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Anatomy of War: Civil Conflict at Every Angle

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About Dr. Frederic Pearson

Dr. Pearson received his B.A. in political science from Oakland University and his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science and international relations from the University of Michigan. He has twice been designated a senior Fulbright scholar and has been a WSU Charles H. Gershenson distinguished faculty fellow. He joined Wayne State University in 1990.

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CIVIL WARS

INTERNAL STRUGGLES

Anatomy of War

Civil conflict at every angle

by Amy Oprean

What makes a country ripe for civil war? Its ethnic rivalries? Its regime? Its wealth, or lack thereof? The profile of a nation in civil war is riddled with contributing factors that are both unique and complex. Yet, as a book co-authored by a Wayne State scholar explains, there are common themes linking internal conflicts happening across the globe. These themes offer clues for successful conflict resolution and sustained peace.

Frederic Pearson, Ph.D., professor of political science and director of Wayne State's Center for Peace and Conflict, and Marie Olson Lounsbery, Ph.D., assistant professor of political science at East Carolina University, co-authored *Civil Wars: Internal Struggles, Global Consequences*, to be a comprehensive study of war that occurs within states. Pearson and Lounsbery surveyed the literature on civil wars and infused it with their own research to create a composite picture of the factors that ignite civil wars, the dynamics of ongoing civil war and the components of successful and permanent resolutions.

"Despite the fact that civil wars around the world have been more numerous than international wars since the '70s, the majority of research still focuses on the latter," Pearson said. "We decided there needed to be a comprehensive look at the concept of civil war from all angles and all levels."

Fueling conflict

Among the trends that their research uncovered, Pearson and Lounsbery provide evidence that civil wars are largely a phenomenon of countries in transition – a change in leaders, a change in regime or gaining independence after colonialism.

"Democracies don't have them as often, and neither do full-scale dictatorships," Pearson said. "It's the in-between stages, for example, when a regime has been overthrown, that are the riskiest."

It's during this time of instability that a country is most likely to see a resurfacing of pent-up ethnic or regional rivalries, which are often initiated by leaders or groups that use it for their own gain. Other factors include the amount of qualified leadership a country has during its time of transition, and whether it has the resources – such as oil or diamonds – to fund ongoing war. Even the topography of a country can have a significant impact on its risk for civil war. "Destabilized countries that are mountainous, such as Afghanistan, are ripe for civil war because mountains provide sanctuary for insurgents."

The new rules of war

In addition to exploring its causes, Pearson and Lounsbery examine historical successes and failures at resolving civil war, gathering clues for the most successful cases and tactics. One of the most prominent findings is that most successful civil war settlements are those negotiated through a third party guarantor. This guarantor, which can be a country, group of countries, regional organizations or the United Nations, pledges protection to the parties without picking a side in the conflict. Pearson says to the extent that third-party negotiators have assured both sides a measure of security and followed through, the higher the chances a resolution can be reached and sustained through negotiation.

The U.S.'s role as a third party negotiator between Israel and Egypt during the Camp David peace accords in the 1970s and since, is one example of success in this model of conflict resolution. "In that situation, the U.S. was a guarantor to both sides, and it fostered an era of relative peace between them that has been maintained to this day," he said. "We even have troops in the Sinai mountain passes in Egypt to guarantee there won't be a surprise attack from either side."

In addition to serving as a university textbook and catalyst for further civil war research among scholars, Pearson hopes the book will influence constructive policy making by the U.S. government in its ongoing involvement in civil wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

"As a country – despite our own history – we've never had a good understanding of the dynamics of civil war; what changes occur during such wars, what keeps them going," Pearson said. "Our findings on this topic would be very helpful to the U.S. as a negotiator in the Middle East and elsewhere."

Pearson is hopeful the book will provide a much-needed source for information on many aspects of civil war, fostering more informed decision-making and a more informed public.

"We certainly don't have all the answers," Pearson said. "These are extremely complex conflicts that are uniquely shaped by a country's people, its history, and many other factors. But it's important that we are well-versed on these conflicts so that we can make informed choices in our attempts to bring peace."

