

17.423 // Causes and Prevention of War
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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 more to read on civil war we would cover it in more depth, but the civil war literature is very thin.

II. EXISTING LITERATURE: IT LEAVES THE WAR MYSTERY ONLY PARTLY SOLVED

III. IDEAS OF THE COURSE: FAMILIES OF HYPOTHESES

- A. Military factors: e.g., arms as war cause and disarmament as solution; "crisis instability" and the "security dilemma" as war causes; disarmament as a solution to war.
- B. Misperception: false optimism; nationalist mythmaking; etc.
- C. Diplomatic/foreign policy bungles & blunders.

IV. CLASS MISSIONS

- A. Explaining historical cases: making/testing theories of war's causes; making prescriptions. How can war be prevented?
- B. Sharing thoughts on writing.

V. 7 CASES EXPLORED: World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Seven Years War, Crimea, Peloponnesian War.

VI. GRADES AND REQUIREMENTS

- A. Background required: none. Students with zero history background are welcome. We start from the beginning.
- B. Requirements.
- C. Discussion sections start next week. Debates on responsibility for the two world wars are featured.

VII. SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE CAUSES OF WAR

- A. Testing social science theories.
 - 1. Observation v. experimentation.
 - 2. Large-n (statistical) method v. case study method.
- B. Criticisms of social "science."
 - 1. "Accidents drive history--'butterflies cause hurricanes' in history--hence general theories cannot explain much." Annie Oakley's crucial role in history.
 - 2. "Each historical event is unique; hence generalization is futile, even misleading." 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."
 - 4. "Social data is bad, hence social science has no reliable empirical basis."
 - 5. "Social science methods are gendered/biased."

