

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Why We Fight

featuring

Chris Blattman, Author, *Why We Fight* and Professor, Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago

interviewed by

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Full Transcript

Reema Saleh: Hi, this is Reema, and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts. You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies, and policy issues it affects. In this series, you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs, and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world.

Reema Saleh: Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Reema Saleh: In this episode, Ana Camilla and Deqa speak with Dr. Chris Blattman, an acclaimed expert on violence and conflict. His recent book, *Why We Fight*, draws on economics, political science, and psychology to examine the root causes of war and the paths to peace. In light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other ongoing conflicts our world faces today, many of us are wondering, is resorting to violence the norm? Are the paths to war easier than the paths to peace? From examining real world interventions, *Why We Fight* explores why violent conflict is rare in reality, and how successful societies interrupt and end violence through peace building.

Chris Blattman: My name's Chris Blattman. I'm a professor here at the Harris School at the University of Chicago, and I work on issues of violence and conflict and poverty in the world from Chicago to Columbia, to sub-Saharan Africa. And I just wrote this book, *Why We Fight*. And it's basically all these lessons I learned from my mentors and from great books and from the little books and the unknown papers that I couldn't believe weren't part of the conversation. I kept waiting for someone to write a book that pulled it all together and waited, waited, and eventually said, "Well, I'm going to write this book." And so, it's a little bit about my own work, but it's mostly trying to bring together this huge field for a big audience.

Deqa Aden: To me, when I was reading the book, what was surprising was the concept that war is the exception, not the rule. Yet many people, when they read that statement, they may say it's the opposite, because most of our conception of the news, you open a newspaper and it's always about a war somewhere

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far away. And then you talk about somewhere along the lines where even the most hostile groups, they actually would rather live next to each other in peace. So, can you talk and elaborate more of the selection bias as you address in the book for the audience? Because I feel like to me, that was the most shocking statement in the introduction part.

Chris Blattman: Well, everyone's attention in the last few weeks has been on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And two weeks into that invasion, India accidentally lobbed a cruise missile at Pakistan, and nothing happened, because India and Pakistan fundamentally don't want to go to war. And so, if that had turned into war, everyone would've talked about all of the root causes and the uncertainty and the misperception around this accidental launch, and everybody got out of control and would be this big accidental story of war. But that didn't happen, everyone likes to talk about Somali and not Somali land. And so, there are all of these things that we just don't pay attention to, which makes sense, just like a doctor pays attention to the patients that are most ill, but a doctor has to keep in mind that most patients are healthy. And so, I think it's helpful just to keep that in mind. It's empirically true, you can look at the numbers. It's overwhelmingly true. But we just have to stop forgetting that because otherwise we're going to be like a doctor that only thinks people are sick.

Ana Camila: There's so many prolonged proxy wars and rising tensions within and across countries. And as the one you mentioned within India and Pakistan. So how could we better draw a line between those prevented or conflicts or parties that didn't go to war versus those who are actually in an unstable equilibrium and that might fall apart anytime?

Chris Blattman: So, there's a lot of these tense stalemates where it just doesn't make sense to fight. And I think Kashmir and India/Pakistan is a good example. That could be what happens with Russia and Ukraine, is a tense stalemate and Kashmir like standoff in the east. That's in some ways better than violence. And it happens when there are some fundamental difficulties to finding like a lasting political settlement. And, of course, we want to see that, and we want to build all sorts of insulation. If you're in a society, you don't want to live just on this cusp of violence all the time, but we would all prefer a stalemate to a hot war. And so, in these circumstances, it's maybe better than the alternative.

Deqa Aden: Speaking of a war, definitions are so important, especially when you're trying to unravel this big concept called war. And I noticed that your key terms were prolonged groups and has to be violent. But when I was looking at the definition, it feels like we're also leaving out individuals who are violent, but in very short temporary moments like mass shootings, like suicide bombers. So, on that note, and also there is this debate among Sociobiologists where they do believe that aggression is part of human nature, while still looking at the debate and looking at this individual level of violence, which is not incorporated in your definition, does that challenge the concept that war is not the norm still?

Chris Blattman: I mean, none of us are going to go out on our lunch hour and punch somebody in the face to get their lunch money. Right? And so, I think overwhelmingly we're a pretty cooperative species. And so, we're actually really good at finding settlements. And then some people are violent some of the time. And especially in a society where there's incentives to do that or where people are unconstrained. So that's certainly true. I was actually trying to make this a much broader definition of war than a lot... A lot of people think war is something that has to happen between political actors or has to happen at larger political units. And I wanted to sort of say, "Well, actually the kind of conflict that happens between gangs and criminal

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actors and the kind of competition that happens between maybe not individuals, but other kinds of villagers, for example, are all in the scope here because they have kind of similar patterns to them."

Chris Blattman: But then I said, "We can learn a lot from individuals because individuals make up groups and groups go to war. Especially some individuals are all powerful in their groups, and their own emotional tendencies and passions may then carry us to war because they're not mediated through groups and institutions." But I did want to scope it out a little bit just to sort of say, well, that's an important phenomenon, but a lot of the data suggests that when our individual passions get filtered through groups, and also more importantly in a prolonged sense, like yeah, maybe individual passions help ignite initial hostilities, but on day 792 of the conflict, how much of this is about reactive, hot thinking and how much of this is about other sorts of factors? And so, I think I wanted to concentrate less on hot reactive thinking, which is something I study in my day job and my own research but focuses more on the things that seem to be empirically important for understanding conflict between groups.

Deqa Aden: Absolutely. In terms of groups, so you mentioned five key reasons why we go to war, which is unchecked interests, intangible incentives, uncertainty, commitment problem, and misperception. But then when you think of a group, is that the motive of a war is going to be different for the soldier on the ground than the person who's at the top. And the person who's far away geographic from the problem, first the person who's constantly seeing, so when you were looking at putting together this, really, I thought it was really fascinating, five really key categories. Supposed to be applicable to the whole group. What were your thinking process when you were really just putting down those five key factors?

Chris Blattman: Yeah. So, I think this is mostly about, these are the factors that lead the political leadership of a country, whether it's constrained or not, to embark on violence as a strategy. And in this case, the things that help you mobilize people, all of the rhetoric, all of the passions, all of the incentives, material, non-material that you would use are important, but they're important in the same sense that being able to arm yourself is important. So, I wanted to focus on why we fight, not why we arm. And mobilizing your soldiers and motivating soldiers is a way of arming. It's a way of wielding military bargaining power. And so, you use all sorts of tactics, just like we use all sorts of technologies and tactics to develop weapons. And that determines your strength and what you can command from the other side, because you've just mobilized your soldiers more effectively, or organized them more effectively, and they're more committed, or not. And so, I wanted to distinguish that concept of what makes you good at arming versus what makes you choose to use violence as a tactic.

Ana Camila: So, going over a more applied situation to those same five factors on why wars happen, what combination of them do you think are the most pressing ones for the Ukrainian situation right now?

Chris Blattman: So, I mean, first I just have to step back and say all of the five factors are sort of an answer to a problem, which is to say, why would you fight in the first place? And so, you have to start with the idea that, well, actually most people that you can settle and bargain and negotiate, or you can fight, and these are two ways of attaining your aims. And one of them is extraordinarily costly, and it's so costly, and we're seeing this right now. I mean, it's just so extraordinarily costly that it's sometimes a mystery why anyone would embark on this path, especially because it's so risky. Nobody wins. Of course, we do fight sometimes, and it's happening right now. So, every answer to why we fight is because something overwhelmed this powerful incentive to peace, which is the cost and ruin of war. So, it had to be equally powerful.

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Chris Blattman: And two of the factors which people are really familiar with, because this is the dominant narrative right now for the war, one is what I called intangible incentives, basically saying there's something out there that at least one group or the leader of that group values more than the cost of war. And so, people point to Putin, and they point to his nationalistic aims, they point to his desires for personal glory and aggrandizement and being the next Catherine the Great, they point to the propaganda that he and his inner circle may have convinced themselves of, totally plausible. That's a set of intangible incentives. Those are things that they value so much, they willingly undertake the cost of war. And the second that we're very familiar with is a whole category called misperceptions, which are the ways in which we just have, somehow, not that we're passionate and we just get angry, and we fight, it's a set of circumstances where we just make mistakes because we have the wrong beliefs about our enemy. So, we underestimate Ukrainian forces. We overestimate our own forces. We underestimate the unity and incapability's of the west.

Chris Blattman: So, people like to point to those two factors. And I think those are part of the story. What we don't do in these circumstances is pay attention to, I think, some of the more underlying strategic factors. And I won't belabor this, but I would say strategic factor number one is when we have unchecked leaders, when we have an autocrat who does not bear the costs, not a mystery. Why is Putin willing to undergo some of the costs of war? Well, it's not falling on him personally. Some of it is, so he should be wary. I think we overweight misperceptions and we underweight just the sheer uncertainty.

Chris Blattman: So many military analysts were caught by surprise on all sides by the capabilities of the Russian army or lack thereof, and then the pluckiness and the resourcefulness and the talents of the Ukrainians. And the result of both their government and the army. And so, I think there's some fundamental uncertainty there that wasn't just a mistake. Partly maybe, but with just fundamental uncertainty.

Chris Blattman: And there's set of commitment problems are a classic example of times when you're worried your enemy's going to be getting stronger. Ukraine's going closer to the west, they may get armed. Your economy's been stagnating for four years after decades of growth, their economy may start to grow. So, they're going to be militarily, economically in a stronger and stronger position probably every year from now on. So, a window of opportunity is closing. And so all of these strategic incentives add up to the point where it's hard to find a resolution. And then you add in ideological aims like these intangible incentives and the mistakes. And now maybe you're at a story.

Ana Camila: A follow up to that is that from your definition of a commitment problem, with what you said last, that Ukraine is gaining more economic development and that's probably going to take them to a more military power in the future. That sounds a little bit to the rising power example that you give in the book. Would you say that would count for example to why is Russia maybe acting on a preventive war kind of way? Or can we add that to that combination of factors you mentioned?

Chris Blattman: Yeah, I think there's an element of this. I don't think Ukraine was going to be armed with missiles by the west. Long-range missiles. So surely that Russia was convinced that and could easily be convinced that Ukraine was going to be much more difficult to attack in future. It was a possibility. I don't think anybody is sure that after 30 years of economic stagnation, it's not necessarily a great bet to say that Ukraine's going to take off. But the possibility that these things could happen I think helps us explain some of the timing of this war, especially after stagnation. On balance probabilities, it's possible that Russia is at its peak influence and has its peak leverage over the Ukraine and Western Europe right around now. And if that's true, it's more like it's the opportune moment. So, then there's enormous counter incentives, but not to

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invade from all of these costs. But I think these things I've talked about aren't necessarily a full commitment problem but are weighing against the incentives for peace and contributing with all these other things to help us understand why this was strategically possible and, in the realm, where other delusions and ideologies could actually carry us to fighting.

Deqa Aden: Do you feel like with the current Ukraine/Russia situation is that there is this pressure where maybe there's miscalculation of how they thought they would take over Ukraine, and now he's stuck at this war, and he can't quit. And his image is on the line, his domestic politics on the line. And what would you say about that?

Chris Blattman: Most times we don't fight and we find some way to settle. And then when groups do fight, eventually, almost all the time, they find a way to settle. Sometimes there's an overwhelming victory of one side against the other. That's pretty rare. That's probably not going to happen here. As much as we might like for the Ukrainians to completely expel Russian invaders, it's actually plausible, but it's pretty unlikely. So, this is going to end in a settlement, and it can end in a settlement soon, or it can end in a settlement later. And a lot of people are pessimistic for some good reasons. I mean, they look at Libya and they look at Syria and they look at Yemen and they look at Kashmir and they say, "Oh my goodness, there are all these examples of these long-drawn-out conflicts," and I just have to point out that it's the same selection problem, right?

Chris Blattman: We're not paying attention to all of the settlements that did happen after relatively brief hostilities. And so, of which there are countless. I mean, Sub-Saharan Africa is a good example. Most wars in all regions of the world are generally short. Now short means months. That still means pretty brutal. There's going to be a settlement. And then the question is, is it after five months of more fighting, or is it after five years? Nobody knows. And the whole bunch of I think factors and ideas come into play, but I would just point out that it will happen. And there's reasons to think it might happen sooner than a lot of people fear.

Deqa Aden: Speaking of the settlement part, when you look at the Somalia -Somaliland situation, there was a four-year civil war and it ended with no settlement. There was no agreement. It's just both parties were exhausted. And then now the reason why there's no more war is because Somali is busy fighting terrorism, is busy doing their own political crisis domestically, that it's put on hold. And that brings the question that maybe for prolonged wars, do you see the struggle where sometimes even people lose track of why? It becomes very emotionally different where even people can't even rationalize it anymore?

Chris Blattman: So, most of the time that doesn't happen. What you're talking about is kind of an intangible incentive that's created by fighting. So, in some sense, we're exhausted. So, you start fighting, the uncertainty gets resolved. A lot of the momentary mistakes, misperceptions get fixed. In the sense that, okay, we're no longer in any illusions about anybody's fighting strength on either side. And I think what you're saying is maybe the process of fighting, these things go away and the motives for war go away, and we get closer to a settlement because all of these uncertainties disappear. I think that's true. But then you're saying, oh, well maybe the process of fighting creates a bitterness and a desire for vengeance and a desire to punish, which I think sometimes happens, it always happens to a degree. Does it happen enough to sort of make people continue to fight no matter what?

Chris Blattman: Well, eventually no, because as you said, they get exhausted. As much as they loathe the enemy, they decide it's better to loathe in peace. So, I would say it's going to make things more difficult, but not as difficult as some of these strategic factors, especially the fact that Putin is an unchecked leader. The

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fact that he does not personally bear so many of the costs of war, and the fact that peace may look less and less attractive every day because we are threatening, for good reason, but we are threatening punishments we would like to inflict on him and on his elite and on Russia, irrespective of whether he ends the war or not, that is making peace a lot less attractive. That to me worries me a lot more than deep-seated hatreds and desire to vengeance.

Ana Camila: So, you mentioned for example a lot about the authoritarianism of Russia. However, there are concerns on this kind of repeating history on the sense of third world war happening. Nonetheless, we see that regimes nowadays are very different from authoritarian regimes decades ago. So, in that sense, do you see or foresee that these reasons that you mentioned and why we go to war might evolve or adapt in time to those same adaptations in the sense that now you see these authoritarian regimes, but they also adapt better to the circumstances, and they act very differently and behave under very different incentives than before?

Chris Blattman: So, the thing that worries me about the current regime in Russia is how centralized it is and personalized. So, this is not the USSR, which was in some ways far less personalized, far more institutionalized with lots of bases of power within this ruling party. It's not the Chinese Communist Party in China where power is much more widely institutionalized and thus a leader is not as unchecked and has to internalize some of the costs. And because power's not personalized, in those places we're not as subject to their intangible incentives, nationalist visions, whatever they might have. We're not as subject to their personal misperceptions, or if their inner circle has degenerated because of his attempt to preserve power. We're not as vulnerable to those kinds of things. And there's probably less uncertainty, and it's easier for these institutionalized autocrats in USSR or China to make commitments and let's avoid commitment problems.

Chris Blattman: And it's the personalization of power that not only leads a leader to ignore costs, but to actually aggravate all of these different causes of war. So, it's the personalization of power in Russia that really worries me. That makes I think nuclear war or some sort of escalation a little bit more likely than it would've been under a more institutionalized autocrat regime.

Ana Camila: So, it's one of the concerns that you express in the book that peace doesn't necessarily mean equality or justice, or a better state overall. So, with this prediction on Ukraine's situation, getting to a settlement and what you just mentioned also authoritarian regime in Russia, I think there are many examples on how these settlements can translate into years of, for example, what's happening in Venezuela where the dictatorship has lasted for over 20 years. What would you add to this concern? Peace doesn't necessarily mean a better state overall when it comes to, okay, yeah, we don't always go to war, but there are also other ways of tensions and violence that could happen, saying at the individual level.

Chris Blattman: Yeah. So, Ukraine's stagnated for the last 30 years. It doesn't have any military allies, or didn't, and still doesn't in some sense. And Russia had a booming, successful economy, oil and gas, consolidation of political control. And so, Russia made a demand of Ukraine saying, "We're strong and we want more." And to the west, they said, "We want a wider sphere of influence. Just like you have, you have the Monroe Doctrine. If Communists were in central America, you would, in fact, you did invade and do everything possible to get rid of them. We're just going to do the same thing. And Ukraine, sorry, but you're going to get the short end of the stick here." And anticipated that Ukrainians would grudgingly accept this in the same way that Belarus and many other neighbors to Russia have grudgingly and bitterly accepted this. And then that didn't happen.

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Chris Blattman: The Ukrainians said, "No way," doesn't always happen actually. Most Russian citizens have tried to say, "No way," but then they've been crushed. And so, Russia tried to take the same tactic here. And so, I think it was this individual attachment to liberty and a rejection of semi sovereignty that also helps explain this war. That's an intangible incentive. That the Ukrainians, in some sense, quote unquote, should have taken this terrible cruel and unequal deal available to them, and they chose not to. And we applaud that, and we find that noble. I mean, Americans look at that and they see a lot of reminiscences of their own American Revolution where a tyrannical power offered them semi sovereignty and partial freedoms and they said no. And so, I think that to me is like the individual reaction that matters. That people said we will not accept an unjust allocation, peace means inequality. And in this case, we're not going to accept that. And there's a remarkable political military coalition to back that up. So that to me is the individual sentiment aggregated that also helps explain what's going on right now.

Deqa Aden: I'm going to change gears and talk about a completely different type of war. So, in the book, in the beginning, you talk about how things like poverty, scarcity, natural resources, climate change don't necessarily ignite war in the first place, more of add fuel to a raging fire. And this made me think of dam disputes in Somalia or violent protests that happen in Cape Town because of water scarcity. So, when you look at those incidents, it could be very isolated incident, which may not fit the definition of war because it's very short and it's very small, but in terms of climate threats in the future, would you put that as actually a war that could actually happen? A water crisis could actually become water wars?

Chris Blattman: So, there's always grounds for dispute and for competition over something that's scarce, that's just a universal. Water, climate, territory, diamonds, anything. And a lot of things we fight over are conceptual, they're policies. And there's only room for my policy, your policy. And so, there's always scarcity and war is always costly. So, the first thing we should just remember is that in general, if the pie is big, if the pie is small, if the pie is getting jostled by instability and shocks and temperature and water, it's going to make things maybe constantly uncertain, and it's going to maybe increase the intensity and the frequency of needing to resettle something. And that creates maybe more opportunities for conflict, but the basic incentives for finding settlements are there. That's why we don't generally see water scarcity associated with the initiation of conflicts. And it's why we don't see huge shocks in commodity prices or rainfall associated with the initiation of conflict.

Chris Blattman: We do see a little bit of an association empirically between climate variation and sudden shocks and the initiation of conflict. It's small, but it's there. It's actually a little bit of a puzzle to me. And I think that's worth a bit more investigation. But listen, of all the things we have to worry about, I would just put them way down the list. Which is not say they are ignorable. It's just, there's a lot of other things where we need to redirect our attention away from these sorts of sensational ones.

Ana Camila: So, regarding your methodology, this book is mainly qualitative, and it even starts with a personal story of yours. Why did you choose this particular method? And is it possible to get across the same core message of the book in a more quantitative approach?

Chris Blattman: I do as you know a lot of quantitative work. I think it's striking that of all the quantitative analysis of conflict, how much of it is divorced from our theories of conflict. And people like to run regressions or do analyses to come up with some kind of nonsense theory of conflict that actually doesn't really hold water if you really analyze it seriously. And I've been guilty of that in my own work as well. And so, it took me a long time. And so partly there's just an absence of empirical work saying, "Listen, if we take

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conflict seriously, then we think mediators should work in general," and we can study that, but we think they should work for reasons, A, B and C, and we think they should not work when they do D and F, or when they're in a situation that doesn't need their skills of specifically solving these five problems. And we don't run those studies, or we do very rarely.

Chris Blattman: So, I came to this partly by running some of the early microlevel studies at villages and gang levels to actually test some of these things. So, it's not like there's no evidence, but what it means is this is a world where the hard evidence is scarce. The theory is very persuasive. And then I would say the comparative case studies, the historical analyses all are very compelling and fit the theory very well. So now we can make a whole bunch of predictions about what kind of interventions and things should work. And now I'm hoping that more and more people just go out and test this rather than just running the 496 regressions of poverty on conflict.

Deqa Aden: This type of methodology is very accessible. The book can be read by anybody. It starts with a personal story, which is very fascinating and very intriguing. The question is, what do you want your readers to take away from the book?

Chris Blattman: I want people to realize, as we said, that war's not natural, and I want them to think about the causes differently. I want them to also instinctually recognize that when these things come up, we need to find a settlement. I mean, look at what's happening right now in American politics, maybe world politics, American politics are saying, "We must fight, no settlement," right? Which is bonkers. Right? I understand the sentiment. I'm angry too. And what Putin and Russia are doing is outrageous, but this will end in a settlement. And so maybe they are strategically bluffing and trying to project strength. And somehow there's a game there that says, this is actually going to either deter future Putin at the cost of extending this conflict. The alternative is that they're just not thinking this through strategically. And they're saying we should pay the price to not allow this to happen. Where what they really mean is we should have Ukrainians pay this price. And I'm worried that people are making these decisions emotionally, rather than thinking them through. Make this choice but make it after you've thought it through. And after you've recognized that you are unchecked in the sense that when you push these costs onto others.

Ana Camila: I'm going to move a little bit to the second part of the book, which is more focused on your purpose of why we don't fight. And you mentioned path to be, for example, interdependence, check and balances, rules and enforcement, interventions, among other measures. So right now, there is quite a debate on what's the actual scope on what can the international community do to help prevent these conflicts to happen in first place. So, for example, one of the mentioned factors, as I said, is interdependence. However, if one of the main mechanisms for international community to sanction or prevent and deter governments to misbehavior, be violent, such as economic sanctions, is not working possibly because of this globalization and interdependency which is not as effective anymore. What would you say can be done or how the international intervention or actors are going to have to adapt to such circumstances so these factors can still be applicable?

Chris Blattman: Right. So, taking one step back. In some sense, every institution or cultural change over time or intervention that the world has that is pacifying is basically rolling back one of these five factors and making it easy for people to find settlements without fighting, or once they start fighting, easier for them to find settlements. And sanctions are a reasonably good but limited tool. That's one example. Sanctions are a way of making unchecked leaders internalize the costs. Saying, "Well, you're not paying attention to these

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costs, so we are going to inflict you with other costs if you fight." This is how US cities deal with gangs who have engaged in high rates of homicide. It's a kind of conditional pressure, you do X, we'll do Y. You don't do X, we won't do Y. And it's a way of making them internalize their cost.

Chris Blattman: It's how Latin American governments deal with cartels and getting them to be less violent. And it's how we deal with people like Putin. It's a reasonably good tactic. It's sort of saying, if you do X, we'll do Y, and to sort of deter them from that action in the first place. Clearly that wasn't a sufficient deterrent for him in this case. It's probably sent a really clear signal to future potential invaders. China's probably looked at this very clearly. Nobody really knows what's going on in their minds, but this has probably made them think, oh, the west is far more unified on this kind of issue than we thought, than anybody thought. And therefore, it's going to deter in future. Now that it's clearly proven insufficient for something like Putin, it's not clear to me that just more sanctions are going to be the answer here.

Chris Blattman: And what's more, is we also have to be willing to say, "If you stop invading, we're not just going to continue to punish you and make peace very unattractive. We have to withdraw it." Just like we say, "If you don't do X, we're not going to do Y." And so that's also proving hard. So now sanctions are going to have this sort of double-edged effect, where will Western governments remove them if Putin was to actually withdraw? Maybe. Would all of these decentralized sort of meme sanctions, which is I think a term dangerously came up with that I like, which is all these sorts of private companies responding to this popular anger to say, "We're not going to sell in Russia." Are they going to suddenly somehow coordinate and start operating back in Russia? Maybe not. So, the danger with sanctions is we're now in a position where we're going to wield them unconditionally. And we've seen instances of this in the past, and in general, that can lead to war being prolonged, not war ending.

Deqa Aden: Speaking of that, this made me think that does war sometimes have to be super rational? When we talk about costs, when someone is dying for a cost and literally putting their lives out there, I can't see them really rationalizing the cost. Because you're literally losing your life for it. Is there this side of war that's just irrational, very just emotional driven, but maybe can be explained from a psychological perspective??

Chris Blattman: So, two of the five kinds of explanation that they say basically subsume almost every explanation for war, I'll call them psychological rather than irrational for a moment. And I'll say why. But these are the intangible incentives and misperceptions. Misperceptions, totally, misperceptions are about the systematic biases we have that keep us from seeing the truth. And they seem to be very prevalent and persistent even in groups, even in big groups, even in big groups engaged in long term warfare. So those are irrational by conventional definition. But then intangible incentives, are they irrational? In some ways our preferences are preferences. Do we think that an American Revolutionary is irrational because they were willing to die for their freedom? Well, you say, "Well maybe if they weren't thinking it through and they were caught up and they got caught up and stayed caught up in it for four years, there's an element of irrationality, but our preferences are our preferences, our values are our values."

Chris Blattman: And so, it can be that there's a flavor of some irrationality in the sense that we don't think through our values, always. Just like, I don't know, we don't really think through why we want that new iPhone, which is a little bit irrational, but we don't treat that as irrational. We're just sort of maximizing consumers. So, to the extent that our preferences are always a little poorly thought through, yes, but I think mostly that's not an irrational explanation. We're rationally acting on the things that we value.

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Ana Camila: Going back to the part on what can we do to find pathways for peace, and it is for example, with the rules and enforcement nowadays there's this perception that international treaties or normal conventions are starting to be more violated because of what we were talking before on these new ways of authoritarianism, which is perhaps not as violent as it was decades ago, but it's definitely much more flexible in eluding all of those consequences. My question would be, how can we find a way to reinforce such paths for peace, given that many governments and even with the accountability checks and balances, they're finding more and more ways to elude those responsibilities?

Chris Blattman: I think the broader problem that you're talking about is the fact that we live in a world where there aren't really strong institutions and other things to constrain the actions of states, especially great powers. So, when we look within a country, whether it's gangs or ethnic groups or political factions, there's lots of things that deter them from fighting. Basically, there is a big state sitting over them and there's public judgment, and all those things have power over these gangs and factions and generally dissuade them from fighting by threatening to punish them. And within world politics, if you think of the Western hemisphere, the US is a hegemon. And to a certain extent it and an alliance of all these American states basically keep their members from fighting one another, right? They're sort of policing one another. And then at the international level, we've slowly built some similar institutions, treaties, UN security council, peacekeeping forces, international criminal court. So, all of these have helped I think a little bit. And when it's smaller nations, a lot of these peacekeeping and peace building and enforcement interventions are pretty effective as a deterrent when war does break out.

Chris Blattman: But what we're finding is they don't work against great powers. We'd love for Putin to think about the international criminal court as something he'd have to face, but he doesn't because Russia hasn't signed on, nor has America, and America has spent the last two decades undermining the court's ability to have jurisdiction in countries that have not signed on. And so now America's kind of hypocritically, not kind, absolutely hypocritically saying we should prosecute this joker for war crimes. And they're sort of seeing the consequences of their own failure to support international institutions. And that's a shame. So, it can be done. It has been done to a degree. It's moving in the right direction still, despite some of the trends. It's possible that this could mean this is the closest I think the US has ever come to thinking it's going to sign on to the ICC, which would be great, but it's going to happen slowly.

Deqa Aden: We're going to go back in cycles. So, we started with the question that war is definitely another norm. And now when I look back in history and I look at you're in the Dark Ages, and I look at all these I guess revolutions that happened that were very violent, I mean, writing the book in the context of postmodern era, do you think that would've shaped... would you still write that book if you were in the Dark Age in Europe, or when you were in an era where violence was constantly happening all around?

Chris Blattman: That's a good question. I mean, so James Robinson, who's here, everyone knows his book *Why Nations Fail*, and *Why Nations Fail* never talks about conflict, right? *Why Nations Fail* is about the slow process of democratization in many parts of the world that happened actually without much violence. So, this long series of revolutions without revolt. And so, the story of England for example, is that every time, it starts with a very narrow class of people in power, just as despotic as some of the most despotic places on the planet right now. And then that circle gets widened to more and more nobility and then landed gentry and then merchants and so forth. Basically, every time some class acquires enough economic or mobilizational power to demand rights and inclusion, they give just enough people those rights to avoid a revolt. And so,

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there are some revolts and conflicts in English history, but they tend to be rare, and it's when that breaks down.

Chris Blattman: And so, you can look around the world, look at the last 50 years, look at the incredible wave of democratization, the seizure of political rights in a lot of Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, much of which happened without violence. And so, I do think the dominant story is one of unequal peace. I mean, if I look at Dark Ages of Europe, and I'm not an expert in this period, so there's a lot of periods of war, but I would say most of the time you just have the subjugation of the masses by the ruling elite. And it doesn't make sense for the peasants to revolt because war's too costly for them. And so, they take their miserable share. And so, I don't want to glorify that, I just want to sort of have us facts that understand the incentives that prevent people from rising up over injustice, at least some of the time.

Ana Camila: I actually wanted to ask about your acknowledgement part of the book in which you specify who your audience is for younger versions of yourself, especially for those of us who are interested in working with the international development and aid sector, about what advice for finding your margin within an area that it's been so debated lately on how actually effective it is, or we're not actually making any impact, we're just alleviating the immediate emergency situations. What do you have to say to that type of audience?

Chris Blattman: Well, I think it's actually in humanitarian crises, whether they're natural or human made, I do think there's a lot you can do. A humongous amount of good. In some sense, humanitarian crises are kind of a simple problem to solve. There's lots of really basic things that your dollar or your vote or your time especially can make a difference on. So, my wife is an executive of America's largest refugee organization, and that's what she does. She's really focused on that alleviation. For people who are more focused on the other margin, which is how do we reduce violence? I think it's a much more, I don't want to say humanitarian intervention is simple, right? But I just want to say we don't actually have answers. The nice thing about working for humanitarian organizations, there's a lot of things you can do that make a big difference. And it's just a matter of scale and fundraising and things.

Chris Blattman: The job of someone who wants to prevent violence from happening in the first place, I think it's more complicated because there's not that many great answers. There's a bunch of mediocre answers. And so, the idea I push is to bring to everything you do in life a spirit of trial and error. I close the book calling it like piecemeal engineering, which is a phrase from Carl Popper, but I spelled piecemeal P-E-A-C-E, because I wanted to think about how this applies to conflict. So first of all, as a young person you have to try on different careers for size. I think I went through seven careers before I found what I was working on. And so just assume you're going to find the wrong career initially. So, keep moving until you feel like you're doing some good and you're being challenged. But then in your job just don't get placated by the existing mediocre junk that you're asked to implement. Just recognize that there will always be mediocre, meh programs and interventions and ideas. And your job is to actually just try to move the needle, get them to try things that are different and systematically build in the idea that we're just going to have to try some different things all the time. Just a little bit.

Chris Blattman: You do a little bit every day. We don't have to totally change the organization. Just say, "I'm just going to try to make them 15% more dynamic," and just try different things. And if we did that collectively, there would just be a lot better answers over time. Just change the whole culture of these organizations. And I think that's totally possible. I think individuals can change the culture, if not the whole

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organization, their country office, or their unit or their country direct or something. And so that's what I would tell people to do.

Deqa Aden: We try to bring a lot of comprehensive questions. I was biasly asking a lot of war questions, maybe I'm Somali, who knows. Is there anything you would like us to ask you that we missed, that you really want to add?

Chris Blattman: One of the things I read about at the end of the book is a trap that a lot of us fall into when we want to help solve a problem in our own city or especially in another country where we're often a foreigner, right? I'm a foreigner when I go work on the south and west side of Chicago in many ways. And I'm certainly a foreigner when I go to Liberia. And a really powerful lesson I've learned from others, both practitioners and social scientists, is that earlier I said there's some simple problems or some complex problems. And we have this mistake where we kind of assume everything's a simple problem and we have the solution. And we forget to distinguish between these really wicked, hard, complex problems and the simple ones. And we do that more when we are this sort of foreigner, I think. When we're not embedded and when we're not accountable. That's the fundamental, it's not just that I don't have this knowledge because I'm not from there. It's that I just can say what I want and proclaim things and fail because no one holds me accountable.

Chris Blattman: So, there's a whole bunch of biases I got earlier in the book that we have to use to understand war. But I think this is the bias that we have to point back at ourselves and recognize that we succumb to when we try to tackle this kind of problem. The whole end of the book is about these kinds of biases and mistakes we make. And I really want people to dwell on that one, and to sort of just approach things with a little bit more humility and then to look at ways to make yourself more accountable. Because I think that's going to make you and the next person who fills that job be much more effective.

Reema Saleh: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict featuring Chris Blattman. This episode was produced and edited by Aishwarya Kumar and Reema Saleh. Special thanks to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit thepearsoninstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.