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Review of Dan Reiter's "How Wars End"

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Dan Reiter's *How Wars End* makes significant contributions to the study of war termination. It highlights the role commitment problems play in extending the length and potentially the severity of wars. Reiter builds on the rationalist bargaining framework of war most famously presented by James Fearon, who argues that private information, commitment problems, and indivisibility are the three rational causes of war.¹ If the bargaining framework of war is correct—and it has become the dominant approach for rationalist international relations scholars—then it should be able to explain not only war initiation but also how wars are fought and why they end. Reiter shows that the revelation of private information, the portion of the bargaining framework most explored by scholars so far, alone cannot explain why and when many wars end. His case studies show not only that commitment problems are a significant factor in the decisions of leaders regarding war termination, but also that states' behavior during wars is consistent with the bargaining framework—provided both revealed information and commitment problems are considered. *How Wars End* is arguably one of the most lucid and helpful books on war termination using the bargaining framework currently available.

The book's great strength is that it blends the informational and commitment problem aspects of the bargaining framework together to explain war termination rather than simply focusing on the role of commitment problems. The informational portion of the bargaining framework, of course, argues that states will strike bargains to end wars or at least make serious attempts to do so after information that was private or unknowable antebellum, such as the relative balance of forces, is known. This is because wars should reveal information about the relative balance of forces, the resolve of the warring states, and the prospects of third party intervention thereby allowing overlapping bargaining ranges to form and be discovered. Yet, much of the newer rationalist literature has begun to focus on commitment problems as a cause of war as it has become clear that the informational approach is insufficient by itself. However, too little of the literature tries to explain how private information and commitment problems work together and instead most works focus on one to the exclusion of the other. In his focus on commitment problems, Reiter emphasizes their role, alongside but not instead of, the widely accepted importance of information.

Specifically, Reiter argues battles should reveal the relative balance of forces fairly quickly. Many wars, however, continue long after the balance of forces seems quite clear, thus the informational portion of the bargaining framework is insufficient by itself. Reiter deftly shows not just that states often fail to make peace after a great deal of information has been revealed, but that many times they do not even change their peace offers. This is crucial as the informational hypothesis simply suggests states take revealed information into account and adjust their bargaining positions accordingly. It does not claim that a bargaining space will always open up because as Donald Wittman argues, one side may up its demands by

¹ James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations of War," *International Organization* 49:3 (Summer 1995): 379-414.

more than the other side lowers its own demands.² Reiter's care in showing that states do not alter their demands and sometimes do not even make peace offers of any sort neatly avoids this potential pitfall. For example, during the U.S. Civil War neither the Union nor the Confederacy advanced peace offers after pivotal battles such as Gettysburg. Reiter asserts this is not because leaders are unaware of or irrationally ignoring revealed information, but rather they continue to fight in hopes of overcoming commitment problems. States often pursue absolute victory (annexation, regime change, or theoretically genocide) in order solve commitment problems and thus will not accept lesser offers as long as they believe they can achieve absolute victory at a reasonable cost.

As a whole, the book provides more evidence that states do generally behave during wars as the bargaining framework would expect. This is vital if we are to have any confidence that such a framework can explain more explored topics such as war initiation. Indeed, Reiter is not alone in applying bargaining to areas outside of war initiation. For example, the bargaining framework may help explain third party intervention in ongoing wars. Like Reiter's work, my own research has suggested that surprising battlefield results are good places to look for revealed information and that difficulties created by commitment problems can lead to conflict—in this case between an initial belligerent and a third party. All of this suggests that if the bargaining framework can help us understand a variety of concepts such as war initiation, intervention, and war termination, it should be possible to use it as a more general starting point to explore broader concepts. As the bargaining approach was in part borrowed from economics, this unification of explanations is already underway. At a minimum it should allow conflict scholars to explore inter- and intrastate wars with the same tools. It potentially offers a way forward for more general theorizing in international relations and growing connections between the various subfields of political science.

The book's commitment problem hypothesis is tested against domestic politics explanations as well as against the informational approach. Studies of war termination often incorporate democratic war-weariness and gambling for resurrection in mixed regimes as explanations of war duration. In his cases, especially that of Finland, Reiter finds no support for the notion that democratic publics become weary of war more quickly than publics in other regime types. Certainly, his cases are sufficient to lead one to question the widely-held belief about democratic war-weariness, though whether these cases are simply outliers or part of a broader trend is less clear given the lack of statistical analysis. With regards to the gambling for resurrection hypothesis—the belief that leaders in mixed regimes will take gambles which risk severe defeat in order to avoid modest defeats because any defeat will result in severe punishment for the leadership—Reiter's cases are potentially more telling. He tackles cases in which the gambling for resurrection hypothesis should work very well, including the case which Hein Goemans used to build his

² Donald Wittman, "How War Ends: A Rational Model Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 23:4 (December 1979): 741-61.

theory—that of Germany in the First World War.³ Thus, in some sense they are so-called critical cases. In the German case, he offers solid evidence that the German leadership failed to negotiate for peace in 1917 not because of domestic concerns, but because of commitment problems, particularly that without annexing Belgium the threat posed by Britain and France was too severe for German leaders to accept. He offers similar evidence that the Japanese leadership during the Second World War continued to favor war out of concerns about commitment problems—specifically that the United States could not credibly commit to not destroy the Japanese polity and remove the emperor—and not due to worries about domestic upheaval. The concerns that the leadership did have about domestic opinion inclined them to end the war rather than prolong it. The book, however, goes further and argues that the Japanese never engaged in strategies which could be seen as gambling for resurrection.

While Reiter makes a compelling argument that from a regime standpoint kamikaze attacks were an effective strategy and also low risk, his failure to discuss the Leyte campaign as a possible gamble for resurrection is troubling. The Japanese intentionally sacrificed several aircraft carriers, essentially offering them as bait to lure the main American naval force away from Leyte Gulf, so that other Japanese forces could attack the American landing vessels and troops ashore without serious opposition. Failure risked essentially the elimination of the Japanese fleet as a serious factor in the war. This is in fact what happened; however, if the plan had worked, it would have been a serious setback for the United States. Whether it would have created an opening for the Japanese to negotiate something less than unconditional surrender is less clear, but it would have at least increased the odds that they could have obtained more favorable terms. Certainly the campaign seems like the exact sort of high risk, high reward action that the gambling for resurrection hypothesis would predict. Even if it could be shown that the Japanese engaged in the Leyte campaign for reasons other than those suggested by the gambling for resurrection hypothesis, any argument claiming they did not gamble for resurrection at least has to consider the Leyte campaign. It seems unlikely that a final verdict on whether mixed regimes gamble for resurrection has been reached.

Outside of this small concern about the book's domestic politics arguments, there are some weaknesses that relate directly to the bargaining framework as well. Specifically, the very nature of selecting cases that show the importance of commitment problems, results in cases that underplay the role of information in war termination. It would be interesting to know if shorter wars or wars where neither side seriously considered pursuing absolute aims, such as the First Gulf War or the Seven Weeks War, are better explained by revealed information than by commitment problems, or if the commitment problems were simply quickly resolved in such wars. While Reiter's cases make it clear that both revealed information and commitment problems are vital factors in war termination, what is lacking is a sense of the proportions of the overall population of wars in which commitment problems are the more important factor and in which informational uncertainties are more

³ Hein Goemans, *War and Punishment: the Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

important. Another implication of Reiter's argument is that commitment problems should make wars last longer unless one side can win an absolute victory very quickly or realize that such a victory is impossible. While the cases support this notion, some statistical work showing whether longer wars are associated with commitment problems would be more compelling.

Reiter, however, reaches his conclusions using only case studies. Objectively recording events within wars which reveal information is challenging and becomes more so if those events must be reduced to numbers. Specifically, Reiter argues that creating a statistical database is very difficult given uncertainties such as how often leaders incorporate new information, how well they understood what a battle meant at the time, whether different actors see the same information the same way, a lack of consistent data across wars and even within wars, and the lack of clear events in guerilla and even some attritional wars. To these I would add the pitfall of hindsight which may make an event look more or less important to scholars than it did to contemporaries. Reiter argues these challenges simply cannot be overcome and thus relies on cases. Decisions about what should be seen as an event, what time period should be used to record events (days, weeks, or months for example) and so on can become arbitrary and if the idea is to show how leaders respond to events, process tracing may well be preferable. While such an approach is useful, and Reiter's cases are compelling, the belief that coding and statistical work are impossible to undertake in relation to commitment problems and revealed information is too strong. Certainly, these tasks would be very difficult and subject to bias and other pitfalls. The potential benefits, however, would make the effort worthwhile. Such a dataset would allow scholars to make at least limited inferences about the broader population of wars— inferences that may be difficult to draw solely from case studies. Reiter is likely correct that such statistical work would never be compelling on its own and would always have to be paired with cases that engaged in process tracing, but this does not mean the effort would be in vain.

More problematic is that Reiter underplays some ways in which information can play a role in war termination. While battles should reveal the current relative balance of forces fairly quickly, this may not answer all the questions about how a war will proceed. For example, if there is significant uncertainty about the belligerents' relative resolve, simply knowing the balance of forces is not enough to create a bargaining space. This is because questions about how much pain each side is willing to endure may remain unanswered well after it is known what the results of most battles will be. For example, in the Vietnam War, while there likely were commitment problems in play, questions about the relative resolve of the United States and North Vietnamese governments were critical as well. These questions were not answered as quickly as questions about the relative balance of forces and each side's ability to inflict pain on the other. Similarly, informational questions about whether an attrition strategy will succeed may take a while to be answered, not only because it may not be obvious even after the first battles which side has the better industrial base, but also because there may be uncertainty about whether the other side's maneuver strategy will prevail first. This sort of uncertainty is directly applicable to Reiter's case on German decision-making in 1917 and 1918. Reiter shows that despite years of deadlocked battles, the Germans and Western powers could not reach a peace agreement due to commitment

problems. However, Reiter downplays a major piece of uncertainty which existed in late 1917 and early 1918: whether or not the German Spring Offensive, using new tactics and troops freed from the Eastern Front by the Russian surrender, would be able to overwhelm the British and French before the American forces would be available in large numbers. Thus, while the battles of 1914 through 1917 made it clear a replay of those battles would result in continued stalemate, the battles in early 1918 were not to be a replay as the relative balance of forces on the Western Front had changed and the tactics used would be different. Thus, though information had been revealed, significant uncertainty remained. Indeed the surrender of Russia, the creation of new tactics, and the entrance of the United States in the war had created new elements of uncertainty. Thus, while battles and other elements of wars reveal much information, significant uncertainty may remain in no small part because new uncertainty may be created. These sorts of informational questions have been seriously understudied in general and their omission is hardly specific to Reiter's work.

On the whole, however, these are minor problems. The first problem is more of a suggestion for future research, and the second suggests that the way we think about the revelation of private information needs to be expanded rather than suggesting that Reiter is wrong about the importance of commitment problems. The work is a valuable contribution to the conflict literature as a whole and war termination specifically. It is very readable—something not always true for important research in the rational choice vein. Most importantly, this clarity does not come at the price of sacrificed detail or nuance. Thus, the book makes a significant contribution to the literature upon which others can and should build and expand. I suspect it will be widely read and have a significant impact on conflict research in the years to come.