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Commitment Problems as a Cause of War Severity

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Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts. By Alex Weisiger.
Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013. 320 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover)
(ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-5186-7)

Alex Weisiger's *Logics of War* observes that most wars last a few months and kill thousands while a few others last years and kill hundreds of thousands or even millions. Weisiger then, in a well written and well organized text, offers an explanation of why this is so: short wars are usually driven by mutual optimism or domestic politics while long wars are caused by commitment problems. Suggesting that commitment problems are a root cause of long, severe wars is not new (Powell 2006; 2012; Reiter 2009). Weisiger, however, expands on existing rationalist arguments about war termination by sorting out the effects of commitment problems caused by power shifts from those caused by a leader's perceived aggressive disposition. He also provides compelling quantitative evidence—something lacking in previous research on commitment problems. Finally, the work's theory is ably illustrated in cases on World War Two and the Paraguayan War as well as in shorter cases on the Crimean, Pacific, Iran-Iraq, Falklands, Franco-Turkish, and Anglo-Persian Wars.

The book's argument begins with the insight that in order for a war to end, the causes of that war must be removed (Blainey, 1988). Like Reiter (2009), Weisiger contends that private information held antebellum is revealed swiftly by battles provided the war is intensely fought. This means mutual optimism cannot cause long, intense conflicts as states' expectations converge quickly as battles are fought. Weisiger concedes that wars in which there is little combat in any given period—for example guerilla conflicts—reveal information slowly and thus can drag on much longer without expectations converging. Still, most informational wars should

be short, meaning long, severe wars cannot rationally be explained by mutual optimism.

Additionally, Weisiger argues regimes waging diversionary wars can only delude their publics for so long, meaning lengthy wars which are fought for rational reasons must be the result of commitment problems.

The book proceeds to neatly sort out the implications of two distinct types of commitment problems: preventive wars fought over concerns about future power shifts and wars fought because one of the belligerent states is dispositionally unable to credibly commit to peace. Weisiger argues that wars fought over power shifts are likely to be long and severe as a state's ability to demand future concessions after becoming more powerful can only be eliminated by greatly weakening that state now or significantly reducing its potential for growth. Obviously, this is difficult to do quickly and requires a great amount of devastation. Alternatively, such wars could end if the rising power is able to impose the feared future concessions on its opponent in the present, obviating the need for future conflict. Again, this is likely to take time. Dispositional commitment problems, however, should lead to even more severe and drawn out conflicts as introducing regime change as a non-negotiable war aim forces a fight to the finish. Importantly, the work also explains where such dispositional commitment problems come from. They arise when the target of a preventive war had no intention of using the coming power shift in the manner which the aggressor feared. This in turn induces the target to conceive of its opponent as irrevocably aggressive as it cannot fathom its opponent's true motives.

Another major contribution is the use of statistics to test the above arguments. Previous commitment problem research avoided large-n studies in part because no direct, quantifiable measure of commitment problems exists. Weisiger overcomes this by using shifts in relative material capabilities during the antebellum period as a proxy for fear of decline and hence

commitment problems. He also uses battle deaths in relation to states' populations and capabilities as a proxy for war severity and revealed information. Employing a series of competing risks regressions he finds that antebellum power shifts do indeed lead to longer wars, while intense fighting leads to shorter wars. Additional regressions indicate the finding on intensity is not driven by military collapse. Thus, it is the information revealed by combat which leads to converging expectations and settlement and not total defeat which leads quicker war termination. The statistics include a series of robustness checks on model forms and include controls for military strategy, regime type, relative capabilities, terrain, and population. When combined the statistics, robust case studies, and careful theorizing make a convincing case for the importance of commitment problems in explaining war duration and severity.

The book, however, is not without some weaknesses. First, while the book reasonably argues—and defends with evidence from the Falklands and Franco-Turkish Wars—that intense wars fought against the will of a state's selectorate will be relatively short as it becomes impossible over time for the regime to hide mounting costs and battlefield failures from its own people, it is less clear why a regime with a small selectorate could not continue a war which produced private goods for a majority of the selectorate even while harming the broader society. In other words, while convincing that intense wars fought for private gains or diversionary purposes will be short given a reasonably large selectorate, it is unclear that there are not some situations where the selectorate is small enough that a winning coalition could be bought off with private goods. In such cases, it should be possible to wage long, intense wars that do not benefit the broader populace. Of course, such scenarios are probably rare meaning the book is right that there are few long wars driven by domestic politics mechanisms.

Second, the book has some difficulty explaining the end of the Iran-Iraq War. While the book convincingly argues that dispositional commitment problems posed by Saddam Hussein were responsible for the Iran-Iraq War being as lengthy and severe as it was, the war ultimately ended in a negotiated settlement without Saddam being removed from power. While Weisiger reasonably contends the Iranians concluded the additional fighting required to remove Saddam would be too costly, why it took them so long to realize this is unclear. Also, this explanation means commitment problems provide limited leverage in explaining the war's termination. How common such negotiated endings are in wars driven by commitment problems is unknown and the puzzle presented by it raises important questions for future research. It does not, however, take away from the book's overall contribution to the war duration and rationalist literatures nor weaken the argument that commitment problems are causal of long, severe wars.

In sum, the work is a compelling explanation of war severity and especially in relation to war duration. It is characterized by clear argumentation and provides ample quantitative and qualitative evidence. It will be of interest to students of war generally and specifically to those interested in rationalist explanations or in the linkages between war initiation and termination.

References

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