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978-1-107-02293-5 - Why Leaders Fight
Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam and Cali M. Ellis
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Why Leaders Fight

The history of political events is made by people. It doesn't exist without us. From wars to elections to political protests, the choices we make, our actions, how we behave, dictate events. Not all individuals have the same impact on our world and our lives, though. Some peoples' choices alter the path that history takes. In particular, national chief executives play a large role in forging the destinies of the countries they lead. *Why Leaders Fight* is about those world leaders and how their beliefs, world views, and tolerance for risk and military conflict are shaped by their life experiences before they enter office – military, family, occupation, and more. Using in-depth research on important leaders and the largest set of data on leader backgrounds ever gathered, the authors of *Why Leaders Fight* show that – within the constraints of domestic political institutions and the international system – who ends up in office plays a critical role in determining when and why countries go to war.

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Preface

History is made by people. From wars to elections to political protests, the world revolves around the way that people decide to behave. In particular, world leaders – the people that run countries big and small around the world – play a large role in shaping the destinies of their countries. This will not be surprising to anyone in the United States or any other place that features public political campaigns. Every four years in the United States, the country becomes preoccupied not just with the policy ideas of potential candidates for the presidency, but with what we can learn about how they would govern from their prior experiences. Whether it is the church Obama attended, Mitt Romney’s business experience, or the fact that there has not been a single unmarried president since the Grover Cleveland administration (and even he married in office), the American public, like democratic societies around the world, cares deeply about the personal and professional backgrounds of its political candidates.

This is a book about those world leaders and how their experiences before they enter office shape how they think about the world and the choices they end up making when in office. It presents the most complete dataset on leader experiences ever created, the Leader Experience and Attribute Descriptions (LEAD) dataset, which contains data on more than twenty leader attributes, from military service to childhood to marriage and children, for every world leader from 1875 to 2004.

We focus in particular on how the background experiences of leaders shape the choices they make about whether to lead their countries into wars and start military conflicts, or avoid conflict and focus on other issues. Our findings show that leader attributes play a significant role in shaping how countries behave in the military arena – a role similar to or even exceeding, at times, that played by the international system or domestic political institutions.

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From the perspective of academic political science, which has mostly ignored the role of leaders in international politics over the last several decades, until a recent renaissance, our findings, and the data underlying these findings, will come as a surprise. They also provide support for exploring the role of leaders in greater depth. Indeed, the results presented in this book suggest that there is a significant interaction between leaders, the constraints of the international system, and the constraints of domestic political institutions. Only by understanding how all three of these factors interact to shape how leaders and countries behave can we better grasp the complicated international political environment.

We are grateful for the support of a number of organizations and people, without which this book would not have been possible. A grant from the National Science Foundation provided crucial financial support for our research, helping us build the LEAD dataset. One or more of the authors presented initial research at a number of venues, including Bates College, Cornell University, the European Institute, Harvard University, Princeton University, Stanford University, the United States Military Academy, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Michigan, the University of Virginia, Yale University, and several political science conferences.

We benefited from the support of many research assistants at Dartmouth College, Harvard University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Pennsylvania, who helped us systematically catalog leader experiences over a several-year period. Thank you to Sam Berson, Limor Bordoley, Brandon Breslow, Shala Byers, Matthew Chiarello, Kathryn Clark, Shelli Gimelstein, Max Kepes, Sabira Khan, Amrit Malothra, Jeanne Michele Mariani, Jack Miller, Jason Murray, Hailey Palmer, Dhruv Ramadive, Tripp Rebrovick, Samuel Schwartz, James Sharp, Joana Sidarov, and Kyle Wirshba, among others.

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