1 ON THE STUDY OF WAR

The analysis of war is too important to be left to the intuitionists.

Quincy Wright

[We] turn to history and only to history if what we are seeking are the actual causes, sources, and conditions of overt changes in patterns and structures of society. Conventional wisdom to the contrary, we shall not find the explanations of change in those studies which are abstracted from history.

Robert Nisbet

Analytical studies of war can be traced back at least to the great work of the historian Thucydides, but systematic exploration of war as a unique but generic form of behavior between political communities was undertaken initially by political philosophers. Machiavelli, Rousseau, Kant, Hobbes, Hegel, and others had significant things to say about the etiology and consequences of war, but their insights were suggestive and prescriptive rather than empirical. They could enumerate the reasons wars are likely, but their causal statements were mostly hypothetical. Few had systematic evidence to support them.

The search for patterns and generalizations based on accumulated evidence is of more recent vintage. Today there is a large literature that has a common focus on the “causes of war.” It is not my purpose to examine in detail this important corpus of work, but it may be appropriate to reflect on some of its achievements and shortfalls because yet another book on war must be justified either as filling a gap or extending in significant ways existing bodies of knowledge.

Descriptive studies of the incidence, location, and costs of war have advanced significantly over the past few decades. Today, comprehensive lists of wars, rebellions, civil wars, and other categories of violence are available (Wright, 1942; Perré, 1962; Bouthoul and Carrère, 1976; Small and Singer, 1982; Levy, 1983; Luard, 1986). Although there are methodological debates about contenders for inclusion and exclusion (Duvall, 1976; Luard, 1986), researchers can take satisfaction in the knowledge that only minor tinkering or marginal additions would be
necessary to satisfy the requirements of comprehensiveness in time and location. While most data admittedly come from Western sources, dealing with armed contests between the nation states of the modern era, there are no compelling reasons to postpone research until, let us say, we have a full catalogue of data on inter-tribal wars in Africa during the thirteenth century. Today we know what we are talking about—the phenomenon to be explained—which was not the case until fairly recently.

In the realm of explanation, however, the record is more sketchy. The causes of war, which are the subject of speculation in international relations over the last four centuries, remain obscure, but less obscure than previously. Modern research has still left a trail of uncertainty, partial clues, contradiction, and continued mystery. This is not unexpected, since the scientific enterprise never moves along a straight path. All avenues and possibilities have to be explored, and we would expect many of them to lead to intellectual dead ends or to findings of only weak significance. That there is no answer to the ancient question "why war?" is not the fault of the scientific method per se. But how questions are posed, which questions are raised, which are neglected, what assumptions are made about causation, and how we select levels of analysis and individual explanatory variables vitally affect the quality of results. Inconsistent results are another problem. For example, studies assert that arms races lead to war or that they do not lead to war. Some argue that balances of power are critical foundations for peace. Others argue, marshaling equally impressive evidence, that preponderances are a necessary condition for peace. Alliances have been linked both to war and to peace. This state of affairs prompted J. David Singer (1979:14) to write that the systematic study of war has failed to "achieve any significant theoretical breakthrough." There is, he suggested, no "compelling explanation" for war. His solution to the problem was to shift from the concept of causality to that of explanation: the latter implies a plurality of possible explanations rather than the identification of a single cause. This, of course, is an important insight. Yet, Singer did not raise other fundamental concerns about the nature of causality or explanation in contemporary war and peace research. He did not, for example, examine the dominant sociological mode of analysis that emphasizes the explanatory potential of broad systemic factors and national attributes, what I will call ecological variables. The assumption is that somehow these background conditions are translated into disputes and wars through actions and interactions. If there is causality, then it lies through a complex chain of conditions and events, but the ecological variables, which are often
EXPLANATORY CONFIGURATIONS

operationalized in dichotomous terms, stand out as the sources of explanation in most studies.

EXPLANATORY CONFIGURATIONS

Investigators of conflict, crises, and war reached a consensus years ago that moncausal explanations are theoretically and empirically deficient. Kenneth Waltz’ (1957) classic typology of war explanations convincingly demonstrated various problems arising from diagnoses that locate war causation exclusively at the individual, state attribute, or systemic levels. He also illustrated how prescriptions based on faulty diagnoses offer no solution to the problem. Even Rousseau’s powerful exploration of the consequences of anarchy, updated by Waltz (1979), remains full of insights, but it only specifies why wars recur (there is nothing to prevent them) and offers few clues that help to predict when, where, and over what issues. Blaine’s (1973), in another telling attack on moncausal theories, continues where Waltz left off. He offers, on the basis of rich historical illustrations, both logical and anecdotal rebuttals of facile explanations of war that do not academic and philosophical thought on the subject. But rebuttals of the obvious are not sufficient. We presently have myriads of theories of war, emphasizing all sorts of factors that can help explain its etiology. As Carroll and Fink (1975) note, there are if anything too many theories, and even too many typologies of theories. Quoting Timasheff approvingly, they point out that anything might lead to war, but nothing will certainly lead to war.

Table 1.1 sets out the location of explanatory variables in some of the theoretical and empirical literature. More elaborate classification schemes are available (e.g., Deutsch and Senghaas, 1971; Carroll and Fink, 1975), but our purpose is not to add yet another typology or to produce so many cells that virtually every study has a niche of its own. The studies are categorized according to the well-known “levels of analysis” scheme, but include only those that emphasize ecological/attribute variables; according to a static–dynamic dichotomy (or more properly, a dimension); and according to an attribute or relational configuration of the independent variables.

Several conclusions emerge from this illustrative rendering of the field. First, a significant proportion of the studies continue to employ single independent variables. While most reason in terms of associations and correlations, they are intended to be causal: variations in a cause changes in b, usually defined as variations in the incidence of war. Second, the location of possible sources of war is infinitely expan-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Static</th>
<th>Dynamic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alliances and war (+ Ostrom &amp; Hoole 1979, - Levy 1981)</td>
<td>+ War conflict and domestic (Davis, Duncan &amp; Siverson 1979, - Rummel 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capitalism and war (+ Lenin 1929, - Wright 1942)</td>
<td>+ Attribute distance and war (+ Wright 1959, - Wilkenfeld 1969)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ = positive association.
- = no association.
EXPLANATORY CONFIGURATIONS

dable (we would have to add an extraterrestrial analytical level to include one study – whose author I prefer not to reveal – that correlated sunspot activity with the incidence of war). The range of explanatory variables runs from the genetic (not considered here) to the cosmic. Some ordering of the comparative significance of these types of variables is long overdue. Third, most studies employ variables from only one level of analysis. This leads to a number of problems, among which is the perennial issue of determinism and free will. Explanatory systems that emphasize structural and ecological variables such as the degree of power concentration in the international system are largely deterministic, as are genetic explanations of war. Studies that emphasize decision-making, values, and perceptions of policy-makers come closer to the free will end of the spectrum. How can the two be reconciled?

The prevalence of contradictory findings is the final problem. There are some important areas of consensus – what Singer has termed "reliable knowledge" – that have emerged from replication and modification of research designs and data. Great powers are more war-prone than other kinds of states. Studies have confirmed Woodrow Wilson's hypothesis (Shaw, 1924:1, 379) that democracies do not go to war against each other. The hypothesis of systemic war contagion processes has been disconfirmed in numerous studies (Geller, 1988:366). At least two studies have demonstrated persuasively (though not without challenge, based on other data and methodologies) that, not surprisingly, borders play a role in conflict. Both alliance membership and contiguity increase the probabilities that any given state will become involved in a war should its neighbour and/or alliance partner be at war (Siverson and Starr, 1990). Some theories of relative power cycles among the great powers show rather impressively how, at certain "inflection points" in the relative rise and decline of great powers, serious wars are more likely to occur than at other times. The problems of adjusting foreign policies to new roles consistent with new power positions in some ways lead to a higher probability of war participation (Doran, 1983). Beyond these and a few other areas of general agreement, explanations of variation in war remain contested either because there have been no findings meeting various tests of significance or because findings have been contradictory. In a significant proportion of the systemic studies of war, there is no verdict.

Is there the prospect that if we heed the perennial cry for more research we will uncover exciting new possibilities? Will the addition of new independent variables increase the storehouse of reliable knowledge? How should researchers deal with the problems of
ON THE STUDY OF WAR

chronic incompatibility of findings? Are the solutions to these difficulties to be found primarily within the context of quantitative analysis? There is a common assumption that with adjustments here, a little methodological tinkering there, and the compilation of ever more studies, researchers will eventually uncover the numerous mysteries that remain. But perhaps more fundamental questions need to be raised. Two in particular come to mind. First, is the emphasis on single ecological variables appropriate to the problem to be investigated? Second, what areas of investigation have been overlooked in the research agenda? This study examines three areas of pronounced neglect: (1) what are the issues that initially generate international conflict? what do men fight about? (2) what is the “meaning” of war to those who resort to it? and (3) in what ways do the arrangements of peace serve as a source of future international conflict? We will examine each of these questions and the relationships between them below, but first we should explore in more detail the issue of ecological variables as explanations of war.

THE PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF ECOLOGICAL VARIABLES

Sociological analyses of war generally link broad background variables of the international system or of its member states to the incidence of international violence. Typical variables include the degree of power concentration in an international system, numbers and types of alliances, balances and imbalances of power, relative rates of power change among key states, the presence or absence of arms races, degrees of status inconsistency, and the like. Other studies have concentrated on the link between national attributes (size, location, type of political system, and the like) and conflict/war. A derivative avenue of inquiry has examined the nature of relationships between attributes of nations. Most continue to employ single independent variables, even though at the theoretical level, monocausal theories of war have been proven inadequate for a long time. The usual answer to this problem is that correlational findings are not causal. They only indicate that the probabilities of war involvement or war initiation increase or decrease under certain specified systemic conditions or attribute profiles. Such results are not only interesting but potentially of theoretical significance. The combination of certain specified systemic and attribute conditions could certainly indicate which sorts of configurations increase or decrease international stability and the overall incidence of war in a particular era. But it does not tell us much
about the sources of individual wars. Not many wars begin because there is a parity or preponderance of power, or because two parties share a frontier, or because they have differential growth rates (consider the unlimited and unknown numbers of wars that did not begin under such conditions). Knowledge of change in probabilities is important, but is it sufficient? Let us use a domestic analogy to make the point that statistical associations between relatively static variables such as system structure or national attributes, and war incidence, while they may reveal certain patterns, do not in most cases offer a satisfactory form of explanation.

I do not have a quarrel with my neighbor because he or she is older, is more wealthy, or has a larger house. All of these attributes are in most cases irrelevant to the neighborly relationship, whereas behavior is critical. If my neighbor throws his garbage on my porch, a quarrel is likely to ensue. We have an issue that generates conflict. The fact of contiguity and our attribute differences offer less satisfactory possibilities. The probabilities of a quarrel with a neighbor are no doubt greater than they would be with an unknown person living on the other side of town. But a probability difference is not a very satisfactory explanation, much less a cause. Some of the studies that link attributes to war incidence face this same problem. It is interesting to know, for example, that great powers are more war-prone than other kinds of states, but this fact can be explained also on a simple probability basis: great powers have more relationships and more interests to advance and protect, and hence we should expect them to resort to armed force more frequently than smaller states. An individual with a broad network of relationships is more likely to be involved in conflicts than is a hermit.

But these are relatively technical problems. More significant is the determinism implied in many of the studies, the presumed relevance and priority of ecological variables. Researchers assume that somehow, through decision-making and other processes, these systemic and other-nation conditions are translated into foreign policy outputs and decisions to employ force. But how? And how are we to estimate their significance compared to more immediate stimuli (behaviors)? Of what relevance was the degree of systemic power polarization to the Argentine generals who decided to invade the Falkland Islands; or to President Nasser, who decided to have another go at Israel? or to the Iraqi president who launched a war against Iran in 1979? There is an element of the ecological fallacy in these questions (explaining an individual event in terms of general system properties), and yet they should be asked.
ON THE STUDY OF WAR

Many of the studies cited here assume a high degree of constraint imposed by system characteristics, national attributes, and relational variables. They are reminiscent of the early voting behavior studies that linked socio-economic variables such as class, education, religion, and income to voting choices. But those early studies failed to ask voters why they voted in a particular way. The view of man in these studies is that of an automaton forced to behave in certain ways because of environmental characteristics or individual attributes. There is no acknowledgment that people have purposes, ideas, preferences, and dislikes; that they have concerns for personal welfare and sometimes even a calculated concern with the welfare of the broader society and its political system. What are the limits of choice? Peter the Great, Louis XIV, Charles XII, Bismarck, Wilson, and Hitler, just to mention a few, did as much to create system characteristics as they were constrained by them.

Why is it that some countries that share numerous attributes nevertheless have substantially different foreign policies? And why do some countries that share few attributes nevertheless have many foreign policy features in common? Libya and Tunisia share many characteristics and inhabit a common global system and regional subsystem. But for years their foreign policies have been fundamentally different except that they both sympathize with the plight of the Palestinians. Burma and Albania have virtually nothing in common, but in the 1960s and 1970s their foreign policy orientation of extreme isolation was almost identical. The list of examples could be elaborated at length, certainly enough to raise questions about the presumed critical importance of ecological variables (or as is often the case, dichotomies) in explaining variations in the incidence of war.

Of the many people who have authored studies of the genre, J. David Singer is among the few who have directly addressed some of the questions raised above. He has argued that the contexts in which nations behave must be examined initially and their explanatory power discovered, because it will not be possible to gauge otherwise how much freedom of choice decision-makers enjoy. Singer’s strategy of choosing to focus on ecological and structural background variables appears initially to be a matter of preference rather than one of the probable weight of explanation. Yet, Singer also argues that ecological variables are fundamental and institutional, while decision-making and other approaches concentrate on more immediate concerns. His distinction follows Thucydides’ separation of the underlying and proximate causes of war. The underlying causes in Singer’s view are clearly more important.
PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF ECOLOGICAL VARIABLES

So that there may be no misunderstanding of Singer's position on the critical importance of ecological variables, it is best to let him speak for himself. In 1970 he wrote (Singer, 1970:536; cf. Singer, 1981:4–5):

While fully concurring that an "ecological" theory of war would be incomplete at best, I would urge that serious attention to these attributes and relational variables is absolutely essential. To look at behavioral events alone, or as parts of interaction sequences, is to court disaster unless they are examined along with – and in the context of – the physical, structural, and cultural setting within which they occur . . . Government decisions and behavior represent the intervening variables between a set of ecological incentives and constraints (domestic and global) on the one hand, and war or no war as the outcome of conflict, on the other; they can only be understood in that sort of context . . . Until we can get at the discrepancies (if any) between the objective incentives and constraints and the way in which they are perceived, we will be far from understanding the behavior which leads toward or away from war . . . Until certain of the key ecological variables are identified and their own explanatory power ascertained, we will never know exactly how much control remained in the hands of the decision-makers and how much of the variance is accounted for by their behavior.

Singer's general strategy is laudable, and there are numerous grounds for exploring the explanatory power of ecological variables. But until recently, few have followed all of Singer's admonitions. Only within the last several years have researchers begun to assess the comparative explanatory power of ecological and decision-making variables. This concern has already produced findings in explaining probabilistically the process of war diffusion (Siverson and Starr, 1990), with alliance membership (representing choice) having a greater impact on war participation than contiguity (representing an ecological variable). The results of another recent study suggest that ecological variables as explanations of war incidence fare rather poorly compared to approaches that employ Thucydides' notion of "proximate" causes (Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1988). Students of war are finally beginning to abandon single-variable and single-level types of analyses – twenty years after Singer pinpointed the problem. The pioneering work is as yet a mere trickle, but it is moving in an appropriate direction. However, the cultural context of war, noted by Singer as a critical research area, remains largely ignored (Singer, 1981).

THE MEANINGS OF WAR

One of the problems of quantitative studies of war is that in
ON THE STUDY OF WAR

order to obtain statistically sufficient universes of the dependent variable, they must remain fairly insensitive to different kinds of war. This is not the problem of legal definitions, or cut-off points in the number of casualties required to be included in the data set, or duration of hostilities. These are relatively technical issues, and since there have been so many wars since 1492, 1648, 1740, or 1816 (the usual starting dates for various data sets), the addition of several wars that had, let us say, 750 casualties instead of the usual 1,000 would probably not alter most findings.

The real difficulty is that through history the use of force in statecraft has had different meanings, and if this is so, the sources, causes, or correlates of war in one period cannot be easily transferred to another. Russia was at war against Turkey in 1713. Pakistan was at war against India in 1971. Both wars satisfy the usual criteria for inclusion in a data set. Similarly, two patients are “ill” when they both have fevers significantly above normal body temperatures. But one has a severe rash and acute lung congestion while the other has severe stomach pains. Both share one symptom – fever – which places them both in the “ill” category. But the other symptoms suggest entirely different causes. The “meaning” of the first illness is likely death; for the second, it is several more hours of discomfort until a medicine produces a cure. In 1713, the war arose because Russia was not fulfilling the terms of peace to which it had committed itself in a war the previous year. Turkey began the war in order to compel Russia to meet those terms. The stakes in the war were not very significant, however, and neither side believed that it was risking much in undertaking a contest of arms. In 1971, Pakistan fought for its survival (defined as East and West Pakistan). The meaning of the war for it was fundamentally different than it had been for either the Ottoman Empire or for Russia in 1713.

Statistical studies have generally avoided classifications of types of war in terms of their cultural and historical meaning. They have distinguished wars by the nature of participants, the track record of war participation by individual states, by geographical location, and the like. These have produced interesting and significant descriptive findings. But does it not seem possible that war is significantly rooted in its social and cultural context? Would it not make a difference in terms of war incidence whether decision-making elites view it as a duel, an avenue for fame, glory, and honor, an act of self-defense, the execution of a judgment, a crime, a technique of persuasion, or as an act of mutual suicide (Wright, 1942:II, 877)? Should it not make a difference in terms of war causes and frequency that Louis XIV in his youth regarded war as an alternative to the joys of the hunting season and