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Survey Says: War Is the Irrational Choice

by John Bohannon on 15 February 2011, 7:04 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [6 Comments](#)

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How many lives would you be willing to sacrifice to remove a murderous dictator like Saddam Hussein? Most of the models that researchers use to study conflicts like the Iraq war assume that civilians and leaders make a rational calculation: If the total cost of the war is less than the cost of the alternatives, they will support war. But according to a new study, those models are wrong. Surveys of people in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other violent situations suggest that participants consistently ignored quantifiable costs and benefits, relying instead on "sacred values." The finding could lead to better predictions of when conflicts will escalate to violence.

Models of rational behavior predict many of society's patterns, such as the prevalence of tax evasion and union strikes. But seemingly irrational behaviors like war—in which the measurable costs often far outweigh the measurable benefits—have stumped researchers going back to Charles Darwin. The prospect of crippling economic burdens and huge numbers of deaths doesn't necessarily sway people from their positions on whether going to war is the right or wrong choice. One possible explanation is that people are not weighing the pros and cons at all, but rather using a moral logic of "sacred values"—convictions that trump all other considerations—that cannot be quantified.

To try to capture people in the act of making such decisions, psychologist Jeremy Ginges of the New School for Social Research in New York City and anthropologist Scott Atran of École Normale Supérieure in Paris challenged people around the world with a series of difficult questions.

They started by surveying 656 Israeli settlers in the West Bank. The researchers asked the settlers about the hypothetical dismantlement of their settlement as part of a peace agreement with Palestinians. Some subjects were asked about their willingness to engage in nonviolent protests, whereas others were asked about violence. Besides their willingness to violently resist eviction, the subjects rated how effective they thought the action would be and how morally right the decision was. If the settlers are making the decision rationally, in line with mainstream models, their willingness to engage in a particular form of protest should depend mostly on their estimation of its effectiveness. But if sacred values come into play, that calculus should be clouded.

When it came to nonviolent options such as picketing and blocking streets, the rational behavior model predicted settlers' decisions. But in deciding whether to engage in violence, [the settlers defied the rational behavior models](#), the researchers report today in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*. Rather than how effective they thought violence would be in saving their homes, the settlers' willingness to engage in violent protest depended only on how morally correct they considered that option to be.

In a series of follow-up surveys of U.S. college students and citizens in Nigeria, the researchers confronted subjects with hypothetical hostage situations. They were asked if they would approve of a solution—which was either diplomatic or violent—for freeing the prisoners. The chance of success varied in terms of the number of hostages who might die. For example, in one version of the survey, subjects were told that 200 hostages would likely be

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Sacred values. A survey posing tough choices revealed that when it comes to violent conflict, people don't weigh pros and cons.

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saved by a military rescue but that there was a two-thirds chance that all would die.

The results revealed again that when people weighed the decision to engage in violence, they were insensitive to the quantifiable costs and benefits—the number of deaths—and were swayed instead by the chance of saving lives, even if it was a poor gamble. For nonviolent actions, their decisions were dictated by the actual number of lives saved. "Decisions about diplomacy were hypersensitive to quantity," the researchers note, maximizing the number of lives likely to be saved. "It is interesting to note that we did not find much in the way of gender effects," the researchers add. Only in the survey of Israeli settlers were men more supportive of violence.

"In addition to the idea sounding right to me, I think that the paper does mobilize some nice evidence to support the case" that morals trump reason when it comes to violent conflict, says Michael Spagat, an economist at Royal Holloway, University of London. For example, if people really were rational about their decision to support or oppose the Iraq War, then they should be weighing the death toll carefully. "If I think that deposing Saddam Hussein is worth 50,000 lives but no more," he says, "then I should flip when I discover that it has cost hundreds of thousands of lives. But my sense is that hardly anyone actually behaves this way." However, Spagat says that the study is limited by its reliance on hypothetical situations. "Moral posturing is cheap," he says, and people are often poor predictors of their own behavior, especially in life-or-death situations.

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Paul Entwistle

If we consider Iraq, there were no published Targeted Performance Management goals (that I know of) such as how much cost or death was acceptable. There is no evidence anyone cared - and their policy was not to bother counting and lie about it. Surely in the USA - at least under Bush - the driving motivation was twofold:

1. book as much high-margin business for Bush's gangster cronies as possible for arms, destruction and subsequent rebuild and 'newly-privatised' services - with funding (irrespective of affordability) from the public purse and later by diverting most Iraqi oil revenues. If you investigate, I think you will find that objective has been brilliantly achieved.
2. The Neo-cons were highly influenced by (and mostly comprised - per Richard Perle who was among their Directorate - on British TV) by the Israeli/Jewish lobby in the US, who presumably wanted the effective destruction for the foreseeable of a Palestinian supporter - again, brilliantly achieved.

I'm not sure you are focusing on the right drivers in some of these cases!

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philgorp

Untill man conquers human nature, war will always be a sad reality

Wednesday, February 16, 2011, 20:21:56 – Flag – Like – Reply



tadchem

I recently had occasion to scan teh King James Bible for references to 'war'. The word appears 225 times in 220 verses. The vast majority of these references are either exhortations in its favor, or reports of its occurrence. Only in two places could I find pleas that it would no longer occur.

Thursday, February 17, 2011, 09:11:16 – Flag – Like – Reply

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Man can not conquer human nature, as long as rich and corporate grid exist. They don't care for common middleclass, they want their monies for their luxury... We can see they started going after union, is the perfect sign of it. There are too many ways they will win as long as middle class people do not wake up and rise with third middle neutral party for themselves. Look at by forming Tea party, foster child of Neo Conservative, we all loose for sure... Why, because we are not united.

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**tadchem**

When one of the opponents in a confrontation is irrational, it is only logical for the rational adversary to be prepared for an irrational act.

A religious dictatorship that believes that war can be "Holy" is the ultimate in irrationality, and the greatest current threat to world peace.

As an NRA acquaintance says, "We do not carry guns to attack those in front of us; we carry guns to defend those behind us."

Wednesday, February 16, 2011, 11:00:34 – Flag – Like – Reply

**jim**

defending "those behind us" sounds like a very morally correct thing to do.

Given this study's implications, I would suspect that defenders would be prone to irrationally engaging in violence against perceived threats even when ineffective, unwarranted and excessive.

For example they may use a lot of violence against a very small threat because they think they are right. Overreaction to fundamentalists may be as dangerous as fundamentalist violence.

Wednesday, February 16, 2011, 12:16:52 – Flag – Like – Reply