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Why Don't Democracies Go to War?

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Tullock (1977) extended the domain of economic analysis to war and revolution. By focusing on the individual's choice in a nonmarket setting, Tullock acted in the tradition of public choice. His methods, and some extensions, are used to answer the question in the title of this paper. The title is a rephrasing of Suganami's (1990, pp.23-24) complaint that international relations theorists have not explained why democracies are less warlike. Tullock hypothesized that governments and individuals choose to fight when the expected benefit exceeds the expected cost. This analysis looks at the people constituting government: the government is either autocratic and the people have no say in its composition, or democratic and determined by vote of the people.¹ The cost-benefit analysis of the individuals deciding whether to make war is considered.² This paper distinguishes between offensive wars, usually motivated by rent-seeking,³ and defensive wars, motivated by external threats. Offensive war is always initiated in pursuit of some benefit, economic or noneconomic.⁴ This paper proves that democracies are less likely to engage in

¹ Thus, we examine only polar cases of pure autocracy and liberal democracy. Intermediate situations will produce intermediate results.

² This is in contrast to traditional international relations theories, which violate methodological individualism. Examples include realism, Marxism and structuralism, which focus on the nation-state, class and impersonal structures as their respective actors. For a typology of these and other theories, see Booth and Smith (1995).

³ One could thus paraphrase Clausewitz's famous dictum "War is politics by other means" as "War is rent-seeking by other means."

⁴ In general, noneconomic motives can be called "ideologies." These include "isms" such as Communism, Fascism, irredentism, autarkic nationalism, machismo, etc., as well as support for charity generated by empathy.

The Paraguayan dictator Francisco Solano López (1862-1870) is an example of machismo run amok. In 1864, he decided that would be a good idea to invade Uruguay. He had one small problem: Paraguay and Uruguay shared no border. He solved this by marching his army through Argentina. This started the War of the Triple Alliance, in which Paraguay was invaded by Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.

offensive wars. Similar considerations apply to defensive wars, so that, again, democracies are less likely to engage in these. Privatized wars, in which combatants are paid in loot or by their sponsoring nongovernmental organization, such as the British East India Company, are not considered, as both autocracies and democracies have engaged in these. Since this paper considers autocracies, it is clearly related to Tullock's (1987) work on autocracy.

When an autocrat goes to war, he allocates a large share of the benefits to himself and has the ability to disperse the costs to the people. He may even go to war when the net benefits are negative: the costs borne by the people exceed the benefits gained by the autocrat. In a democracy, the costs of war are likewise spread among the people. However, the people have the power to depose a war-making government through the ballot box. Moreover, no individual receives a share of the benefits nearly as large as an autocrat's. It is thus difficult to gain a consensus for war. This combination of reduced benefits and reduced ability to bear costs reduces the incentive for a democracy to go to war, and thus, reduces its likelihood. Note that this is not saying that democracies never go to war, which is not this paper's intent.

While democracies are less likely to fight offensive wars, they may not even fight defensive wars that have already started. The War on Terrorism began long ago when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) began its attacks on Western airliners in the 1960s. The PFLP attacked its first American target, a TWA airliner, during "Skyjack Sunday" in 1970. Throughout the years, Arab and Muslim terrorists have attacked U.S. and other Western targets with near impunity. The American military responses were either nonexistent, as in response to the PFLP hijackings, or feckless, as in the retaliations for the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Lebanon, which barely harmed Lebanese Hezbollah, the committers of the suicide bombings, and did not strike Syria, the sponsor of the bombers. It was only in response to the attacks of September 11, 2001 that a consensus formed in the U.S. and throughout the West to actively engage in the defensive war that had begun long ago. Until September 2001, the benefits of pursuing what was then a low-intensity defensive war seemed low, while the costs seemed high. This underestimation of benefits was myopic, as the benefits lay not in retaliation and elimination of terrorists per se, but in deterring faceless current and future enemies. The costs were

Solano López would not abide cowardice: he tortured and executed commanders who ordered retreats. The end result was that Paraguay lost half of its area and population and 90% of its adult male population.

It should be noted that ideology can be constructed ex post to justify rent-seeking.

perceived to be high: the consensus held that relationships with both American allies and the Muslim world would be disrupted. September 2001 made clear the true costs and benefits of the War on Terrorism. Not fighting is, on net, more costly than fighting in terms of American lives. The most immediate result has been the war on al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban regime which sheltered it.

Russia's last three wars provide evidence about how the benefits and costs of war vary across government type. The Afghan War (1979-1989) was fought at terrible cost and was ultimately unsuccessful. The Soviet people, especially the soldiers, bore the brunt of the costs. However, they were powerless to affect the course of war. After nine years and the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leadership decided that the war was unwinnable and withdrew their forces. In contrast, the First Chechen War (1994-96) was less costly in men and materiel, but these costs were far more visible as a result of media coverage. The democratization of Russia enabled Russian mothers and others to protest the war: they were ultimately successful in stopping it. The ongoing Second Chechen War (1999-) appears to be a defensive war to counter the perceived threat to Russians from Chechnya. It was precipitated by the rise of lawlessness in Chechnya, including kidnappings and other atrocities committed against Russians, and the bombings of several apartment buildings in Moscow, blamed, perhaps incorrectly, on Chechens. This threat has been heightened by the introduction of Islamist forces, such as al-Qaeda, on the Chechen side. The Russian media appear to have been reined in by a more centralized government, so that criticism is suppressed. The result is at least grudgingly popular Russian support for the war.

This analysis has an obvious implication: power should be dispersed throughout societies to prevent offensive wars.⁵ Nations thus acquire an interest in the dispersal of power within other nations. This dispersal can be accomplished both economically and politically. The breakup of the Soviet Union has dramatically reduced Russia's potential for war, as witnessed by the reaction to the First Chechen War. The immediate reduction in central power caused by the end of communism was reinforced by the dispersal of power to the regions. The dispersal of economic power has increased trade. These trade relationships create further costs to wars. The peripheral wars have been caused by rent-seeking by dictatorial regimes, often in the ideological guise of ethnic struggle.

⁵ Rummel (1997) draws the same conclusion. However, his approach is essentially sociological: his subtitle is *Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence*. He does not model the individual's choice whether to commit violence.

If democracies are less likely to make war to begin with, it must be true that democracies are the least likely to make war on each other. Democracies, particularly those with free-market economies have the greatest dispersion of power of any nations. If anything, democracies will agree to reduce or eliminate war preparations against each other and may even form alliances to protect their relationships. The next step can be to form more permanent structures, essentially creating a constitutional contract.

As Gordon Tullock has shown, economic analysis can shed light on areas usually considered outside the domain of economics. This is the essence of public choice. His use of cost-benefit analysis of the individual's choices in war has led to this paper's conclusion that democracies are less likely to go to war. Once again, economic analysis can shed light where other methods of analysis offer only darkness. In this paper, it is traditional international relations theories which are unable to answer one of their own questions. An implication of this paper is that international relations is a fruitful area for public choice researchers.

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