

## WHY NATIONS GO TO WAR

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This 11<sup>th</sup> edition of *Why nations go to war* analyses ten case studies covering major international wars. The particular focus of each of the case studies turns upon the personalities of political and military leaders. Stoessinger emphasises that people go to war or precipitate wars. War is not some faceless entity that merely unfolds in some inexplicable way. In a critical stance towards attempts to explain war, the author holds that personalities often do not receive their due recognition in publications on war. Decisions by leaders to go to war or leadership decisions that result in warlike acts causing societies or vulnerable sections of society to suffer, receive attention in this updated edition of *Why nations go to war*. It is in the particular focus on people (the leaders who decide to go to war) where Stoessinger seeks for "... common truths about war in our time".

The selected case studies cover wars that unfolded over almost a century. The narratives commence with World War I and conclude with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Events holding the risk of war are covered, and in particular the bellicosity of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Iran and North Korea, as well as complex emergencies in Africa. Responses to the events of 11 September 2001 receive a thorough update, concluding with the initiatives of the new US President, Barak Obama. In the same vein, information on Korea, India and Pakistan, the Middle East, the Balkans and Africa are updated to keep in step with rapid developments of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The general focus on personalities and war presents a snapshot of prominent political and military individuals who decided to go to war, or who deeply influenced such decisions before and during the war. The discussions cover both those who took the offensive, as well as those leaders who responded in defence. This edition also elevates the roles of people who stand up against leaders

who do not have the people's best interest at heart and who make war on the people or drag them into unwinnable wars. Decisions to go to war do not always point to a love of war or to leaders being warmongers. A lack of pragmatism and failure to give peace a chance often becomes visible even within so-called "just wars".

As for the First World War (1914–1918), the leaders of Germany, Russia, Serbia and Austria-Hungary were perhaps not the single-minded warmongers as often assumed. Aloofness, and at times a predisposition towards peace, rather than war, is found amongst some of the leaders, but perhaps less so amongst those who advised them or dealt with the diplomatic activities. In this regard, communications between the German Kaiser Wilhelm and his cousin, Czar Nicholas II of Russia, show the extent of attempts to avoid or perhaps contain the war between Serbia and Austria, even though these efforts were ultimately used by the Russian leadership to gain an advantage over the Germans. In a harsh criticism of the political leadership of the time (Germany, Russia, Serbia and Austria in particular), Stoessinger depicts such political leaders as either arrogant, stupid, careless or weak and preoccupied with their egos and ultimately shirking their responsibilities not to have their people dragged into a catastrophe such as World War I. The result was the killing fields of Europe where almost a generation of Europe's young men were annihilated as a result of weak and often careless decisions by leaders.

The chapter on Hitler covers Operation Barbarossa (1941) and the notion that Hitler's view of the German nation as expendable and a single-minded desire to destroy Russia and not to conquer it, led to his defeat. While Hitler sought the energy and rationale for success of his Russian campaign in his perception of the inferiority of the Russians, Stalin somehow managed to infuse a commitment to Mother Russia, not communism, into the Russian soldier and Russian society at large. Hitler failed to appeal convincingly to the German inner commitment to Mother Germany, could not learn from mistakes and defeats and perhaps also never held the German people in high esteem. His arrogance and ego blinded him to the realities of an unwinnable war. In addition to being the aggressor, Hitler lost the war. In a sense, Germany's defeat stemmed from Hitler's madness that conquered his being and led to the suffering of the German nation. For Stalin, his inner madness never got the upper hand, as in the case of Hitler. Irrespective of this latter distinction, both the German as well as the Russian people suffered terribly under the decisions by two political leaders to go to war. The defeat and death of Hitler stopped the German suffering, but not so for Russian society who had to live under Stalin's rule for an extended post-war period. A remark on Russian treachery by the Polish president during a 2009 Polish-Russian commemoration of the outbreak of World War 2 showed that the Russian and German invasions of Poland have not yet been forgotten, with the ghosts of Stalin and Hitler lingering on in the minds of those who were trampled upon.

The reasons for the outbreak of the Korean War (June 1950) remain speculative, but the roles of the political and military leadership are rather clear. Although the North Korean leadership decided to go to war, the American leadership used the United Nations to expand the war whilst General MacArthur is

blamed for provoking the Chinese intervention. North Korean aggression, followed by an aggressive UN-led response, unfolded as a war with no winners. The UN unfortunately became party to the war, thus compromising its role as a neutral arbiter. Political leaders, each with his own perceptions, fears and hopes drove the war until exhaustion wiped out any illusion of victory held by the leadership.

Stoessinger concludes the chapter on Korea with a discussion on North Korea's recent brinkmanship through its nuclear programme to force concessions from the international community. Inherently, the last section alludes to US and United Nations initiatives for a diplomatic rather than a military solution to a very dangerous game playing out in the world's most tense and militarised region, while the North Korean leadership's willingness to seek confrontation points the other way. The two Koreas thus remain in the shadow of war with parties on both sides of the divide having access to nuclear weapons – a matter that calls for even more pragmatic leadership and the notion to give peace a chance. Aggressive leadership responses, such as in 1950, could well raise the nuclear spectre.

The section on the war in Vietnam depicts how five consecutive American presidents dragged the US down the abyss of war. Truman missed Asian realities in the Vietnamese theatre as Korea, Europe and the emergent Cold War blocks cemented his perceptions. Eisenhower did not learn from the defeat of France by the Viet Minh, as well as the cool relations between Ho Chi Minh and the Chinese. Stoessinger avers that Ho Chi Minh's outlook centred on the interests of Vietnam, not on communism and Chinese sympathies. Kennedy commenced direct US involvement that sowed the seeds to make Vietnam a military rather than a politico-diplomatic case. Subsequently the militarisation and Vietnamisation along military lines took shape. Low military casualties only served to strengthen the American view of military victory, whilst the Vietnam problem required a political rather than military solution.

Johnson and his advisors escalated the military involvement and turned Vietnam into a major American war and an existential threat to the North Vietnamese political leaders. The escalation left political leaders in a position where military contributions to facilitate political solutions dwindled for both the American as well as the Vietnamese leadership. Western contempt for Vietnamese leadership made political solutions even more opaque. Johnson's legacy left Nixon with the burden of a major military extraction without losing face. Eventually the politics of detente between the USA, China and the former Soviet Union served to wind down the war in Vietnam. In effect, the Vietnam War shows a pattern of errors by consecutive American leaders, but also a willingness by the North Vietnamese leadership to sacrifice their own people for political objectives. This latter observation serves as a mere side note as leaders in Southeast Asia quickly turned and made war on each other once the American soldiers had departed by 1973. As the emotions faded, leading American figures of the time gradually acknowledged that they got it wrong.

In Yugoslavia, Tito's leadership held together a deeply fractured society. Upon his death at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new leaders accentuated the

differences in society along ethnic, religious and nationalist lines with Serbs under the leadership of Milosevic featuring most prominently. When bloodless coercion did not work, parties employed violence. Serbs like Milosevic, Karadzic and Mladic drove the Serbian war effort against “the rest”. Here, once again, the aggressor eventually lost, but not before wreaking havoc upon defenceless sections of the former Yugoslavian society. Foreign military and multinational diplomatic initiatives slowly turned the tide of violence. An opposing alliance leadership held together by an international consensus and framed by growing humanitarian and legal principles underpinned an international response. The international initiatives employed military coercion alongside a renewed international stance against humanitarian transgressions to stop the war and bring individual leaders and soldiers to justice.

When domestic as well as international opinion turned against the Serb leadership with their predilection towards war, the leaders’ standing crumbled and proponents of international humanitarian law reached out and held individual leaders accountable for war crimes. By 2000, Serbian leaders faced an international tribunal to bring about some perception of “peace with justice” to the Balkans. It remained, however, a case of leaders deciding on and conducting a war primarily against innocent people for no reason other than who they were or to whom they prayed. Once again, however, the aggressors lost and were eventually exposed by international law as nothing more than political and military thugs.

The chapter on India and Pakistan covers a narrative of savage wars between Hindu and Moslem since 1948. West Pakistan, East Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kashmir and India are earlier and current political entities invoking emotional terms that frame war in South Asia. Leaders, each steeped in his or her culture and religion decided upon or allowed violence to become the ultimate arbiter and to escalate with the idea of destroying the opponent. Much of the contest was (and remains) some personal competition between Indian and Pakistani leaders. In a sense, the earlier fact of India having a woman as president opposing a Muslim male president in West Pakistan only served to deepen the rift. Territory, culture, religion, partition, and leaders living worlds apart in their outlooks merged with fundamentalist sub-state movements to create conditions that required cool heads and not the confrontational extremities displayed by leadership.

The societal, national and regional issues that Pakistan, India and the now Bangladesh had to resolve were complex and divisive. For it to be repeated and reinforced in the leadership fuels the Pakistan-India confrontation and the regular roads to war. The nuclear option is available to both countries and the strategic culture of the leadership to invoke war heightens the risk of future wars. One has to note, however, that in response to the recent Indian 9/11 (terrorists operating from Pakistani soil attacking prominent targets in Mumbai) India’s leadership showed laudable constraint. The Indian restraint not to invoke the military solution is probably informed by its democratic culture – something, according to Stoessinger, that Pakistani leaders still have to master.

Leadership decisions in the Middle East initially played out as a zero-sum game of right clashing with wrong and each “side” accumulating its own body of adherents. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century dawned, the reigning view of right versus wrong shifted to that of Israeli right(s) clashing with Arab right(s). Arab and Israeli leadership nonetheless played their role to regularly take nations to war as they held deep zero-sum views that made war attractive. War became a productive option for the Israeli leadership, (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973) but politically the Arabs (particularly the Palestinians) gained increasing moral ground as Arab leaders realised after five attempts that going to war did not render the desired political outcomes. Lebanon and the Palestinians blunted the successful Israeli war option. Unconventional Palestinian uprisings and armed insurgent groups in Lebanon in particular offset the traditional Israeli military advantage and forced the Jewish leadership to compete politically as international sentiments turned to a roadmap for peace rather than siding with warring parties. Stoessinger suggests that coalition-building with moderates appears to be a better political answer for war, which renders less and less political benefit. For long, the death and destruction of war (within the bigger picture of political solutions) perhaps played its role, but political leaders often got it wrong by underestimating the opposition or misperceiving the opposing leadership. For contemporary leaders in the region, however, an emphasis on war to foster a political solution is faltering.

Saddam Hussein (depicted as a war lover) indulged in several wars against his neighbours and his fellow citizens only to find that he (and also Iraq) gained little from war fighting over a period of almost three decades. Saddam’s experiment in war ended with him being prosecuted and executed by his own people (with some American help) – a stark reminder once again of the observation that aggressors who start wars rarely emerge as victors. Moslem against Moslem in the war between Iraq and Iran, and later between Iraq and Kuwait, and Moslem against the infidel in Saddam against the UN- and US-led coalitions (1991 and 2003) – neither war brought victory. Of interest is that, in the case of Iraq and Kuwait, an opportunity arose to prevent war, but Hussein pushed on. In the case of the US-led coalition in 2003, Saddam made reasonable concessions, but the coalition leadership seemed unwilling to mark time and consider Hussein’s concessions. As in the case of World War 1, those bent on and in the momentum of war as a solution rarely seem to back down and subsequently drag others into unwanted wars.

In the last section, “New wars for a new century”, Stoessinger attends to the legacies of Osama Bin Laden and George W Bush through the lenses of religious fanatics, pragmatists and crusaders. While it seems that the religious fanatic’s embracement of war is steeped in a culture hardly open for change, the pragmatist-crusader personality does shift and is more malleable than the fanatic. In this regard, Stoessinger observes several political leaders. The author singles out George W Bush of the USA to demonstrate the shift from pragmatist to crusader as his crusade against the axis of evil, the eventual attack upon Iraq, and the nuclear spats with Iran and North Korea overtook his calculated response to 9/11. Curiously enough, North Korea and Iran continue to show real evidence of weapons of mass destruction, while Iraq appears clean and thus portrays a serious leadership error in judgement

that yanked several nations into war in 2003. In spite of significant international opposition, no UN resolution and what now appears as reasonable offers from Saddam Hussein to allow inspections followed. Bush nonetheless went to war against Iraq. Although the US president declared victory on 1 May 2003, the Second Gulf War (together with Afghanistan) is fast assuming the contours of another unpopular war for the US and its allies.

The theoretical stance remains that intensive diplomacy backed by force – but short of war – could well have forced Hussein to back down and surrender for he was much more interested in his own survival than that of Iraqi society. The 2003 invasion was neither a war of choice and not of necessity nor an example of how mature and pragmatic leaders should deal with dictators and war lovers. This dilemma seeped into the Afghan theatre as well where the solution remains embedded in troop surges (not unlike Vietnam) while Stoessinger avers that escape from the dilemma most probably resides in Afghan societal culture of a “loya jirga” where a gathering of esteemed leaders representing the will of the Afghan people is employed to select a national leader.

In his concluding chapter, Stoessinger outlines his findings on wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Firstly, those nations (or leaders) who begin a war hardly ever emerge as winners. Secondly, personalities of leaders are of crucial importance and say much of decisions to invoke war as a policy option. Thirdly, misperception appears to play a central or even pivotal role in the outbreak of wars. Such misperceptions of leaders remain tied to personalities in four different ways that Stoessinger links to the respective case studies: expectations of quick campaigns that lead to victory, holding a distorted view of the adversary, believing the adversary is bound to attack first, and misperceiving (overestimating) the real power of the adversary.

Stoessinger raises the matter of the Rwandan and Darfurian massacres or genocides and their driving forces of race and greed. The point made is that similar to “official wars”, people are massacred even in the absence of war while the world looks on, with vast refugee populations being created where the individual is perhaps even worse off than those who died. Such atrocities compel Stoessinger to call upon leadership and societies to stand up against evil in order for good to triumph – rather than for governments to declare war summarily and to deploy their militaries. Settings that suit the Saddam Husseins, Bin Ladens and Taliban leaders come to fruition when these leaders exploit the fertile conditions to mobilise societies for the wrong or dubious reasons. When their opponents also get it wrong, the path leads to war, and leaders should avoid this.

In summary, Stoessinger has studied the war-people nexus over an extended period of time and presents a longitudinal view of this particular relationship. Although it appears that he employs the luxury of hindsight, one must note that Stoessinger is not speculative, but grounds his “hindsight” in fact, as well as his thesis that leaders should exploit all opportunities to avoid war as it is people, leaders in particular, who err and stumble into the destructive wars covered in the publication. He thus uncovers some truths by focussing on leaders who so often love war, wrongly decide that war is the solution, or bungle the opportunity to

prevent war. As such, one may conclude that leaders are often wrong and Stoessinger highlights this. Finally, the rising practice of holding such leaders accountable in international courts of law portrays a much-needed intervention in an era when dubious characters parading as leaders seem to regularly step into the realm of politics and armed violence.

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