

Political Science 972: International Conflict
Discussion Questions for Week 2
Historical Development of War: Classical

1. Comparing war in the pre-gunpowder era (which for convenience I will call “classical”) and the contemporary (21st century) era, what characteristics can one find in common, and what characteristics are fundamentally different? Stated only slightly differently, does someone trying to understand contemporary conflict have anything to learn from conflict prior to 1650? [some of the other questions below pursue this in greater detail]

Subsidiary note: Does the answer change if we substitute “20th century” above?

2. What are the possible linkages between war and large-scale organized political activity found in civilized societies. In particular, what are the arguments for and against these two extreme positions:

- The institution of war was fundamental to the development and maintenance of civilization;
- War is a relic of pre-civilized times and is a major threat to civilization;

More generally, to what extent does organized violence (both the preparations for and implementations of) determine the political and social structures of a society in general? To what extent do the economic structures and technology determine the organization of violence? Have there been key turning points in history where the answers to these questions changed; what has caused those?

[This is, of course, one of those questions that people spend lifetimes trying to figure out, so don't be surprised if there appear to be arguments in favor of both positions. This assertion also applies to the remaining fifteen weeks of this class...]

3. Roger Spiller (CGSC) regards the European medieval period as a “desert” as far as military strategy is concerned—nothing of interest was written between the late Roman period and the Renaissance. Realists effectively say the same thing (also skipping the Roman Empire). Agree or disagree: is there anything to be learned from the functioning of organized conflict in the medieval system? To what extent was it a “system”?

4. What sort of military systems do you need to run a nice stable empire? What are the threats to such a system? Were there circumstances related to the military and/or the immediate neighborhood that led the Roman Empire to “fall”, never to recover despite countless efforts over the next 1000 year to accomplish this, whereas the Chinese empire simply cycled through periods of more or less central control for around 4000 years? What would an imperial system look like today, or have circumstances changed so much that this is inconceivable? [Of particular relevance: what is the difference, if any, between an imperial system and a unipolar system?]

5. For Ibn-Khaldun (and to a large extent, William McNeil), the fundamental dynamic in conflict is that of the herders and agriculturalists (who, in turn, support cities). Herders are physically strong, mobile, and “natural warriors” but have very limited technology. Cities (and their supporting farms) are wealthy but a sedentary life does not produce good warriors. Hence for Ibn Khaldun, history is a continual sequence of nomads conquering urban areas, being absorbed by those areas culturally, and after a few generations becoming vulnerable to other nomads. How universal is this model; how much does it affect our understanding of classical conflict?

6. What cultural, political or economic elements are most effective in limiting the levels of organized violence in a society (by "society" I mean a cultural area in general—a group of people who are interacting over a long period of time—not just a single state). To what extent have these constraints changed over time?

A closely related issue (courtesy William McNeil; Martin vanCreveld generalizes this to the issue of “Hollandization”—the rampaging Lutherans of the 17th century decided to settle down and merely become fabulously wealthy)—what are the tradeoffs between "raiding and trading"? To what extent can commercial exchange accomplish the same objectives as organized violence, and to what extent are the two distinct? To what extent does one type of activity consistently evolve into the other (particularly if one includes in the "trading" category taxation systems that work with minimal coercion). Has this changed significantly over time?

7. The classical period is generally considered to be relatively static in terms of technology, but some technological innovations occurred. What are the most important of these, and what were their implications.

8. Based on the global historical record, assess the relative importance of *technological* and *cultural* factors in determining the extent and character of politically-motivated violence. You might start addressing this by considering cases where:

- a. Character of war has changed significantly despite minimal changes in technology
- b. Character of war has changed significantly despite minimal changes in culture

9. To what extent does primitive conflict (that is, conflict in cultures that are not urbanized, literate or, for the most part, stratified) tell us *anything* about warfare in industrialized societies. Suppose that Keegan’s version of the Yanomamö is correct (there is a lot of controversy about the underlying evidence), should we care?

10. How consistent is the image of the role of the warrior in society across time and across cultures. What are some of the recurring images, what (if anything) seems to determine these, and to what extent is the mythical image of the warrior consistent with the reality? [Likely competing hypothesis: the mythical image of the warrior generally lags reality by about 50 to 100 years, i.e. in the memory of the old about how they remember the “good old days, ” rather than what is actually happening.] To what extent do pre-modern images influence modern images.