

Bear F. Braumoeller. *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in The Modern Age.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780190849535 (hardback, £19.99).

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“Only the Dead and the Future of War”

These days, international relations (IR) and the study of war need more books that are big in ambition, asking important questions and providing sweeping answers. Unfortunately, the professional incentives in political science these days tend to steer most scholars away from writing big books. It is hard to imagine returning to the heyday of big IR books from 1976 to 1981, a period that saw the publication of an extraordinary series of path-breaking works, including Robert Jervis’ *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society*, George Quester’s *Offense and Defense in the International System*, Richard Ned Lebow’s *Between Peace and War*, Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita’s *The War Trap*, A. F. K. Organski’s and Jacek Kugler’s *The War Ledger*, Robert O. Keohane’s and Joseph Nye’s *Power and Interdependence*, Stephen Krasner’s *Defending the National Interest*, and Robert Gilpin’s *War and Change in World Politics*, to name a few.¹

The psychologist Stephen Pinker’s 2011 book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, was one of the most important books on war in the 2010s, arguing that all forms of interpersonal violence, from homicide to interstate war, have been in decline for years, decades, centuries.² It was most certainly a big book, aiming to describe centuries-long trends for a wide variety of behaviors. Eschewing Occam, the book threw the kitchen and even the bathroom sink at the reader in laying out possible explanations of the decline in violence, from international peacekeeping to improved personal hygiene.

¹ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: Wiley, 1977); Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977); Stephen Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

² Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking 2011).

Like nearly all other big books, *Better Angels* opened rather than closed debate. Bear F. Braumoeller's recent book, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age*, is a critical scholarly contribution to the debate over the thesis that interstate war is in decline, the so-called "decline thesis" that has also been discussed in books by Richard Rosecrance, John Mueller, Francis Fukuyama, and Joshua Goldstein, among others.³ Braumoeller has undertaken an absolutely central scholarly task, the close and rigorous examination of the elements of big ideas. Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* book and thesis turned the world on its ear, until closer scholarly examination overturned its core argument that interstate conflicts occur predominantly across rather than within civilizations.⁴

Only the Dead is centrally focused on a single empirical question: is interstate war in decline? This question is absolutely central to the decline thesis, both because interstate war is one of the most salient and deadly forms of interpersonal violence, and because the decline thesis of course turns on this empirical observation.

Evaluating the empirical assertion that interstate war is in decline is a much thornier task than it might first appear. Pinker's book is too broad to give this issue the close attention it very much needs; his analysis mostly uses mainstream data to construct line graphs. This is where *Only the Dead* provides its most important contribution. As an expert both in IR and the quantitative analysis of conflict data, Braumoeller is the perfect candidate to place Pinker's empirical assertions under the microscope. As an extra benefit, Braumoeller makes the dry (but essential) analysis of quantitative data as transparent and engaging as possible to the lay reader, without cutting into the meat of the discussion.

There are a number of reasons why assessing the possibility of a decline in interstate war is deceptively difficult. One simple problem for scholars is what comparison they should draw. Should they compare the incidence of war in the decade of the 2000s to that of the 1940s, the 1920s, or the 1900s? Or is it better to compare a single year, like 2001, to another single year, like 1901? Another question: how, in spatial terms, do scholars think about war frequency? Should they offer a simple count of all wars per decade, or a count of all wars per country per decade, allowing that interstate war becomes more likely as the number of countries increases?

These may seem like minor questions that are better left to the data mongers. However, those of us who use quantitative analysis in our research and teaching are motivated by Mark Twain's famous remark that 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.' We understand that the easiest way to lie with statistics is to be loose and opaque regarding dull matters such as what data we use and what methods we use to analyze those data. We all face this problem in our everyday lives, for example when we ask questions like how the stock market is doing and whether our government is making progress in flattening the curve of coronavirus infections. How we answer those questions depends on matters such as our frame of comparison (are we comparing the stock market today to last month, last year, or five years ago), what data we use (do we assess the coronavirus pandemic by using data on new rates of infections, data on coronavirus deaths, or unexplained increases in mortality rates), and so forth. Braumoeller is both clear and comprehensive in working through the various elements of these questions pertaining to trends in interstate war.

Braumoeller's central argument is that since 1816, the most supportable inference based on the available data is that the global frequency of interstate war has not gotten higher or lower, though there are limited elements of decline, such as the island of peace in Western Europe after 1945. *Only the Dead* will be seen as the definitive empirical assessment of the

³ Richard N. Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), John E. Mueller, *Retreat From Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992); Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War On War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Dutton, 2011).

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). One of many empirical critiques of Huntington's thesis is Errol Henderson and Richard Tucker, "Clear and Present Strangers: The Clash of Civilizations and Interstate Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly* 45:2 (June 2001): 317-338.

proposition that interstate war declined from 1816 up through the early 2000s. I am sympathetic with the conclusion that the global frequency of interstate war did not decline during the Cold War. Some colleagues and I have developed a new data set on interstate wars since 1816, classifying all conflicts between states with at least 500 battle dead.⁵ We have uncovered a number of post-1945 interstate wars that were missed by the canonical Correlates of War data set⁶ that Pinker mostly relies on, including wars between China and Taiwan in the 1950s, additional wars between China and Vietnam in the 1980s, a 1961 war between Tunisia and France, a 1960s war between Indonesia and Malaysia, Soviet and New Zealand participation in the Korean War, and Chinese participation in the Vietnam War.

Braumoeller's conclusion serves as a crucial critique of the heart of Pinker's book and the decline thesis more broadly. That is, of all the forms of violent political conflict, it is interstate war that is most likely to be in decline, as few would argue that substate conflicts such as civil wars, insurgency, and terrorism are disappearing. To give one simple snapshot, the Uppsala Data project, in its most recent year of data collection, 2018, records the presence of dozens of ongoing substate conflicts.⁷

Our next question must be, why has there not been a decline in interstate war? This is a secondary concern of Braumoeller's book, though he does include a chapter expressing skepticism of some of the explanations for the decline of war. He notes, for example, that we should be careful in exaggerating the pacifism of Enlightenment-era humanism, as this corpus of thought also gave birth to modern nationalism, a dangerous source of violent conflict. Certainly, contemporary political developments in Russia, China, the U.S., India, Brazil, Hungary, and elsewhere have highlighted the dangers that resurgent nationalism can pose to interstate peace, intrastate peace, and democracy itself.

But these are passing discussions in *Only the Dead*, relatively brief in relation to the breadth and depth of existing scholarship on ideas such as nationalism. Braumoeller offers more sustained discussion of international order as a possible cause of peace, drawing on some of the ideas presented in his first, outstanding book, *Great Powers and the International System*.⁸ His bottom line here is that the effects of international orders are mixed, as conflict within an order may be reduced, but conflict may be higher between states inside and outside the order. He also observes that we should be careful about placing too much faith in the ability of the liberal international order to maintain peace "within its ranks," given signs that the liberal order may be breaking apart (222-224).

Only the Dead is pessimistic in its outlook for the future. If the liberal international order degrades, its ability to maintain peace within its ranks will similarly erode, but if it revives, then states within the liberal order will continue to use force against targets that lie outside of the order. The conclusion contains a grimly resigned view of human nature that is a dark inversion of Pinker's hope: "War *is* over if we want it. We just don't want it. Other things matter more, as they always have" (224).

Perhaps, just perhaps. But a less resigned perspective is that the world's nations have developed an increasingly effective array of tools for preventing interstate war, even if intrastate conflict remains a much thornier problem. Immanuel

⁵ Dan Reiter, Allan C. Stam, and Michael C. Horowitz, "A Revised Look at Interstate Wars, 1816-2007," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60:5 (2016): 956-976. Braumoeller made use of an early version of our Interstate War Data (IWD) in some of the supplementary analysis in his book. The latest version of our data, version 1.2, is available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/CZGAO2>.

⁶ Available at <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets>.

⁷ Available at <https://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/>.

⁸ Bear F. Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Kant's liberal triangle of democracy, economic interdependence, and international organizations has proven to be a powerful palliative to interstate conflict, and, if the liberal order endures (certainly, a big if), can continue to pacify interstate relations into the twenty-first century.⁹ And now the lines of the liberal world order are not bright and clean, in that elements of the liberal world order have expanded and helped pacify a broader set of international relations. The 1990s expansion of trade has clearly helped reduce conflict between Israel and Jordan, and between China and Taiwan, for example. The United Nations and other international institutions have exhibited some unexpected pacifying effects, as the American public is much less likely to support the use of force without United Nations' support.¹⁰

Other factors can ameliorate conflict within and without the liberal order. Mediation by the United States in particular has helped substantially dampen escalation in South Asia, especially in 1999 and 2002.¹¹ Deterrence has largely contained North Korean aggression since 1953. And if patriarchy is a taproot cause of conflict, its erosion through initiatives such as gender diverse peacekeeping forces, legislative gender quotas, and the expansion of global gender equity hold promise to ameliorate conflict further.¹²

Pessimists will dismiss the enduring ability of these tools to keep the peace. But I will close with a final empirical observation. Though intrastate conflicts still rage, the world has enjoyed an absence of interstate war from 2003 up until this writing in 2020, with the arguable exception of the hybrid Russia-Ukraine conflict.¹³ Whether or not this period of interstate peace constitutes a statistically significant trend is debatable, but the world hasn't enjoyed seventeen years of interstate peace since before the time of Napoléon. It may be that Pinker's original vision of an array of different factors coming together to contribute to interstate peace was not in fact wrong, but was only delayed in finally being realized. The future will tell.

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⁹ Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

¹⁰ Terrence L. Chapman, *Securing Approval: Domestic Politics and Multilateral Authorization for War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Michael Poznansky, *In the Shadow of International Law: Secrecy and Regime Change in the Postwar World* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2020).

¹¹ Kyle Beardsley, *The Mediation Dilemma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

¹² Dan Reiter, "The Positivist Study of Gender and International Relations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(2015): 1301-1326; Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Balliff-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³ See IWD, version 1.2.