GOVERNMENT 386:

THE CAUSES OF WAR

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Course Description: Government 386 examines problems of war and peace in theoretical and historical perspective. More specifically, we will examine the causes of interstate war—that is, large scale organized violence between the armed forces of states. We will seek to discover what kinds of conditions make war between states more or less likely. Topics covered include: 1) historical patterns in warfare; 2) theoretical explanations for war; 3) evaluation of the evidence for the various explanations; 4) the impact of nuclear weapons on international politics; 5) the uses and limitations of air power; 6) ethics and warfare; and, 7) international terrorism and asymmetric warfare.

Causes of war may be found at several “levels of analysis.” Our survey will focus on theories of war at three levels of analysis: the individual and small groups, the nation-state, and the international system. At each level different theories aim to identify causes of war and discover variables that make war more or less likely. At the individual level, for example, various psychological theories of decision making and small group dynamics offer explanations for war. At the state level, the central claim is that something about the nature of particular types of states causes them to be more aggressive or war-prone than other types of states (for example, democracies vs. authoritarian states, trading vs. autarchic states, unstable vs. secure governments). Finally, explanations at the international system level focus on balance of power politics, cycles of hegemonic rise and decline, arms races, deterrence failure, and alliance patterns as possible causes of war. After surveying explanations for war at these three levels, we will end the course by discussing a number of special topics: 1) the role of nuclear weapons; 2) the uses of air power in the contemporary era; 3) ethics and warfare; and, 4) international terrorism and asymmetric warfare.

Throughout the class, we will pay special attention to evaluating the empirical evidence for different theories of war: what kind of evidence counts for or against a perspective? How well does the historical record support a theory’s key hypotheses? Does statistical evidence, which looks at the conditions surrounding the outbreak of dozens or hundreds of wars, support or impugn hypotheses? Is this evidence consistent with the careful casework of historians who look at particular wars in great detail? Upon completing the course, students will not only be acquainted with the main types of explanations offered
for war, but they will also be able to evaluate the evidence supporting the various explanations of the causes of war. In turn, this knowledge should help students evaluate different proposals for fostering peace and reducing conflict in the future, and for crafting national security strategies.

Requirements and Grading: Requirements are two preliminary exams, a final examination, and participation in a discussion section. There is no research paper. The two prelims will each combine an in-class and a take-home section. The in-class section will consist of several “explain and describe” questions and a short essay question. A short paper (5 pages) makes up the take-home section of each prelim exam. The two prelims each count for 25% of your final grade, while the final exam (which is entirely in class and comprehensive) accounts for 40%. Discussion section attendance and participation makes up the remaining 10%.

- Final Examination Date and Time: Thursday, May 10, 7:00 - 9:30 PM
- Please make sure that you can take the final examination at the designated date and time; no early exam or alternate exam time will be considered. If you cannot take the final exam at the assigned time, do not take this class.

Texts: Three books are available for purchase at the Cornell Campus Store and at Kraftees (in Collegetown), and a reading packet (in two volumes) is available at K C Copy Center in Collegetown (118 Dryden Rd).

The reading load averages only 93 pages per week. Yet be forewarned: some of the heaviest weeks of reading come near the end of the semester. In addition, some of the reading is heavy on concepts and short on narrative, which always makes for slower going. Try to read ahead or at least keep up, or when dead week rolls around the week won’t be the only thing that is dead ....

The following items are required:

- Reading packet for Government 386.

Course Web Page: to sign up, go to:

http://www.cit.cornell.edu/atc/cst/howto_selfenroll.shtml

Cornell University Policies and Regulations: Participation in this class commits students and instructors to abide by Cornell’s expectations and policies regarding equal opportunity and academic integrity. Further, it implies permission from students to submit their written work to services that check for plagiarism. Each student in this course is expected to abide by the Cornell University Code of Academic Integrity. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with university policies regarding plagiarism and other violations of
academic integrity. In particular, please make yourself familiar with the definition of plagiarism, and be aware that you may not turn in the same piece of work (or part thereof) for credit in multiple classes, either in the same semester or while at Cornell in general. Violations of the University Code of Academic Integrity will be firmly dealt with in this class. The Code can be found on the web at (a link to the Code can also be found on the Government 386 web page):

http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/Academic/AIC.html

In addition, this instructor observes all university policies addressing racial, ethnic, gender, sexual preference, or religious discrimination and all forms of harassment; he conducts class in conformance with provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with pertinent policies and to bring any concerns related to them to the attention of the instructor.

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Course Schedule and Outline:

❖ Topic 1: Introductory Overview and Historical Patterns in Warfare

Readings:


❖ Topic 2: Individual and Small-Group Explanations

Individual Level Explanations
(personal psychology, cognitive psychology)

Readings:


**Small Group Level Explanations**  
(groupthink, bureaucratic politics)

**Readings:**


🌟 **Topic 3: State Level Explanations**

**The Diversionary Theory of War**

**Readings:**


**Military Organizations and War**

**Readings:**


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1 Preliminary Examination #1. Friday, February 23 in class. Take-home essay handed out in class and due at the beginning of class on Wednesday, February 28.  

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Democracy and War

Readings:


Economic Interdependence and War

Readings:


_topic 4: International System Level Theory

The Security Dilemma and Its Consequences: Arms Races, Offense-Defense Balance, and Deterrence

Readings:


**Distribution of Power and Alliance Patterns as Causes of War**

Readings:


**Power Transition and Hegemonic Rise and Decline**

Readings:

1. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*. Parts of Chapter 1 (pp. 9 – 18), chapter 3 (pp. 106-110, pp. 146-155), and all of chapters 4-5 (pp. 156 – 210).

**Revisionist and Status Quo States**

Readings:


**Putting it All Together: Combining Multiple Levels of Analysis**

Readings:

Topic 5: Nuclear Weapons

Who Wants Them, Who Gets Them, and What Difference Do They Make?

Readings:


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Preliminary Examination #2. Friday, April 13, in class. Take-home essay handed out in class and due at the beginning of class on Wednesday, April 18.  

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Topic 6: Ethics of War and the Conduct of War

Just War Theory

Reading:

1. Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, 3rd Edition. Chapters 4- 5 (pp. 51 – 85), 8 - 9 (pp. 127 – 159), 11 (pp. 176 - 196), and 14-16 (pp. 225 – 268).

Topic 7: Air Power

The Uses and Limitations of Air Power

Readings:

Topic 8: Terrorism and Asymmetric Warfare

_Terrorism and War_

**Readings:**


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**Study Period:** May 6 - 8  
**Final Exam Period:** May 9 –18.  
**Our Final Exam:** Thursday, May 10, 7:00 - 9:30 PM  
**Location:** Lewis Auditorium, GS

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