

Dave Hill

This assignment is developed for use in SSP101 Power and Politics. This course is a foundational political science course that introduces students to canonical and critical voices within political science. Although the perspective is global and universal, there is an emphasis upon U.S. politics and change. Most students who take the course are non-majors, and most are beginning college students. The course fulfills the requirements for the flexible core and as a result draws from the student population as a whole.

The assignment could be completed in one two-hour meeting. It is a LOW stakes assignment. The assignment, depending upon how it is used, could count for 10% of the grade. Five percent could be derived from students in class work. Five percent could be derived from the short writing assignment completed at home. The Meanings of War seminar was an essential cornerstone in the creation of this assignment.

Two elements of the seminar were especially important: First, this seminar was an extremely important in thinking through "non-state" views of war. Of course, states are closely connected to war, but within mainstream history and political science, organized and explicit state action is perceived to be a necessary condition for a state of war. However, just as non-state actors can also engage in actions very like war, states can engage in wars that are subtle or secret. This could take the form of paramilitary action but it could take the form of exclusion and withholding of needed rights, services and sustenance from targeted or marginalized groups.

Second, this seminar has been a tremendous help in understanding how this just mentioned form of subtle state war fare is used commonly in neo-liberal or colonial pursuits. It is tempting to think that most wars are official and recognized—however, if we include the steady stream of colonial aggressions as a form of war—then we could be justified in concluding that most modern war are NOT official and go unrecorded as acts of war. There were many other benefits of the seminar; however, these two just listed are extremely important.

Feedback from seminar participants was extremely important in developing and refining this assignment. During our winter intensive, seminar participants (esp. Arianna Martinez) helped me to tailor and stream line a much longer assignment. This was useful in part because it made it possible to integrate the assignment into a longer syllabus. In addition, it also made it easier to focus upon the essential steps and focus points of each assignment.

The assignment aligned well with elements of Global Learning and Integrative Learning and with both oral and written communication skills. At one level, because war is a global issue and because the assignment encourages students to look at war holistically, it is a good fit with Global Learning. On the other hand, the assignment also asks students to bring together different, divergent ideas and to create a new synthesis of these ideas. Because much of this assignment connects with presenting new visions of already-expressed-ideas, it connects well the critical thinking and informed presentation goals of Integrative Learning. As it stands, student's final report is in written form, which aligns more closely with the goals of Integrative Learning.

Abstract: In small student discussion groups, students will consider the validity of multiple definitions of war. As result of critical consideration, students will see that using a diversity of definitions allows us to understand a wider range of social behaviors as forms of war. This new knowledge has wide implications for research on power and justice.

Each class will be divided into groups of 2-5 students.

Each group will be presented with a set of materials:

One set of these materials will be definitions

A second set of material will concern current events.

Students will first write down ONE example EACH of a war from U.S. history. They will also explain WHY they believe that this example constitutes a war

(Example: World War I was a war because....).

Students will then share there definitions with each other and one of the students will write a short summary of their shared beginning ideas.

Each group will then review three canonical definitions of war and one, newer anthropological definition: -- The first three are considered to be classical definitions within political science; they are well summarized in in Johan van der Dennen's bibliography (which could be assigned).

According to van der Dennen: ¹

Von Clausewitz (1911) defined war as “an act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfil our will”, and elsewhere he emphasized the continuity of violence with other political methods: “War is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means.”

Sorel (1912) defined war as a “political act by means of which States, unable to adjust a dispute regarding their obligations, rights or interests, resort to armed force to decide which is the stronger and may therefore impose its will on the other”.

Kallen (1939) seems to favor a political definition of war when he writes: “If war may be defined as an armed contest between two or more sovereign institutions employing organized military forces in the pursuit of specific ends, the significant term in the definition is ‘organized’.”

Robert Reid-Pharr’s anthropological observation that traditional accounts of war (a category that Sorel, Kallen fall into) reifies various forms of social stratification and ignores subsurface yet belligerent, murderous organized patterns within society. According to Reid-Pharr, in these

¹ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/12857871.pdf>

invisible wars – inflicted mostly upon those in marginalized social areas "Domestic space becomes martial space."²

After reading and briefly discussing these three definitions, students will then read summaries of three social conflicts related to recent politics:

The U.S. invasion of Iraq, 2003³

The U.S. intervention in Libya, 2011⁴

The U.S. led – War on Drugs – Mass Incarceration⁵

Students will then discuss WHY or why NOT each of these three state-led actions could be considered or not considered to be a war.

They will also consider which definitions of war (above) lead to different conclusions regarding each specific example.

Students will write a short, informal “report out” describing their choices, their reasoning for their choice and their reaction to this knowledge. This report will be presented to the entire class at the end of the meeting.

For example – a report might comment – “We found that U.S. intervention in Libya could be described as a war using all four definitions. We were a little bit surprised by this because the invasion was never declared a war and is not often discussed.”

The whole group discussion will close with the question “How and why do traditional definitions of war leave out? If the War on Drugs IS a war⁶, then who is it a war upon?”

The student reports could be edited and polished for use in larger project. They could also be typed up, with slight editing, and graded as a response or journal assignment.

As it stands this is a low stakes assignment and the main intent is to spark discussion and to help students understand the how using a more socially inclusive definitions of war can lead to a stronger and more accurate understanding of war and its places in social analysis.

² <https://meaningsofwar.commonsc.gc.cuny.edu/files/2017/03/Reid-Pharr-Archives-of-War-Short-1.pdf>

³ For a critical account of this war as a performative act see,
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636412.2019.1551567>

⁴ <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/lessons-libya-how-not-intervene>

⁵ http://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/drug-war-mass-incarceration-and-race_01_18_0.pdf

⁶ Mass incarceration and the War on Drugs are recurrent themes in our readings.

As a final reflection, students will, individually, write a short reflection that addresses the following questions:

- 1) How do some definitions of war lead to exclusion?
- 2) When a set of belligerent actions are NOT categorized as war, who benefits and who is harmed?
- 3) Reid-Pharr speaks of domestic space being martial-ized: In the case of underserved and oppressed groups, how common is this martialization?
- 4) What would happen to public discourse if such actions were labeled as being similar to acts of war?

Each question should be answered in about one paragraph. The turn in total should be about one page.