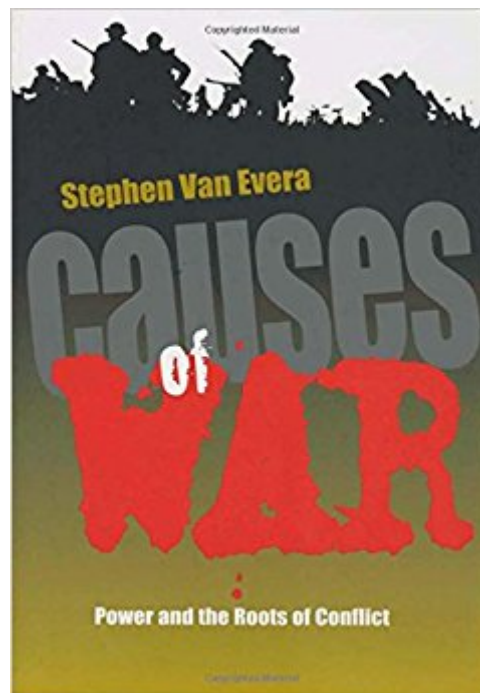




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# Causes Of War: Power And The Roots Of Conflict (Cornell Studies In Security Affairs)



## Synopsis

What causes war? How can military conflicts best be prevented? In this book, Stephen Van Evera frames five conditions that increase the risk of interstate war: false optimism about the likely outcome of a war, a first-strike advantage, fluctuation in the relative power of states, circumstances that allow nations to parlay one conquest into another, and circumstances that make conquest easy. According to Van Evera, all but one of these conditions—false optimism—rarely occur today, but policymakers often erroneously believe in their existence. He argues that these misperceptions are responsible for many modern wars, and explores both World Wars, the Korean War, and the 1967 Mideast War as test cases. Finally, he assesses the possibility of nuclear war by applying all five hypotheses to its potential onset. Van Evera's book demonstrates that ideas from the Realist paradigm can offer strong explanations for international conflict and valuable prescriptions for its control. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Van Evera's book is a masterful work of positivist social science . . . He offers convincing evidence to show that offense-defense theory is a major explanation for the onset of modern wars."—Choice "An important book on the roots of war, remarkable in its theoretical rigor and historical sweep. Van Evera demolishes the view that war is an inevitable outgrowth of an anarchic world that encourages belligerence."—Foreign Affairs "Van Evera's volume is sure

to become a core work in the field of war studies. It deserves to be read by anyone with a serious interest in the causes of war."~ Journal of Strategic Studies "This is a very logical and historically well-informed book, which argues that the realist explanations of war may be missing one of the most important aspects of power: whether the offense is thought to be favored instead of the defense."~ Political Science Quarterly "Stephen Van Evera's eagerly anticipated book is rich in theory and thoroughly anchored in history. It is indispensable reading for anyone interested in understanding the wars of the past and preventing those of the future."~ Jack S. Levy, Rutgers University "Stephen Van Evera tackles the central question in international relations~ why war occurs between major powers~ and presents theoretical arguments that shed important light on this age-old subject. Causes of War effectively supports its findings with a wide reading of history. This unusually ambitious book promises to be the point of departure for all future work on the topic."~ Charles L. Glaser, University of Chicago "I strongly recommend Causes of War for course use. As the main textbook in my advanced undergraduate course on peace and war, the book raised the level of student writing and class discussion significantly. Stephen Van Evera's clear and thorough discussion about research methods made it easy for students to understand challenging issues. This book is a cutting-edge work of theory and a fine text for classroom use."~ William Rose, Connecticut College "Causes of War is a beautifully written and brilliant work that will cast a giant shadow over the study of war for years to come. Not every student of international politics will agree with Van Evera's theories, but each of us will have to confront them."~ John J. Mearsheimer, University of Chicago --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

What causes war? How can military conflicts best be prevented? A prominent political scientist here addresses these questions, offering ideas that will be widely debated. Stephen Van Evera frames five conditions that increase the risk of interstate war: false optimism about the likely outcome of a war, a first-strike advantage, fluctuation in the relative power of states, circumstances that allow nations to parlay one conquest into another, and circumstances that make conquest easy. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

This book claims to offer a "master theory" explaining the causes of war. It also seeks to provide policy prescriptions to show soldiers and statesmen how to make conflict less likely. It is a lofty aim, but the book falls far short of its mark. Van Evera's book is a revision of part of a fifteen-year-old dissertation that must rank among the most widely cited unpublished works in history, It is a work of

social science, and he takes great care to observe all the methodological conventions of the field. The resulting volume is thus of greater interest to students and professors than soldiers and statesmen. It is, at its core, a book about formulating and testing hypotheses. It is organized around five hypotheses: (1) "war is more likely when states fall prey to false optimism about its outcome," (2) "war is more likely when the advantage lies with the first side to mobilize or attack," (3) "war is more likely when the relative power of states fluctuates sharply," (4) "war is more likely when the control of resources enables the protection or acquisition of other resources," and (5) "war is more likely when conquest is easy." Van Evera devotes the first four chapters of the book to his first four hypotheses. These chapters collectively offer a useful survey of how power and perceptions of it can create incentives for war. At times, however, the book's search for a "master theory" clashes with the demands of careful scholarship. In some cases, Van Evera cites evidence supporting his hypotheses while omitting equally persuasive facts contradicting it. Elsewhere he draws upon ambiguous or contradictory cases to support his hypothesis. He also frequently makes assertions without supporting them. He claims, for example, that while striking first rarely confers a battlefield advantage, leaders often operate under the illusion that it does. (p. 71). He offers no basis for this conclusion. Instead, he merely lists cases that he believes support his contention. Moreover, the cases he examines in depth - World War I, China's entry into the Korean War, and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War - are at best ambiguous on this issue. The heart of the book examines the hypothesis that war is more likely when conquest is easy - in other words, when the offense is at a marked advantage. Van Evera argues that his formulation of offense-defense theory offers the master key that unlocks the causes of war. It is, however, little more than a re-tread of theories that grew out of nuclear deterrence theory and the study of the origins of World War I during the Cold War. There is scant evidence that statesmen actually decide to start wars because of a perceived offensive advantage. There is one potential exception, World War I, and Van Evera milks it for all that it is worth. There is, however, something methodologically suspect about using a case to prove a theory that grew out of a study of that very case. Thucydides believed that states go to war due to fear, honor, and self-interest. Van Evera apparently dismisses the third explanation, because nowhere does it appear in his hypotheses. Implicit in his book's overall argument is the assumption that states can never use war as a rational instrument to achieve political objectives. In fact, however, throughout history statesmen have found war preferable to other outcomes, and not merely due to misperception. The book's final chapter, which discusses nuclear strategy, is its weakest. Indeed, it seems out of place. It is a polemic against ballistic missile defense distinguished by assertion rather than argumentation. Whatever one's view of national missile defense, there are

thoughtful arguments on both sides of the issue. These are, however, entirely absent from this book. Instead, what appears is a regurgitation of Cold War arguments about nuclear deterrence, ones that are by now worn and frayed.

Good analysis of and stock taking of realist theories of the causes of war, including going beyond the normal structural realist "material factors" and systems level causes. Yes van Evera could use more historical research to back up his cases, that is a constant criticism I have of his work. However, this is a good, well argued book that is very accessible unlike books that are either: heavily quantitative (which are just qualitative works set to numbers, how you quantify social phenomenon is a subjective enterprise), rational choice, or post-modern.

This book is profoundly disappointing. After waiting almost a decade for publication, one wonders "is this really it?" While scholars have identified myriad potential causes of war, Van Evera picks just five, all drawn from the so-called Realist school. Current puzzles such as the democratic peace go unmentioned. Discussion of where his analysis fits into the quantitative literature on the origins of war is absent, there is no bibliography, the index is incomplete, he relies almost entirely on English language secondary sources for his case studies, and the methodological discussion is embarrassing. Regarding the latter, Van Evera smugly claims that the rules of scientific inference simply do not apply in his case. As a course book its principle use would be to instruct graduate students on how *\*not\** to conduct social science. If you're a true believer in the realist school, then this is a book you will love, otherwise it is largely forgettable sophistry. Blainey's 'Causes' is a far, far better book.

As a policy maker involved in foreign policy, I am usually dismayed by the lack of useful research from political scientists. This book is a profound exception. Van Evera's book has clarified my thinking on many points; I recommend this book wholeheartedly.

reinvesting argumentative dialogue that flirts with disaster in a nuclear age is destined to result in disaster. the path to peace is carefully outlined in religious text throughout time... and should be complete in van everera's text. i recommend text from the Hopi, Swiss, Tibet, Kikuyu traditional elders on the subject of "peace".

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