Cheap Signals, Costly Consequences: How International Relations Affect Civil Conflict

Book Prospectus

Clayton L. Thyne, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Kentucky
1615 Patterson Office Tower
Lexington, KY 40506-0027
859-257-6958 (phone)
859-257-7034 (fax)
clayton.thyne@uky.edu
http://www.uky.edu/~clthyn2
Reasons for Writing

Interest in civil conflict has become increasingly popular among international relations scholars, graduate students, and policy-makers in recent years. Despite this increased interest, there has been little theoretical development and empirical evidence to explain how international actors affect the onset, duration and outcome of civil wars. Instead, the vast majority of civil war research focuses on intrastate factors, such as grievances, state strength, the economy, or ethnic divisions. I have written this book in an attempt to fill this gap by developing a theory and empirical tests to explain how relations between states—which I refer to as “signals”—affect each stage of this process. For example, how did Bush’s “axis of evil” statement affect the likelihood of civil war onset in Iraq, Iran and North Korea? How might the administration’s current actions affect the duration and eventual outcome of the civil conflicts in Colombia and Sri Lanka? Beyond advancing the current scholarly literature on this subject, this book puts policy makers in a better position to prevent future civil wars and end those that are currently underway by examining how the international community can directly affect each stage of the civil war process.

Comparison with Competing Books

Despite the high level of interest in civil war among political scientists, there have been relatively few books published on this subject that take a rationalist approach, or provide large N empirical tests combined with case studies. None attempt to unify the three main stages of civil conflict either theoretically or empirically. Nevertheless, three books in particular are closely related to my work. Walter (2001) also takes a rationalist approach to understanding civil conflicts.¹ Her focus is on the termination and implementation of peace agreements following a civil war, while my book focuses on all three phases of the civil war process. Toft (2003) draws on the same bargaining approach that I use, though her study examines why some ethnic conflicts turn violent, while my book examines civil wars against the state, and extends to the duration and outcome of the conflict.² Regan (2000) examines the factors that make third party interventions in a civil war more likely, and more effective.³ The second and third parts of my book (duration and outcome) draw heavily on Regan’s work; however, the key difference is that my book looks to the pre-war conditions to better understand how external actors affect an ongoing civil war. Similar to my approach, Regan, Toft and Walter utilize a rationalist approach, large N empirical analyses, and case studies.

Proposed Structure and Contents of the Book

This book is structured in three main sections, each of which examines how international relations affect the three main phases of civil wars: onset, duration and outcome. As I explain below, each stage of the civil war process builds on the previous stage and unifies these stages. I

provide a map of the argument akin to Russett and Oneal (2001)\textsuperscript{4}, and update the map as I move from chapter to chapter. This map is presented on the final page of this prospectus.

Though the theory lends itself to a complex formal model, I provide only a textual description of theory to make the book accessible to a larger audience. I take two approaches to the empirical tests of the theory. The primary tests use large N datasets and sophisticated statistical analyses. I have made an attempt to relegate much of the technical language to footnotes to reach a larger audience, while still maintaining the academic integrity of the analyses. The secondary tests are provided in the form of two extended case studies, which help bring the large N tests to life for the reader. The following paragraphs give a brief explanation of each chapter.

\textit{Chapter 1: Introduction}\newline
(2 figures)

I begin by presenting the puzzle and purpose of the book. The puzzle is two-fold. First, with very few exceptions, scholars have completely neglected the role that international relations may play in the onset of civil conflict, which provides little theory or empirical evidence to explain how these factors affect the first stage of civil conflicts. Second, because scholars have neglected a role for external actors in their explanations for the onset of civil conflicts, work examining how external actors affect the duration and outcome (second and third phases) of civil conflicts is largely underdeveloped. This is because combatants develop expectations for interventions in the pre-war phase, which means that the effect of interventions on the duration and outcome of an ongoing civil conflict are best understood in the context of these pre-war signals. I set this puzzle up in the context of Jimmy Carter’s foreign policy and the Nicaraguan Civil War (1978-79), which I return to in a case study later in Chapter 4.

After setting up the puzzle, I proceed to clearly define three sets of research questions to be answered in the book. First, how might relations between states affect internal stability within each state’s borders? Second, how might interventions from external states affect the duration and outcome of conflicts that are currently underway? Are the effects of interstate signals distinct to each phase of the conflict, or is there some underlying process relating signals sent during each phase of the war with previous events? Third, what can policy-makers learn from this study to help them reach their foreign policy goals?

The remainder of the introduction provides a brief literature review of work that has asked similar questions, explains why the reader should be interested in the book, and previews what the reader should expect in the remainder of the book.

\textit{Chapter 2: How Interstate Signals Affect the Onset, Duration and Outcome of Civil Conflicts}\newline
(2 tables; 7 figures)

In Chapter 2, I lay out my primary theoretical argument by drawing on three main bodies of literature. First, I draw on bargaining theory, which has been used extensively to explain the onset of interstate conflicts. In this context, I argue that (like interstate conflicts) the onset of

civil wars is the result of competing actors being unable to agree on the eventual result of a conflict. War is rare under perfect information. Thus, the key to understanding the onset of civil conflicts is a better understanding of informational uncertainties. The role that external actors might play in a future civil conflict is one potential source of informational uncertainty.

Second, I draw on signaling theory to explain that external actors provide information in the form of signals that might affect the intrastate bargaining process. In this context, signaling theory suggests that any act by an external state, such as applying sanctions, severing trade ties, or withdrawing a diplomat, serves to provide information to the potential intrastate combatants about the likelihood of future support or resistance from the external actor if a civil war were to begin. However, we cannot assume that all signals will affect the onset of civil conflict in the same manner. Thus, I draw on an economic approach known as rational expectations to explain how different types of signals will affect the onset of civil conflict.

Rational expectations suggests that rational actors will respond not only to information that they have today, but to their expectations for what will happen in the future. In this context, I argue that the costliness of the signal determines how much information is provided, and how the actors will update their bargaining positions based on the signal from the external actor. Cheap signals may disrupt the intrastate bargaining process because they fail to provide both the government and the opposition with sufficient information to develop similar expectations about which side would receive support if a civil war were to begin. Thus, cheap signals should have a significant effect on the likelihood of civil war onset because they produce informational uncertainties. In contrast, costly signals should have little effect on the likelihood of civil war onset because they provide a plethora of information to the potential combatants, which makes it less likely that they will disagree on the eventual result of a civil conflict (i.e., rational expectations converge). Beyond simply looking at the costliness of the signal, I develop a handful of secondary hypotheses to explain how the characteristics of the signaling state and the consistency of signals affect the onset of civil conflict.

The second and third part of my theory seeks to explain how external actors affect the duration and outcome of a civil war. Previous work implicitly assumes that actions taken by third parties during a civil war, such as interventions, are exogenous to pre-war conditions. This is a potentially problematic assumption given my argument that intrastate combatants develop expectations for external support in the pre-war phase. If signals indeed matter in the pre-war phase, then we must consider these signals in developing expectations for the effect of third party actions once a war begins. To remedy this problem, I consider the (in)consistency of actions taken by third parties during a civil war in comparison to their pre-war signals. Actions taken by third parties during a war that are consistent with pre-war signals should have very little impact on the duration of a civil war because the combatants should expect these moves based on the pre-war signals. In contrast, actions that are inconsistent with pre-war signals should have a dramatic effect on the duration and outcome of a civil war. Civil wars should be shorter when one side receives unexpected support because these types of interventions will dramatically alter...
the balance of power between the combatants, forcing one side to lose quickly, or make massive concessions to avoid annihilation. Likewise, the outcome of the conflict should favor the side that receives the unexpected support.

Chapter 3: Interstate Signals and Civil War Onset: Empirical Tests
(5 tables; 5 figures)

The hypotheses developed in Chapter 2 are tested on a large N dataset examining all civil wars from 1949 to 1999. I present the first of these tests in Chapter 3. Using logistic regression, I examine how signals from external actors affect the probability of civil war onset in all states. As predicted by my theory, I find that costly signals (trade ties, alliances, sanctions and militarized actions) have little effect on the onset of civil conflict. In contrast, cheap signals have a dramatic effect on the likelihood of civil war onset. Cheap hostile signals increase the likelihood of civil war onset, while cheap supportive signals have a pacifying effect. Among the secondary hypotheses, I find that increased consistency and military strength of the signaling state dampen the effect of cheap signals. These findings offer moderate support for my secondary hypotheses and strong support for my primary hypotheses, which provides a springboard for empirical analyses of the duration and outcome of civil conflicts. This also represents the most comprehensive analysis and discussion of the role that external actors play in the onset of civil wars published to date.

Chapter 4: Cheap Signals and Civil War Onset in Nicaragua
(2 figures)

After presenting the large N analyses of civil war onset in Chapter 3, I provide the first of two extended case studies in Chapter 4 to better highlight the theory and findings from the previous chapter. Here, I explain how signals sent from the United States during the 1970s affected the onset of civil war in Nicaragua in 1978. Nicaragua was quite stable from the mid-1930s to the late-1970s due to the consistently supportive signals from the United States, which allowed Somoza to keep a tight grip on the opposition. These signals changed dramatically in 1977 when President Carter came into office and began denouncing Somoza’s human rights offenses. As predicted by my theory, Carter’s cheap hostile signals had a dramatic effect in rallying the opposition, and led to the onset of civil war in Nicaragua in 1978 and Somoza’s eventual downfall the following year.

Chapter 5: Interstate Signals and Civil War Duration: Empirical Tests
(3 tables; 2 figures)

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to provide empirical tests of the duration hypotheses. I return to the large N approach to examine how external actors affected the duration of the 83 civil wars from 1949 to 1993 using a Weibull duration model. In contrast to earlier work on this subject, I revise the coding of interventions to reflect the consistency of the intervention with the intervener’s pre-war signal. As predicted by my theory, I find that interventions that are consistent with pre-war signals have little effect on the duration of the conflict. In contrast, unexpected interventions dramatically reduce the duration of fighting. This evidence contrasts greatly with previous work on this subject, which has consistently shown that interventions—no matter how conceived—
prolong the duration of fighting. This provides evidence that external actors indeed develop expectations for interventions in the pre-war phase, which then have important implications for the effect of third party actions once the war begins.

Chapter 6: Interstate Signals and Civil War Outcome: Empirical Tests
(2 tables; 2 figures)

The analyses presented in Chapter 6 extend those from the previous chapter by examining the outcome of civil wars using a competing risk duration model. I use the same independent variables as those developed in Chapter 5 to examine which side of the conflict either wins, or is able to exact heavy concessions from their opponent. As predicted by my theory, the side receiving unexpected support is much more likely to gain a favorable outcome from the conflict. This chapter extends the current literature in two important ways. First, past literature has rarely considered a role for external actors in their analysis of civil war outcomes, preferring instead to examine only intrastate factors. Second, I recode the outcome of civil conflicts to consider both the winner/loser, and whether one side exacted concessions from the other, which has been coded as an even negotiated settlement in past work.

Chapter 7: Interstate Signals, Civil War Duration and Outcome in Iraq
(1 table)

In Chapter 7, I present the second extended case study by analyzing the duration and outcome of the civil war in Iraq in 1991. Following the Gulf War, the United States was very active in using cheap hostile signals to foment rebellion against Hussein’s rule. Both the Shiite and Kurdish communities responded to these signals by rising up against the government. Both rebellions ended quickly, however, when the US failed to provide immediate support to the movements. The brevity of these rebellions provides tangible evidence to support the large N analyses presented in Chapter 5. Though both rebellions ended quickly, we see a dramatic difference in their outcome. The Shiites were brutally crushed, and faced massive persecution until the US-led invasion in 2003. In contrast, the Kurds obtained a high degree of freedom and autonomy following their rebellion. These disparate outcomes can be explained in the context of my theory by examining the actions taken by the international community. Responding to a massive public outcry, the international community provided massive support to the Kurds, which allowed them to live in peace following their rebellion. In contrast, the Shiites were completely abandoned. This case study provides an excellent example of the theory and empirical analyses of my large N duration and outcome chapters.

Chapter 8: Lessons Learned and Implications for United States Foreign Policy
(6 tables; 3 figures)

Following each empirical chapter, I provide implications for policy makers in general terms. In Chapter 8, I provide more detailed policy implications for today’s world for policy makers in the United States. I begin by explaining how the diminution of civil conflicts is consistent with two of the president’s key foreign policy goals: improving the human condition throughout the world and the disruption of global terror networks. Based on this, I forecast the likelihood of civil war onset in all states throughout the world, and then make recommendations for how policy makers
should either continue or modify their foreign policy approach to the states that are most at risk for civil conflict in order to help them remain peaceful. Next, I examine how the US approach towards the states that are currently experiencing civil conflicts is likely affecting the duration and outcome of these conflicts, and make recommendations for how modifications in these approaches are likely to affect the conflicts.

Chapter 9: Epilogue

In the final chapter, I provide a brief summary of the theory and analyses presented in the previous chapters. I then move to a discussion of how the theory and empirical tests presented in the book speak to the broader literatures on international relations and civil conflict. Finally, I highlight several avenues for future research on this subject.

Length and Completion Date

The book is completed. It comprises approximately 80,000 words, 300 manuscript pages, and 500 references.

Readership

This book has been written to reach a large audience. The primary audience will be academic specialists and graduate students. While the content of the book is on civil wars, my approach should appeal far beyond civil war scholars. I drew on several areas of international relations literature to develop the theory. Thus, this book should interest scholars working with signaling theory, bargaining theory, rational expectations, and more detailed areas, such as deterrence theory. In short, this book should be attractive to nearly anyone examining either interstate or intrastate conflict, and I would expect it to be assigned in classes dealing with these subjects. Comparative scholars will also be interested in this work. Comparativists have considered a role for external actors in their explanations of ethnic mobilization and civil conflicts; however, none have provided a primary focus on this subject either theoretically or empirically. The importance of this subject should make this book appealing to scholars offering classes in nationalization or mobilization.

I have also made great efforts to make this book appealing to both advanced undergraduate students and policy makers. Both the theory and empirical analyses would be more technical if the same work appeared in an academic journal. I have toned down the technical jargon to make the book more accessible to these groups. The case studies should be particularly appealing to undergraduates because they are easy to read, and help clarify both the theory and more complex large N empirical analyses. For the policy community, I conclude each empirical chapter with a discussion of general policy recommendations derived from the analyses. The final substantive chapter (Chapter 8) is written specifically for policy-makers. In this chapter, I provide detailed advice for policy-makers in pursuit of President Bush’s foreign policy agenda. Again, in this chapter I bury much of the more technical language, focusing my efforts on providing very clear and detailed policy recommendations.
About the Author

I am an assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Kentucky (University of Iowa Ph.D.). I have a number of recent publications on this subject. Most notable is my 2006 article entitled, “Cheap Signals with Costly Consequences: The Effect of Interstate Relations on Civil War, 1945—1999”.6 This article is a forerunner to the theory and empirical analyses presented in the onset sections of this book, and it previews the work I have completed in the duration and outcome portions of this book. I have also presented each main component of my theory and empirical analyses at a number of professional conferences. Thus, we can expect conflict scholars to be familiar with much of the content presented in this book. I have two other publications that examine the interaction of education and civil war, an article focusing on the civil war in Sudan, and an article examining education reform in Latin America.7


Summary of the Argument and Hypotheses

External Actor’s Signal to the Government

Pre-war / Onset phase

- Hostile
  - Costly signal
    - little effect on CW onset (H1)
  - Cheap signal
    - increase probability of CW onset (H2)

Supportive

- Costly signal
  - little effect on CW onset (H1)
- Cheap signal
  - decrease probability of CW onset (H2)

Intra-war / Duration phase

- Become supportive – switch policies
  - decrease duration (H11)
- Remain hostile – no switch
  - little effect on duration (H11)
- Remain supportive – no switch
  - little effect on duration (H11)
- Become hostile – switch policies
  - decrease duration (H11)

Intra-war / Outcome phase

- victory/settlement favorable to the government (H12)
- little effect on outcome (H12)
- little effect on outcome (H13)
- victory/settlement favorable to the opposition (H13)

Secondary hypotheses:

- H3: Noisy signals should increase the probability of civil war onset.
- H4: Negative shocks should increase the probability of civil war onset.
- H5: Positive shocks should decrease the probability of civil war onset.
- H6: Democracy × pre-war signal (interaction) should decrease the probability of civil war onset.
- H7: Regime type similarities × pre-war signal (interaction) should decrease the probability of civil war onset.
- H8: Sender’s military power × pre-war signal (interaction) should decrease the probability of civil war onset.
- H9: Consistency of past signals × pre-war signal (interaction) should decrease the probability of civil war onset.
- H10: Cultural similarities × pre-war signal (interaction) should decrease the probability of civil war onset.