

THE CAUSES OF WAR, ACCORDING TO WALTZ

War and conflict are major features of international relations. Although well studied,¹ the complex causes of war are poorly understood, and there is little agreement among practitioners and academicians. This said, I believe that the analysis of Kenneth Waltz in his Man, the State and War can help clarify our thinking.

In his book, Waltz develops the three traditional attitudes about the cause of war:

1) war is caused primarily by man's nature; humans are defective, either evil or led by passion, not reason.

2) war is caused primarily by the nature of the society and its state; states and their governments can be either bad or misguided.

3) war is caused primarily by the international situation of anarchy; this anarchy causes war because there is nothing to prevent war.

He then discusses how people have tended to think in terms of a single attitude, therefore, overemphasizing a single factor – man, the state, or international anarchy. This overemphasis leads to a partial analysis that misses the critical relationships. Men are the decision-makers who decide to fight, but war is fought by men through the institutions and capabilities of the state. Men also create the state, but states and societies condition and, therefore, make men. Moreover, the behavior of men and states is shaped by the anarchy of the international system. The three factors are, therefore, interdependent. None is primary. All must be considered together.

He concludes that: 1) the **immediate or direct** causes of war are the acts of individuals (though not necessarily because of biological or psychological factors) and states and 2) the **permissive** cause of war is international anarchy. International anarchy describes the framework of world politics, but without considering man and the state there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy. Anarchy means there is no reliable process of reconciling conflicts of interest, because there is no government over the states. Given this situation, men acting for states and societies in the pursuit of their national interests can decide to go to war, because there is no government above them to control their actions. Men and their governments make war because, at times, it appears to be in their interests and because there is nothing to deter them or to compel them not to go to war. The anarchy of the international situation passively permits war.

[NOTE: Do not link the three traditional attitudes about the cause of war to the three levels of analysis approach to thinking about international relations, as some academicians tend to do. Waltz is using the three attitudes to make his points about war and the relationship between sovereignty and anarchy. The level of analysis approach also uses the international system, the

¹ Some useful references: Howard, The Causes of War, and Other Essays. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984); Vasquez, The War Puzzle. (NY: Cambridge UP, 1993); Rapoport, The Origins of Violence: Approaches to the Study of Conflict. (NY: Paragon House, 1989); and Levy, "The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence," in Tetlock et al., eds. Behavior, Society and Nuclear War, Volume 1 (NY: Oxford UP, 1989).

state, and man to organize thinking. However, this it does to focus the analysis and clarify critical aspects of the situation. If used carefully, it is not a single factor analysis. However, because each level focuses on a single factor, using this approach to study war could lead one to overemphasize a single factor.]