17.42 // Causes and Prevention of War // MIT //
Stephen Van Evera,

COURSE OVERVIEW

I. COURSE QUESTIONS
  -- What causes war? Including: wars of the past, present, and future.
  -- How can war best be prevented?
  -- We focus on interstate war. If there were better sources on civil war
     we would cover it in more depth, but historical evidence on civil wars
     is often thin. (Also, Prof. Roger Petersen covers the subject well in
     his course 17.582, "Civil War," which is open to undergraduates with
     permission of the instructor.) Likewise on religion and war: today's
     events show its importance but scholars have studied it poorly so our
     cases give it less attention than it deserves.

II. EXISTING LITERATURE LEAVES THE WAR MYSTERY ONLY PARTLY SOLVED

III. IDEAS OF THE COURSE: FAMILIES OF HYPOTHESES
  A. Military factors:
      > Arms as war cause and disarmament as solution to war.
      > "First-move advantage" and the "security dilemma" as war causes.
        Examples of first-move advantage: the 1967 Israel-Arab war and World
        War I. Example of security dilemma wars: World War I is the classic
        case but most wars somehow illustrate.
      > Are weapons of mass destruction (WMD)--nuclear or biological
        weapons--a cause or preventive of 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 Gulf wars; the US in Vietnam
      and before the second Gulf war (2003).
  C. Diplomatic/foreign policy bungles and blunders. Appeasement as a
      cause of war.
  D. Other causes of war: climate change, dictatorship, personality
      disorder, men.
  E. A class theme: pre-modern war was about hard material conflicts of
      interest. Modern wars are largely wars of illusions and
      misperceptions. But you are free to conclude otherwise.

IV. 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,
      how to devise and frame explanations and arguments, how to marshall
      and present evidence. How to distinguish the trivial from the
      essential. How to think.
  C. We focus on developing your communication skills because **you will need
      communication skills to succeed in the real world.** MIT alumni have
      reported that they later found they needed more communication and
      leadership skills to rise to the top in life. We are here to help
      with that.
  D. Feel free to consult 17.42 staff about non-17.42 stuff like planning
      your career. We will offer what wisdom we can.
  E.

V. 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.

VI. GRADES AND REQUIREMENTS
   A. Background required: none. **Students with zero history background are
       welcome. Absolutely no background 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.

VII. SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE CAUSES OF WAR
   A. Testing social science theories.
       1. Observation vs. experimentation.
       2. Large-n (statistical) method vs. case study method.
   B. Criticisms of social science.
       1. "Accidents drive history--'butterflies cause hurricanes' in
           history--hence general theories cannot explain much." When Annie
           Oakley was on tour in Europe before 1914 she had a shot at Kaiser
           Wilhelm. What if....?
       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. "Human will defeats our effort to generalize about human conduct.
           Once we know what people will do, they'll change their minds."
           But will they?
       4. "Social data is bad, hence social science has no reliable
           empirical basis." This is sometimes true but often not. Compare
           social science with paleontology: we can interview our subjects
           and read their memoirs; physical scientists can't. So let's stop
           whining.
   C. Controversies in social science about how to do it.
       1. Social scientists waste much energy debating what is the best way
           to measure the association between measures of variables. Some
           claim that large-n methods are inherently stronger than case
           methods. This claim is false. Neither method is inherently
           stronger. Rather, the stronger method is the one that suits the
           data available. This varies with the subject being studied.
       2. In the history field the study of international history and
           military history is being destroyed and replaced by a hegemonic
           study of race, class and gender issues. Questions of race, class
           and gender are very important, but so are international and
           military history! Its demise is harming our ability to study the
           causes and prevention of war.

17.42 Causes and Prevention of War
Spring 2009