our enduring question, if this trend were to hold it would raise questions about whether war is, in fact, necessarily a persistent
feature of international politics (Mueller 2009). For that reason it is a trend that is clearly worthy of continued attention in the years ahead.

We may now turn to the second type of military conflicts, MIDs, which, as noted above, are international conflicts in which states seek to win a dispute through military coercion. The COW data project has presented a data set that identifies 2,586 MIDs between 1816 and 2010. We noted above that the average annual incidence of interstate wars has been on a downward trend in the post-Cold War era. The pattern of MIDs is more complicated: while their incidence has not gone down since the end of the Cold War, the average level of violence of MIDs has perhaps become somewhat attenuated in the most recent period.

The incidence of MIDs is reported in Figure 5.2. As with interstate wars, there was a long-term increase in the average number of MID initiations between 1816 and 1999, from about four MID initiations per year in the second half of the nineteenth century to ten MIDs per year in the first half of the twentieth century, and then to about 28 MIDs per year between 1950 and 1999. In the most recent period, from 2000 to 2010, the annual MID rate has stayed at almost the same level as it was during the previous fifty years. The particular years that constituted the Cold War era and the first two decades of the post-Cold War period are presented in the right-most two bars in the figure. They indicate that while 26 MIDs were launched per year on average between 1946 and 1990, an average of 28 MIDs were initiated per year in the post-Cold War years up to 2010. As with the data on interstate wars, we should be cautious in drawing inferences about MIDs in the post-Cold War era since we are still early in the period. However, at least in this early post-Cold War phase, MIDs have persisted as a prominent feature of international relations.

At the same time, it is possible that the severity of MIDs has decreased in the post-Cold War era. We can assess this possibility by reference to Figure 5.3. Consider the first pie chart in the figure. It reports the percentage of the 477 MIDs that occurred between 1900 and 1945 that took the form solely of threats issued by one state against another (5 percent of the total), the percentage that were more severe than threats,
namely, displays of military force (24 percent), and finally, at the highest level of hostility, the percentage of MIDs that entailed the actual use of force between the contesting states, including violent clashes short of war (71 percent). Turning next to the second pie chart, we see that during the Cold War years of 1946–89, during which there were 1150 MIDs, the percentage of that total that were of the most severe type, the use of force, reached 77 percent. Notice, finally, the third pie chart: it indicates that during the first twenty years of the post-Cold War period, during which there were 598 MIDs, 59 percent of that total entailed the use of force, substantially below that of both the Cold War era and the first half of the twentieth century. It would seem then that while the annual incidence of MIDs has not declined with the end of the Cold War, a smaller percentage of the MIDs that have occurred are reaching the highest level of severity. This mixed pattern of trends regarding MIDs certainly invites research in the years ahead.

We next focus on extra-state wars, which, you will recall, involve a violent clash – resulting in at least 1,000 combat deaths – between the national government of a recognized state and an entity in a foreign territory that is not an internationally recognized state, or is a non-state actor located in a foreign state. Figure 5.4 reports the frequency with which countries initiated extra-state wars between 1816 and 2007. Countries launched a total of about 162 such wars, placing this category much closer to interstate wars than to MIDs. Extra-state wars display a historical trajectory quite different from the other two categories we have examined, reflecting what we discussed in Chapter 2 about the great burst of nineteenth-century imperialism, which peaked in the second half of that century, and then declined in the twentieth century as colonial peoples fought for and ultimately acquired independence.

**Lethality of International Wars**

The COW data project does not present battlefield fatalities for each MID, but we do have reasonable estimates for such deaths that were incurred during interstate and extra-state wars. At least 32 million combat deaths resulted from the 95 interstate wars that were fought between 1816 and 2007. Of that total, more than 8 million combat deaths occurred during World War I, and 16 million during World War II. Approxi-
approximately 2.1 million or more combatants were killed during that period in extra-state wars.

As we can see in Panel A of Figure 5.5, the lethality of interstate wars increased dramatically from the first to the second half of the nineteenth century, and then exploded in the first half of the twentieth century. More powerful weapons, such as heavy artillery, tanks, and machine guns; industrialization and thus the ability of states to produce vast quantities of those weapons; and a stronger capacity of governments to mobilize national populations and to put together ever larger militaries: all of these factors combined during this period to produce armed forces that could inflict truly massive casualties on one another. Thereafter, reflecting perhaps the fact that the major powers avoided direct war with one another as a result of nuclear weapons and democracies, wars on average dropped in lethality. We can also see that the two wars that have occurred in the post-Cold War era (Iraq and Afghanistan) were less lethal for combatant forces than were the wars that took place during the Cold War.

We may also observe in Panel B of Figure 5.5 that extra-state wars became more lethal during the twentieth as opposed to the nineteenth century. Wars of decolonization could be especially lethal: for example, some 270,000 combatants were killed during France’s unsuccessful war between 1946 and 1954 to hold onto Vietnam, and 34,000 combatants were killed during France’s failed bid between 1954 and 1962 to retain Algeria. There appears to have been a decrease in the lethality of extra-state wars with the end of the Cold War.

Interstate wars also cause vast numbers of non-combatants deaths (Downes 2008). Perhaps 50 million civilians were killed during the wars of the twentieth century. At least 30 million civilians were killed in World War II alone. Many civilians died during that war as a result of malnutrition or disease or as a result of air bombings that were conducted by the Germans as well as the British and the Americans. World War II also witnessed genocide in the form of the Holocaust – the highly organized campaign by the Nazi state to destroy the Jewish community throughout Europe. That campaign resulted in the Nazi murder of 6 million Jews. Approximately 3 million of the 6 million
Jewish people killed by the Nazis were Polish citizens. The Nazi government killed at least an additional 1.9 million non-Jewish Polish citizens. The Nazis also conducted a massive murder campaign when they occupied the western part of the Soviet Union: the total number of Jewish and non-Jewish Soviet civilians killed by the Nazis is not known with precision, but estimates range from 13 million to 15 million people. The Nazis killed an additional 5 million Soviet prisoners of war through intentional mass starvation. The Nazis also killed prior to and during the war approximately 200,000 Roma (Gypsies), and tens of thousands of disabled people, political prisoners, homosexuals, and other individuals the Nazis thought did not fit in the world they were
seeking to create. Such mass killings and attempts at genocide are not a thing of the past: since World War II, perhaps two million or more civilians have been killed during interstate wars such as the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Immediate Causes of War

To this point we have sought in the main to describe international military conflicts: their types, incidence, and lethality. Now we shift our attention to developing a capacity to explain why such conflicts occur. We will proceed in two steps: in this section we will identify the immediate causes of war, and in the next section we will identify possible underlying causes of war. In particular, in this section we will look at how a strong disagreement between states about a specific issue – that is, a conflict of interest between those states – can prompt them to undertake MIDs or even full-fledged wars. As we will see below, conflicts of interest can revolve around economic resources, policy disagreements, political regimes, ethnic or religious identity, and territory.

Conflicts of interest involving scarce economic resources have served to foment militarized violence between states (Gleditsch et al. 2006). For example, disagreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors over water resources may have helped set the stage for one of the major Arab–Israeli wars in June 1967. When, in 1964, Israel began to draw water from the Jordan River, Egypt’s President Nasser coordinated an Arab plan that would effectively divert water flows in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon away from Israel. Israel responded with military strikes against the constructions sites for this project in Syria three times during 1965 and 1966 (Cooley 1984; Amery 1997).

Economic conflicts involving energy have also led to militarized conflicts. As we noted in Chapter 1, China and its neighbors have been locked into a struggle for control of the oil and natural gas resources that may lie beneath the South China Sea.
Conflict of Interest over Domestic Political Regimes: the French Revolutionary Period in the 1790s and the Build-up to the US Invasion of Iraq in 2003

Then: Austrian Rationale for Fearing a Democratic Regime in France, 1791

In the early 1790s, a top Austrian official, Baron Thugut, feared that the democratic character of revolutionary France would undermine the Habsburg dynasty. He said:

Austria has certainly fought more wars in which threatening danger was much closer. But one cannot compare those with such an all-embracing struggle that we are now in … Just as [earlier] wars weakened us, so they weakened the enemy, and at the end military victory or a more or less advantageous peace would bring them to a halt. But now this House [the Habsburgs] … must fight a nation which has not only become utterly fanatical but which tries to drag along with it other peoples and which has prepared its current efforts for a long time in all of Europe through the voices of its prophets.


Now: American Rationale for Overthrowing Iraq’s Authoritarian Regime, 2003

In 2003, the United States launched a war against Iraq in part because President George W. Bush and his advisors believed that Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship in Iraq represented a threat both to the region and to the United States and the replacement of Hussein’s regime with a democratic regime would yield a more peaceful Iraq and a more stable Middle East. President Bush at that time said:

The success of a free Iraq will be watched and noted throughout the region. Millions will see that freedom, equality, and material progress are possible at the heart of the Middle East. Leaders in the region will face the clearest evidence that free institutions and open societies are the only path to long-term national success and dignity. And a transformed Middle East would benefit the entire world, by undermining the ideologies that export violence to other lands. Iraq as a dictatorship had great power to destabilize the Middle East; Iraq as a democracy will have great power to inspire the Middle East. The advance of democratic institutions in Iraq is setting an example that others, including the Palestinian people, would be wise to follow.


In two very different historical eras, leaders and officials have been similarly motivated to go to war out of concern about the domestic political regimes of other countries.

and this conflict of interest has produced low-level MIDs. Saddam Hussein justified Iraq’s August 1990 invasion of neighboring Kuwait in part with the claim that oil companies were using lateral drills to steal Iraqi oil. The United States then led an international coalition to expel Iraq from Kuwait. The United States decided to invade Iraq in 2003 in part because it worried that if Iraq had nuclear weapons, it would use them to dominate the Middle East and its economically crucial oil resources. This fear was expressed in July 2002 by Vice-President Dick Cheney:
Armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror, and seated atop ten percent of the world’s oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world’s energy supplies, directly threaten America’s friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail. (Cheney 2002)

Policy disagreements can also produce conflicts of interest between states that have the potential for military conflict. In early September 2007, Israeli warplanes destroyed what appears to have been a nuclear reactor that Syria had under construction. Israeli leaders had concluded that the Syrian government intended to employ the reactor to build nuclear weapons, which they deemed an unacceptable possible threat to Israel. In this instance, Israel’s intolerance of Syria’s possible policy of acquiring nuclear weapons produced a militarized interstate dispute. It did not produce an interstate war because Syria chose not to escalate by retaliating against Israel.

States can also find themselves in serious conflicts of interest as a result of disagreements about one or another’s political regime. Box 5.1 highlights two very different instances, one at the outset of the modern era and one much more recent, in which disputes over political regimes have led to war.

Issues of ethnic identity can also lead states into serious conflicts of interest. By ethnic identity, we are referring to the linguistic, cultural, and religious beliefs and practices, common ancestral or kin ties, or other historical experiences that people believe they share in common and cause them to believe that they constitute a community. In 1999, members of the NATO alliance attacked the Balkan country of Serbia. Why? Ethnic Albanians, who comprise the majority of residents in Kosovo, then a province in the south of Serbia, were pressing for greater self-governance, which they felt had been long denied to them while they remained part of the national community. In the late 1990s, an ultra-nationalist Serbian government under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic abused and murdered Albanian civilians in Kosovo as a part

Photo 5.2
Strategically Important Territory: The Golan Heights

Israel captured the Golan Heights during the 1967 war, and considers it to be a strategic piece of territory since it is well suited for military purposes, including surveillance and artillery fire.

Source: PA Images.
of an effort to suppress an armed Albanian secessionist movement, the Kosovo Liberation Army. The United States and its NATO allies became concerned that Milosevic might unleash a war aimed at ‘ethnic cleansing,’ that is, the Serbs might murder and commit atrocities against local residents of Albanian background with the goal of inducing the survivors to flee and thus leave Kosovo open for Serbian control. By consequence, between March and June 1999, the United States and its NATO allies launched air strikes against Serbia to compel the Milosevic government to cease its anti-Albanian campaign and accept a NATO peacekeeping force in Kosovo. Kosovo has since declared its independence from Serbia and is today administered by the United Nations.

Finally, conflicts of interest regarding territory have a high potential for engendering military conflict (Senese and Vasquez 2005). Territorial disputes are fraught with the risk of war for three reasons. First, as discussed above, the territories in dispute may possess important economic resources. Second, countries may assign military importance to a borderland. For example, Israel seized the Golan Heights from Syria in 1967; it has been reluctant to return the area because Israel uses it to monitor Syrian military activities.

Moreover, in circumstances in which countries border one another and contain populations with similar ethnic characteristics, one side or the other might be tempted to go to war to ‘unite the nation’ under the rule of one sovereign state. Decolonization and the onset of the Cold War often divided similar cultural groups into separate states. After the new states were established, one often sought reunification with the
other through military conquest. Examples of this type of culture-based international territorial conflict include the two Koreas, where unification has not occurred; the two Vietnams, where unification eventually took place in 1975; and Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), where the outcome is unknown but will greatly determine the future of peace in East Asia. Box 5.2 illustrates the radically differing perspectives of Taiwanese and PRC officials on the status of the island, notwithstanding the ethnic similarities of the two nations – or perhaps because of them.

Most states resolve conflicts of interest with other states through diplomacy. Thus, the presence of a conflict of interest cannot by itself explain the onset of war. When we see the onset of a MID or a war, there must be, in addition to an immediate conflict of interest, the operation of one or a number of other, underlying or fundamental causes of war. What are those underlying or fundamental causes? It is to that question that we now direct our attention.

Underlying Causes of War: the Individual Level of Analysis

Individuals must be at the heart of the study of the causes of war, for leaders and other policy makers are the actors who ultimately make the decision for or against war. In this section we examine important examples of scholarship that emphasize the role of leaders (and their policy subordinates) in causing wars.

This scholarship is interesting in its own right, but it is also important in terms of our theoretical understanding of international relations. Realist international theory, which we examined in Chapter 3, assumes that states are rational and unitary actors. That is, realist theory works with the assumption that when we analyze international affairs we need not take into account the preferences, beliefs, and decision-making procedures of individual leaders and their policy officials. Instead, realist theory works with the assumption that we can gain strong insights into the behavior and interactions of states if we assume that states are unitary actors in the sense that they act as if they were integrated, coherent entities: government leaders may be assumed to react more to their international circumstances than to their personal characteristics. In addition, according to realist theory, we may gain good leverage on international affairs by assuming that states (including their leaders) are rational: they perceive international circumstances correctly and act after a full and careful search for and assessment of policy options. Those states that do not do so suffer costs and adjust, or make so many mistakes, and suffer so many costs, that they are ultimately selected out of the international system.

In this section we examine different lines of scholarship on the impact made by individual leaders and their policy officials on the probability of war. These lines of scholarship differ among themselves, but they are united by a resolute rejection of the
realist view that we can understand international relations well by assuming that states are rational unitary actors. Instead, they put forward arguments that emphasize that to understand the sources of war we need to understand how state leaders may find it difficult if not impossible to act in accord with perfect rationality as assumed in realist theory. Then, in the next major section, we will see in the scholarship on domestic institutions how the assumption of states as unitary actors is also highly questioned in the field of international relations.

**Misperception, Crisis Escalation, and War: the Role of Stress and ‘Motivated Biases’**

A national leader may go to war as a result of misperceptions: that is, he or she may perceive something about the world that is factually incorrect (Jervis 1988; Leng 2004). As we noted in the previous section, US leaders thought Saddam had a threatening nuclear program, but he did not; at least some US leaders thought a US occupation of Iraq would be easy to accomplish, and it was not. When are leaders more likely to succumb to misperceptions in a way that propels their countries toward war?

One possibility is stress. Scholars have suggested that when national leaders and their subordinates find themselves in a diplomatic crisis and perceive that the risk of war is present and growing, they are likely to experience severe physical and emotional stress. That stress could cause them to make mistakes in how they perceive their own policy options and those of their adversaries. These stress-induced misperceptions and mistakes, in turn, could increase the risk that the crisis might escalate to war.

Political scientist Ole Holsti (1972) has produced the classic work on the possible link between stress, impaired decision-making, and the decision for war. Holsti argues that, during the diplomatic crisis of July–August 1914 that led to the outbreak of World War I, discussed in Chapter 2, a dramatic upsurge in communications between Britain, France, Germany, and Russia in a short period of time appears to have contributed to rising stress among the leaders of those countries. That stress led the leaders to believe that time was working against them and their options in the crisis were decreasing in number, while the policy options of their adversaries were still wide open. Each leader began to say that it was up to the adversary to resolve the crisis before war engulfed Europe. As a result of this stress-induced tendency to perceive that others had more options, the main European leaders all inferred that it was not their responsibility, but that of others, to take decisive steps to stop the crisis that was moving toward war. Since none acted, the crisis spiraled out of control.

Stress may not be the only source of misperceptions. Cognitive psychologists have also identified a tendency for individuals to have ‘motivated biases.’ A motivated bias is any belief or attitude that a person holds because it advances or protects some interest, desire, or preference. Such motivated biases can impair the capacity of a decision maker to revise his or her beliefs in the face of new information. For example, one study has found that, during the Anglo-German crisis over Morocco in 1906, those German decision makers who had initially sought a confrontation with Britain were more reluctant to change course as the crisis began to take a turn against Germany than were German decision makers who had not made a commitment to the initial course of action leading to the crisis (Kaufman 1994). Motivated biases may
account for the difference in views about how many US forces would be needed for Iraq in 2003, a matter we highlighted in the introduction to this chapter. Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz had been the main early proponent for the invasion, and so might not have wanted to anticipate how hard the invasion would be; General Shinseki appears to have played a less central role in deciding to attack Iraq, and therefore might have been more dispassionate in estimating what it would take to stabilize the country.

Social Psychology of Small Groups: Groupthink

The capacity of leaders and officials to process information and make sound judgments in the midst of a crisis might be impaired not just because of stress, but also as a result of psychological needs that those leaders and officials bring to their jobs. The groupthink thesis (Janis 1982) in particular suggests that a psychological need on the part of individuals to be accepted and liked by their work colleagues can lead national leaders and especially their advisors to make serious errors of analysis and judgment in the midst of a foreign policy crisis. For example, in April 1961, the new US president, John F. Kennedy, decided to press ahead with a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) plan that had been developed in the last years of the Eisenhower administration to overthrow Cuba’s pro-Soviet regime under Fidel Castro. The operation involved transporting about 1,500 anti-Castro rebels to beaches in Cuba called the Bay of Pigs, who were supposed to instigate a larger uprising by Cubans against their government. Cuban military forces quickly surrounded and attacked the anti-Castro force; Kennedy ceased support for the rebels, who were soon killed or captured; and Castro’s victory fortified his grip over Cuba.

Several senior advisors to President Kennedy had doubts about the Bay of Pigs operation, but failed to express them. From the groupthink perspective, this silence was due to the fact that the doubters liked belonging to an elite group of advisors, and since most of those advisors seemed to support the operation, the doubters stayed quiet rather than jeopardize their positions in the group. Arthur Schlesinger, one of the doubters, recounted later that he did not want to appear soft while the other members of Kennedy’s new team were expressing a strong ‘we can do it’ attitude.

The groupthink thesis may shed some light on why Kennedy’s advisors failed to give the President their full assessment of the prospects for success of the Bay of Pigs operation. However, constructivist IR theory and feminist IR theory might suggest that the groupthink thesis raises at least as many questions as it answers. We take up this engagement of the groupthink thesis by those two perspectives in Box 5.3.

Moreover, one study (Kramer 1988) has suggested that the Bay of Pigs failure occurred not because of groupthink but because President Kennedy made the political calculation that if he canceled an operation that President Eisenhower had already approved, and this became known, Kennedy would suffer a serious loss of confidence both at home and abroad. On the other hand, more recently, and in seeming support of the groupthink thesis, a US Senate Intelligence Committee report invoked the groupthink thesis to explain how, in the lead-up to the Iraq war of 2003, the CIA over-rated the status of Iraq’s nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programs. Commentaries on the Senate report emphasize that CIA analysts likely made errors in their assessments because they knew that national decision makers wanted to be told that Iraq had large-scale programs directed toward weapons of mass destruction (Phythian 2006).
5.3 Differing Theoretical Approaches

Constructivist and Feminist Interpretations of Groupthink and the Bay of Pigs

**Background**
As we discuss in the main text, President John F. Kennedy approved in April 1961 a CIA-backed invasion of Cuba by a force of Cuban exiles, an operation that ended in failure.

**Groupthink explanation:** Prior to the final go-ahead, advisors to President Kennedy who otherwise harbored doubts about the chances of success of the operation remained silent because they worried that if they expressed their doubts they would lose the respect and esteem of colleagues and the President. The result was that the advisors, by staying silent, helped propel Kennedy and the United States into a serious military debacle.

**Constructivism:** For a constructivist scholar, the groupthink argument raises but fails to ask a question about what transpired when groupthink dynamics were activated. In particular, the constructivist would ask, why did Kennedy’s advisors believe that expressing doubts would lead to a loss of esteem with their colleagues and access to the President? A constructivist would suggest that the foundation for that fear was a network of shared understandings among the advisors and between them and the President. In particular, they all shared the view that Castro presented a serious threat to the United States, and that covert operations like the Bay of Pigs presented at least some prospect of success. The advisors knew that colleagues and the President had these ideas, and knowing that they feared that voicing doubts meant revolting against the group, which in turn would trigger exclusion. Hence, a constructivist would say that to understand how groupthink operated and contributed to the Bay of Pigs disaster, it is necessary to understand that the advisors and the President shared common understandings, namely, about the character of threats facing the United States and the prospects for success of a military response to those threats.

**Feminism:** A feminist IR scholar might criticize the constructivist viewpoint on the same grounds that constructivist criticizes the groupthink thesis; namely, that the constructivist argument is helpful but insufficient, for it raises but fails to answer a number of key questions. In particular, why did Kennedy’s advisors believe that Castro was a threat to the United States, why did they believe that a covert military operation would have any prospect of success, and perhaps most importantly, why did they each feel so strongly that they could not risk losing the comradeship of their colleagues and access to the President as a result of expressing doubts about the whole enterprise? A feminist IR scholar would suggest that gender might be a part of the story, for not only was Kennedy a male, but so too was each and every one of his advisors on the Bay of Pigs. Perhaps, the feminist IR scholar would suggest, Kennedy and his advisors, by virtue of how they were socialized as males, and perhaps because of their male-based psychiatric make-up, were more inclined than was objectively true to see an independent and non-pliable Castro as a fundamental threat to them and the United States, and to believe that it was entirely appropriate and rational to think of using violence to deal with the problem of Castro. Most crucially, the feminist IR scholar might suggest, it could be the case that men have an especially high need for approval from other men, and an especially great desire for proximity to power. Thus, Kennedy’s advisors might, by virtue of their gender, have been especially prone to think that violence was the answer to Castro, and may have been especially fearful that expressing doubts about that answer would lead to their expulsion from the group. Those male advisors were essentially biased by their gender both to make a recommendation to use violence and paralyzed in expressing doubts about that approach to the Castro challenge.
Personality Trait of Leaders: Over-Optimism

Leaders have often believed – falsely as it turns out – that if war were to occur their side would win a quick and easy victory, and thus be more willing to fight. One scholar has gone so far as to suggest that a crucial clue to understanding the causes of war is the ‘optimism with which most wars were commenced by nations’ leaders’ (Blainey 1988:35).

Scholars have identified at least three reasons why leaders may be overly optimistic in estimating what they can achieve with military force. First, individuals in general may be prone to positive illusions – what we think we can accomplish is often greater than what we would expect to achieve if we had a truly accurate picture of our capabilities (Johnson 2004). Individuals may be prone toward positive illusions because they inspire confidence and confidence impels us to strive harder than we otherwise would. National leaders may be particularly prone toward positive illusions. Optimism and a ‘can-do’ attitude are among the characteristics that cause an individual to attract and instill confidence in others, and thus they are an attribute of successful leadership. The characteristics that make a person attractive and effective as a leader, in fact the very characteristics that helped that person ascend to power in the first place, might also make that person prone toward overestimating what can be achieved in a foreign crisis through different policy instruments, including the use of military force.

Second, it is possible that sudden increases in a country’s military power may cause at least some of its leaders and policy makers to become more belligerent. For example, Pakistan’s successful testing of a nuclear weapon in May 1998 may have contributed to its decision to use force against India later that year. A scholar of nuclear proliferation, Scott Sagan (Sagan et al. 2007: 139), notes that:

Positive illusions: The idea that what we think we can accomplish is often greater than what we would expect to achieve if we had a truly accurate picture of our capabilities.

Pre-Conflict Aspirations of Leaders and the Realities of War

The United States Invades Iraq, March 2003

Aspiration: On March 16, 2003, three days before President George Bush announced that the United States would invade Iraq, Vice President Dick Cheney, predicted that ‘I think things have gotten so bad inside Iraq, from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.’ When asked if he thought Americans were ready for a ‘long, costly and bloody battle,’ the Vice President replied that ‘Well, I don’t think it’s likely to unfold that way…. [the Iraqi people] want to get rid of Saddam Hussein, and they will welcome as liberators the United States when we come to do that.’

Reality: The United States readily defeated Iraqi regular military forces. However, an insurgency soon took hold and required several years to contain, and entailed the loss of more than 4,000 US military personnel, including 3,500 combat deaths. It was not until December 2009, more than six years after the war had begun, that the United States did not sustain a combat fatality during the course of a month. US forces were unable to withdraw from the country until 2011.

Sources: NBC (2003); GlobalSecurity.org (undated).
When Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons there were many inside its military who said, ‘This is our chance to do something about Kashmir,’ so they misled then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif into approving an operation which sent Pakistani soldiers disguised as Mujahedeen guerillas to conduct low-level military actions in India-controlled Kashmir near the town of Kargil in the winter of 1998.

This infiltration in turn sparked a war between Pakistan and India, also in possession of nuclear weapons, between May and July 1999. Hence, the Pakistani military may have been emboldened by its acquisition of nuclear weapons, and this may have contributed to Pakistani aggression against India.

Feminist international theory, as we discussed in Chapter 3, suggests that men and women might differ systematically in the manner in which they view and approach international relations. One specific way in which this might occur is through gender’s role in the generation of positive illusions (Johnson et al. 2006; McDermott et al. 2009; Rosen 2005). As you will recall from Chapter 3, Dominic Johnson and his co-authors conducted a study on the confidence of individuals prior to playing a computer-based conflict simulation game that included different ways of resolving disputes with other players, including the launching of ‘wars.’ Among the findings the study revealed were (a) prior to playing the game, males in the study were much more likely than females to predict that they would achieve above average scores; (b) individuals who were overconfident before the game started were substantially more likely to launch wars as a way of trying to win the game; and (c) males who were especially confident prior to the game were especially likely to launch wars. From these findings, the research team concluded that males may have a propensity toward overconfidence and this overconfidence may have led males to tend to launch wars to win the game. The research team could not identify what it might be about males that seemed to link them to overconfidence and then to the tendency to launch wars, and this question demands future research. However, the study does point to the possibility that there may be connections between gender, overconfidence, and decisions for war.

Recent studies have identified significant associations between the status of women within countries and the likelihood of those states becoming embroiled in military conflicts with other countries. For example, one study (Caprioli and Boyer 2001) finds that states with higher levels of gender equality tend to use less military violence in military crises than do those states with lower levels of gender equality. In addition, scholars have found that states where there is greater domestic security for women are also more likely to have cordial ties rather than violent relations with other countries (Hudson et al. 2008/2009).

In sum, and in strong contention with the realist view that individual characteristics can be put aside in the analysis of war, scholars have found that a range of individual-level factors – misperceptions, groupthink, and positive illusions – may contribute to the risk of war between states.

**Levels of Analysis**

**The Individual as the Cause of War**

- Misperceptions may cause leaders to make errors resulting in war. These misperceptions may be due to stress or motivated biases.

- Groupthink may cause the advisors to refrain from expressing doubts about the wisdom of using force, thus increasing the chances such force will be used.

- Leaders may be especially prone to over-optimism in what they think they can accomplish through the use of military force, thus enhancing the chances they will choose that option.

- Gender may play a role in generating positive illusions and groupthink.
Underlying Causes of War: the State Level of Analysis

Realist theory, we noted above, suggests that we can obtain good insights into international affairs by assuming that states act as unitary actors. That is, we may assume that state leaders act in the foreign domain more in reaction to circumstances in that domain, and not so much if at all in response to domestic institutions or conditions. Many scholars challenge this realist approach to international analysis. As we will see below, they suggest that domestic institutions and policy processes within countries shape the way leaders deal with international problems and, apart from and in addition to the impact of individual-level factors, might contribute to decisions by leaders to go to war. As we will see below, these scholars focus on a variety of domestic economic, political, and policy-making features of countries that may influence the risk of war.

Domestic Economic Systems and War

Some scholars, drawing often from the Marxist tradition that we described in Chapter 3, have suggested that the economic organization of a country, and in particular whether the country has a capitalist or socialist economy, may determine whether that country is more or less inclined to use military force to resolve foreign conflicts of interest. As we saw in Chapter 3, in a capitalist economic system (or market-based economy) consumers, enterprises, and workers interact in relatively unregulated markets. This interaction determines which goods and services a country produces and consumes, how much workers are paid, and how much money is used for consumption as opposed to saving and investment. In contrast, in a socialist economic system the government plays a central role in the organization and coordination both of the supply of the factors of production, such as the number of workers in a particular industry, and the quantity of goods and services that are produced in that industry.

As noted in Chapter 1, Russian Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin suggested that the main cause of World War I was the fact that the European states had capitalist economies. He argued that these capitalist countries necessarily underpaid their workers and, consequently facing insufficient demand at home, they competed for colonies abroad and thus ultimately came to war against one another. More recent work in international relations (Rosecrance 1999; Gartzke 2007) suggests that, in fact, capitalist countries are particularly likely to remain at peace with one another. Such countries avoid conflict with each other because they want relatively open trade and a stable international monetary system, and territorial issues among them have ceased to matter because they mutually recognize that they can obtain economic prosperity much more readily through trade and financial integration than through conquest of each other or other countries.

Domestic Political Institutions and Governmental Processes

The most important challenge to the realist view about the immateriality of domestic factors in world politics is situated firmly in the liberal tradition: it is the democratic peace thesis, that is, democracies almost never fight each other. As we discussed in Chapter 3, scholars have suggested that two sets of causes account for the democratic peace: the first relates to institutional constraints (Russett 1993); the second to normative constraints (Owen 1994). We now examine in more detail how these two causal processes may produce the democratic peace.
Institutional Politics and War: The US Oil Embargo against Japan, 1941

Theory: The Unitary-Actor Assumption in Realist International Theory

Realist international theory assumes that states are unitary actors. That is, having established a national strategy, top state leaders can then execute it in the manner that reflects their preferences and ideas by effective orchestration and control of the actions of various parts of the national government. According to this assumption, state leaders have a high capacity to monitor and control subordinate officials.

Practice: The US Oil Embargo Against Japan, 1941

In response to Japan’s invasion of French Indochina (today’s Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on July 24, 1941 ordered a freeze on Japanese financial assets in the United States. When Roosevelt announced the freeze, he promised that Japan could apply to the US government for licenses to import oil, that such licenses would be issued, and that funds held by Japanese importers in the United States would be released so the Japanese could pay for licensed oil sales. Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson (who later, under President Harry Truman, served as Secretary of State), the official responsible for releasing Japanese funds, refused to do so in the first weeks of August, while Roosevelt was out of the country. When Roosevelt returned at the end of August and learned of Acheson’s refusal to release the funds, the President apparently decided he could not reverse Acheson’s actions. Thus, a financial sanction that Roosevelt wanted to exclude oil came to include oil, as Acheson had wanted. The oil embargo contributed to the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor in an ill-conceived effort to achieve a quick victory against the United States.

Acheson later claimed that even though Roosevelt had said he wanted the oil shipments to go through, Acheson knew that what Roosevelt really wanted and what the US national interest really required was a total embargo of oil shipments to Japan. Acheson suggested that ‘[If] President Roosevelt lacked decisiveness in the degree his successor [President Truman] possessed it, he had a sense of direction in which he constantly advanced. It seemed to those in government [that is, Acheson] that our most useful function was to increase in so far as we could the rate of that advance.’

Normative constraints are the beliefs, values, and attitudes that inform and shape the behavior of a leader. The normative constraints on democratic leaders might give democracies time and political space to solve their problems with each other. The kind of person who is likely to rise to power in a democratic state must demonstrate that she or he values compromise over total victory, peaceful change over violence, and the rule of law over the use of force to solve disputes. Exactly the opposite characteristics are likely to propel a person to the top leadership position in an authoritarian state. Authoritarian leaders often gain and maintain power through the use of violence. Both kinds of leaders are likely to bring their very different orientations to political life to foreign policy interactions. If that is so, then leaders of democratic states will likely find it much easier to amicably resolve any conflicts of interests with leaders of other democratic states than they would with leaders of autocratic countries. Moreover, leaders of autocratic states would have grave difficulties in reaching peaceful accords with each other if they faced serious conflicts of interests.

Democratic institutions and norms may be doing more than maintaining the democratic peace. They may also be serving as brakes on the possible risk that military conflict abroad might undermine those democratic institutions. In January 1961, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his farewell address as President, warned that a military-industrial complex, a growing US military bureaucracy together with a network of large American defense-related firms, was acquiring too much influence over US national security policy. Eisenhower (1961) also warned that ‘In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist … We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.’ Sociologist Harold Lasswell (1941) had issued a similar warning when he suggested that there might be emerging at that time what he termed the ‘garrison state,’ that is, highly militarized countries in which governments controlled economic, social, and political life in order to maximize military power. Yet, the US system of political checks and balances, together with a widespread skepticism about government, have interacted to ensure that the United States has retained its republican character and has not become a garrison state working at the behest of a military-industrial complex (Friedberg 2000).

The democratic peace thesis is persuasive. However, we should keep in mind three points of caution. First, democracies rarely go to war with each other, but they often become involved in militarized conflicts with non-democratic states. Second, while there is strong empirical support for the democratic peace, there is as yet no consensus on why we observe it. Finally, even in democracies, policy subordinates will misinterpret – possibly even purposely – the directives of leaders and essentially begin to pursue something approaching their own foreign policies. During a political-diplomatic crisis such policy incoherence can contribute to the risk of war, as can be observed in the example in Box 5.5.

In sum, the economic and political systems of countries play a large role in inclining those countries toward peace or war with each other in the context of a serious conflict of interest.
Underlying Causes of War: the International Level of Analysis

International anarchy may act as a permissive cause of war, that is, it may enable factors situated at other levels of analysis to induce states to be inclined toward war. It may also serve as an active cause of war, that is, it might positively propel states to do things that increase the risk of war between them.

Anarchy as a Permissive Condition for War

If international anarchy, that is, the absence of an international government to which states can appeal for redress of grievances or protection, always inclined states to fight when they found themselves in diplomatic crises, then every time we see states having such a crisis then we should also see those states go to war. Most diplomatic crises do not end in war. Hence, anarchy by itself cannot cause states to go to war with each other.

International anarchy might instead give free rein to individual-level and state-level factors that push states toward war (Waltz 1959). The United Nations is available to offer a helpful framework for diplomatic resolutions of disputes, and in doing so it has probably helped states resolve disagreements before they escalated to war. However, the UN cannot itself provide protection to a state if it is attacked, or penalize a state that turns to violence. Because then there is no reliable international government, the risk of war weighs on state leaders in the midst of a crisis. If those leaders experience stress or groupthink or overconfidence and begin to make errors, no outside agency exists that can, with a high level of reliability, stop them from going over the brink to war.

Anarchy as a Propellant of International Conflict

International anarchy may not just allow other factors to propel states toward conflict, it may itself positively and independently induce states to initiate military crises and even war (Fearon 1995). Anarchy may, in the first place, generate what international relations scholars call the problem of private information. Because there is no international authority to force states to reveal their true preferences, intentions, and capabilities, they have the capacity and thus the incentive to overstate their resolve and capabilities during a diplomatic or military crisis. This tendency toward bluff could make a diplomatic solution more difficult to obtain and war more likely.
weapons activities from Western intelligence agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Actually, Hussein had ceased serious efforts to develop a nuclear military capability sometime during the 1990s, but US, British, and other intelligence services were convinced that he was going for the bomb. Toward the end of the crisis of 2002–03 that culminated in the second Iraq war, Hussein’s government sought to signal that Iraq really had no nuclear weapons program, but by then it was too late. US and British leaders were convinced that Hussein was lying, and the only way to do away with Iraq’s nuclear threat was to invade and destroy his regime.

Second, anarchy may produce what is often called the commitment problem. Given the absence of an international government, states must fear that any diplomatic agreement they reach with an adversary to stave off a war might be violated at some point in the future when that adversary is in a position to be more deadly and demanding. In those circumstances, one or both sides may decide that it may be better to fight today rather than be cheated upon and attacked at a moment of weakness in the future. For example, as noted above, it is quite likely that US and allied leaders in 2002 and early 2003 simply ceased to believe that Saddam would keep his word if he signed an agreement to make no future demands on Kuwait and to refrain from reconstituting his nuclear program. Without that trust, or a capacity to ensure compliance, it seemed a safer path for the US and allied leaders to invade and remove Saddam from power once and for all.

Scholars of international relations use a helpful analytical device from game theory to explore this type of situation, namely the Prisoner’s Dilemma. Imagine that the police catch two criminals as they are breaking into a liquor store. The police search and find evidence in the getaway car that indicates they have just apprehended not two break-in thieves but possibly two professional contract killers who work in tandem and have killed several people. The police place the two criminals in two separate holding cells at the station. They cannot communicate with each other. The local district attorney arrives. She goes into each holding cell. She tells each prisoner that if he stays quiet, he will, at the very least, go to prison for five years for the break-in. She also tells each prisoner that if he agrees to testify at trial that both he and his partner are contract killers, and the other does not, then the one who testifies will go free while the other will get 50 years in prison. She also adds this: if both prisoners admit to being contract killers, they will each receive a sentence of 20 years in prison.

The situation the prisoners are facing is depicted in the payoff matrix in Figure 5.6. A’s payoffs are listed in the left side of each cell; B’s payoffs are listed in the right side of each cell. Each year of jail is a bad experience, so for each year a negative 1 is assigned: a jail sentence of 20 years therefore translates into a payoff of −20.

Prisoner A may think along the following lines: if I stay quiet (which we call a strategy on the part of A to cooperate with B), and B does the same thing (an outcome of cooperate–cooperate), we both receive five years in jail for the break-in, or a payoff of −5. That is bad but better than a lot of the other options I am facing. Still, I am not going to stay quiet, for two reasons. First, I might be able to walk out of here a free man, if I agree to testify about the contract killings and my partner stays quiet (which we will call a strategy by A to ‘defect’ from B). Second, if I stay quiet, and he agrees to testify (a strategy of defect by B), he goes free and I go to jail for 50 years! So, I’ll admit to the murders, and if my partner does the same I’ll receive the 20-year sentence, but there’s the chance he’ll stay quiet and then I’ll walk free, and in any event if I talk I’ll
avoid 50 years in prison. B thinks exactly along the same lines. The likely result: A and B both admit to being contract killers, and both go to jail for 20 years. Each loses a chance to serve no more than five years in prison, but each has avoided the worst possible outcome, namely, a 50-year sentence.

Let us now return to Iraq, the United States, and the lead-up to their war in 2003. For the sake of conversation, the United States may be viewed as state A in Figure 5.5, and Iraq may be viewed as state B. Let us imagine that, prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the two sides might have considered making the following deal: Iraq would forego any future nuclear weapons program or aggressive designs on Kuwait or other neighbors, and the United States would agree not to invade the country and to lift economic sanctions that had been in place since the early 1990s. The two sides in this instance would grudgingly have to live with each other, but they would avoid a costly war. This arrangement would correspond to the cooperate–cooperate outcome in the northwest corner of the payoff matrix in Figure 5.6. However, the United States would worry that if it lifted sanctions and forswore attacking Iraq, the latter might be tempted to develop nuclear weapons secretly, and after it had those weapons it might become extremely dangerous toward Kuwait and other countries in the Middle East. In that case, the United States would find itself in the cooperate–defect cell in the north-east corner of the matrix. Iraq on the other hand would worry that if it adhered to the agreement, the United States would find some other pretext at a later date to undermine it; the result would be for Iraq to find itself in the highly unfavorable southwest corner of the matrix. Hence, for both sides, a war – the defect–defect cell in the south-east corner of the matrix – is clearly costly but at least it gives each the hope that it can avoid its worst outcome, that is, making a deal but then later being cheated upon by the other. The mutual fear of the United States and Iraq of defection is being driven by the absence of an effective international government to enforce agreements, that is, international anarchy.

International anarchy may establish a context in which states overstate their claims and resolve, and fear that a deal to avert war today might lead to a situation in the future that is actually worse than commencing a war. In these two ways, international anarchy might propel states with a conflict of interest toward war.
Internal Wars and their Causes

In general, an internal war is an instance in which politically organized groups within a country, including most often the national government, become engaged in sustained military operations against one another. Students of international relations have good reasons to be interested in internal wars, and especially civil wars, as we shall see in the next section.

Internal Wars and International Peace and Security

Internal wars may have important repercussions for international peace and security. In particular, an internal war may spread to other countries, it may cause the state experiencing the internal war to be more aggressive towards other states, or it may cause other states to become hostile toward the state experiencing domestic violence.

An internal war in one country can instigate international violence through at least three different pathways. First, an internal war in one country can bring about contagion, that is, it can spread to neighboring countries (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Braithwaite 2010). Rebels in one country often find shelter in a neighboring country, and they sometimes begin to fight the government of that country. The Taliban, who originally held power in Afghanistan, moved in large numbers to Pakistan after the US invasion of 2001, and in recent years have been conducting an insurgency against the US and the US-supported government in Kabul while also fighting an insurgency aimed at Pakistan's central government. Alternatively, refugee flows from a war-torn country into a neighboring country can lead to instability and the outbreak of violence in the latter country, as occurred in the mid-1990s when refugees from Rwanda's civil war fled to neighboring Zaire and overwhelmed its infrastructure, which in turn contributed to the onset of a civil war in that country.

Second, a state that has experienced an internal war and political change arising from that war may for a time become more aggressive toward other states. It may do so both out of a fear that other states are hostile to it, and to divert domestic attention from the problems the new government is having in establishing the legitimacy of its rule as well as domestic order and stability (Maoz 1989; Walt 1996; Colgan 2013).

The third pathway by which internal war within a country might lead to international military conflict is that a state experiencing violence at home might attract invasions or other military confrontations from abroad. This could take place in at least two ways. On the one hand, a foreign state may believe that the country experiencing internal war may be vulnerable and easy to defeat militarily. Saddam Hussein appears to have made this calculation when he decided to invade Iran in September 1980, just as Iran was enmeshed in revolutionary change. As it turned out, the war dragged on for eight years and ended in a stalemate that favored Iran.

Another form of international military intervention against a state involved in internal war might arise from outrage by other states about the manner in which domestic violence is taking place within the country. Internal wars often produce social chaos, mass hunger, and a collapse of medical care, and combatants, as we will see below, often deliberately kill massive numbers of civilians. Combatants sometimes commit war crimes during these conflicts – mass killings of civilians, using rape as a military strategy, or employing children as soldiers – as has happened in numerous internal wars in recent years in the Balkans (for example, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo) and in sub-Saharan Africa (such as in Sierra Leone and the Central African
and in Asia (for example, in Sri Lanka). In some of those instances, one or more outside states have reacted to the atrocities by intervening militarily to try to bring the internal strife to an end. Such humanitarian interventions raise the possibility that there is developing a ‘responsibility to protect’ by outside powers when non-combatants are targeted by governments and rebels in civil wars. We will discuss humanitarian interventions in greater detail in Chapter 11.

Given their repercussions for international relations, we need to understand internal wars. It is to that task that we now direct attention.

Internal Wars: Types and Trends

There are many types of internal wars. The most prevalent form is civil war. A civil war is a sustained clash between forces that are controlled by the national government and forces that are controlled by an organized opposition group within the country. Those opposition groups typically have one of two goals. First, they may seek to overthrow the current regime and seize control of the central government, especially its military and national police. Several ‘Arab Spring’ revolutions that swept through North Africa and the Middle East in 2011–12 are in this class of civil wars. The Libyan civil war that began in February 2011 was complex in its origins and conduct, but was essentially a military struggle on the part of several loosely allied domestic opposition forces, supported by a coalition of outside powers including the United States, that fought to overthrow Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and his dictatorship centered in the capital city of Tripoli. It ended with the defeat of forces loyal to Gaddafi, the fall of the dictatorship, the formation of a transitional government that was recognized by the United Nations in September 2011, and the capture and killing of Gaddafi the following month.

Sometimes the opposition group or coalition does not wish to seize control of the national government, but instead to bring about the secession of a part a country to form a new state. An example of such a secessionist civil war concerns Sudan. Forces in the southern part of Sudan fought two prolonged civil wars (1955–72 and 1983–2005) against the central government in Khartoum, and in 2012 finally achieved independence and became the sovereign state of the Republic of South Sudan. Different

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**Photo 5.3 Child Soldier in Civil War in Liberia, 2003**

In the mid-2000s, up to 300,000 children were being forced to fight in 30 armed conflicts around the world. The problem is especially acute in sub-Saharan Africa. This file photograph dated July 28, 2003 shows a nine-year-old Liberian child soldier fighting for Charles Taylor’s government forces during the civil war in Monrovia, Liberia. In 2006, Taylor was arrested and transferred to the Hague, the Netherlands, to stand trial for instigating a civil war in the neighboring country of Sierra Leone, and for violating numerous terms of the Geneva Convention in that country, including the use of child soldiers.

**Source:** © NIC BOTHMA/epa/Corbis.
opposition groups in Darfur, in the western part of Sudan, have also fought a civil war aimed at secession since 2003, but have not succeeded in breaking away from the central government. We will return to the Darfur civil war below, in our discussion of the causes of internal wars.

Civil wars constitute about 92 percent of the 334 internal wars that occurred between 1816 and 2007, according to the COW research team. Two other types of internal wars do not involve the central government fighting an opposition group. The first type consists of inter-communal wars: they constitute about 5 percent of COW-identified internal wars, and take place when members of different religious communities in a country become embroiled in large-scale organized violence. For example, several militias that fought one another during the civil war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 were organized along sectarian lines – among others there were several different Shia Muslim, Sunni Muslim, and Maronite Christian fighting forces. Finally, in a few instances – about 3 percent of the total – internal conflicts have consisted of violence between military forces of governmental entities below the national level and non-governmental entities. For example, in 1967, fighting broke out in China between Red Guard radicals and regional military forces during the Cultural Revolution that communist leader Mao Tse-Tung sought to instigate against what he thought were increasingly conservative party comrades.

In Figure 5.7 we offer COW-generated data on the incidence of internal wars that occurred between 1816 and 2007. Internal wars began at a remarkably steady rate of about 1.3 internal wars per year during the bulk of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Then, during the period of decolonization and its aftermath, we see a sharp upward spike, to about 2.8 new internal wars per year, during the years between 1950 and 1999. Finally, the incidence of new internal wars actually increased during the 2000–2007 period and, if we compare the 1946–89 era to the post-Cold War years between 1990 and 2007, we observe an increase in the annual incidence of new internal wars, a phenomenon that demands further research.

We present in Figure 5.8 tentative estimates of trends in the lethality of internal wars: these are rough estimates because good data on battlefield deaths during internal

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**Figure 5.7**

Incidence of Internal Wars, 1816–2007, and During and After the Cold War

For each designated time period, the bar represents the average annual number of internal wars that began during the period; the number in parentheses is the total number of such wars that began during the period.


**Inter-communal wars**: A war in which members of different religious communities in a country become embroiled in large-scale organized violence.
wars is much less systematic than what is available on interstate or extra-state wars. Keeping that note of caution in mind, we are able to observe that at least 6 million combatants were killed in internal wars between 1816 and 2007, the vast majority of whom were killed in the civil wars of the twentieth century. In more recent times, the lethality of internal wars appears to have gone down, both in terms of total killed and killed per war.

Internal wars may be at least as lethal for non-combatants as the various types of international wars. Civilian deaths during internal wars are often due to intentional wartime killings by one or more sides involved in the war (Kalyvas and Kocher 2009). For example, a recent study identified 115 civil wars during the years between 1945 and 2000, and it found that during 27 of those wars at least one of the warring sides carried out a strategy of mass civilian killings (Valentino et al. 2004).

There have been numerous instances in which civil wars spark civilian killings on an enormous scale. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge rebel force overturned the central government in Phnom Penh in 1975, and then began what it called a 'purification' campaign that, by 1979, resulted in the murder of somewhere between 1.5 and 2 million men, women, and children, or something approaching 20 percent of Cambodia's population in 1975. Just nineteen years later, in the sub-Saharan country of Rwanda, a civil war began during which government-supported armed groups composed mainly of individuals from one tribal group, the Hutu, killed in a matter of months approximately 800,000 unarmed civilians belonging to individuals of another tribal group, the Tutsi, or other Hutu civilians who were thought to be protecting Tutsi or who were thought in one way or another to oppose the massacre. In that case, as in Cambodia, approximately 20 percent of Rwanda's pre-war civilian population was murdered.

Finally, with the aid of Figure 5.9 we turn to the issue of the internationalization of civil wars, by which we mean that, during the course of the internal war, one or more foreign states intervened and provided support to one or another of the warring sides, including sometimes the introduction of combat forces, but did not take over the bulk of the fighting. We can make at least three observations about external interventions in internal wars from the data in the figure. First, for reasons that scholars...
have not yet identified, international interventions do not take place in connection to all civil wars. Second, such interventions are not a new phenomenon: they occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and have continued in the twenty-first century. Third, the frequency with which foreign states intervened in internal wars was roughly twice as high during the second half of the twentieth century, and in particular during the Cold War, than in earlier periods, or since the end of the Cold War. Part of the explanation is that the Cold War was conducted through a series of proxy wars consisting of interventions by one or both superpowers in civil wars and other internal military conflicts in the Third World.

Genocide after the Cambodian Civil War, 1975–79
Photos of the victims of the Khmer Rouge are displayed at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, which is in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. The site is a former high school that was used by the Khmer Rouge as a torture and killing center.
Source: PA Images.

Genocide in Rwanda, 1994
The Rwanda killings of 1994 tell us that genocide remains a fundamental problem even in contemporary times.

Figure 5.9
International Interventions in Internal Wars, 1816–2007, and during and after the Cold War
Percentage of Internal Wars in which International Intervention Occurred
Causes of Internal Wars

Just as the levels-of-analysis framework helps us learn about the causes of inter-state war, it is also helpful in exploring what observers have suggested might be the causes of internal wars, and in particular civil wars.

The Individual and Internal War

Many of the factors discussed above that prompt individual national leaders to go to war probably operate on the leaders of factions in internal wars. Beyond that, scholars have suggested that at least two additional individual-level mechanisms may increase the likelihood of internal wars, namely, greed and grievance (Collier et al. 2009). By greed we mean a person’s intense desire to possess goods or money, and by grievance we mean a person’s belief that he or she is being victimized by or excluded from important institutions in a country. Individuals may believe they are being victimized or excluded for many reasons, including their religion, race, ethnic background, gender, or social class.

Greed may be a part of what motivates individuals in internal (and international) wars of all sorts, but it may play a particularly large role in countries that possess natural resources that can be readily acquired, transported, and sold for cash. Such resources, sometimes termed lootable wealth, may include diamonds, gold, minerals, timber, narcotics, and oil. Countries where lootable wealth has played a role in prompting or prolonging civil wars are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, including Angola, Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (Weinstein 2005).

In addition to greed, grievance might be a powerful individual-level factor in prompting internal wars. Scholars in recent years have found that ethnicity-based grievances have played a key role in motivating individuals to take up arms in civil wars (Cederman et al. 2010). Ethnic identity-based grievances were very much a part of the tensions that led to the civil war between the Hutu and the Tutsi in Rwanda, for example. More generally, perhaps 60 ethnicity-based conflicts occurred between 1946 and 2005 and reached the COW standard for a civil war, namely, 1,000 battlefield deaths within 12 months, which suggests that ethnic conflicts made up a substantial portion of all civil wars during the second half of the twentieth century.

Competition over natural resources can interact with ethnic differences and contribute to individual and ultimately group-level grievances and the onset of an internal war. One example of this dynamic can be observed in the secessionist civil war in the Darfur region of Sudan. That civil war, which began in 2003 and was ongoing in 2014, has pitted the central government in Khartoum and local Arab militias called the Janjaweed against two indigenous rebel groups, the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A), and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The war has been brutal: perhaps 450,000 civilians have been killed and 2.75 million persons displaced from their homes. The United Nations since late 2007 has undertaken a peacekeeping mission in the region, replacing an earlier effort by the African Union, but periodic violence has continued. The United States and other countries have accused the central government in Khartoum of perpetrating genocide in Darfur, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an international arrest warrant for Sudan’s president, Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, for directing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.

The continuing civil war in Darfur has many roots, and among them has been the overlay of ethnicity and competition over scarce resources. In particular, at the heart

Greed: A person’s intense desire to possess goods or money. On the individual level of analysis, a primary mechanism that increases the likelihood of internal war.

Grievance: A person’s belief that he or she is being victimized by or excluded from important institutions in a country. On the individual level of analysis, a primary mechanism that increases the likelihood of internal war.

Lootable wealth: Natural resources that can be readily acquired, transported, and sold for cash. In some countries, greed and lootable wealth combine to make internal conflict more likely.

Janjaweed: Local Arab militias in Sudan allied with the central government in Khartoum against the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army and the Justice and Equality Movement in the Sudanese civil war.

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of the Darfur war is a dispute between African farmers who wish to settle and cultivate land and Arab semi-nomadic livestock herders who want periodic access to that land. The latter group has been supported by the Khartoum government. Herder–farmer tensions had long been present in Darfur. However, a drought that began roughly in the mid-1980s and was still in effect in the mid-2000s sharpened the competition between farmers and herders over scarce land and water resources, making the settlement of this underlying resource dispute more difficult and turning it into a driver of what has become an inter-ethnic war in that region (Straus 2005).

The State and Internal War

Two characteristics of countries at the state level of analysis may play a role in the outbreak of internal wars, namely, the degree of inclusiveness of different elements of society in the control of the state, and the capacity of the state.

Governments in ethnically divided societies that favor one ethnic group, and systematically discriminate against other groups, are much more likely to induce the latter to take up some form of resistance, perhaps leading to a secessionist war. The degree of inclusion or exclusion on the basis of ethnicity by a national government is an important state-level contributor to civil peace or civil war. The presence of democratic political institutions does not appear to reduce the likelihood of civil wars, so while inclusiveness is important it appears that there may be several political arrangements whereby that goal can be achieved (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier et al. 2009).

Second, the capacity of the government to resist an armed insurgency has a strong influence on the likelihood that a country will experience some form of internal war (Fearon and Laitin 2003). A number of statistical studies have shown that wealthy countries are markedly less likely to experience internal wars. Such countries may be characterized by less severe or widespread grievances on the part of individuals within those countries. In addition, a country’s wealth creates the basis for the strength of its government. If the society is wealthy, then the govern-
ment will have a relatively larger pool of tax revenues and a more sophisticated and educated workforce. This strong government in turn will be able to reduce the risk that the country will experience a civil war. For example, it will have sophisticated military and police intelligence resources, so it can identify and suppress domestic dissident groups that might have the potential to turn to arms. It is also likely to have built a network of roads, and these roads give government military leaders an advantage in moving troops to trouble spots, overcoming possible terrain advantages that rebels might otherwise enjoy, such as mountainous regions, and suppress early signs of rebellion. A strong government is also better able than a weaker government to conscript fighters to defeat insurgencies before the latter reach a high level of effectiveness.

In sum, characteristics of governments – whether they are inclusive or exclusive, and, perhaps most important, whether they have strong and effective societal-control capabilities – play an important role in the incidence of internal wars.

The International System and Internal War

At least three conditions at the international level affect internal wars: interstate wars, colonialism and its aftermath, and the Cold War.

Wars between states can increase the chances of a civil war in one or the other combatant state. Political scientist Theda Skocpol (1974) has shown how the multiple wars that the French kings fought in the eighteenth century, and Russian monarchies fought during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, alienated important domestic groups, weakened the regimes, and pushed them toward revolution and civil war. China's defeat by Japan in 1895 caused the Ch'ing dynasty to undertake a number of political and administrative reforms, but those reforms themselves led to a weakening of central governmental authority and paved the way for a period of successive revolutions in China between 1911 and 1949.

Since World War II, ex-colonies have been at a high risk of internal war. Colonialism may be a risk factor for internal war for three reasons. First, European great powers drew colonial borders not on the basis of the ethnicity of the peoples in the colonies, but the relative power and degree of competition among the great powers themselves. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the countries that therefore emerged from colonialism had highly diverse ethnic populations, with members of the same ethnic group often located in two or more neighboring states. This mismatch between borders and ethnicity in post-colonial Africa may have made domestic stability more difficult to attain and maintain (Englebert et al. 2002).

In addition, colonial powers in sub-Saharan Africa focused mainly on extracting natural resources, and did little to create institutions, such as courts systems, that would promote long-term economic growth (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). The countries that emerged from colonialism in that region were hence weak economically, and thus less able to co-opt or defeat anti-regime opposition groups. Third, the colonial powers maintained order through the deployment of their own military and police forces. Once those forces were withdrawn, the newly independent countries had weak armies at their disposal: the door was left open to civil war (Fearon and Laitin 2003: 81).

The Cold War also had a very large impact on internal wars. We saw in Figure 5.7 that the average annual incidence of such wars during the years from 1950 to 1999 was double that during most of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twen-
tieth century. It is likely that the underlying causes of that spike in internal wars after World War II are to be found in the factors we discussed above, especially the destabilizing legacies of decolonization in many countries that won independence after 1945. However, as we discussed in Chapter 2, the Cold War meant that both rebels and national governments would have the material resources and training to fight each other.

The end of the Cold War did not bring about an end of internal wars: this can be observed in Figure 5.7. This suggests that the US–Soviet competition enabled, but was not the sole cause of such wars. More recently, the post-Cold War years of 1990–2007 witnessed an increase in the incidence of new civil wars compared to previous decades. That upsurge can be attributed to two specific consequences of the end of the Cold War: the break-up of the Soviet Union (six internal wars) and Yugoslavia (four internal wars). If we take those wars out of the analysis, the post-Cold War incidence of internal wars, at 2.9 new wars per year, converges with the 1950–99 experience of about 2.8 wars per year and is not very different from the Cold War experience of 2.4 new wars per year. At the same time, it may be recalled that the lethality of internal wars has declined in the wake of the Cold War. It is possible, given a recent analysis of the changing character of civil wars after the end of the Cold War, that the end of that conflict has meant internal war combatants – both governments and the opposition – in recent years are fighting with relatively fewer heavy armaments, since they have lost their Soviet and US suppliers, and as a result they are less able to inflict heavy casualties on each other (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010).

In sum, international factors, particularly interstate wars, colonialism and its legacy, and the Cold War and its termination, have all played a role in the onset and character of internal wars in the contemporary era.

Revisiting the Enduring Question and Looking Ahead

Military conflicts, including full-scale wars, have been and remain a central feature of international politics. Why do they happen, given that they are often horrifically costly in terms of the deaths of both combatants and civilians? This is the enduring question that we pursued in this chapter. We have shown that wars and other types of military conflicts between states, and within them, are rare but have taken place per-
sistent through history. We also showed that war occurs in the most immediate sense because states have conflicts of interest with one another. Yet, that explanation is not satisfactory by itself, because states often have conflicts of interest and their disagreements over those interests do not end in war.

Why, then, do some disagreements between states, and the conflicts of interests on which those disagreements rest, escalate to MIDs or even full-fledged wars? Given that arguments that stress the immediate causes of wars are not sufficient, we then shifted our focus to different possible underlying causes of wars and other violent conflicts between states. These causes are situated and operate at the individual, state, and international level of analysis, and many of them are emphasized by realist, liberal, constructivist, and feminist theories of world politics. Those theories and the causes they identify provide us with a quite substantial menu of possible fundamental causes of war.

We also discussed wars within countries. We examined why internal wars matter on their own terms, for example, in respect to their lethality for civilians, and by virtue of their capacity to affect international relations. We also explored different types of internal wars, and sought to understand the multiple causes for such wars, causes that again are situated at the individual, state, and international levels of analysis.

War is a persistent and dangerous part of the international domain. Yet, consider the case of France and Germany during the past 150 years. These two countries fought each other in three major wars between 1870 and 1945. During most of that period, when they were not actually fighting each other, they were bitter diplomatic adversaries. Yet, after 1945 these two countries reconciled and became close partners in the European Union. Just as there are many pathways to war, there must be factors in world politics that provide states with pathways to peace. We turn to this possibility in the next chapter.

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- Pivotal decisions in which you weigh up the pros and cons of complicated decisions with grave consequences
- Outside resources, including links to contemporary articles and videos, that add to what you have learned in this chapter
Study Questions

1. Is war an inevitable feature of international relations?
2. What one thing would you change about the internal features of a specific country that you believe would decisively lower the risk of war in the modern era?
3. How does a constant, like international anarchy, possibly influence the onset of interstate wars, which vary across time?
4. Is there a link between gender and war?
5. Given what we know about internal war, what can be done to reduce its incidence and severity?

Further Reading


Pinker, Steven (2011) *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (London: Allen Lane). Pinker puts forward the provocative thesis that human beings in general are becoming less violent toward one another, of which one manifestation is a decline in war.

Waltz, Kenneth (1959) *Man, State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press). This is the seminal work on viewing the causes of war from the perspective of factors situated at the individual, state, and inter-state levels of analysis, or what Waltz himself termed ‘images.’