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Critical Dialogue Series: “Why War?” Two Answers to Einstein and Freud’s 1932 Question


In July 1932, Albert Einstein wrote to Sigmund Freud, in response to a proposal by the League of Nations and its International Institute of Intellectual Co-Operation for a “frank exchange of views on any problem that I might select.” In the letter, Einstein posed this “matter of life and death for civilization” question to Freud: “Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?” Confessing that his own thought “affords no insight into the dark places of human will and feeling,” he sought to engage “the light of your far-reaching knowledge.” In his response, Freud elaborated his theory of the death or destructive instincts and their displacement and restriction by “civilizing” processes. The Einstein-Freud exchange was published by the League of Nations in several languages in 1933. The definitive English translation, with the title “Why War?” can be found in Freud (1953–74). Einstein’s question is even more urgent in today’s world of nuclear and biological weapons. The two books here reviewed, by Jonathan Renshon and David Winter, develop some answers from political psychology.

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Review of Jonathan Renshon’s Fight for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics

Singapore, June 2018: Two world leaders—each with the sense of entitlement that comes from surpassing an older brother—met to exchange tokens of status involving nuclear weapons, a Korean War peace treaty, future power alignments in northeast Asia, and opulent real estate possibilities on the North Korean coast. Clearly Jonathan Renshon’s book is appearing at an opportune time.

In Fighting for Status, Renshon argues that “status dissatisfaction” is a major cause of war. That is, when nations (and their leaders) experience real or threatened loss of status (“status deficits”),
they are likely to go to war as a way of restoring or increasing status. A major strength of the book is that the author deploys three complementary methods to establish the importance of status, and especially status dissatisfaction, in international relations and conflict escalation: experimentation with human participants, analysis of archival data on national characteristics and military actions (“large-N” studies), and historical case studies. In presenting each method, he assiduously describes the assumptions and pitfalls of the design, the details of method, and alternative interpretations of results.

For example, using standard experimental social psychology design and procedures, Renshon studied MTurk participants, government and military members of the Senior Executive Fellows program at Harvard’s Kennedy School, and matched residents of the city of Boston. Status threat and consequent concern for status (“status dissatisfaction” is Renshon’s preferred concept) was manipulated by asking participants to imagine situations in which they lost (or gained) status. This procedure, Renshon argues, insures that the independent variable (“status concerns”) is conceptually separate from the dependent variable (escalation of commitment in a decision task). For the MTurk participants, this was a hypothetical funds-allocation task; for the others, it was a computer-based “Island Game” in which participants could “spend” units of soldiers to “capture” territory—but rigged so they always ended up losing ground. As expected, status dissatisfaction increased escalation in these losing situations, thus intensifying the “sunk costs bias” (“I’ve sunk too much money or effort into this project to quit now—even if it is failing”) familiar to economists.

These experiments do indeed seem to echo the fate of many derailed peace efforts during wars, where each side feels it has invested too much in resources and casualties to quit without victory. However, two questions can and should always be asked (even if they cannot be answered definitively) about the validity of the experimental design purporting to capture real-world phenomena like war and peace that are not open to laboratory experimentation. Have all essential features of the real world been preserved? Have other, irrelevant, features been introduced? The experimental paradigm need not “look like” the real world. Face validity or “mundane realism” is not necessary if the essential features are embodied in the experiment—but this is difficult to determine a priori. “Scenario manipulations,” in which participants are asked to imagine some hypothetical situation, may elicit responses quite different from the real thing. Consider the following “thought experiment.” On September 10, 2001, you are participating in a psychological experiment in lower Manhattan and are instructed to “imagine that two airplanes had just hit and demolished the World Trade Center. What would you do?” How does your hypothetical response compare to your real response a day later to this actual event? I do not know the answer to this question, nor do I think any person—psychologist or other—really knows.

Renshon next assembled a “large-N” archival analysis by adapting data from the Correlates of War (COW) project. From the “militarized interstate disputes” dataset, he created a “directed-dyad data set” (that is, who initiated violence against whom) for most countries of the world, from 1816 through 2005. From the COW diplomatic exchange dataset (number and level of diplomatic missions received) and Google-based estimates of the sending countries’ “importance,” he created a year-by-year composite measure of national status. Countries with a large population, democratic or autocratic political system, many IGO memberships, having economic sanctions imposed or threatened, and possessing nuclear weapons tend to score high in status. (So it seems that Kim Jong-un was “right” to pursue nuclear capability as a path to status.) In line with his assertion that “status is local,” Renshon used network analysis to group countries into closely interacting “status communities.” Status deficit, the key independent variable, is the discrepancy between a country’s status rank and its rank on the COW Composite Index of National Capability (population, energy consumption, iron and steel production, and military expenditure and personnel). After including several control variables, Renshon finds that status deficits increase the probability that a nation will go to war.
The conceptual complexities and formidable mathematics of these various transformations can be a little daunting. Many readers may therefore appreciate the concluding chapters, in which Renshon brings these quantitative studies to life with four historical case studies of leaders driven by status concerns to take disastrous military actions. Taken together, these four studies form a kind of historical chain. The main case involves German leaders’ program of Weltpolitik (roughly translated as “worldwide policy”) between 1897 and 1911. During this period, German population increased over twice as fast, and steel production over three times as fast as Britain’s—yet overseas colonies had been largely appropriated by Britain and France, which countries thereby seemed to have claimed the final word in international diplomacy. Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bülow called for Germany to seek “a place in the sun”: in short, higher status. That quest led to the trenches of the Great War.

A second case is drawn from the other side in 1914. After Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia in revenge for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Russian leaders were determined to protect their country’s authority, prestige, and “place among the [great] powers” by supporting Serbia. They mobilized against Austria-Hungary and Germany, which gave Germany just the opportunity it wanted to declare war. Thirty-two years later, after a Second Great War began the slow-motion collapse of the British Empire and erosion of British status, the country’s leaders were further jolted in July 1956 when Egyptian leader Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. In response, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden persuaded Israel and France to join in an invasion of the Suez Canal. Nasser won that round, largely because U.S. and Soviet pressure forced the invading forces to withdraw. Five years later, after the humiliation of Syria’s withdrawal from its 1958 “United Arab Republic” union with Egypt, Nasser tried to reaffirm Egyptian status and prestige by intervening in support of a military revolt in Yemen—ultimately, a quagmire that Nasser later described as “my Vietnam.” In Egypt, this intervention arguably weakened the military capabilities and left it unprepared for the 1967 Six-Day War. And in Yemen, fighting, civil wars, and outside intervention in pursuit of status have continued, off and on, to this day.

I think Renshon has established his case: Status dissatisfaction does seem to be a frequent factor in conflict escalation and war. But what, exactly, is “status”? Like similar concepts such as prestige, reputation, honor, and authority, it is both perceptual (the status of person A is largely the beliefs of others about A’s status) and positional or ordinal (the status of A is in relation to that of others such as B or C). Do these words constitute a single cluster, or are they several separate but related entities?

An analogy to money may clarify the conceptual haze. Money exists in an immediate, concrete form, as when we buy something with cash; but it also has a potential, less tangible form, as “money in the bank.” Even more abstractly, it is “borrowing potential” or the amount that a bank would lend. I suggest that status, prestige, honor, reputation, and authority are all forms of “power in the bank” or potential power. To quote Hobbes (1651/1950), “Reputation of power, is Power”; “Honor consisteth only in the opinion of Power”; and “the Value, or worth of a man, is … so much as would be given for the use of his Power” (pp. 69, 75, 70). Like the signs of status rank in the animal kingdom, they signal power in an efficient and (reasonably) orderly way. Only when there is disagreement does the potential economy—or money or power—collapse. Usually the powerful persons and nations can use their status cards and don’t have to carry or pay with cash.

Is status dissatisfaction a factor in all wars? Leaders bent on conquest can always find, or manufacture, some slighting of their status, just as Adolf Hitler (1939), speaking to the Reichstag on the day German armies invaded Poland, invented far-fetched tales of “terror and pressure against our German compatriots and with a slow strangling of the Free City of Danzig.” Was this an echo of Hitler’s deep-seated status dissatisfactions, or was it a crude rationalization for conquest? Might status dissatisfaction be a mediator for other causes?

In any case, status deficits often do lead to war, but sometimes they do not, and this difference highlights an important postulate of Renshon’s theory: that nations and their leaders care about
status and *choose* military paths to gain it. In support of this postulate Renshon quotes William Wohlforth’s (2009) assertion that “humans appear to be hardwired for sensitivity to status and that relative standing is a powerful and independent motivator of behavior” (p. 29). Yet some people, and some countries, respond to status dissatisfaction with humor, withdrawal, or redirection of energy. For example, with the independence of Indonesia in the years after World War II, the Netherlands lost most of its vast colonial empire; unlike Anthony Eden, however, Dutch leaders did not consider launching attacks on neighboring Belgium or Luxembourg. Instead, they focused on quality of life and public health (perhaps as alternative forms of status). And after twice suffering the consequences of its *Weltpolitik*, Germany has changed its goals: As foreign minister Joschka Fischer proudly proclaimed in 2013, “we made the decision to bid farewell to the concept of a state based on power and become a merchant state” (quoted in Cohen, 2013). For political psychologists, the next step would be to identify alternative, nonlethal ways to deal with status dissatisfactions—a discovery that would be eagerly awaited by readers, social scientists, political leaders, and all who care about preserving our increasingly threatened and fragile world.

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Jonathan Renshon’s Response to David Winter’s Review

I want to begin by thanking David Winter, Kristen Monroe, and *Political Psychology*. Winter’s review was everything a writer could hope for: thoughtful, direct, clear, and full of insights that both frame the contribution of the book as well as suggest avenues for future research. I want to focus my response on several empirical issues raised in the review. One cluster of them relates to the general thrust of the evidence presented in the book, while another focuses specifically on the experimental evidence.

On the main body of evidence presented in the book, Winter wonders “is status dissatisfaction a factor in all wars?” and, further, worries that “leaders bent on conquest can always find, or manufacture, some slighting of their status.” On the first question, the answer is that status dissatisfaction is certainly not a factor in all wars, and moreover, that even when it is a factor, its importance is likely to vary (wars, like airplane crashes, only happen when many things go wrong simultaneously). My contention in the book is that status dissatisfaction can help us understand the outbreak of war in many cases and also helps to fill in details left blank in other theories. For example, my theory helps answer a core question from power transition theory: What makes “revisionist” powers dissatisfied in the first place? On the second question, I think Winter is right to worry about taking leaders at their word. This is, in fact, exactly why I relied in the case studies less on public pronouncements than on private diaries and accounts by contemporaries who are less likely to be attempting to justify their actions to a domestic constituency.

On the experimental evidence, David Winter focuses on the potential pitfalls of using hypothetical scenarios. In particular, he worries that subjects asked to imagine themselves in a situation might respond differently than they would had they really experienced the situation. He uses a particularly
dramatic example to illustrate this concern: What subject on September 10, 2001, asked to imagine a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, would respond the same way that they would after having actually experienced such an event?

Fundamentally, there are two issues at stake in such a question. The first issue is whether we have asked respondents to imagine themselves in a situation they have no experience being in (or similarly, to imagine themselves playing a role, such as President, of which they have no direct experience). The second issue concerns how closely answers to hypothetical vignettes match real-world behavior. On both these points, the main laboratory experiment presented in the book does not present any issues: We turn to behavioral lab experiments precisely because of concerns about hypothetical decisions with no stakes. In the elite study I ran, subjects made choices with real consequences, and the measure of escalation was actual money won or lost.

Study 1, however, was the exact type of hypothetical survey experiment that triggers the worries that Winter mentions. Some of this is alleviated by the accumulation of evidence, such as the pairing in the book of a hypothetical survey experiment with a behavioral lab experiment. More generally, however, there is substantial evidence that results obtained via hypothetical survey experiments do match observed behavior (for example, in framing experiments, see Kühberger, Schulte-Mecklenbeck, & Perner, 2002 and on voting behavior see Hainmueller, Hangartner, & Yamamoto, 2015). That does not mean there is never cause for worry, however. A new working paper of mine addresses the concerns that Winter raises about asking subjects to “play a role” that is foreign to them: Josh Kertzer and I show that asking subjects to engage in perspective taking exacerbates their preexisting biases (Kertzer & Renshon, 2018).

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Review of David Winter’s *Roots of War: Wanting Power, Seeing Threat, Justifying Force*

David Winter has spent several decades at the cutting edge of political psychology research. His diverse body of work over that time span has mostly focused on power motivation, personality research, authoritarianism, and “at a distance” methods of content analysis. He brings that considerable experience to bear in his new book, *Roots of War: Wanting Power, Seeing Threat, Justifying Force*. Winter’s central argument is that we can use power as a “central organizing concept” for understanding when and why wars occur (and, just as importantly, why they don’t). The book is organized around roughly three sections that parallel three aspects of power: wanting power, accentuation of threat/misperception of another actor’s desire for power, and the justification of the use of power to mobilize support for war.

In service of his larger argument, Winter employs a dizzying variety of data and methods, including content analysis of historical documents, surveys, lab experiments, and case studies. Having investigated how power motive imagery can lead to war, Winter ends the book with a detailed discussion of what attributes and policies might be used to “tame” power drives at the individual
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and country level. On the individual level, Winter uses additional laboratory and historical research to highlight the stabilizing effects of “generative historical consciousness.” At the societal level, three practices—raising the status of women, dealing with difference, and accurate perception—are presented as possible constraints on power motives. While these later chapters do not constitute the book’s central focus, they are a welcome addition in an era when most books’ policy prescriptions are mere afterthoughts.

One doesn’t need to reach far to find things to admire in this book. Three in particular stand out. One remarkable feature of the book is its breadth. Winter brings to bear writers, scholars, and events from across centuries (millennia, even) on the subjects of war and power. If it is by now common for IR scholars to invoke Thucydides to explain power and war, it is far less common to learn about the concept through the writing of William Shakespeare, Émile Zola, and Virginia Woolf. We are, as a discipline, the poorer for staying on such well-worn paths; Winter’s book helpfully pushes us to consider less obvious meanings and implications of power.

A second laudable feature of this book is the exhaustive and diverse set of evidence compiled by Winter. Many books fall into the trap of utilizing a journal article’s worth of original data collection and evidence and then adding the “padding” of a few case studies in order to round out a book. In stark contrast, Winter fits all of the data and analysis conducted over several decades into a book without it ballooning into several volumes. For example, Chapter 5 of the book (on misperceiving intentions) includes archival-based content analysis of British and German newspapers and diplomats in 1914 and 1939, U.S. and Soviet leaders and papers of record during the Cuban Missile Crisis, pro-Union and pro-secessionist newspapers accounts of Lincoln’s speech on the eve of the Civil War as well as several decades worth of experimental sessions in which thousands of undergraduates took on different “roles” in an effort to understand the relationship between identity and threat perception in international crises.

One final notable contribution of the book lies in what it does for political psychology more generally. It is still common for political psychological approaches to be relegated to the “error term” in some corners of IR: explaining mistakes and misperception while leaving broader patterns to “grand” theories of IR. Winter’s book helps to reclaim a core concept—power—from structural, rational, and realist approaches by explicating its dynamics on the individual level.

Of course, readers tend to prefer book reviews that are closer to “roasts” than to festschrifts, so (without going quite that far) it is worth highlighting some of the trade-offs that have been made in order to produce such a wide-ranging, expansive book on the subject of power and war. I’ll focus on two in particular, the first empirical and the second conceptual. The first issue I have in mind relates to the admirable directness with which Winter handles challenges of causal inference. The beginning of Chapter 4 (“Power Motivation in War and Peace”), for example, reminds us that we must avoid the strategy of simply looking for evidence of power motivation in wars (i.e., we cannot select on the dependent variable) before explaining the selection method for structured case comparisons, à la George and Bennett (2005). Similarly, Winter does a fantastic job elucidating the justification for both his “power motivation” measure, as well as the broader method of “at a distance” content analysis; no surprise given his outsized role in developing and popularizing this approach within political psychology.

However, while the book is straightforward in highlighting some of the problems of inference it encounters, more could have been done to address or preempt them. My reading of the most significant threat to Winter’s theory is not that his results for power motivation—higher in the war crises than in those that were resolved peacefully—are incorrect. Instead, one concern is that they, and the eventual conflict, are both caused by some third factor: One can buy the results of the analysis without necessarily conceding that power motivation was a causal factor. The typical method of addressing this concern is to pair the “focused case comparison” method with process tracing. Winter, however, mostly uses the cases in Chapter 4 to highlight the results of his content analysis. Here, the
trade-off is evident: The reader is treated to original data collection and reproducible content analysis, but at the expense of the standard case-study approach that traces casual processes and alleviates worries about potential confounders (the longitudinal study of Britain over 385 years encounters the same issue).

This is particularly important since there are so many potential causes of any given conflict, some of which are identified by Winter himself. For example, Table 4.3 (p. 155) shows us that integrative complexity (the degree to which people think in multidimensional terms and integrate a variety of evidence into their beliefs or decisions) is—along with power motivation—higher for war crises than those that ended peacefully. Given the voluminous literature on integrative complexity (some of it by Winter himself: Doty, Winter, Peterson, & Kemmelmeier, 1997; Winter 2007) and the obvious potential causal pathways between lower complexity and the outcome of war, such a result naturally begs the question: Why should we privilege power over complexity? Winter’s answer is that power is related to complexity and that “simplified functioning appears in power interactions.” Still, one wishes for either a more direct head-to-head test of compelling alternative explanations such as integrative complexity or an empirical design that might demonstrate the implied causal pathway (power motivation $\rightarrow$ lowered complexity $\rightarrow$ war) and assuage concerns about prominent alternative explanations.

A second issue where trade-offs are visible concerns the concept of power itself. Chapters 2 (“Reasons, Motives and Causes”) and 3 (“On Power”) provide much of the theoretical scaffolding for the rest of the book. The former traces the motive of power as it is found threaded throughout leaders’ rationales for war and scholars’ theories and explanations. The latter chapter provides a useful primer on the concept of power itself and definitions that are succinct and useful: Power is the “ability or capacity of one person. . . to produce intended effects on another person or group” (p. 95). So far, so good. However, at times it can feel as though the scales have tipped too far on the side of expansiveness, sacrificing explanatory power in the process.

Two examples help to make this point. In Table 2.1 (pp. 64–66), Winter collects contemporaneous rationales for war voiced by leaders throughout history. He concludes that—though they are rationalizations “wrapped in self-deception and laced with cynical manipulation”—they can be all be seen as invoking “power words” (“having impact, responding to real or imagined power of another and maintaining or restoring prestige”). In Chapter 4 (p. 143), Winter discusses an analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis documents and writes that Kennedy’s initial reaction of “disbelief, shock, anger and fear” are reactions that signify high levels of power motivation.

There are two related issues here. The first is that if “power” is so broad as to encompass motives as varied as “protecting innocent lives” and “safeguarding national honor,” than the concept of power becomes less useful for theory building. In any case, can one imagine a rationale for conflict (or for doing anything for that matter) that didn’t in some way imply “having impact?” The related issue is that this approach to theorizing takes many concepts we’ve used to and argues that they are, in some way, related to power. For example, Winter argues that prestige is “power in the bank,” or “potential” power that may be used in the future. This is effectively an instrumental interpretation of prestige. While this is certainly true some of the time, that is a bit like saying that concepts like time horizons, risk taking, emotions, and deterrence are related to power. That may be so, but it’s not immediately obvious what we gain analytically from moving to this higher level of abstraction. This is the conundrum of a book dedicated to such an important concept: The more we expand the definition of power, the less it may actually help us explain.

Of course, these are relatively minor quibbles in an otherwise wonderful book. For much of the book, Winter’s analysis rests on a solid foundation of dozens of studies conducted by him and his

\[1\text{This particular result is not particularly strong in the selection of cases included in the book, though as Winter acknowledges, there is plenty of work that has found that relationship to be rather robust, such as Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez (1977).}\]
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colleagues over several decades. These studies of power motivation, threat perception, and justification do more than summarize Winter’s work over the course of his career; they also present a model for younger scholars to emulate and a blueprint for years of future research.

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David Winter’s Response to Jonathan Renshon’s Review

I thank Jonathan Renshon for his generous review of Roots of War, and I’m pleased that his characterization of the book corresponds so closely with what I wanted to convey. At the same time, I am also grateful for his more critical comments and suggestions because they suggest interesting pathways for further research.

First, as to understanding process and cause. Past crises involving war or peace are easy to view as stable, homogeneous blocks, clearly labelled in the historical archives. Thus the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis label is “peacefully resolved,” whereas that of the 1990 Iraqi occupation of Kuwait is stamped “war.” But in the real world, events and crises move and flow, twisting and turning in real time. As Renshon suggests, the difficult task of untangling these complex webs of causality can be facilitated by close process tracing. For example, Markwicka (2018) has traced the flow of different emotions during the course of these two crises, using ordinary-language descriptions. Where transcripts are available, the flow of psychological variables such as motives, integrative complexity, optimism, and responsibility—all occurring in response to events and each other—can be charted through systematic content analysis. And so document collections—from the 1916–18 peace proposals made during World War I (Dickinson, 1919; Epstein, 1957) or the endless truce negotiations in the Korean or Vietnam Wars—could provide valuable resources for process tracing of why wars do—or do not—end.

Some caution, however, is appropriate when analyzing transcripts or notes. During the Missile Crisis, only some meetings of President Kennedy’s advisors were recorded, and many scholars suggest that the most crucial decisions were made in a smaller unrecorded group, or even by Kennedy himself. Soviet notes on the crisis discussions in the Presidium are quite fragmentary, though they can be supplemented with later writings by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, still later by his son Sergei and other Soviet leaders (see Winter, 2013).

Renshon rightly points out that my concept of “power” can easily become so broadly defined as to jeopardize its explanatory power. I do accept the broad definition of power as “one creature having an intended effect upon another creature.” In this sense, power is a fundamental dimension of behavior and life—represented in its essence, as Canetti (1962, pp. 203–11) suggests, in seizing,
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eating, and incorporation. That is, all living flora and fauna incorporate the material of each other: In the words of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots” (Act IV, scene 3, lines 24–26). And so power can be seen as the ultimate organic recycling process by which life, with inputs of energy from the sun, continues and thus becomes, in a sense, immortal. Confronted with such a blunt and perhaps alarming idea, what is a reasonable goal for human society? I suggest that the process be as “civilized” (restrained, orderly, allowing creatures to flourish while avoiding unnecessary pain) as possible. And so power must be controlled or tempered, so as to reap its greatest benefits and avert its worst excesses (that is, war). Freud described such a civilizing process in the concluding part of his reply to Einstein. Exploring how it can be encouraged is the focus of my ongoing research after Roots of War (see Winter, 2016; Winter & Leclerc, in press).

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