17.42 // Causes and Prevention of War // MIT
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17.42 COURSE OVERVIEW

I. COURSE QUESTIONS
  > What causes war? Including: wars of the past, present, and
    future.
     > What general phenomena cause war?
     > What were the causes of specific wars? Who caused
       specific wars (e.g., World War I?
  > How can war best be prevented?
  > Why has war changed? Until 1945 most wars were interstate,
    now most wars are civil wars. Also, warfare diminished
    sharply after 1945. Why?
  > Will another world war someday occur? If so, what will be its
    causes?
  > We focus on interstate war. For civil war, see 17.582,
    "Civil War," usually taught by Prof. Roger Petersen,
    sometimes by Prof. Fotini Christia, and open to
    undergraduates with permission of the instructor.

II. SCHOLARSHIP ON THE CAUSES OF WAR IS INCOMPLETE. John
Burgess started the Columbia School of Political Science in 1881
to find a solution to the war problem. We now have some answers
but big questions remain.

III. WHAT THEORIES OF WAR ARE YOU EXPECTING TO HEAR DISCUSSED IN
     THIS CLASS?
     Please share your expectations.

IV. IDEAS OF THE COURSE: FAMILIES OF HYPOTHESES
  A. Military factors:
     > Arms cause war, arms control or disarmament can prevent
       war.
     > "First-move advantage" causes war. Examples: the 1967
       Israel-Arab war and World War I.
     > "War is more likely when states are insecure. This
       happens when conquest is easy." World War I is the
       classic example but most wars illustrate, including the
       Cold War, US vs. China 1950, Germany vs. Europe 1939, the
       Peloponnesian War, and the 2003 Iraq war.
     > Do weapons of mass destruction (WMD)--nuclear or
       biological weapons--cause peace or war? Is the possible
       future spread of WMD to more states, or even to sub-state
       organizations like terrorists or individuals, a cause of
       war?
  B. Misperception: false optimism; nationalist mythmaking;
      militarism; the stupidity of bureaucracies; myths purveyed
      by religious establishments; ingroup-outgroup dynamics and
      their role in causing misperception. Examples of
      misperceiving states: Germany before WWI and WWII; Japan
      before WWII; Athens before its expedition to Syracuse; al-
      Qaeda today; Saddam Hussein before the 1991 and 2003 Gulf
      wars; the US in Vietnam and before the second Gulf war

(2003).
  C. Religion as a cause of war and peace. Under what
      conditions do religions become aggressive and/or violent?
  D. Diplomatic/foreign policy bungles and blunders.
      Appeasement as a cause of war.
  E. Other causes of war: climate change, dictatorship,
      personality disorder, men and their testosterone.
  F. A class theme: pre-modern war was often about material
      conflicts of interest. Modern wars are often wars of
      illusions and misperceptions.

V. CLASS MISSIONS
  A. Specific course missions: explaining historical cases;
      making/testing theories of war's causes; making
      prescriptions. How can war be prevented?
  B. Broad course missions: to help students learn how to ask
      questions, devise and frame explanations and arguments,
      marshall evidence, and present arguments and evidence. How
      to distinguish the essential from the trivial in an unformed
      domain.
  C. We focus on developing your communication skills. MIT
      alumni have reported that they later found they needed more
      communication and leadership skills to realize their
      potential. We are here to help with that.

VI. NINE CASES EXPLORED: Peloponnesian War, Seven Years War,
      Wars of German Unification, World War I, World War II,
      Korea, Israel-Arab conflict, 2003 US-Iraq War, the US-al-
      Qaeda war/Clash of Civilizations.
         Other current wars will also be mentioned: India-
      Pakistan, Ukraine, ISIS, the U.S.-North Korea confrontation.

VII. GRADES AND REQUIREMENTS
  A. Background required: none. **Students with zero history
      background are welcome. No knowledge of international or
      diplomatic history is assumed** for this course. We start
      from the beginning.
  B. Requirements: see the syllabus.
  C. Discussion sections are important. Sections are small.
      Hence they won't work if you don't attend regularly and try
      to contribute to discussion. Help us make sections work!
      A section highlight: Debates on responsibility for the two
      world wars are featured in coming weeks.

VIII. SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE CAUSES OF WAR
  A. The premise of social science: like the physical world,

human affairs are governed by regularities, or "laws of motion." These laws of political/social motion can be divined by using the scientific method, and knowledge of these laws can be used to solve social problems.
B. Inferring and testing general social science theories.
   1. Observation vs. experimentation.
      > Controlled experiments can rarely be used to study international politics.
      > In observational science, "natural experiments" or "quasi-experiments" are especially useful. These are situations that occur in history that have attributes of controlled experiments. They offer strong tests of theories.
   2. Large-n (statistical) method vs. case study method.
C. Explaining specific events: Carl Hempel's "covering law" (or "deductive nomological") method.
   1. Identify valid theories.
   2. Identify the scope conditions required for their operation.
   3. Investigate whether the theory's cause and required scope conditions are present in the case to be explained. If so, the theory helps explain the case.
D. Criticisms of social science.
   1. "Accidents drive history--'butterflies cause hurricanes' in history--hence general theories cannot explain much." Annie Oakley had a chance to shoot Kaiser Wilhelm while on tour in Europe before 1914. What if she had?
   2. "Each historical event is unique; hence generalization is futile, even misleading"--a claim made by historians. Implied: politics has no laws of motion.
   3. "Controlled experiments are necessary to test theories. They are often infeasible in political science, so it can't be a science."
   4. "Data on human affairs is unreliable or lacking, hence social science has no reliable empirical basis." This is sometimes true but often the reverse is true. Compare social science with paleontology: we can interview our subjects and read their memoirs; natural scientists can't. Social scientists really can't complain on this score.
E. Controversies in social science about how to do it.
   1. Social scientists disagree on the best way to measure causal relationships between phenomena. Should scholars use large-n methods, experimental methods, or case methods?
   2. In the history field the study of international history and military history has been pushed aside by other subjects, such as the study of race, class and gender issues. Questions of race, class and gender are very important, but so are international and military history. Their marginalization harms our ability to study the causes and prevention of war.

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Spring 2018