

# Causes of War

## **Sources of Commitment Problems**

March 12, 2015

# Today's Agenda

- 1. When commitment problems cause negotiations to break down.**
- 2. Presentation on "Terrorism, Democracy, and Credible Commitments."**
- 3. Presentation on "War Is in the Error Term."**

# Recap: Commitment Problems as a Cause of War

- 1. I must rather renege than abide by the settlement**
- 2. You must rather fight now than let me get away with it**
  - Cost of reneging can't be "priced into" settlement**

# A Stark Example

- **States A and B**
- **Territory at stake**
  - **Until war occurs: negotiated daily**
  - **After war: winner gets it forever**
- **Shifting power**
  - **Today: A sure to win**
  - **Tomorrow (and ever after): B sure to win**

# A Stark Example

**Suppose A and B reach some agreement for today.  
What happens tomorrow?**

- War**
  - B gets everything, pays war cost**
  - A gets nothing, pays war cost**
- Bargaining table**
  - B can offer A nothing**
  - A will accept to avoid war costs**

# A Stark Example

**So what happens today?**

- War**
  - A gets everything, pays war cost**
  - B gets nothing, pays war cost**
- Bargaining table**
  - A can take it all today**
  - ... but will never get anything again**

# A Stark Example

**A's choice today:**

- Attack → Have territory forever, pay war cost**
- Negotiate → Have territory for a day, no war cost**

**How can B keep A from attacking?**

# Mitigating Factors

- **Short-sightedness**
- **Less drastic power shift**
- **War destroys territory's value**
- **Power shift occurs regardless of war**



# Powell's Conditions for Bargaining Breakdown

- 1. Dividing a flow of benefits**
- 2. Cannot commit to future divisions**
- 3. Each actor can lock in a division now**
- 4. Locking in is inefficient**
- 5. Shifts in power to lock in**

# The Logic

- **No commitment → must compensate "up front"**
- **Small pool of benefits available at any given time**
- **Potentially huge gains to locking in via war**
- **Not enough available now to satisfy aggressor**

# Shifting Power: The Puzzle

**Why do states bother trying to gain power?**

## Other Examples

- **First-strike advantages**
- **Bargaining over objects of future bargaining power**

# Commitment Problems versus Uncertainty

- **Limits of uncertainty as an explanation**
  - **Long wars**
  - **"If only we'd known..."**
- **Can uncertainty play a role in commitment problems?**
- **Implications for empirical study?**

## For Next Time

- **Second critical response paper is due**
- **Read Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests" (JSTOR)**
- **Presentation on "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War"**
- **Presentation on "Does Private Information Lead to Delay or War in Crisis Bargaining?"**