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The Causes of War

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critical sources, as replication of the study will be difficult if not impossible. But the data will ring true to most Washington veterans, who have heard similar accounts at the bars of Officers' Clubs, or in the E ring itself. And the deft manipulation of the most popular models in organizational theory is a thought-provoking bonus for the reader.

JOHN B. BONDS
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Blainey, Geoffrey. *The Causes of War*. New York: Macmillan, 1973. 278pp.

Professor Blainey has given lay and professional readers alike a stimulating critique of traditional theories of war's causation and provided a provocative alternative interpretation of his own. In this literate essay, the author dissects conventional explanations of modern warfare (since 1700), discrediting in the process most of the popular myths concerning causal forces. When it comes to presenting his own thesis, however, he is little more convincing than his predecessors, identifying what might be called "symptoms of bellicosity," but indulging in truisms when he attempts a more definitive diagnosis of basic causes.

Considering war and peace a continuum, the author begins his analysis with an inquiry into one end—the causal forces of peace. Herein, he systematically refutes arguments that peace has been attributable to either political stability, economic prosperity, commercial intercourse, expanded communications, common culture, disarmament, power balances, international associations or international law. He further finds that neither war weariness nor magnanimous treaty terms guarantee tranquility. And just as these conditions reveal no clues to the sources of peace, so, according to Blainey, their absence is no certain precursor of war. Domestic strife, depression, nationalism, arms races, ideological differences,

power imbalances, legal and institutional deficiencies are all shown to be equally unreliable indices of war.

Are there then no identifiable or universal causes of war? For Blainey, only one: disagreement over measurement of power. "War is [always] a dispute about the measurement of power," he asserts. It begins when two nations disagree on their relative strength and ends when agreement on this subject is reached. It is thus most likely to occur when there is a relative parity of power between competing states, and least likely in situations of great power disparity.

Beyond this, Blainey claims that there exist "recurrent clues" to this phenomenon, clues which determine the probability of conflict. The foremost of these is "optimism" and the expectation of speedy victory. This optimism is in turn the function of calculations concerning: size and availability of military force, probability of third-party intervention, prospect of internal strife at home or within one's opponent, present and anticipated state of economic health, and seasonal conditions. Favorable assessment of these factors encourages the optimism preliminary to war.

As corollary to this concept, the author claims that war occurs only when two or more powers agree that they have more to gain by fighting than by negotiating; therefore, war constitutes a form of convention between consenting states. According to this model, war is the deliberate act of all participants, never accidental or the consequences of rigid alliances, arms races, misunderstandings, or blundering diplomacy; it is not even the product of unilateral ambitions of nations or statesmen.

This reviewer, perhaps because of his suspicion of universal theories, found Blainey most rewarding in his demolition of the foundations of causation theory; the book is worth reading for

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this contribution alone. When the author assays the creation of an alternative model of war causation, he serves to provoke more than to persuade.

At first glance, his thesis that war is a dispute about the measurement of power seems to ignore the policy imperatives that induce such calculations; it also seems to neglect conflicts where measurement of power does not appear to have been an obvious factor. Blainey surmounts such objections, however, by including prestige, ideology, trade, territory, alliances, etc., as forms of power. With such an all-encompassing definition of power, war can indeed be seen as a dispute over its measurement; but such an explanation becomes almost truistic. It has little value as either a predictive or descriptive formula concerning the causation of war. It reveals nothing that will suggest the imminence of war, indicate its symptoms, or imply techniques for war avoidance. And it leads the author into the questionable generalization that war is more likely under conditions of balanced power than those where serious imbalances occur.

The contention that optimism is the most important clue to the likelihood of war appears to be another truism. Nations do not, as Blainey admits, go to war unless they believe they have more to gain by fighting than by negotiating, and certainly they will anticipate, or at least say they anticipate, quick success. But is this optimism a clue to war's causation, or simply evidence of political necessity and man's enormous capacity for misperception and self-delusion—a normal way of preparing for crisis regardless of rational expectations? Manifestations of optimism are of little relevance in estimating the causes of war, and have limited utility even as symptoms, because they appear relatively late in the escalation of crisis, after many other danger signals have become obvious.

As for the factors Blainey contends

are calculated to produce optimism, these constitute variations of the standard elements—forces, resources and will—that policymakers have traditionally used as indices of national power and readiness. And while positive estimates of these factors do produce optimism, is the probability of war a function of optimism, as the author contends, or of capability and opportunity? Certainly it is difficult to accept his view that anything that produces optimism in such calculations automatically encourages war.

Blainey's discussion of war as a convention between two consenting states presents an intriguing concept. It is useful to be reminded that war is seldom the product of accidental or unilateral action, that even surprise attacks such as Port Arthur or Pearl Harbor are not sudden unilateral initiatives but the product of bilateral actions that were directed toward conflict with considerable understanding and volition on both sides. However, this idea of war as mutual agreement tends toward a relativism that is hard to accept; just because two or more nations agree that there is no alternative to fighting, responsibility for producing such a situation does not necessarily fall equally upon all. Here again the author's analysis seems to suffer from the omission of considerations of policy motives.

Issues such as these are guaranteed to engage the reader's attention and stimulate thought, if not agreement, especially when presented in the graceful and unpretentious style that characterizes this book. In the final analysis, we can agree with Professor Blainey that the crucial question is why war instead of some other means is chosen to measure power or implement policy. That is a question still unanswered but perceptively deliberated in *The Causes of War*.

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