



2021-048

## *The Politics of the First World War: A Course in Game Theory and International Security* by Scott Wolford.

New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018. Pp. xxxi, 436. ISBN 978-1-108-44437-8.

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*For years, I've been frustrated by the lack of options for teaching undergraduate international security in the way that I conduct my own research on the topic: through the construction and analysis of game-theoretic models. —Scott Wolford.*

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Historian and game theorist Scott Wolford (Univ. of Texas) has written a textbook for a new type of international relations course, linking historical case studies with game theory. His chosen subject, World War I, that endlessly fruitful source of hard questions for international relations specialists examining political/military issues of lingering relevance.

In his subsequent discussions, Wolford defaults to the classic game theory “4-cell matrix model” reminiscent of the “prisoners dilemma,” as well as decision trees and searches for the elusive “Nash Equilibrium” (where players’ strategy changes become disadvantageous). The author provides well sourced analyses of the events and decisions in question. The text is limited by the binary nature of the game theory matrix and accompanying equations. The ghosts of Schlieffen, Kitchener, Joffre, Lloyd George, Jellicoe, Tirpitz, Wilson et al. would find such analysis reductionist. They believed they were analyzing real-world questions of the utmost importance and complexity. Wolford counters that

To theorize is to simplify, to leave things out, to cut away the inessential, to make the puzzling explicable. Anything less takes us further away from what makes us need a theory, a map, or a metaphor in the first place. This is where the spare, mathematical structure of game theory can help us make sense of the otherwise rickety, chaotic, and bewildering historical record of international war and peace. (10–11)

I believe he has a point.

Chapter 1 (of the book’s 15) is an overview of the Great War, “one of those rare events that lives up to its historiographical hype” (4). Wolford indicates the key questions he will examine in later chapters; these, he stresses, will lie in the realm of political science and not history per se. To my dismay, he refuses to cast blame on any belligerent nation or leader. Instead, he presupposes that leaders on both sides doubtless believed they were making the sort of rational choices, that you or I might make in the same circumstances.

Chapters 2, 5, 11, and 12 bring game theory to bear on, respectively, the decision to go to war, information uncertainty, commitment to terminating the war, and information uncertainty with specific regard to ending the war. Accepting the explanatory authority of game theory in these chapters is the price of admission to Wolford’s course.

The remaining chapters address particular subjects: in 3, the Anglo-German naval race (think dreadnoughts); in 4, the July Crisis and the outbreak of a general war; in 6, the British entry into

the war on the heels of the German invasion of Belgium; in 7, coalition warfare as it pertained to both the Entente and the Triple Alliance; in 8, the shift from maneuver to attritional warfare early on, at least on the Western Front; in 9, the entry of Italy and the Ottoman Empire into the evolving global struggle; in 10, the naval war in the North Sea, which remained mostly limited compared to the “total war” being waged on land; in 13, unrestricted submarine warfare and the Americans’ reaction to it; in 14, the endgame in 1918 and the relatively sudden German defeat. Finally, chap. 15 sums up the catastrophe of the Great War and what it means for the study of contemporary international relations and political science.

In chap. 6, Wolford methodically construes Britain’s delayed entry into the war as a matter of information, or its lack: “The problem for Britain in the July Crisis is that it’s not sure whether Germany’s aims are limited or unlimited” (143). If they were in fact limited, it made no sense for England to enter the war. But Germany’s offensive into Belgium signaled that it meant to crush France after absorbing Belgium, thus upending the European balance of power; capturing the Channel ports would thereby pose a mortal threat to Great Britain. In this latter scenario, joining France and Belgium would make good strategic sense for the British.

Using matrix models and equations, the author demonstrates that Germans were bent on an unlimited solution from the outset, which left just one side needing to play a “guessing game.” Britain declared war after Germany invaded, which it fully expected: “Germany knows that Britain will defend Belgium; it just doesn’t care” (148). The General Staff always knew the next war would entail a conflict with Great Britain; Ludendorff had acknowledged this in a 1912 planning document (148n). And, too, a few weeks after war broke out, a German Foreign Ministry official drafted the Septemberprogramm, whose list of war aims amounted, “in no uncertain terms, to the destruction of the prevailing balance of power” (151).

Chapter 10 introduces an intriguing theoretical guessing game, in which both British and German naval leaders decided to pursue a “limited war” strategy in the North Sea. The Royal Navy’s “distant blockade” strategy based the Grand Fleet in the Orkneys and other northern British Isles, while deploying minefields between Scotland and Norway. This kept most neutral cargo vessels from reaching German ports. The German High Seas Fleet remained in port through most of the war, protected by its own extensive minefields. German battlecruisers’ rare attacks on the British coast early on proved too risky to attempt more often. Some British leaders wanted to blockade the German coast and implement the “Copenhagen strategy” of directly attacking enemy vessels in their ports. Caution prevailed and both sides thereafter hewed to a restrictive war strategy.

The most drastic exception to the limited war strategy was the High Seas Fleet sortie (31 May 1916) that resulted in the Battle of Jutland (or Skagerrak). The British took heavy losses but kept the upper hand strategically, while the German fleet was very lucky to escape to its protected anchorages. Wolford observes that “Germany’s decision to save its fleet is made easier, however, by the Royal Navy’s decision not to pursue the campaign further once German ships chose to break off contact” (269). But the British commander, Admiral Jellicoe, though he chose not to fight a night battle, had every intention of resuming the fight at dawn, in hopes of catching the Germans outside their protective minefields. But recent analysis of communications intelligence reveals that Jellicoe was deliberately kept in the dark about German intentions. British Naval intelligence was deciphering German message traffic and immediately deduced where the enemy fleet was heading; they considered this information to be too sensitive to transmit by wireless to Jellicoe,

who guessed wrong about the possible course his opponent would steer.<sup>1</sup> Wolford acknowledges that these rare confrontations attest to a willingness by both sides to abandon the limited war strategy if the situation permitted.

The topic of unilateral indecision discussed in chap. 6 recurs in chap. 13: Germany's decision to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917 was based on a long-maturing determination in spite of the obvious consequence—the entry of the United States into the war.

By late 1916, Germany views the United States as a de facto member of the Entente. With American intervention likely no matter what it does on the high seas, Germany's leaders declare a war zone around the British Isles, sinking any and all ships that might be delivering war material that sustains Britain's war effort before, according to the overly optimistic projections of Admiral Holtzendorff, American troops can land in sufficient numbers to turn the tide against the Central Powers. (371–72)

Once again, though the United States may have been weighing a decision for war (justifying Wolford's game theory analysis),

With Entente strength on the rise thanks to a practically inevitable American intervention, Germany's leaders roll the dice because not doing so would lead to certain disaster.... "I don't give a damn about America," Ludendorff says in early 1917, expressing his view that, consistent with Hindenburg's view of the inevitability of American intervention, a new bid for victory over Britain shouldn't wait, especially for the incredible promise of American restraint. (372)

Indulging in game theory modeling of episodes like this or the British entry into the war in 1914 seems almost unnecessary and belies the author's promise not to assign blame.<sup>2</sup> Still, Wolford's fair-minded readers (and the fortunate students in his course) may excuse all this, given the deep practical education in game-theory methodology provided in *The Politics of the First World War*.

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1. See Jason Hines, "Sins of Omission and Commission: A Reassessment of the Role of Intelligence in the Battle of Jutland," *Journ. of Military Hist.* 72 (2008) 117–53, and my "Reflections on the Battle of Jutland," *Wavell Room* (28 Nov 2019), available online.

2. The historical record, cited in passing by Wolford, clearly points toward the "Fischer thesis" regarding German guilt.