



# WHY WE FIGHT

## CHRISTOPHER BLATTMAN

**WAR IS HARD.** Most people think war is easy and peace hard, but that's wrong. **Why We Fight** shows that war is hard and peace is easier than most people think. The problem is that we only pay attention to the conflicts that happen. But two weeks into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India accidentally launched a cruise missile at Pakistan. Calm ensued. And for 20 years before his invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin tried every other means to influence Ukraine short of invasion.

**Why We Fight** starts with a simple message: Most enemies prefer to loathe in peace. The reason is fighting is so ruinous. That's true for every level of society, whether it be gangs, villages, political blocs, ethnic groups, religious factions, or nations. That logic also tells us why these groups do fight. In every instance, something equally powerful led leaders to ignore the risk and destruction and battle in spite of them. Every answer to why we fight is a reason that societies or their leaders ignore the terrible costs.

## 5 REASONS FOR WAR SOCIETIES AND THEIR LEADERS GO TO WAR WHEN THEY ARE:

### 1 UNACCOUNTABLE

When leaders are unchecked and unaccountable to their people, they ignore the costs of fighting and can pursue their own agendas.

Consider Vladimir Putin. A personalized autocrat, he doesn't have to weigh the interests of his soldiers and citizens. He can pursue whatever helps him preserve control.

### 2 IDEOLOGICAL

Leaders have intangible and ideological incentives for war too—God's glory, freedom, or some nationalist vision. They're willing to pay the costs of war for these ethereal goals, evil and noble.

Consider Putin again. Most accounts dwell on his nationalist obsessions and desires for a glorious legacy. He's willing to pay the cost of war for these ideological reasons.

### 3 BIASED

Human have amazing abilities to cling to mistaken beliefs. We can be overconfident, underestimating the ruin of war and overestimating our chances of victory. And we demonize and misjudge our opponents. These misperceptions can carry us to war.

When newspapers report that Putin is insulated and isolated from the truth, underestimating Ukrainian and Western resolve, these are stories of misperceptions.

### 4 UNCERTAIN

In the murky runup to war, you don't know your enemy's strength or resolve. And you know your enemy has reasons to bluff, hoping they'll extract a better deal without fighting. Sometimes the only response to a bluff is to call and invade.

Consider Russia's invasion again. How unified would the West be? How much would Ukrainians resist? How competent was the Russian military. All these things were fundamentally uncertain. Many experts were genuinely surprised. This is not just a tale of bias and misperception but of uncertainty.

### 5 UNRELIABLE

When a declining power faces a rising one, how can they trust the rising power to commit to peace? Better to pay the brutal costs of war now, to lock in your advantage.

In 2022, Russia was at peak leverage. Ukraine could eventually get drones and defensive missiles. And Ukraine was growing more democratic—to Putin, a dangerous example of freedom nearby. And how could Ukraine commit to stop either move? Commitment problems meant that, after exhausting every other option, Russia could lock in its leverage by attacking.

## AND FINALLY...THE PATHS TO PEACE

The best reason to try to understand these five causes of war is that they can reveal why some societies are stable, peaceful, and successful. **Why We Fight** tackles this topic and shows that stable societies have built themselves some insulation from all five kinds of failure, through strategies such as interdependence, checks and balances, violence-reducing institutions, and interventions.



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