1

Introduction

Does revenge play a role in fomenting international conflict? Scholars
have long recognized revenge as one of the root causes of violence in
human societies. From crusading in the Middle Ages to genocide in the
twentieth century, from ancient blood feuds to modern urban riots, from
tribal warfare to suicide terrorism, the fingerprints of vengeance can be
found on acts of violence both commonplace and cataclysmic.[1] Historical
accounts have also cited revenge as a contributing factor in a number of
interstate wars, including World War II, the Indo-Pakistani conflict, the
1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1980 Iran-Iraq War, the 1988 Eritrean-
Ethiopian War, and the 2003 Iraq War (Lowenheim and Heimann
2008: 689). Yet scholars of International Relations (IR) have paid sur-
prisingly little attention to the topic of revenge. The purpose of this book
is to develop a general theory of war and revenge. In particular, I examine
the link between the vengefulness of a country's population and its
propensity to use force against other states. This leads to a powerful
and provocative insight: among democracies, where domestic political
institutions make leaders accountable to the mass public, the most violent
states are those with the most vengeful citizens.

My theory takes ordinary people rather than leaders or states as its
starting point. In doing so, I advance a conceptualization of revenge that

[1] On the role of revenge in the Crusades, see Throop (2011). On genocide, see Hinton
(1998). On blood feuds, see Bohem (1984); Daly and Wilson (1988); Ericksen and Horton
(1992); Fletcher (2004). On urban riots, see Horowitz (2001) and Gullace (2005). On
tribal warfare, see Blick (1988); Chagnon (1988); Beckerman et al. (2009). On suicide
terrorism, see Moghadam (2003) and Speckhard and Ahkmedova (2006).

pushes back against the pejorative outlook that has long dominated discussions of revenge in Western philosophy and law. Over the centuries, this so-called anti-revenge discourse has variously painted revenge as an immoral, irrational, pathological, and atavistic impulse that has no place in a civilized society (Miller 1998). I make no such normative judgments in this book. Rather, I take an evidence-based approach, drawing on a growing multidisciplinary body of research to argue that revenge is best understood as a core value – rooted in the belief that those who hurt others deserve to be hurt in return – that shapes individuals' behavior and opinions across a wide variety of contexts, both personal and political. Revenge, in other words, is not just something people do, it is something they believe in, and those beliefs have consequences that reach far beyond each individual's sphere of personal concern.

The link between individual vengefulness and state violence lies in the dynamic interaction between elected leaders and their citizens. As with many complex political issues, ordinary people rely heavily on their values to inform their opinions toward the use of military force (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987), and studies have shown that vengefulness can be an important predictor of support for the use of military force, even if there has not been a direct attack on the nation's homeland or its citizens (Liberman 2006, 2013, 2014; Gollwitzer et al. 2014; Washburn and Skitka 2015; Liberman and Skitka 2017). Building on this research, I argue that citizens' desire for revenge against an adversary is a potent force that national leaders can mobilize into support for war by using strategically crafted rhetoric that frames the use of force as a punishment the adversary deserves to suffer.

For democratic leaders, whose political fortunes are inextricably linked to public opinion, the ability to generate popular support for war in this way is highly consequential. When the public is generally averse to war, democratic accountability acts as a constraint on leaders' freedom to use military force as a tool of foreign policy. Embarking on an unpopular war can undermine leaders' popularity, sap their political capital, and ultimately place their position in office in jeopardy (Mueller 1973; Edwards 1976; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Rivers and Rose 1985; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Goemans 2000; Karol and Miguel 2007; Kernell 2007; Croco 2015). These risks create a strong incentive not to use the hammer of military force on every single nail but only on those rare occasions when the stars align for a swift, victorious, and popular war. However, if a leader can generate a significant boost in popular support for war by framing the conflict in a way that resonates

with citizens' beliefs about revenge, then the political risk will be lessened and the constraints of accountability will be loosened.

In a world where there are significant cross-national differences in vengefulness, this logic implies that leaders with more vengeful populations are less constrained because they have a larger reservoir of latent support for war that they can galvanize by framing the use of force as a punishment. Consequently, they are more likely (on average) to initiate the use of force in their disputes with other states. Thus, the vengefulness of a country's population is best understood as an underlying risk factor rather than a proximate cause of war. In order for two states to traverse the path from peace to war, a conflict of interest must first arise between them, and they must then fail to find a peaceful bargain that both sides prefer to war. My claim is not that the vengefulness of a country's population creates conflicts of interest or causes bargaining to fail. Rather, I argue that once a conflict of interest has emerged and bargaining is under way, a highly vengeful population can exacerbate the proximate causes of bargaining failure by lowering the expected costs of military action for leaders, thereby shrinking the set of peaceful outcomes that both sides would prefer to a fight. The smaller this "bargaining range," the more likely it is that bargaining will fail and that war will be the result (Fearon 1995).

The theory that I develop in this book stands apart from prior attempts to theorize about the role of revenge in interstate conflict both in its focus on ordinary individuals as the locus of the desire for revenge and in its attention to tracing out the domestic political mechanism whereby that desire is externalized as state behavior. By locating the theory's micro-foundations at the individual level, this approach overcomes the primary problem that has plagued the existing literature on war and revenge: the state as the unit of analysis. In this respect, this book is part of what Hafner-Burton et al. (2017: S2) refer to as "the behavioral revolution" in International Relations. The defining feature of this revolution is "the use of empirical research on preferences, beliefs, and decision making to modify choice- and game-theoretic models." While much of the work in this vein has concentrated on leaders, studies of public opinion have also flourished.[2]

---

[2] For recent examples of work on leaders, see Hafner Burton et al. (2014); Yarhi-Milo (2014); Renshon (2015); Rathbun et al. (2017); Saunders (2017). For recent examples of work on public opinion, see Kertzer and McGraw (2012); Tomz and Weeks (2013); Bayram (2015); Rho and Tomz (2017).

One of the fundamental challenges faced by the public opinion arm of the behavioral revolution is aggregation, i.e., "how individual-level findings can be aggregated to understand collective as well as individual decision making" (Hafner-Burton et al. 2017: S17). Studies of public opinion in IR often posit that their findings regarding individual preferences are "intrinsically interesting because they act as constraints on national decision makers in democratic settings," but they do not often address aggregation directly (Hafner-Burton et al. 2017: S19). In contrast, this book attempts to provide a more fleshed-out account of how individual heterogeneity in values translates into differences in state behavior by relaxing the assumption – common to many theories of democracy and war – that democratic leaders cannot manufacture popular support for war, and by recognizing that the core values that inform individuals' preferences about the use of military force vary both across individuals and across cultures. These two theoretical moves turn the constraining effect of accountability to the public into a variable rather than a constant and defining feature of democracy.

In this respect, the theory that I develop in this book stands apart from much of the previous research on domestic politics and war, which has largely focused on differences between democracies and autocracies rather than variation among democracies themselves.[3] This has been a productive line of research, but it has also obscured important variation within the group of democracies. The existing literature paints a fairly rosy picture of the conflict behavior of democracies. Compared with autocracies, democracies tend to fight shorter, lower-cost, and more victorious wars (Siverson 1995; Bennett and Stam 1996; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Reiter and Stam 2002; Filson and Werner 2004; Slantchev 2004; Valentino et al. 2010). Yet it is also true that some democracies behave much more belligerently than others in their international relations. How can we explain why similar institutions can nonetheless produce these different patterns of conflict behavior? In this book, I contend that cross-cultural differences in core values, and particularly in endorsement of revenge, are an important part of the answer to this question.

Democracy is no longer a rare and radical form of government but one that has taken root in a large and culturally diverse set of nations, and the differences among democracies are just as consequential as their

---

[3] For other recent work that focuses on democratic heterogeneity, see Caverley (2014) and Baum and Potter (2015).

similarities. Although my theory deals specifically with conflict initiation, it has broad implications for other aspects of interstate war, including the democratic peace. Indeed, it suggests that the increasing diversity of democracies may have the potential to weaken the separate peace that has prevailed among democratic nations for more than two centuries.

PRIOR APPROACHES AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

The central challenge of integrating revenge into IR theory is the state as the unit of analysis. Revenge, which involves perceptions, beliefs, and emotions that we typically think of as fundamentally human attributes, does not map neatly or easily onto an abstract, corporate entity like the state. Prior work has dealt with this challenge in two main ways. The first approach makes national leaders the locus of the desire for revenge. The most prominent recent example of this kind of argument is the 2003 Iraq War. It has long been suggested that part of President George W. Bush's motivation for going to war with Iraq was his long-standing desire to get revenge on Saddam Hussein for orchestrating an assassination attempt that targeted his father, former President George H. W. Bush, during a visit to Kuwait in 1993 (Lebow 2010). This narrative was fueled in part by President Bush's own words. For instance, he once referred to Saddam Hussein as "a guy that tried to kill my dad at one time."[4]

However, this case also illustrates the limitations of leader-centric accounts. As a general matter, it is difficult to look inside leaders' hearts and minds for the personal motivations that might be driving their policy decisions, and there is little concrete evidence that President Bush acted out of a desire for revenge. Furthermore, such accounts tend to deal with single, idiosyncratic cases – e.g., a current president seeking to avenge an attack on a former president who also happens to be his father – making it difficult for them to give us any generalizable insights into when and how revenge helps to fan the flames of conflict. Finally, this type of argument equates the whims of individual leaders with national policy while ignoring the fact that in most modern polities, decision makers are embedded in a set of domestic political institutions that serve to constrain, to varying degrees, their freedom of action, and that create channels through which other domestic actors can influence the policy-making process.

[4] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2017, *Remarks by The President at John Cornyn for Senate Reception*, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020926–17.html.

The second approach makes the state itself rather than individual leaders the locus of the desire for revenge, as exemplified by the works of Harkavy (2000) and Lowenheim and Heimann (2008). According to Harkavy, national humiliation, such as military defeat or long-term domination, leads to "collective narcissistic rage," which motivates states to go to war in order to exact revenge. Lowenheim and Heimann add some additional nuance, arguing that vengeful behavior by states is driven by three factors: the degree of moral outrage that a state experiences following a harm done against it, the intensity of the state's humiliation following that harm, and the extent to which negative reciprocity is institutionalized in international politics. Both these arguments ultimately rest on the attribution of emotions, such as anger and humiliation, to states themselves. In other words, they posit that states have an emotional capacity that is not reducible to "the mere aggregation of individuals' (decision makers, members of the public) emotions" (Lowenheim and Heimann 2008: 689).[5]

The concept of state emotions has both empirical and theoretical limitations. First, it cuts against the mainstream perspective on emotion, which views emotion as something that can be experienced only by living beings with brains and bodies.[6] Lowenheim and Heimann attempt to deal with this problem by positing that individuals within the state – its rulers, officials, and citizens – experience the state's emotions on its behalf. The essence of this argument is that these individuals assume particular "role identities," as a result of which they experience emotions that are specific to those roles and that are distinct from their personal emotions. However, there is little empirical evidence to support the idea that such role-based emotions exist and can be distinguished from an individual's personal emotions.[7] Moreover, even if individuals' role-based emotions

---

[5] For more on emotions in international relations, see Crawford (2000); Bleiker and Hutchison (2008); Sasley (2011).

[6] See Niedenthal (2007) on the "embodiment" of emotion.

[7] In their case study of the Second Lebanon War (2006) between Israel and Hezbollah, Lowehheim and Heimann use the statements of key decision makers as evidence that the desire for revenge drove Israel's behavior during the conflict. Even setting aside the obvious issues with inferring emotions from leaders' publicly available statements, the authors do not indicate how they separate the emotions that these individuals feel because of their particular role identities from their personal emotions. Nor do they indicate how such an analysis could be replicated outside of those few (and mostly recent) cases of conflict for which we have access to a similarly detailed documentary record. Thus, in practice their approach does little to improve on the lack of generalizability that characterizes leader-centric accounts.

could be reliably identified, individuals in different roles might have very different emotional reactions to the same event, raising the thorny question of whose role-based emotions should be assigned to the state.

More broadly, as with the leader-centric arguments discussed previously, the state emotions account fails to recognize the political nature of the decision to go to war. The story it offers is a simple one: the state experiences some kind of harm or humiliation, feels a desire for revenge, and acts on it by going to war. Yet we know that state action does not spring directly from emotional drives as the actions of individuals often do. Rather, it is the result of a policy-making process that is shaped by a state's political institutions and by the set of domestic political actors who are enfranchised by those institutions. Thus, even if they exist, state emotions cannot translate directly into policy, because policy-making is a political process.

Given these limitations, it is not surprising that neither the leader-centric approach nor the state emotions approach has established revenge as important topic of study in International Relations. What is needed is a new approach that identifies both when and how revenge enters into the political processes that lie behind the decision to go to war. The theory that I develop here rises to meet that challenge by grounding itself firmly in the existing research on revenge, public opinion formation, and democratic accountability.

A NEW APPROACH: FROM VENGEFUL CITIZENS TO VIOLENT STATES

Ordinary people do not have a direct say in when and how their country uses military force, but this does not mean they are necessarily lacking in influence. They have the power to give voice to their opinions, and those opinions can enter into the decision-making process when leaders have an incentive to take the preferences of their citizens into consideration. Thus, in order to link individual vengefulness to state violence, we need to answer three key questions. First, how do ordinary people think about revenge and what role does it play in their everyday lives? Second, when and how does revenge influence individuals' attitudes toward war? Third, when and how do those attitudes shape the choices of state leaders?

My answer to the first question is that at the individual level, revenge is best understood as a core value. An individual's core values are his or her deeply held and enduring beliefs about "desirable modes of conduct or

desirable end states of existence" (Rokeach 1973: 7). These beliefs play an essential role in human behavior by providing the evaluative criteria that people use "to select and justify action and to evaluate people (including the self) and events" (Schwartz 1992: 1). Due to the strong anti-revenge bias in Western thought (Miller 1998), revenge has not traditionally been recognized as a core value. However, thanks to the growing body of empirical research on revenge, we now know a great deal about how ordinary people, as opposed to philosophers and legal scholars, think about revenge. Building on this research, I argue that the essence of revenge is the belief that wrongs deserve to be repaid and that like other core values, this belief serves as an important standard of judgment in matters both personal and political.

In particular, the belief that wrongs deserve to be repaid has a profound effect on individuals' attitudes toward violence. For those who hold revenge as a core value, the use of violence in response to a perceived harm or injury is seen as an act of moral virtue. This is not a view that accepts the old adage that "two wrongs don't make a right." Rather, the return of harm for harm and suffering for suffering is necessary to balance the scales of justice. In other words, when the target of an act of violence is viewed as deserving of punishment, that act of violence is imbued with an aura of righteousness, transforming it from something vicious into something virtuous. Consequently, individuals who hold revenge as a core value are more likely to express support for the use of punitive violence in a variety of forms, including, as I show in Chapter 3, corporal punishment, vigilante killing, police repression, the death penalty, and torture.

War is also a form of violence, which leads to our second key question: when and how does revenge influence individuals' attitudes toward war? My answer here draws on the extensive literature on the role of core values in the formation of public opinion. Scholars have long recognized that core values serve as heuristics or decision-making shortcuts that allow individuals to develop a coherent set of opinions across a wide range of political issues without paying the (often prohibitive) costs of gathering extensive information about each new issue (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Wildavsky 1987; Sniderman et al. 1993). Instead, a person can figure out where he or she stands on an issue simply by asking whether or not it accords with his or her core values (Feldman 1988).

However, values do not always translate automatically into specific issue positions (Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002). Indeed, most

political debates are complex and multifaceted, touching on a variety of competing considerations that may point in opposite directions. Ordinary people therefore rely on the cues and information carried in elite political discourse to help them connect their values to the political debates of the day (Zaller 1992). When elite discourse frames an issue in a way that highlights a particular value, citizens are more likely to see the issue in terms of that value and to base their opinions on it (Iyengar 1991; Zaller 1992; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Nelson et al. 1997; Chong and Druckman 2007). For this reason, the ability to influence how an issue is framed is a source of political power. By using strategically crafted rhetoric that resonates with their citizens' core values, political elites can sway public opinion in favor of their preferred policies.

This, I argue, is the process by which revenge becomes salient to citizens' opinions about the use of military force, including the use of force in cases that do not involve an attack on the nation's homeland or citizens. By framing the use of force as a punishment that the adversary deserves to suffer in return for some prior transgression (real or invented), political elites, and particularly national leaders, can transform a complex international crisis into a simple and familiar narrative – a bad guy getting his just deserts – that will resonate strongly with their more vengeful citizens. In turn, these individuals will be more likely to support aggressive action against the adversary because, to them, going to war against an evildoer is more than a matter of security; it is a matter of justice. Thus, leaders can use the power of their rhetoric to boost popular support for war by appealing to their citizens' basic beliefs about revenge.

Having identified revenge as a potentially powerful source of popular support for war brings us to our third key question: when and how does this relationship influence the choices of state leaders? The answer to this question has two components. First, the relationship between revenge and support for war will have bearing on the choices of state leaders in places where those leaders can be held accountable by the public. In democracies, public opinion must be part of leaders' calculus about matters of war and peace. An unpopular war carries many political costs, and democratically elected leaders therefore have a strong incentive to use all the resources of their office, including the bully pulpit, to frame the use of force in a way that garners maximum popular support (Rosenblatt 1998). The more successful they are at doing so, the more freedom they will have to use military force as a tool of foreign policy. In autocracies, by contrast, leaders are constrained less by public opinion than by other

regime insiders (Weeks 2008), whose support can be garnered through more direct methods like payoffs and threats, (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005).

Second, the degree to which democratic leaders can loosen the constraint of accountability to the public by appealing to their citizens' desire for revenge against evildoers depends on the prevalence of revenge in their populations. Due to diverse cultural legacies, cross-national differences in endorsement of revenge as a core value persist even in today's highly globalized world, and these differences impact leaders' ability to generate popular support for war by using a punishment frame. Put another way, all elected leaders have a set of tools that they can use to manage public opinion about war. Framing the use of force as punishment is one of those tools, and leaders with more vengeful populations will, on average, find it to be more reliable and more effective than leaders with less vengeful populations. With such a powerful tool at hand, leaders with more vengeful populations can behave more hawkishly in their foreign policies knowing that they have the capacity to bring the public along with them. Consequently, there are systematic differences in the conflict behavior of democracies with highly vengeful populations compared with democracies with less vengeful populations. In other words, vengeful citizens help to create violent states.

BROADER CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Theories of Democracy and War

My theory joins a large and growing body of IR scholarship that gives individual preferences an important role in shaping states' foreign policies. In the area of international trade, for instance, scholars have long argued that models of trade policy-making must incorporate individuals' preferences over trade policy (Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Nor have theories of war been neglectful of the political relevance of the mass public. Indeed, the role of public opinion – and the constraint it places on the behavior of democratically elected leaders – is often held to be one of the fundamental reasons why the conflict behavior of democracies differs from that of autocracies along many different dimensions (Reiter and Tillman 2002).

According to the existing literature, democracies display a number of desirable tendencies when it comes to the use of military force. They are more likely to win the wars they initiate and to win them quickly, more