

WHY

THE ROOTS OF WAR

WE

AND THE PATHS TO PEACE

FIGHT

CHRISTOPHER BLATTMAN



WHY WE FIGHT



The Roots of War and
the Paths to Peace

CHRISTOPHER BLATTMAN

VIKING

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*To the internet café, now defunct, at the corner of Fifth Ngong Avenue and
Bishops Road, Nairobi*

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INTRODUCTION

Napoleon rang the doorbell a third time. “I know this is the place,” he said, turning to face us. I stood on the sidewalk beside his partner, Charles, and my colleague Megan. Megan and I, the obvious outsiders, were trailing the duo for the day.

Unlike us, Nap and Charles had grown up on Chicago’s West Side. Both had run fearsome local gangs in their youths. Nowadays, however, most folks in North Lawndale knew the gray-haired pair for their relentless prowling of the neighborhood’s drug corners and porch stoops—their efforts to coax younger versions of themselves away from a life of dope selling and violence. Guys like Johnny, who was clearly not answering his door.

Johnny led a neighborhood crew. Crews, mobs, cliques—old-timers like Nap kept tossing out terms like these for the young men dealing drugs and trading bullets on the streets of Lawndale. The word he never used was “gang.” “These aren’t gangs,” Nap told me, shaking his head. “We had organization, we had discipline, we had rules. But these kids . . . no way.” Today’s crews were fragmented, fractious versions of the large, unified criminal structures that once dominated Black neighborhoods like Lawndale. True, Nap was giving us the old ex-gang leader’s version of a “kids today” rant, but it was a tirade with truth.

It was a warm autumn day. Along the quiet tree-lined street, the leaves had begun to turn but had not yet fallen, and so the stoops of the three-story family homes were still well shaded. A few young men sat outside talking to friends, keeping an eye on the block. I was still new to Chicago at the time, and the quiet leafy street hardly resembled the image of criminal turf

I'd seen on TV. But this, Nap told us, this was the Holy Land. These few blocks were the birthplace of one of the largest and most influential street gangs in American history: the Vice Lords.

Down the street, some of the young men were staring at the spectacle from their porches: our little troop, neon vests over street clothes. Strangers were unusual in the Holy Land. And we were knocking on the chief's door.

Some people would have given up on Johnny at that moment, but there's a reason I call Nap and Charles relentless. Charles hollered, "Hey! Any of you guys know where Johnny's at?" and strode straight toward the closest knot of young men.

All across the city, outreach workers like Nap and Charles were chasing down a thousand Johnnies—the one thousand men we figured were most likely to pull a trigger in the months ahead. The previous year, 2016, murders in Chicago had spiked by an astonishing 58 percent. Nap and Charles represented a new kind of response, to get those numbers down.

Word had gotten around about the goods Nap and Charles were dealing. "You guys from that program?" one of the young men asked. He immediately relaxed and grinned. That program was offering a transition to a new life—eighteen months of a legitimate job and paycheck, with about ten hours of behavioral therapy woven in each week. The job was what interested him most. "What I got to do to get in?" another asked.

Just as Nap was starting his spiel, Johnny's door swung open. A short, confident young man with bright eyes emerged. He was wearing a Superman T-shirt and fitted black sweatpants, lean and well built, like the track athlete he'd once been. A little girl about two years old followed him out. "Sorry," he said, "we were sleeping."

Johnny's brother used to run the mob on the block, but he'd been shot and killed a month before by a rival crew. Now Johnny was "Lil' Chief." He looked us up and down: "What's going on?" As his daughter rode her tricycle up and down the sidewalk, Nap and Charles gave him the pitch on a new life. If they could get Johnny in, with his cred and charisma, other men would follow. And, they hoped, the program would lower the risk that Johnny's crew would retaliate against their rivals. Later on Nap would say,

“Did you see how those young men gathered around him like that?” Megan and I nodded. “That’s what a chief looks like.”

Three weeks later, walking home from a day of manual labor at his new job, a car pulled up. Lil’ Chief took sixteen bullets to his right arm, chest, and legs. Fortunately, his old track training kicked in. Johnny managed to sprint to safety in a corner store, bleeding from sixteen places all over the tile floor. Amazingly, he lived. But Johnny couldn’t escape his war.

Why? Why were groups of young men like him embroiled in gun-wielding feuds, killing over and over and over again? What could a couple of old guys like Nap and Charles, let alone an outsider like me, do about it?

These weren’t questions I’d ever expected to ask or answer. But once you witness the cruel extravagance of violence, it’s hard to care about anything else. Even when you see it from a position of safety with the privilege of distance. Everything else fades in importance. Almost two decades ago, that’s what happened to me.

WHY VIOLENCE MATTERS

Before the war came, a drive across northern Uganda took you over dry, dusty dirt roads, through miles of swaying grass taller than your head. Green when the rains came, brown when they didn’t, the long stalks waved endlessly over flat, arid plains, interrupted only by the occasional trading post or pasture.

Most Acholi families, farmers and herders by profession, lived in clusters of circular huts, with smooth mud walls and conical thatch roofs, in the midst of their fields of maize and cattle. This area of the country, Acholiland, once held more cows than people. It must have been beautiful.

By the time I landed in the north, the grasses were still there, but the cows, the crops, and the picturesque huts were long gone. A civil war had raged for almost two decades. Fear of rebels and the Ugandan army had pushed those families, almost two million people, into dense camps no more than a few miles from their empty and overgrown lands.

The camps were filled with the same round brown homes with the same thatch roofs. But now, instead of idyllic homesteads nestled among greenery and livestock, there were thousands upon thousands of huts laid out on brown bare earth, baking in the sun, cramped together so tightly that you needed to crouch to pass between their eaves. These were places of despair.

The government had cleared the countryside of people and thrust them into these squalid settlements. It made it easier for soldiers to hunt for rebels and harder for insurgents to steal food and supplies—a classic counterinsurgency strategy. It was also a war crime, since it denied millions of people sustenance and freedom.

Forbidden from tilling their nearby lands, these families barely subsisted on the bags of beans and flour trucked in every week by the UN. The doors of their huts were made from gleaming tin cans, hammered flat, all with the identical message “Refined vegetable oil. Not to be sold or exchanged. Brought to you by the American people.”

This is not where I expected to be. I was thirty years old, a PhD student in economics at Berkeley. Economists did not hang out in active war zones and displacement camps. My dissertation committee had been unanimous: “Don’t go.” Yet here I was. What, I asked myself, was I doing?

You see, I was training in a tribe that cared about income and its expansion above all else. That obsession is what had brought me to East Africa in the first place, to study industry and economic growth in Nairobi, a peaceful city a few hundred miles from northern Uganda. The war was small, contained, far away, and hence ignorable. That meant, like the millions of others in that bustling capital, I did my work mostly unaware of the tragedy nearby. That is, until one day a con artist struck up a conversation with me over lunch. As he distracted me, his partner nabbed my backpack, laptop and all. So I spent the rest of my trip in internet cafés, working at Kenya’s glacial dial-up speed. If I ever meet that con artist again, I owe him a grateful hug.

Dial-up meant that every email took ten painful minutes to load. There wasn’t much to do during those long electronic interludes, so it was natural

to talk with others idling at computers nearby. One day I turned to the woman beside me and we began to chat.

Jeannie Annan had just returned from working in northern Uganda's neglected war. A humanitarian worker and a psychology PhD student, she eyed me suspiciously. I was wearing a suit. Good things seldom came from Westerners wearing suits in Africa. But I seemed interested in the war and informed about what was happening, which was more than she could say for most of the people she met. So she gave me a chance.

A few months later, I was traveling the north's dry, dusty roads beside her, marveling at the miles of endless grass, hoping a rebel unit wouldn't pop out. Mostly (I admit) I went because I was interested in Jeannie. But we also had an idea. After decades of conflict, no one knew the true toll of violence on the young men and women displaced, shot at, and conscripted. Jeannie understood the war and the psychological toll of violence, while I knew economics, surveys, and statistics. We joined forces. We hired a local team and spent the next two years surveying people affected by the fighting. Our study was trying to put some hard numbers to the savage toll, discover programs that could help, and test what works. The brutal costs of conflict were everywhere to see. We were the despondent accountants.

I had not yet fallen in love with her, but after a month in northern Uganda, I was well on my way. We started the project together, wrote our dissertations together, graduated, and got our first jobs at Yale together. Today we've been married fifteen years and have a long list of research papers. Our most important collaborations, however, are an eleven-year-old girl and a nine-year-old boy.

That chance encounter over a dial-up connection also changed my career. In northern Uganda, I learned about violence more savage and distressing than I'd ever imagined. The young men and women I met told me stories so horrible I don't even want to try to recount them. I can't do them justice. Those were some of the most emotionally punishing months of my life. In the end, they made me rethink everything.

There and in the years that followed, I learned a society's success isn't just about expanding its wealth. It is about a rebel group not enslaving your

eleven-year-old daughter as a wife. It is about sitting in front of your home without the fear of a drive-by shooting and a bullet gone astray. It is about being able to go to a police officer, a court, or a mayor and get some semblance of justice. It is about the government never being allowed to push you off your land and stick you in a concentration camp. Another economist, Amartya Sen, called this “development as freedom.” It is hard to imagine something more important to be free of than violence.

As it happens, fighting also makes us poor. Nothing destroys progress like conflict—crushing economies, destroying infrastructure, or killing, maiming, and setting back an entire generation.^[1] War undermines economic growth in indirect ways as well. Most people and businesses won’t do the basic things that lead to development when they expect bombings, ethnic cleansings, or arbitrary justice; they won’t specialize in tasks, trade, invest their wealth, or develop new techniques and ideas.

This is true for cities like Chicago, too, where every year a few hundred shootings probably cost the population a few hundred million dollars. The economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith predicted as much over two and a half centuries ago: “Little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism,” he wrote in 1755, “but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice.”^[2] Clearly, if I cared about prosperity, equal rights, and justice, I had to care about war.



LET ME BE CLEAR WHAT I MEAN, HOWEVER. WHEN I ~~SAY~~ I DON'T JUST MEAN COUNTRIES DUKING out. I mean any kind of prolonged, violent struggle between groups. That includes villages, clans, gangs, ethnic groups, religious sects, political factions, and nations. Wildly different as these may be, their origins have much in common. We’ll see that with Northern Irish zealots, Colombian cartels, European tyrants, Liberian rebels, Greek oligarchs, Chicago gangs, Indian mobs, Rwandan genocidaires, English soccer hooligans, and American invaders.

Some people look at the fighting in North Lawndale or northern Uganda and think, “Oh, those places are at it again,” or, “My society is long

past that,” or simply, “We are different.” But that’s wrong. True, all these levels of violence and all these societies are distinctive. But even if you’re one of the people reading this book from the refuge of a prosperous and peaceful place, we’ll see how the logic that explains fighting far away also explains the tumult in your country’s past, the ongoing battles between people not so different from you, or why your government (or its allies) still attack other nations. My goal is to give you a framework to understand the common forces that drive these unnatural disasters.^[3]

Expansive as that sounds, though, I’m not going to try to explain every kind of contest. When I said that war is a prolonged, violent struggle between groups, I chose my words carefully. One is *prolonged*. Lengthy fights are different from brief skirmishes. Short and deadly quarrels are important, but they’re easier to explain through idiosyncrasy, or momentary miscalculations. The real puzzle is why opponents would spend years or even decades destroying themselves and the objects of their desire.

Another key term is *groups*. Individuals fight all the time, but a lot of this interpersonal violence is reactive and short-lived. A book on that would dwell on the traits we inherit from our primate ancestors, our ingrained fight-or-flight instincts, and the ease with which humans identify with members of their in-group. Wars, however, are long struggles where reactions like these recede in importance. Our reflexes are still relevant, as we’ll see. But big groups are deliberative and strategic. This means I’ll only talk about why individuals discriminate, brawl, lynch, or kill when that tells us something about larger group behavior.^[4]

The final crucial word is *violent*. It’s normal for groups to compete bitterly. But one of the most common errors people make is to confuse the reasons a contest is intense and hostile with the reasons that a rivalry turns violent. You see, acrimonious competition is normal, but prolonged violence between groups is not. Wars shouldn’t happen, and most of the time they don’t.

WAR IS THE EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE

The fact is, even the bitterest of enemies prefer to loathe one another in peace. That's easy to forget. Our attention gets captured by the wars that do happen, like the ones in northern Uganda or North Lawndale. News reports and history books do the same—they focus on the handful of violent struggles that occur. Few write books about the countless conflicts avoided. But we can't just look at the hostilities that happen any more than a medical student should study only the terminally ill and forget that most people are healthy.

This book tries to pull us away from this unrepresentative view, because it's just not true. Take ethnic and religious violence, for instance. Political scientists have tallied all the ethnic and sectarian groups in places like Eastern Europe, Central Asia, South Asia, and Africa, where riots and purges are supposedly endemic. They counted the number of pairs that are close enough to compete with one another, and then they looked at the number that actually fought. In Africa, they counted about one major case of ethnic violence per year out of two thousand potential ones. In India, they found less than one riot per ten million people per year, and death rates that are at most sixteen per ten million. (To put this in context, sixteen per hundred thousand is a moderate murder rate in a large US city—a level one hundred times higher than deaths from sectarian riots in India). Even if these tabulations are off by a huge amount, it's clear that most groups, even hostile ones, live side by side without fighting. Enemies prefer to loathe one another in peace.^[5]

We see this at the international level too. There was the long confrontation between America and the Soviets, who managed to divide Europe (indeed the world) into two parts without nuking one another. There is the perpetual standoff between Pakistan and India, the gloomy impasse between North and South Korea, and the constant deadlock over the South China Sea. There was the hasty but peaceful exit of France and England from their African colonies as soon as it became clear they might fight for independence, plus the nonviolent Soviet retreat from Eastern Europe. And then there are the societies riven by political factions, angry and polarized by class and ideology, who nonetheless compete in parliaments rather than

on battlefields. Somehow, however, we tend to forget these events. We write tomes about great wars, and overlook the quiet peaces. We pay attention to the gory spectacles, the most salient events. Meanwhile, the quieter moments of compromise slip from memory.^[6]

This focus on the failures is a kind of selection bias, a logical error to which we're all prone. The mistake has two important consequences. One is that we exaggerate how much we fight. You start to hear things like "the world is full of conflict," or "humanity's natural state is war," or "an armed confrontation between [insert great powers here] is inevitable." But none of those statements is true.

Overlooking all the conflicts avoided entails a second and greater harm, however; we get the roots of war and the paths to peace all wrong. When people focus on the times peace failed, and trace back the circumstances and events to find the causes, they often find a familiar set: flawed leaders, historic injustices, dire poverty, angry young men, cheap weapons, and cataclysmic events. War seems to be the inevitable result. But this ignores the times conflict was avoided. If people also looked at the times rivals didn't fight, they'd see a lot of the same preceding conditions. All these so-called causes of war are commonplace. Prolonged violence is not. Things that are present in both the failures and the successes are probably not the roots of war.

To understand why, let me tell you about another famous example of selection bias, from World War II. When American aircraft returned from missions over German positions, they were covered in bullet holes along their main bodies and wings. So the US military told its engineers to add more armor to these parts of the plane. A statistician named Abraham Wald disagreed. He said the engineers should do the opposite: shield the engines and cockpit, where returning planes showed no damage at all. He'd deduced something crucial: the missing bullet holes must be on the missing planes. Shots to the cockpit and engine sent those planes crashing. That's why we didn't see bombers with damage to those parts of the craft. The military was mistakenly focusing on a select sample, and so it got the causes of failure

wrong. This is one of those mistakes that are obvious in retrospect, and yet we all make them again and again.

The US military was focused on the successes—a kind of selection problem known as survivor bias. When it comes to war, we're prone to the opposite kind of selection—we pay too much attention to the times peace failed. It's as if the US military engineers looked only at the bombers that went down. Those planes are covered in gunfire from tip to tail. When we do that, it's hard to know which shots were fatal because we aren't comparing them to the planes that survived. The same thing happens when you take a war and trace it back to its so-called roots. Every history of every rivalry is riddled with a barrage of bullet holes, like poverty and grievances and guns. But the aggrieved seldom revolt, most poor young rabble-rousers don't rebel, and the most heavily armed groups prefer a cold war to a hot one.

To find the real roots of fighting, we need to pay attention to the struggles that stay peaceful. By this I don't mean happy and harmonious. Rivalries can be hostile and contentious. The groups may be polarized. They're often heavily armed. They disparage and threaten one another, and they ostentatiously display their weapons. That is all normal. Bloodshed and destruction are not.

My hope is that now you'll start to see this everywhere. When you next pick up a newspaper or a history book, amid all the bombast and belligerence, you'll start to pay attention to the politicians making speeches, pushing for conciliation. You'll notice the rivals who fire rockets at one another for a week or two, then halt hostilities. You'll hear tales of councillors whispering, "Peace, Sire," in their sovereign's ear. You'll note the veteran generals reminding the more inexperienced and enthusiastic officers what misery awaits them. The easiest to spot will be the treasurers and other keepers of the purse who soberly point out that war simply cannot be afforded. All these agonies and costs are what drives most rivals to compromise.

WHY EVEN THE BITTEREST RIVALS PREFER PEACE

The voices counseling peace usually win out for one simple reason: war is ruinous. It massacres soldiers, ravages civilians, starves cities, plunders stores, disrupts trade, demolishes industry, and bankrupts governments. About 2,500 years ago, the Chinese general Sun Tzu put it aptly in *The Art of War*: “There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare.” Even the bitterest of enemies foresee the consequences of fighting. These costs are terrible. That is why adversaries strive for an arrangement that avoids risk and destruction. One-off killings and skirmishes take place in the heat of the moment. Then cooler heads prevail.

The cooler heads look for ways to compromise. As Winston Churchill once said, “Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war.” For every war that ever was, a thousand others have been averted through discussion and concession. Negotiation and fighting are alternative ways of getting what you want. That’s what Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung meant in 1938 when he said, “Politics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed.” Mao was echoing the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz, who, a century before, reminded us that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.”

What we must not forget, however, is that one of these two strategies is devastating, while the other is not. “Compromise or fight” gives rivals a stark choice: carve up an undamaged prize peacefully, or each pay an enormous cost to gamble over the shrunken, shattered remains. War’s destructiveness means that both sides are almost always better off finding a peaceful split than going to war.

That’s why, throughout history, most foes opted for the peaceful path. Starting seven thousand years ago, for instance, civilizations regularly bought off so-called barbarians—mobile societies of mounted herders, skilled at fighting—to save their cities from getting sacked. Similarly, most empires on record have offered weaker states the option of submission and tribute instead of invasion. Meanwhile, in small towns and villages, a murderer’s clan paid blood money to the victim’s family to avoid cycles of

retribution and feuding. They realized it's better to compensate than to fight.

Or consider the centuries-long struggles between European commoners and aristocrats. When arms, agriculture, or demography favored the peasantry, and the masses grew richer and demanded more rights, the highborn faced a choice: fight or concede. Historians pay more attention to the great peasant rebellions—the handful of times aristocrats were unwilling to comply. More often, however, the elites relinquished some privileges—enfranchising the more powerful merchants, reducing rents for the most troublesome sharecroppers, or distributing bread to the unruliest urban mobs. Europe's slow democratization was a long-running series of revolutions without revolt.

Nations also prefer to placate rather than battle. Before national borders solidified nearly a century and a half ago, rising nations regularly bought or seized territory without a shot, while the weaker powers quietly acquiesced. The European powers tried to avoid warring over colonies, and so the tiny group of monarchs held congresses to calmly carve up Eastern Europe, Africa, and other frontiers. Likewise, a rising United States purchased Alaska from Russia and a large swath of the Midwest from France, and it even tried buying Cuba from Spain as an alternative to invading.

Today's territorial concessions are typically more subtle: rights over underground oil reserves or who gets to build a hydro plant on the Nile River; or (in ongoing negotiations) who controls the South China Sea. Most of the important elements in the negotiations, however, aren't even land. Hegemons from the United States to Russia to China twist the arms of weaker nations to curtail their weapons programs, support a policy, or change a law. Armed resistance is seldom these governments' best response, however unfair the international system might get. Meanwhile, within countries, political factions find ingenious ways to redistribute political influence when power shifts. And powerful minorities get guarantees of a disproportionate number of parliamentary seats or vetoes. It is peaceful bargains all the way down.

Unfortunately, peace doesn't necessarily mean equality or justice. As so many of these examples show, if one side has most of the bargaining power, it can expect to set its terms. The weaker rival might resent its tiny share of influence and spoils, but it'll acquiesce. The world is full of such terrible but peaceful inequities: minority ethnic groups who control the military and the government, dominating the majority; narrow aristocracies that hold all the land and manufactories in their nation, leaving little for the peasants; or military superpowers that dictate the world order to other countries. For most underdogs, the costs and risks of revolution are too great. However unfair, it doesn't make sense to revolt.



COMPROMISE IS THE RULE BECAUSE, FOR THE MOST PART, GROUPS BEHAVE STRATEGICALLY. BY THAT that they, like players of poker or chess, are trying hard to think ahead, to discern their opponents' strengths and plans, and to choose their actions based on what they expect their opponents to do. They're not perfect. They make mistakes or lack information. But they have huge incentives to do their best.

The science of strategy is called game theory. It works out how one side will behave based on what it believes its opponent will do. Starting with the first chapter, we'll walk through the strategic choice: compromise or fight. We won't use this game theory blindly, however. Some people use these models to paint a picture of an unreasonably rational race—*Homo economicus*. We'll be interested in this species because they still manage to commit an awful lot of violence. (As we'll see, in special circumstances, fighting is your best strategy.) But groups and their leaders are not always logical or all-seeing, and collections of people don't hold coherent beliefs that the body politic faithfully represents. So this will also be a book about *Homo unreasonabilus* and *Homo righteousus*, plus other breeds of humankind that historians, psychologists, biologists, and sociologists have discovered. Chapter by chapter, we're going to meet each one. But our simple game of strategy will always remain our frame of reference because