

# PSCI 2221: Causes of War

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Vanderbilt University  
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War is awful. In the 20th century alone, war killed at least 136 million people.<sup>1</sup> What makes these deaths especially tragic is that they seem preventable. Why resort to war instead of diplomacy or other peaceful tactics? In this course we will study the political processes that lead to large-scale organized violence. We will try to rationalize war.

My main goal in this class is for you to come away understanding:

- How to construct and evaluate arguments about *causes* like a social scientist would.
- Prominent theories about the causes of war.
- How to analyze data to evaluate these theories and to better understand war.

## General Information

**Place and time.** PSCI 2221 meets in Rand Hall 308 on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 11:15am–12:05pm.

**Contact Info.** You can reach me by email at [brenton.kenkel@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:brenton.kenkel@vanderbilt.edu). I always respond to student emails within one business day, usually quicker than that—but don't expect an instant reply if you email me late at night or on the weekend.

**Office Hours.** My office hours are Tuesday 10:30am–12:00pm in Commons Center 326. No need to make an appointment—just drop in.

**TA.** The TA for PSCI 2221 is Nguyen Ha. You can email her at [nguyen.t.ha@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:nguyen.t.ha@vanderbilt.edu). Her office hours are Thursday 9:30–10:30am in Commons Center 304K.

## Grading

Your grade will be based on:

- Weekly reading quizzes (15%). (Lowest score dropped.)
- Four data analysis assignments (20%).
- Three critical response papers (20%).
- Midterm exam (20%).
- Final exam (25%).

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<sup>1</sup>Milton Leitenberg, “Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century” (Occasional Paper 29, Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, Cornell University, 2006).

If you care to know the nitty-gritty details about how your assignment grades are translated into your final grade, see the “Calculating Your Course Grade” handout.

## **Late Assignments**

For critical response papers and data analysis assignments, there is a one-time-use, no-questions-asked, 72-hour extension policy. The first time you miss a deadline on one of these assignments, you can turn in the assignment anytime within 72 hours of the original due date for no penalty. You don’t have to ask or inform me that you are taking the extension option; I will apply it automatically. After the first 72 hours—or if you have used the extension on a previous assignment—each day late is a 5 percentage point grade reduction.

## **Expectations**

As one of the top-ranked universities in the country, Vanderbilt’s mission is to pursue excellence in education, scholarship, and research. To advance that pursuit, this course will maintain high academic standards—at the same level of expectations that we had before the Covid-19 pandemic. I expect students to attend class, to engage thoughtfully with the material, and to do the hard intellectual work necessary to succeed on assignments and exams. Deadlines will be enforced, and only the best work will receive high grades. I will only grant exceptions to course policies for documented medical or emergency situations.

## **Accommodations**

I want to provide an effective learning environment for students of all backgrounds, identities, and abilities. If there are circumstances that make our learning environment and activities difficult, if you have medical information that you need to share with me, or if you need specific arrangements in case the building needs to be evacuated, please let me know. If there are circumstances that make our learning environment and activities difficult, or if you have medical information that you need to share with me, please let me know.

I will do whatever it takes to make sure this class is a place where you can learn and thrive, but I can only do so if you discuss your needs with me as early as possible. I promise to maintain the confidentiality of these discussions. If appropriate, you should also contact Student Access Services to get more information about specific accommodations.

## **Academic Integrity**

As in all classes at Vanderbilt, your work in PSCI 2221 is governed by the Honor Code. I encourage to discuss course material and assignments with your peers, but the written work you turn in must be solely your own.

I have no tolerance for plagiarism. If you turn in plagiarized work, you will receive a failing grade for the course and be reported to the Honor Council. Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not an excuse or a defense.

Plagiarism is not just verbatim copying and pasting—representing someone else’s arguments or ideas as your own without citing the source is also a form of plagiarism. For more information about what is and is not plagiarism, refer to the Student Handbook section on the Honor System. Take particular note of the section “The Honor Code Applied to Preparation of Papers”: <https://tinyurl.com/vandy-honor-papers>.

## Schedule and Readings

This class has one required textbook: *Thinking Clearly with Data* by Ethan Bueno de Mesquita and Anthony Fowler. All other readings will be posted on Brightspace.

Most readings are academic papers and sometimes may be dense. To help out, I’ll post guides listing the key questions you should be able to answer after completing the reading.

Date	Reading	
<b>The Puzzle of War</b>		
Fri 8/26	<a href="#">Fearon (1995)</a>	
Mon 8/29	<a href="#">Fearon (1995)</a> (cont.)	
Wed 8/31	<a href="#">Lake (2010)</a>	
Fri 9/2	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 1–2	
<b>Information Asymmetry</b>		
Mon 9/5	<a href="#">Blainey (1973)</a> , ch. 8	
Wed 9/7	<a href="#">Bas and Schub (2016)</a>	
Fri 9/9	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 3	
<b>Commitment Problems</b>		
Mon 9/12	<a href="#">Powell (2006)</a>	
Wed 9/14	<a href="#">Bell and Johnson (2015)</a>	
Fri 9/16	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 4	<b>Data 1 due</b>
<b>Civil vs. Interstate Wars</b>		
Mon 9/19	<a href="#">Walter (2009)</a>	
Wed 9/21	<a href="#">Walter (1997)</a>	
Fri 9/23	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 5	<b>Response 1 due</b>
<b>Nuclear Weapons</b>		
Mon 9/26	<a href="#">Waltz (1990)</a>	
Wed 9/28	<a href="#">Rauchhaus (2009)</a>	
Fri 9/30	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 6	<b>Data 2 due</b>
<b>Third-Party Mediation</b>		
Mon 10/3	<a href="#">Kydd (2003)</a>	

Wed	10/5	<a href="#">Savun (2008)</a>	<b>Midterm handed out</b>
Fri	10/7	<i>No class.</i>	<b>Midterm due</b>
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<b>Borders and Territory</b>			
Mon	10/10	<a href="#">Toft (2014)</a>	
Wed	10/12	<a href="#">Zacher (2001)</a>	
Fri	10/14	<i>Fall break.</i>	
Mon	10/17	<a href="#">Simmons (2005)</a>	
Wed	10/19	<a href="#">Carter and Goemans (2011)</a>	
Fri	10/21	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 9	<b>Response 2 due</b>
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<b>Democracy and Dictatorship</b>			
Mon	10/24	<a href="#">Lake (1992)</a>	
Wed	10/26	<a href="#">Oneal and Russett (1999)</a>	
Fri	10/28	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 10	
Mon	10/31	<a href="#">Gibler (2007)</a>	
Wed	11/2	<a href="#">Weeks (2012)</a>	
Fri	11/4	<i>No new reading.</i>	<b>Data 3 due</b>
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<b>Leaders</b>			
Mon	11/7	<a href="#">Debs and Goemans (2010)</a>	
Wed	11/9	<a href="#">Croco (2011)</a>	
Fri	11/11	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 12	
Mon	11/14	<a href="#">Horowitz and Stam (2014)</a>	
Wed	11/16	<a href="#">Bertoli, Dafoe and Trager (2019)</a>	
Fri	11/18	<i>Thinking Clearly</i> ch. 11	<b>Response 3 due</b>
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<b>Public Opinion</b>			
Mon	11/28	<a href="#">Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020)</a>	
Wed	11/30	<a href="#">Tomz and Weeks (2013)</a>	
Fri	12/2	<i>No new reading.</i>	<b>Data 4 due</b>
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<b>Making and Keeping Peace</b>			
Mon	12/5	<a href="#">Fortna (2003)</a>	
Wed	12/7	<a href="#">Werner and Yuen (2005)</a>	
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<b>Final Exam</b>			
Mon	12/12		<b>Final handed out</b>
Wed	12/14		<b>Final due</b>
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## References

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