



## What Causes War?

August 1, 2017

By Kori Schake

**Kori Schake** is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and teaches "Thinking About War" at Stanford University. Schake is the editor, with James Mattis, of the book *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military*. Her history of the Anglo-American hegemonic transition is forthcoming from Harvard University Press. This article is reprised from a lecture given at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's History Institute for Teachers, March 2017, at the First Division Museum, Wheaton, IL, on "Why Does America Go to War?" She is grateful to Sean O'Grady, her terrific research assistant and Stanford University classics major, for thinking about this with her.

*Abstract: What causes war? Thucydides thinks fear, honor, and interest—those fundamental human motivations that persuade us beyond caution—cause wars. Clausewitz tries to leach those passions out of the process and distill a calculus of political aims as the cause of war. Geoffrey Blainey has a simpler discriminator: states choose war when they think they will win. Barbara Tuchman has the simplest explanation of all: human folly. Azar Gat believes scarcity drives warfare, and, therefore, prosperity is making it obsolete. The author analyzes the contributions of these five writers in addressing this perennial question about war.*

War is the scourge of civilization. It destroys prosperity and kills an enormous number of people—combatants and civilians both are swept into its maw. And yet, war is a constant across all human societies and eras; it is at least as prevalent as peace. It up-ends existing order, often serving the purpose in international relations that earthquakes perform in the natural world, releasing pressure and redistributing territory. So the question of what causes war is an essential question of civilization.

Political science has a wealth of theories about why wars happen. The explanations are very often structural: redistributions of power are inevitable because of economics or ideology. Political scientists look for patterns and models that can be templates. History offers a different perspective, one focused on the particulars of each case. The study of history is, therefore, the study of individual choices. For the historian, wars do not happen, they are chosen. They are not the result of impersonal forces inevitably pulling societies into the meat grinder of armed conflict.

Two of the most influential assessors of those choices are the ancient Athenian Thucydides and nineteenth century Prussian Carl von Clausewitz. They are conjoined in this article with brief glances at three important contemporary

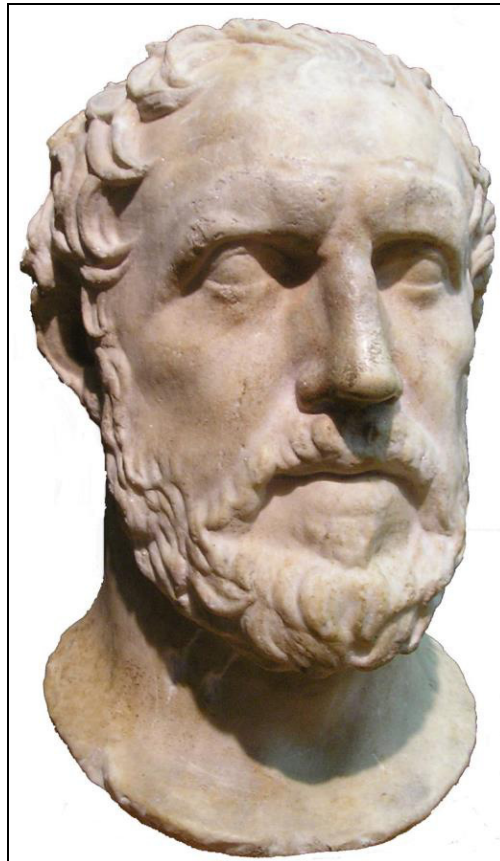
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Fall 2017 | 1

doi: 10.1016/j.orbis.2017.08.002

commentators: Geoffrey Blainey, Barbara Tuchman, and Azar Gat. All five look intently at what causes wars. Thucydides thinks fear, honor, and interest—those fundamental human motivations that persuade us beyond caution—cause wars. Clausewitz tries to leach those passions out of the process and distill a calculus of political aims as the cause of war. Geoffrey Blainey has a simpler discriminator: states choose war when they think they will win. Barbara Tuchman has the simplest explanation of all: human folly. Azar Gat believes scarcity drives warfare, and, therefore, prosperity is making it obsolete.



Bust of Thucydides residing in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Wikimedia.

### **A Human Interest Story**

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