

*The Power of Criticism:
Historical Methodology in Geoffrey Blainey's
The Causes of War*

Blainey, Geoffrey, The Causes of War,
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Geoffrey Blainey's *The Causes of War* is a well-written and engaging work that – even if it at times too flowery, too well-written, and *too* engaging – leads its readers along a well-structured path to an understanding of what Blainey believes to be the reasons states ultimately choose armed conflict as a means of solving disagreements, disputes, and conflicts. Blainey's work may be evaluated and criticized both in terms of its theoretical conclusions and framework and also in terms of its historical methodology; for the purposes of this paper I will restrict myself to comments on the latter. Blainey, an Australian economic historian and noted Australian author, uses historical examples in two separate ways: first, to attack and discredit established theories of the causes of war, and second to help build up his own somewhat suspect theoretical framework for understanding what he thinks those causes might be. This historical methodology succeeds admirably in some ways, and proves particularly useful in disproving existent theories of the causes of war, but fails in others, and is particularly useless in helping Blainey prove his own theory of how wars are caused.

Blainey's use of historical examples to discredit and disprove existent theories of war is effective and striking. His first chapters present many different theories of the causes of war, some time-worn and tarnished, some apocryphal and unlikely, and some seemingly compelling and logical. One by one, Blainey takes on these theories and – through the judicious use of historical example – demonstrates their weaknesses. War-weariness as a cause of peace, for example, falls quickly before Blainey's conflicting examples of periods when war-weariness led to peace and when the same sort of war-weariness led to greater war; the theory that economic depression leads to war (the "juvenile delinquent" model) similarly perishes in the face of evidence that some wars begin just at that time when nations and national economies are flush – though indeed the Second World War is one good example of exactly the opposite; the

suggestion that peace is maintained by moderate treaties and subverted when harsh terms are levied on the defeated (as at Versailles) is contemptuously assailed by a host of examples of how moderate treaties led only to renewed and greater conflict, while occasionally harsh treaties leave nations in exactly the sort of peaceful circumstances we might wish to find around the world. Again and again in this fashion Blainey presents a theory of the causes of war, explains its origins, and then almost casually rips it to shreds by pinpointing historical cases in which the theory has applied and then pinpointing other cases in which the exact opposite has taken place.

Blainey seems to take positive delight in destroying some theories – especially those that are “common knowledge” and those that seem (in Blainey’s opinion) to view the world through rose-colored glasses. Although most people, Blainey notes, genuinely *like* the theory that wars break out in the face of an imbalance of power, for instance, history has thus shown – as he points out by dredging up numerous specific, real historical examples – that war actually tends to break out exactly when there is a perceived balance of power. Blainey takes particular delight in attacking the Manchester Creed, which he seems to regard as the creed of naïve and foolish optimists. “Saluting that long procession which seemed to be marching steadily towards a shrine of international peace,” he writes, “the men of Manchester saw the lights of the torch-bearers but failed to see that behind marched a phalanx of sword bearers.” (32)

Blainey’s use of history to explain and bolster his own theories of the causes of war is far less convincing or impressive. Even though he expresses the laudable goal of using historical data to reach “wider conclusions,” Blainey engages in no clear, systematic approach in setting up a theoretical framework. The weakness of his methodology in this regard is related exactly to the strength of his methodology in attacking other theories: the problem is that while plucking obscure examples from history can easily disprove stated theories, in order for those historical

examples to provide effective support for a new theory it must be shown that they are somehow representative of all other historical examples. Because Blainey approaches his topic unsystematically, provides few clear definitions of what he means by such basic concepts as “war” and “major power,” and makes no effort to create a comprehensive data set, he is completely unable to demonstrate that his historical examples are representative of history as a whole. Blainey, in essence, sounds more like a military historian sitting around with a bunch of other military historians having a bull session than like a social scientist objectively weighing *comprehensive* empirical data against proposed theories.

At times, such as when he discusses the notion of the “death watch,” Blainey does make an effort to approach his topic in a scientific manner. Even such analyses, however, are usually flawed – in this case Blainey gives some interesting statistical data about what percentage of wars broke out when kings died, but fails entirely to consider data on what percentage of king deaths brought on wars. More importantly, Blainey’s unscientific, non-rigorous, “catch-as-catch-can” model enables him to leave out a number of important cases. Blainey thus spends far less time on World War II in Europe than perhaps he should have; for instance, when writing about launching wars in winter, he leaves out the invasion of the USSR by Germany and the Winter War launched by the USSR against Finland, both of which were momentous campaigns that were critically affected by considerations of winter.

Perhaps the best example of how Blainey misuses historical data comes in his chapter on “A Calendar of War.” In this chapter, Blainey suggests that wars follow important nationalist holidays. “That bullish confidence [to wage war],” he explains, “could be aided not only by seasonal conditions and the rising tide of prosperity. It could apparently be aided also by national celebrations and the confidence they reflected and kindled.” (104) Blainey’s

methodology in “proving” this point, however, is completely unscientific; his case-study selection actually *rests upon his dependent variable*, the outbreak of war. In other words, Blainey looks at wars, and then *looks back in history* to determine whether there were national festivals in each warring nations’ past. This methodology is reminiscent of Blainey’s looking at wars and then looking back to see whether important kings had died recently; both analyses are flawed in the same way. The problem in this instance is that there are *always* national festivals at some point in a nation’s history, and so Blainey’s argument essentially means nothing. Almost by definition Blainey should find that every major war is preceded (in a period from one to ten years) by an important national festival; to find otherwise when looking at nation-states would be bizarre. From this data, given that he selects his cases based upon whether a war broke out, he cannot say that wars are caused by national festivals – unless and until he looks at *all* cases of national festivals and determines what percentage of them lead to war.

Blainey’s methodology presents several difficult questions: first, is *The Causes of War* only useful as a negative work? If it is true that Blainey’s use of historical examples is good only in the cases of tearing down accepted theories, should we effectively rip out all of the pages after the second chapter? Why didn’t Blainey himself recognize the weakness of the theories he was building and work to “steal the thunder” of critics? Is it legitimate to use selected historical cases to attempt to state general theories? Do we need clear, set definitions of “war” and “major powers” and exhaustive archives of military data before attempting to come to an understanding of how wars come about? Can our problems with this work be solved by testing Blainey’s theories against a large dataset, such as that collected in the Correlates of War (COW) project? Despite these questions, Blainey’s book remains an interesting and engaging read, and is certainly a valuable work for those studying the causes of war to understand and question.