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To cite this article: Susan L. Woodward (2007) Do the Root Causes of Civil War Matter? On Using Knowledge to Improve Peacebuilding Interventions, JOURNAL OF INTERVENTION AND STATEBUILDING, 1:2, 143-170, DOI: [10.1080/17502970701302789](https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970701302789)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970701302789>



Published online: 24 Apr 2007.



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Do the Root Causes of Civil War Matter? On Using Knowledge to Improve Peacebuilding Interventions

Susan L. Woodward

The normative and practical success of the 1990s campaign on the right and responsibility to intervene to stop civil wars should be acknowledged so that policy and research can move on to the more pressing question of how we intervene and improve on currently inadequate results. This essay confronts a standard explanation, the failure to address the root causes of a conflict. It argues from academic research on three aspects – the knowledge on causes shaping current policies, the interests of those who matter in intervention, and the new research on civil war – that a focus on root causes would not improve outcomes and could even be counterproductive.

Keywords civil war; intervention; peacebuilding; root causes; violence

Introduction

The public debate over whether and how to intervene to aid the people of Darfur, Sudan, throughout 2004, 2005 and 2006 has once again pitted humanitarians and constructivists against the realists. Did the failures of Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993–95 and the political movement in the 1990s to persuade governments and their international organizations, first, that there was a *right* to intervene and, later, even a *responsibility* to intervene to end the violence of internal war, create a new normative consensus (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001; Woodward 2002)? Did states as a result begin to calculate their interests differently, so that such wars were perceived to pose a very real threat to their own national interest and to international peace and security in general (United Nations 2005)? Did the evidence that intervention makes a positive difference (Human Security Centre 2005; Fortna 2003, 2004b; Walter 2002; Doyle and Sambanis 2000) strengthen that normative consensus and make intervention more likely? Or, are the realists correct that Darfur, Congo and Afghanistan in 2005–06 demonstrate that little has changed in states' perception of interests and continuing selectivity of action and resources (Zartman 2005)? Is the assumption correct that where strategic interests are absent, so, too, is political will?

Behind this very public debate on intervention, however, a very different debate is now taking place among scholars, especially policy-oriented ones, over the outcome of interventions in the 1990s. Did they succeed or fail? Data-based, this debate could only be taking place if the interventionists had won, at least for a certain period of time. Led by Andrew Mack and his Human-Security Centre team in the first annual *Human Security Yearbook*, published in October 2005, the success position is based primarily on improved datasets on armed conflict coming from the joint Uppsala/PRIO research team (Gleditsch *et al* 2002)¹ which show that civil wars may not be the rising threat in the post-cold war era that activist-analysts portrayed. The incidence of civil war did rise after 1989, but it was driven largely by the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and the numbers peak already in 1992. By 2002, there were 40 per cent fewer armed conflicts than in 1990. Although there was a slight increase in 1998, the probability that any particular country will be involved in armed conflict has been declining since the late 1950s or earlier. However, the best explanation for this secular decline, Mack argues and seeks to demonstrate, is the very success of the interventionist movement, namely, a growing willingness to act internationally, especially through UN peacekeeping operations.

Mack's argument gains further support from the recent research by Page Fortna (2004b) identifying a decisive shift away from wars, both interstate and intrastate, that end in military victory to those ending in a draw. This shift occurs for civil wars in the 1990s: 38 of the 54 cases for which she has data, or 70 per cent, ended in a tie. In a careful and thorough test of possible explanations, she also finds the best fit to the data to be the development of peacekeeping. And indeed, the number of UN peacekeeping missions rose from five in the 1980s to an additional 35 in the 1990s, and then, with their success in ending the violence, the number falls to 15 in 1999 and only seven in 2000–05.² There is then a sharp jump again in peacekeeping missions in 2005: by June, the number had surged from seven to 17, and by October 2006, to 18, including substantial enhancements of existing missions. Calculated by number of troops in UN peacekeeping operations worldwide, commitments by summer 2006 were at an all-time high from the previous high in August 1995 of 68,894 for military and police, to 77,768 deployed in August 2006 and 140,304 committed on 1 October 2006.³ There does not seem to be a reluctance to act.

The recent rise in peacekeeping (and more often, peacebuilding) missions can, however, be read as evidence for the other side of the debate: that the problem is no longer the failure to intervene but the failure to intervene successfully. While the Uppsala/PRIO data show a decline in new civil wars, the total armed conflict worldwide has not declined but grown. The reason, James Fearon and David Laitin argue, is the failure to end long-running wars, so-called 'protracted conflicts' (Fearon 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003). Many of the recent deployments, indeed, are second-tour peacebuilding operations, that is, ones returning to countries of earlier missions which had failed to leave a stable state and end the violence

definitively, such as Haiti, Liberia and Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). In 2006, the list of recidivist deployments grew longer with UNSCR 1701 to expand and alter UNIFIL in southern Lebanon, the Secretary-General's call for a new mission in Timor-Leste, and the ongoing battle with the government of Sudan to replace the African Union mission in Darfur with a United Nations force. Then there are cases such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Cyprus and, until the summer of 2006, southern Lebanon, which are treated as a success and no longer coded as armed conflict, but where peace and political stability appear to be held only by long-term peacekeeping deployments. These data and a comparative analysis of African cases have led Jeremy Weinstein (2005) to suggest that the willingness to intervene may have become too automatic. Citing multiple examples of 'autonomous recovery' which did succeed alongside the many interventions that fail to achieve their goals, he is now seen as leading the other side of the debate, urging caution on the impulse to intervene and greater attention to countries that have ended the violence and restored political order without international assistance (see also Luttwak 1999).

This essay begins from the position that this is a false debate; both sides are correct. A normative consensus on intervention does now exist, and the increased willingness to intervene requires a change in research and policy focus to its consequences and the variation in outcomes. The current problem is not whether to intervene but how: what outsiders do to create a stable peace. Should we not be asking instead whether international mediation and peace operations, because of the greater willingness to act earlier to stop the violence, are creating a world that is less stable rather than more? Does the emerging research interest in 'post-conflict violence' and in fragile or crisis states, by disguising outcomes in new concepts, prevent asking that question directly? Is the success of the 1990s campaign placing greater requirements on peacekeepers and peacebuilding missions? A major obstacle to addressing these questions, I propose, is the conventional explanation held nearly universally by people in the target country, operational organizations, and the research community: that the cause of failure, or less than adequate outcomes, is the failure to address the 'root causes' of the conflict.

There are two difficulties with this conventional explanation. One is that it is so widely shared and so impervious to variation in outcomes that it prevents careful research on the specific relation between policies and practices of intervention and specific consequences in a case, research which could produce theoretically-based knowledge. The second is that it is probably wrong. This essay proposes three sets of reasons why a focus on the 'root causes' of a conflict will not improve the outcomes and effectiveness of peacemaking interventions: what we know and can know about 'root causes', the transformative nature of civil wars and the motivations and interests of intervening parties. It begins with a short discussion of current explanations for outcomes before elaborating on these three reasons.

Current Explanations for Inadequate Results

The research community has, in fact, been devoting greater attention to explaining variation in the outcome of international intervention to stop internal violence since 1990 (Doyle and Sambanis 2000; Stedman, Rothchild and Cousens (eds) 2002). They have appeared to settle on three explanations for inadequate results: (1) the mismatch between committed resources and the complexity of a specific conflict (Doyle and Sambanis 2000) – the problem of ‘incentive incompatibility’ analyzed by George Downs and Stephen Stedman (2002); (2) the lack of donor coordination on strategy, programme and projects once resources are committed (Jones 2002); and (3) insufficient attention to statebuilding alongside relief and reconstruction (Chesterman 2004, Paris 2004, Woodward 2002a,b).

At the same time, policy practitioners and agencies engaged in the ‘conflict business’ have also begun to focus actively on ways to be more effective, such as through greater use of lessons learned units, evaluation and monitoring contracts, ongoing consultancy arrangements with policy institutions, and outreach to academics. This includes taking on board the three explanations emerging from research and arguing: (1) for a selectivity of their own, to counteract that of the major powers and donors, such as the proposals in the Brahimi Report on peacekeeping operations (Brahimi 2000) which urged the United Nations Secretary-General to recommend a ‘no’ to any intervention being contemplated by the Security Council for which the resources necessary to succeed were not going to be forthcoming; (2) for greater policy coherence and donor coordination, such as the institutional reforms recommended for the United Nations by the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and, in turn, by the Secretary-General, and adopted by the General Assembly in 2005 – the creation of a Peacebuilding Commission, a peacebuilding support office, and a Peacebuilding Fund; and (3) for more attention in post-conflict reconstruction programmes to statebuilding.

The difficulty with the first two explanations, however, is that the policy recommendations do not take us much beyond the advocacy framework of a *droit d'ingérence* and the ‘responsibility to protect’. Certainly the empirical research behind the first explanation of an appropriate level of resources is far more precise and, thus, helpful to policy, but it says what the advocates argued: resources are not committed in relation to the normative claim or the measurable difficulty of the case, but selectively in terms of the specific interests of major powers. The authors even choose a minimalist definition of success, that the fighting stop and not resume in five years, admitting that a higher standard was desirable but that there was no point in using a measure that few interventions could meet (for example, Stedman, Rothchild and Cousens 2002; Edelstein 2004). The second explanation for poor outcomes – lack of coordination – has received the greatest attention in the policy literature and in current reforms at both national and international, field and headquarters levels,

but it presumes that what is to be done is known, or can easily be known if coordination among donors and other international actors were present, not that there may be very real reasons for, and interests in, a lack of coordination. Indeed, its goal of greater policy coherence through coordination, among national agencies and within international organizations and missions, is also based on a discouraged, minimalistic conclusion that external actors cannot agree on post-war strategy, which is what is actually needed, and one must settle instead for operational coordination.

The third explanation, that the precondition of stable peace and economic growth is a functioning government or – in the language of Roland Paris – the institutions necessary to a liberal peace, does move beyond the paradigm of legitimated intervention to the subsequent question of what is done once one intervenes. It engages directly with debates in both policy and academic circles on electoralism (is the essence of democracy really elections, and what are the costs and benefits of holding elections early after the fighting ceases?), the call in the Brahimi Report on peacekeeping for a doctrinal shift to civilian policing, and the growing emphasis in post-conflict reconstruction on the ‘rule of law’ (Carothers 2006). Nonetheless, this emphasis on statebuilding has also narrowed, in the face of less than successful results in the two transitional administrations of Kosovo and Timor Leste and the explicit statebuilding operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, to a question of ownership. Who should be in the driving seat, the outsiders or the locals, and how assertive should outsiders be, if a stable peace is to result (Chesterman 2004, 2007)? The question of ownership, moreover, comes close to suggesting that the problem may be intervention itself because any externally designed programme based on generalized templates will be insufficiently tailored to local circumstances, and, in the end, will fail to address the ‘root causes’ of that conflict.

It would be wrong to say that these three dominant explanations for inadequate outcomes in peacebuilding are the only ones. The case study literature, in particular, whether in policy and programme evaluations or by academic researchers, provides a wide range of lessons in specific cases of the external actions and policies that would have been more successful. The difficulty, however, is its very particularity and its tendency to reinforce an emerging cleavage within the policy community between those who insist on developing best practice manuals and frameworks to benefit from this new knowledge and to be prepared in the face of this growing demand for international action, on the one hand, and those who insist on the importance of context to successful assistance and the neglect by external actors of that context and the characteristics of a specific case (Ahmed 2005). Scholars are beginning to address this problem as well by arguing that, indeed, civil wars differ and these differences matter, and thus to identify patterns of variation and to develop policy-useful classifications of civil wars. This is an extremely important development in the research community, but it is at the early stages.

Do 'Root Causes' of Civil War Matter?

Against this ongoing tension between particularity and policy-usable generalizations stands the view that the actual problem with results is the failure to deal with the 'root causes' of the conflict. This widely shared conviction appears to resolve this tension, since it is both general and case-based simultaneously.

Take conflict-resolution theorists, for example. Third parties can assist parties' move from war to peace, they argue, by helping them listen to each other, to their particular concerns, and, above all, to their explanations for the conflict. By thus showing respect for each others' point of view, in a safe environment reinforced by confidence-building measures to get them to the point of seeing that their concerns may not be zero-sum if framed differently or that a compromise is acceptable, peace will be nearly self-implementing. Thus, external actors must take grievances seriously, and thus at least the parties' identification of causes, and the moment to confront the causes of the conflict is early, at the point of mediation and negotiation. Policy-oriented analysts of the post-conflict stage of international peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions who insist on the importance of taking 'context' seriously, adapting templates and best practice documents to the particular conflict and seeking out reliable sources of local knowledge, have something similar in mind. Judging by the extent to which the term 'root causes' appears in the grey literature of field agencies, such as humanitarian organizations, one might argue that operations practitioners are the most wedded to this explanation and its label. Although the failure of donors to provide these agencies with sufficient resources comes first, the failure to take 'root causes' into account regularly follows as explanation for why a large proportion of their projects and programmes suffer from unsustainability.

But is this true? If we took the causes of a civil war into account more directly in what we do to end a civil war, would we have a higher success rate? Unfortunately, its status as a nearly universal convention among policy, local and research communities has made the argument more a policy given than a proposition in need of empirical demonstration. This default character also makes it available for whatever political position one wants to promote, including an excuse not to intervene to stop violence at all, as illustrated by its use by US President George W. Bush and his Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in the summer of 2006, to prevent immediate intervention in Lebanon to stop the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah on the grounds that no ceasefire would last if it did not address the root causes of the conflict, despite the overwhelming international opinion on the other side. Three sets of reasons warn that the causes of a civil war do *not* matter to successful peacebuilding and that the focus of both policy and research should be elsewhere. In the remainder of this essay, I will address these reasons by posing three questions. First, what do we know about the causes of civil war? Second, what does the newest research on the dynamics of civil war itself tell us about the role that its causes should play in

bringing the violence to an end? And, third, how do the policymakers and practitioners who decide whether and how we intervene address those causes once we learn what they are?

Knowledge on the Causes of Civil War

Academic study of civil war, political violence and the breakdown of social order addresses one of the oldest questions of social science, but the increased public attention to civil war in the 1990s gave it a new impetus. The primary research question was the causes of civil war, particularly what causes the onset of civil war. Most important, and also problematic as I will discuss later, the normal disconnect between academic research and the policy community which often prevents the application of such knowledge was less of a problem in this particular round of research on the subject because much of it was financed and even commissioned by those with policy concerns. Most prominent was the World Bank, which grew increasingly concerned during the 1990s, particularly under the presidency of James Wolfensohn, about the costs to development of civil war, including the destruction of World-Bank infrastructure projects and the preponderance of conflict-affected countries among the most highly indebted countries. The World Bank set up a research unit, led by the British Africanist economist, Paul Collier, on the 'Economics of Crime, Violence, and Civil War'. Second was the Carnegie Corporation of New York, under the presidency of David Hamburg. He sought to place prevention on the policy agenda for largely ethical and humanitarian concerns but also pragmatic and cost-benefit ones; prevention being less costly. Hamburg created the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, which issued a massive series of studies and overall report (1997) on conflict prevention. Third was the US government, through the office of the Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., which was persuaded by academic researchers that early warning was both possible and less costly than intervention to stop the fighting. Through funding and authorization by the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Intelligence, a task force to study State Failure (later changed to Political Instability) was created to mobilize US academic analysis on the causes of civil war as a means of early warning; it is currently in its fifth panel of data collection and analysis.⁴

At the same time, the two UN Secretaries-General in this period (Boutros Boutros-Ghali [1992] and Kofi Annan) gave substantial emphasis to the problem of conflict prevention in speeches and UN documents. By the late 1990s, official development agencies, such as the UK Department of International Development (DFID) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), also turned their attention to what they called 'conflict' in general, with separate bureaus and the development of conflict assessment tools, in particular. In their case, however, the reason was the huge impact of Mary Anderson's critical analysis of foreign developmental and humanitarian assistance, *Do No Harm* (1999). Like the World Bank, Carnegie Corporation and CIA Directorate sponsorship, the result

was to promote research on and causal analysis of armed conflict and the role of external actors.

The result of this policy-interested research in the 1990s was not, however, the kind of usable knowledge one might want to address the 'root causes' of a civil war. Instead, it generated a debate between two competing interpretations, which had such a great influence on public understanding of civil war and on policies adopted to address the violence that neither criticisms of these explanations nor alternative knowledge could get a hearing. Before addressing the consequences, I briefly discuss those two schools, which I will label the cultural and the economic, and a third, a political-regime explanation, which is also probably now part of the conventional wisdom but has had less prominence.⁵

1. *The cultural argument.* For proponents of this position, the root cause of civil war is cultural difference and especially political discrimination against minorities defined in cultural terms (leading some to adopt the general term 'grievances' for this cause). It is often summarized, however, as 'ethnic conflict'. By this argument, culturally pluralistic or divided societies (the two terms are used interchangeably) are violence-prone due to long-standing primordial identities (sometimes called 'ancient hatreds') and recurring conflicts over status, treatment and rights between groups so identified (Petersen 2002; Kaufman 2001; Kaufmann 1996; Gurr 1993, 2000).

For some analysts, these identities are not given but socially or politically constructed, and thus the source of the conflict is not difference *per se* but political leaders (called ethnic entrepreneurs) who 'manipulate' identities and feelings of discrimination by appeals to nationalism in ethnically heterogeneous societies for political (primarily electoral) gain (Gagnon 1994/95; Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Snyder and Mansfield 1995; Snyder 2000). A substantial literature on post-colonial states and the kinds of political conflicts and resulting lines of cleavage created by colonial strategies of rule has been particularly useful in analysis of African conflicts (Mamdani 2001; Young 2002). An international-security version argues that internal wars reflect international conflict; with the end of the Cold War, ideological conflicts have disappeared (Fukuyama 1992) and been replaced by conflicts over 'identity' and 'civilization', defined by religious beliefs and cultures (Huntington 1993, 1997; Kaufmann 1996). In all versions, however, wars are fought over the political consequences of cultural differences.

2. *The economic argument.* This perspective is identified with a particular formulation by the World-Bank research team led by Paul Collier (1998; 2001; 2000). Civil war is caused by rebels seeking economic gain. Finding no statistically significant correlation between civil war and the level of income inequality in a country, despite the robust, positive correlation between poverty (also measured by country) and civil war and the economic grievances central to older, class-based or relative-deprivation ('J-curve') theories of rebellion, Collier *et al* proposed an explanation in the high positive correlations they did find in the aggregate data: between civil-war onset and declining economic growth rates,

low overall GDP per capita, dependence of a country on primary commodity exports, and a large pool of unemployed young men. Their analysis began with motivations – why rebel? – but moved later to opportunities because they only had structural data. In both versions, however, the problem was defined in Olsonian, collective-action terms: under what conditions could rebels finance and sustain a rebellion against a government, or, in their rational-choice language, what explains the strategic choice to rebel and what would solve their collective action problem (Oson 1965)? The answer was standard to that approach, the selective incentives of economic gain for both leaders and recruits. But in contrast to the ‘grievance’ assumption of the ethnic-conflict school, civil war was caused by ‘greed’ and the opportunity provided by war ‘to loot’, especially where huge profits could be made from natural resources like diamonds or timber, called ‘resource predation’.

3. *The political-regime argument.* In this framework, civil war is caused by authoritarian rule, or the absence of democracy. The particular formulation of this argument that dominates the policy discussion, however, is largely a refinement of the cultural argument, in which aggrieved minorities defined culturally remain the main players, but the problem lies in the absence of mechanisms for redress. At the same time, like the economic argument, its support comes from aggregate statistical analysis of patterns relating political instability (including violence) to regime-type done by the Political Instability Task Force (Goldstone *et al.* 2005). Public attention to this argument may well have more to do with its strong affinity to an equally public argument during the 1990s, that of democratic-peace theory in international relations, but its empirical base is the minorities-at-risk and Polity datasets developed at the University of Maryland by Ted Robert Gurr and associates (1993; 2000) and the political problems of culturally fragmented or polarized societies.

More recent refinements by the task force, moreover, have much in common with the branch of the ethnic-conflict school that focuses on the dangers of violence-provoking nationalism in the course of democratization; for the task force, the predictive power in their model of ‘factionalism’ was very strong (Goldstone *et al.* 2005: 17). They take the argument further, arguing that it is ‘partial democracies’ and a particular sequence of democratization, not the process of democratic transition in general, that is most prone to political instability and even violence (Goldstone *et al.* 2005).

The significance of these research findings on the causes of civil war in the 1990s is their influence on public perceptions and policies. In the hands of decision-makers, for example, the cultural (ethnic-conflict) argument has often been used against intervention, or at least to limit it to humanitarian mandates and organizations, on the view that such conflicts have been going on for so long and are so emotional – ‘ancient hatreds’ – that no outsider can do much about them; the ‘intractable problem from hell’ in Secretary of State Warren Christopher’s infamous statement about Bosnia in 1993 and the less explicit

innuendo in public discussion about the futility of intervention in African conflicts. The shift in the characterization of violence in Iraq during 2006 from insurgency to 'sectarian', as the violence worsened and US debate about 'quagmire' and withdrawal intensified, is part of this same pattern. Similarly, the economic-gain argument has also been used against intervention and in favour of distant policies such as economic sanctions by the public portrait of rebels as criminals who deserve punishment and deterrence, not engagement. Policies to end the violence and create a peace when intervention does take place have also, however, been largely shaped by one or all of these three causal arguments.

The ethnic-conflict argument has so strongly influenced diplomats who act as third-party negotiators that peace agreements and constitutions (whether contained in the peace agreement or navigated in the early stages of state-rebuilding after the agreement) now routinely focus on power-sharing arrangements in the executive branch of government, consociational principles of decision-making, and protections and subventions for minority rights defined culturally (Sisk 1996; Roeder and Rothchild 2005). Regional and municipal autonomy, decentralization, and in some cases even federalism are increasingly common, universal prescriptions. Although existing sovereign borders remain sacrosanct in principle, proposals to end violence always now include territorial administration (from autonomy to partition) on ethnic/cultural lines to facilitate more ethnically homogeneous communities which are said to be necessary to stable democracy.

Policies based on the economic argument have been more influential in the earlier stages of war termination, perhaps because the view has been applied most frequently to Africa where major-power interest in intervention is more dubious. Economic sanctions targeted at governments identified as the predators, or military and economic aid to help governments defeat rebels; targeted financial sanctions to reduce rebel access to finance from illegal trafficking in natural resources and trade regulations on primary commodities such as the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme to regulate trade in rough diamonds; and other financial regulations aimed at interrupting the flow of diaspora funding, money laundering and so-called 'terrorist financing', or at least to gain transparency on the financial transactions of long-distance trade, are now widely employed to make it more difficult to finance war (Ballentine and Nitzschke 2005).⁶ Policies at the stage of implementing a peace agreement have also been designed to reduce the financial assets for war, based on the 'economic causes' argument – reducing military expenditures, developing state capacity for managing natural resources, and security sector reform (Pugh *et al.* 2004).

More recently, the Collier team has focused directly on post-conflict aid aimed primarily at interrupting what they label the 'conflict trap' of low or nonexistent economic growth after war, that is, that the original causes of a civil war will still operate when a peacebuilding intervention is on the ground to provoke its renewal. Arguing that the growth potential of post-war economic aid is even higher than in an average poor country, they urge military peacekeepers be sent

in the first three years after a peace agreement is signed and then to front-load development aid in years four to seven – not when the governments' absorption capacity for foreign aid is too low, but not so late as to condemn the country to another downward economic spiral. Such aid must foster policy reforms based on neoliberal growth theory, to attract foreign direct investment as the basis for the economic turnaround and generally be market-friendly, efficient and transparent in the use of economic resources.

Perhaps the most striking contrast among the policy implications of these competing causal arguments is the position taken on democracy. The economic-conflict school warns against premature promotion of democracy and urges delay until the end of the ten-year period they analyze. For the political-regime school, democracy promotion is essential from the beginning, although they also insist on the correct sequencing of the different components of democracy. If elections come first, the outcome will be the most unstable type of political regime; and any set of institutional arrangements that increase the risk of factionalism will be counterproductive (Goldstone *et al.* 2005).

The difficulty with these research findings for those who argue that peace-building policy must address the 'root causes' of a war goes beyond the fact that scholars disagree and that the policy implications of each differ and in some cases even conflict. A third problem is that all three explanations have been subject to substantial criticism and disproof, but these criticisms do not seem to have had the same hearing in the policy world, let alone had any influence on revisions in policy in response to this new knowledge.

Thus, new research demonstrates that ethnic diversity does not incline a country to violence. Quite the contrary, ethnically heterogeneous societies are less inclined to civil war than homogeneous ones (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Sambanis 2000). Nor has there, in fact, been any decline since the end of the Cold War in wars that scholars code as based on 'ideological' conflict in favour of those coded as 'ethnic' (Fortna 2004b). The quality of the data on ethnicity, and particularly the index of ethnic fractionalization so crucial to analysis of ethnic-conflict as a cause, is so poor and subject to coding errors, in fact, that much new scholarship has focused on improving the measurement of ethnicity and related datasets.⁷ Nonetheless, the newest research shows clearly that ethnic identity and conflicts related to cultural difference are so situation-specific that large-N aggregate statistical analysis showing a strong correlation between ethnicity and civil war can have little meaning (Posner 2005; Habyarimana *et al.* 2004a,b).

The problem of poor data and methodology is even greater in the work of the economic school of Collier *et al.*, including coding errors, missing data that reduce the number of cases to very few, highly contestable proxy measures, and the civil war data set (Suhrke, Villanger and Woodward 2005). This research, too, has provoked other scholars to revise or develop new datasets on civil war. Substantively, new research shows that there is no statistical relation between dependence on primary commodities and rebellion (Ron 2005; Fearon 2005), and that there is great variation in political consequences (including type of civil war if that is one outcome) according to the type of primary commodity a country

sells (Ross 2006, 2004a,b; Ballentine and Nitzschke 2005). Scholars who study the microdynamics of insurgency, which is necessary to identify a collective-action problem and its solution, demonstrate persuasively that neither selective incentives such as access to finance nor ethnic loyalty solves the collective problem of rebellion (Gutierrez Sanin 2004) or tells us very much at all about the microfoundations of violence (Kalyvas 2006; Lacina 2006; Wood 2003).

Similarly for the political-regime argument, highly aggregated, statistical analysis of political instability does not provide the reason – the causal mechanism – that partial democracies are most vulnerable to violence (Gandhi and Vreeland 2004). For that, one needs to go to the case study literature, and its overriding lesson is that regime type (authoritarian or democratic, or a mixed, partial type) does not provide enough information about the specific dynamic of politics that do, in fact, explain the onset and trajectories of civil war. Such politics may be provoked by governmental policies, for example, the introduction of decentralizing reforms, a radical structural adjustment programme, or land privatization that leads to large-scale landlessness, but the process is part of the cause (Collier and Sambanis 2005; Murshed and Gates 2005; Sanchez and Chacon 2005; Sambanis 2004; Ballentine and Sherman 2003). Indeed, as the Political Instability Task Force now argues, on the basis of their newest findings that both consolidated democracies and authoritarian governments are least prone to civil war and political instability, it might be more fruitful not to ask about causes of war but causes of system stability or instability. Causes, or at least triggers, of destabilization often lie, according to the case-study literature, moreover, in a state's external environment. The causes of civil war are almost never solely domestic.

In sum, the policy interest in stopping the violence of civil wars has led to substantial advances in what we know about their causes, but current policies tend to be based on research that has been superseded and that, in any case, proposed competing arguments. If effective peacebuilding depends on addressing 'root causes' and the knowledge on which those policies are based is wrong, then our interventions may do more harm than we would by ignoring causes altogether.

Furthermore, if the root causes of any civil war lie in international factors, even partially – for example, the changing global economic context, the instability of a neighbourhood, the strategic policies of major powers, the economic policies supported by donors and banks, the conditions for aid or trade – then the focus of peacebuilding must include those international conditions or actions, not just domestic transformation. While the regional security context of a country in conflict has been incorporated into some peacebuilding strategies, such as the regional stabilization annex (1B) of the Dayton peace accord for Bosnia-Herzegovina and its implementation by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and further regional arms control negotiations in Vienna, or the agreement on cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours facilitated by Lakhdar Brahimi in 2002, for the most part the international conditions and policies that figure most prominently in analyses of root causes are beyond the reach of a peace operation or worse,

the external actors who would have to make changes will not and insist that local actors bear full responsibility for the violence.

Most important, the parties themselves will not agree about the ‘root causes’ of their war. That is the nature of civil war. Not only is civil war a highly complex phenomenon, such that there is no single cause in the sense promoted by the three influential schools of explanation, but the fuel that provokes and prolongs a war includes fundamental disagreements over its cause (and thus respective responsibilities for its start and resolution). Crucial to the way a conflict ends are the parties’ campaigns to win external support (including intervention) for their side by shaping outsiders’ perceptions of the cause of the war. Academic experts often lend their support to these campaigns without full disclosure that they have taken on an advocacy role. One reason that military victories tend to be more stable than negotiated or assisted endings (Licklider 1993) may be that victors impose their explanation and can, thus, terminate the competition over cause and responsibility. Otherwise, the politics of the immediate post-war period is suffused with (if not actually driven by) a continuing contest over interpretations, relative responsibilities and guilt, and search for external support for one origin and cause over others. While policy makers tend (impatiently, one must acknowledge) to dismiss academic research on grounds that ‘experts do not agree’, these disagreements pale in intensity and consequence in the face of the inevitable disagreements among the parties.

Causes vs. Outcomes: Our Emerging Knowledge on Civil War

Academic research provides a second set of reasons why effective peacemaking does not depend on knowing and addressing the ‘root causes’ of a conflict, indeed, reasons why such a focus would be counterproductive. These arise from the newest academic research on the nature of civil war and its dynamics.

Wars are transformative, even if the greater willingness to intervene makes them less decisive than in the past. Creating a sustainable peace requires addressing the reality created by that war – the outcomes, not the causes. While aggregate-level studies demonstrate that the longer a civil war lasts, the more intractable to resolution it becomes (Hartzell *et al.* 2001), Fearon (2004) argues that this varies with the type of civil war. Case studies go further in demonstrating that it is not in the causes of the war but the changes wreaked by war that one can find bases for its successful termination. I will limit myself here to three major trends in the current research.

Causes of Violence versus Causes of Civil War

One of the problems of two of the 1990s arguments on causes (the cultural and the economic) was that their causes were individual motivations, but their data were aggregate and structural. A primary criticism of that research, therefore,

was its neglect of the microfoundations of war. The newer research focuses on microfoundations, and one of the consequences is a very important distinction, promoted most explicitly by Stathis Kalyvas (2006), between the causes of violence in civil war and the causes of civil war. They are not the same. To explain violence, he and others argue, one must look to fundamentally personal and local (as opposed to national) causes, not to the causal narratives of macropolitics which are adopted by outsiders and the research on causes discussed above. The focus on local politics is not a particularistic explanation, as some might think; Kalyvas, for example, has proposed a general theory based on research on the Greek civil war which can be tested on other cases and eventually used by practitioners. The policy implication, however, is that to stop the violence, the primary concern of interventions, and to establish a set of conditions and institutions that prevent a reversion to violence after the international presence leaves, practitioners must understand these local (village, town, community) and personal dynamics.⁸

The distinction does help explain the persistence of the cultural and economic arguments on causes of civil war, despite massive contrary evidence. After all, the propaganda of civil war often uses the language of ethnic or religious difference, and much of what many would call looting and criminal behaviour do occur. Case studies on the dynamics of civil-war violence show clearly, however, that the cultural and economic arguments more often have the direction of causality reversed. The experience of violence has consequences, one of which is to *cause* ethnic conflict. That is, Kalyvas' metanarratives, what Crawford Young (2002) calls 'discourses of difference', are necessary to civil war because behaviour that most people would abhor in peacetime must be justified.⁹

Another consequence of violence is to make choices for individuals. All three earlier arguments presumed that violence and war were a consequence of individual or collective *choice*. It is not identities per se, whether ethnic, racial or religious, or even the perception of discrimination and lack of avenues for redress on that basis, that cause people to use violence and commit atrocities against people of other identities, but the reverse. Once violence begins, people are forced to take sides which have been defined by others. Just as those broad cultural labels hide actual wartime distinctions more closely related to roles on the ground (for example, soldier, enemy, war widow, war profiteer), so post-war identities and distinctions should be free to develop in response to new roles and the requirements of peace.

A third consequence of violence itself relates to its mobilizing effect. Neither pre-war 'grievances' nor the prospect of loot can explain the decision to use violence, whereas the experience of violence itself can, such as the high levels of women's participation in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal provoked by the rape of women by internal security forces (Murshed and Gates 2005; on El Salvador, Wood 2003). Lacina's study of the severity of civil war violence argues that 'knowing why wars start does not necessarily reveal when they will be most devastating' (2006: 287). Similarly, the experience of violence can help explain how programmes aimed at ending the war and preventing post-war violence can

have a demobilizing effect. Research by Jeremy Weinstein and Macartan Humphreys (2005) on the demobilization of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone shows the importance of taking the effects of violence during the war directly into account, quite independently of its causes. Demobilization requires reintegration, as standard approaches to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of the UN Development Programme and companion policies understand, but the extent to which ex-combatants were accepted by family and neighbours, and thus were successfully reintegrated after the conflict, could not be explained by either age, gender, ethnicity of their fighting units, or participation in an organized DDR programme. What mattered was the 'combatant's experience of the war, in particular, the extent to which he or she engaged in abusive practices'. The affected population, including families, know what units did during the war, and this affects their willingness to allow them back into the community. Indeed, there is frequently a *rise* in violence after the ceasefire or peace agreement which may even be more deadly than the war, a fact first given attention by the research of Charles Call and William Stanley (2002) on El Salvador and Guatemala. This violence is not a product of unresolved pre-war grievances but of new, post-war hardships (such as huge unemployment) and war-created resources, such as the proliferation of small arms, the wartime bonding among fighters, or the criminal gangs willing to take the risks to provide supplies during the war and their smuggling routes and networks.

Socio-economic Change

Society, economy and interests are all transformed by war, and especially by a civil war (Cramer 2006; Keen 1997, 1998, 2005). Contrary to the 'new war' argument (Kaldor 1999), moreover, the historical research on civil wars on this subject is vast (Kalyvas 2001). War transforms society. Rural populations move to the cities and stay. Women take on roles that had formerly been male-dominant, including military roles that make it nearly impossible for them to return to their pre-war communities and status. The demographic balance changes as disease more than bullets kills off the most vulnerable (as Les Roberts has documented in DR Congo [2004]), or as middle-class professionals (the core of 'civil society') are able to escape and refugees do not return. 'Warriors', writes Gutierrez Sanin (2004) about Colombia, 'are transformed by the very experience of war – they create social ties, and develop a specific know-how that teaches them that survival depends on the precision and adequacy of collective tasks' (2004: 5). Leadership potential may be created by war, but many leaders and potential leaders are also killed off prematurely.

War also transforms the economy. Strategic infrastructure, even if it is destroyed, becomes more salient in the national psyche. Foreign investment is delayed or diverted, and foreign markets may be lost forever. Long-distance smuggling routes shift, depriving some and opening other areas to global networks. New social groups gain opportunities to enter business and succeed.

While much attention has focused on the negative aspects of a war economy, such as its criminalization, some scholars like Roland Marchal on Somalia or Christopher Cramer (2006) on Angola and Mozambique emphasize the positive side, in the sense of opportunities for social groups previously excluded – thus part of what might have been catalogued as a grievance leading to war – whose economic agility, entrepreneurship, and new wealth should be seen as a potent resource of post-war stability.

War transforms interests. Elisabeth Wood (2000) argues that the influence of war on dominant economic interests in El Salvador and South Africa made peace possible. In El Salvador, the shift of investments to export production and services by landowners responding to the costs of war on the land also changed their attitudes toward the kind of political regime that would best protect their class power and a resulting willingness to compromise with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) insurgents on establishing a democratic regime. In Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Marie-Joelle Zahar (2000) argues, the interests of militias, particularly its leaders, changed fundamentally in the course of having to organize for war, mobilize resources, administer territories they control, and keep their fighters fighting. Those who would help end the war, she concludes, should take these changed interests seriously. Post-war prospects will be shaped substantially as well by whether outsiders overcome their initial assessment of causes and acknowledge these new interests and skills, for example, as the basis of a peacetime political party and potential government or simply as a force they originally viewed as one to be demobilized, downgraded and perhaps even punished.

The Political Process

The critique of the 1990s literature on the causes of civil war for not taking sufficient account of the political dynamics that lead to war and, equally, those that can bring it to an end, does connect causes to endings, but only if one understands the nature of civil war. Unlike interstate war, where there are declarations of war and *casus belli*, civil wars are the outcome of long-developing processes of decay in the socio-cultural and official institutional mechanisms that normally keep limits on the use of violence in a particular locality or country (Marshall 2004; Ellis 1999). The moment of breakdown into high-intensity or large-scale violence, the moment normally coded as war and noticed by outsiders, is most frequently due to some ‘trigger’ that is a contingent event unrelated to the issues at stake and parties’ goals (see Kalyvas 1999 on the distinction). Some recognition of this long process of breakdown may be what is meant by the adjective ‘root’, but the research suggests, instead, that the focus for both prevention and peace should not be on causes as conventionally understood but on how mechanisms that keep limits on the use of violence as a means to political ends are destabilized or restored.

The essence of civil war, regardless of substantive goals, is a contest for power – over who rules, who gets to define policies for their group or goals, and above all, the very rules over who rules. This abnormal level of power uncertainty (sometimes called the collapse of civil authority or state failure) and its bases in a society must be restabilized to end the violence. The issue at stake in ending a civil war and its violence is not *who* wins (for example, ‘moderates’ vs. ‘radicals’) but *what* rules will reduce that power uncertainty and gain sufficient legitimacy over alternatives to end the ongoing contest (Stinchcombe 1999). These rules will, by definition, favour some groups over others, but it is not the persons or groups emphasized in the conventional literature on causes that is at issue, but the rules that facilitate a return to non-violent methods of political competition. The political mechanisms that can restabilize in such conditions have not been studied as much as we need.

The debate about causes has promoted the view that some types of conflicts are more amenable to solution than others (for example, that ‘ideological’ conflicts are less ‘zero-sum’ and thus more amenable to solution than ‘ethnic’ conflicts). Aside from the contrary empirical evidence (Fortna 2004b), this argument appears to ignore the element of power involved: (1) that the constitutional solution that ends a civil war is always an imposition by whoever has the power sufficient to gain legitimacy over alternatives, (2) that whatever institutions to regulate political competition emerge, they will only last if they persuade losers who still control arms that they gain by these new rules, or that they have no alternative but to hope thus, and (3) that most causes of civil war are never truly solved but redefined by creative leadership willing and able to change the political agenda (Uyangoda 2005). As a result, historically, the particular causes or projects which end the war often have little to do with those with which the war began. The role of external actors in helping to stabilize this power uncertainty or the reverse, actually prolonging or increasing the uncertainty that causes violence, must also be addressed (Woodward 2006).

Motivations for Intervention: What Matters to those who Matter?

If the ‘root causes’ matter to more effective outcomes, to whom do they matter? A third consideration in the proposition that success requires taking causes seriously is their compatibility, or lack of conflict, with the interests and motivations of those policymakers, practitioners and organizations who intervene, provide assistance and design the approaches to ending civil wars.

A dispassionate analysis of the effect of interveners’ motivations on peace-building outcomes is remarkably rare because of the principle, and thus presumption, of neutrality in humanitarian operations, United Nations peace-keeping and conflict-resolution theory. Though increasingly debated and under attack from many sides, the presumption interferes with asking the question. There is consensus now in the policy and evaluations literature that assistance programmes are donor-driven (Woodward 2002a,b). Some discussion of the

varying consequences of that fact occurs in the literature on ownership. Some analyses of peacebuilding operations also acknowledge what insiders have long recognized, that all such operations are highly political. Yet systematic analysis of its consequences is scarce. Instead, I discuss four types of motivations and interests guiding the decision of external actors to intervene and the decision of operations and assistance to argue that there is little or no room for taking 'root causes' into account.

1. *Ideology.* Peacebuilding operations occur in a larger context. Whether one takes the world-polity interpretation of Roland Paris (2004), the critical-theory version of Mark Duffield (2001), or the realist interpretation acknowledged by US Secretary of State Rice's policy agenda of 'transformational diplomacy' (Center for Global Development 2006), post-conflict policy is guided by a particular model of the state, economy and society, an ideology of 'liberal internationalism', which interveners aim to achieve. Liberal democracy, a market economy and market-friendly state, economic policy defined by neoclassical growth theory and the new institutionalist economists, community participation in development, and a strong role for civil society and the private sector form the template of all peacebuilding programmes. Some elements of this model do conform to the prescriptions of two of the causes-of-civil-war schools from the 1990s, but the initial World-Bank sponsorship of the economic-school research and US government sponsorship of the political-regime research suggest that the source of this alignment is not policy responsiveness to research but shared theoretical frameworks between the two.

The difficulty comes when this ideological template, or some of its elements, is shown to conflict with the outcome of a sustainable peace and post-war growth. Most frequently analyzed is the conflict between the policies required by the International Monetary Fund for settling a country's debt arrears first and to that end, immediate macroeconomic stabilization, and the resulting effect of these restrictive policies on the public expenditures necessary to implement the peace agreement (such as power-sharing, security sector reform and rule-of-law institutions), or to generate the economic preconditions, such as jobs and reconstruction, for a decline in violence and a sustainable peace (deSoto and Castillo 1994; Woodward 2002b). Even the Collier and Hoeffler (2004) proposals for post-conflict aid, criticized above, do urge a change from this IMF template in the sequencing of economic policies to one that starts with the goal of social equity and certain economic reforms and delays macroeconomic stabilization. Another example common in the literature is the negative consequences for peace of the early emphasis on privatization, particularly promoted by USAID, which has been shown to increase the very landlessness that is so prominent a factor in the case-study literature on the causes of war and to legalize the economic gains from illegal and criminal activity during the war of those very persons (so-called warlords) whose power is a target of demilitarization and democratization policies. Similar, too, is the extent to which this ideological template ignores the sequencing recommendations from the causes literature

such that the elements of democratization, liberalization and privatization that are most destabilizing, such as early elections and large aid infusions without the necessary institutional context to make them work as intended, are nonetheless promoted first.

2. *National Security Interest.* This essay began by asserting that the normative consensus sought by the political campaign in support of intervention during the 1990s had been won. Even where the strategic interests of major powers may not dictate intervention in specific cases, it is now agreed (even by formerly die-hard non-interventionists such as China) that internal armed conflict has externalities that threaten international security and, by extension, the national security of all countries. The direct threat to US national security of 'fragile states' and the violence of civil war is prominently argued in its 2002 (and again 2005) national security doctrine (Woodward 2005c). European states and the European Union followed rapidly, and the argument is prominent in the Report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2004) presented to the Secretary-General of the United Nations in December 2003. Moreover, all documents accept the foundational principle of this new consensus, the responsibility of the international community to act when a government has failed. The goal of intervention is to restore a regime that is accountable to international norms or, in the original formulation by the team of Deng, Zartman and colleagues (1996), a government that earns its recognition of sovereignty.

Nonetheless, here, too, the assistance policies of donors to peacebuilding operations give priority to those aspects of a state's capacity and political will seen necessary to implement the rules and norms of the current international economic and security order – such as foreign-debt repayment, enforcement of contracts with foreign parties (especially private investors), border control (over illegal trafficking, organized crime, unregulated population movements, customs), arms control and non-proliferation regimes, and accountability for war crimes – not to those aspects of domestic governance seen critical to the protection of human rights and citizen security at home (Woodward 2005b). Even elections are rushed for the purpose of creating partners for international actors. Where domestic needs are funded, they tend to be physical infrastructure (for example, a school but not the teachers) which can fly the donor's flag, or choices made to satisfy the donor's legislators or domestic pressure groups. These externally defined criteria, such as required quotas for the political representation of women and minorities, or limits on public expenditures for education or health, are increasingly the target of local protests on the grounds of cultural insensitivity or imposing higher standards than those found in wealthy democracies. Because responsible sovereignty in practice often means a search for political leaders who will sign and implement international agreements, including through domestic legislation, the crucial relationship in the causes-of-war argument – the ties of political responsibility between a government and its citizens – gets lost. A stark illustration of this is the contrast between external assessments of failure, so frequently assigned to leaders' lack of 'political will'

or the presence of ‘spoilers’, and the assessments from the local populations themselves (as revealed in post-war public opinion surveys and focus groups), which universally and repeatedly emphasize their government’s failure to reduce unemployment and related aspects of human insecurity.

3. *Strategic interest.* Alongside the normative consensus that the national interest of all states lies in stopping the violence and creating responsible states, there remain specific strategic interests of those states that take an active role in a particular intervention. States do not risk money, troops or political capital without their own specific interests as well. The reasons that states intervene in the internal affairs of another state have not, it appears, been changed by the new consensus on the obligation to intervene, that is, to support or create clients, buttress or build alliances, and respond to domestic constituencies (Owen 2002; Finnemore 2003). These partisan political objectives will vary among intervening countries and among recipient countries, but they will always be critical to choices on the ground. Some will aim at shaping the post-war domestic political balance decisively in favour of particular leaders or groups and against those they identify as enemies of the new state or perpetrators during the war. Others may view the country as a critical piece of its national defence policy, such as a location for military bases from which to project power or as a strategic ally. Some may be focused simply on sending refugees home to reduce the fiscal burden and political backlash they generate. While this strategic motivation may produce specific peacebuilding programmes and projects that address root causes, it does so largely by coincidence, not intention. In some cases, in fact, these interests have been shown to prolong the conflicts that led to war though in the guise of a peacebuilding operation.

4. *Bureaucratic Interest.* Those who design and organize peacebuilding missions, strategies, programmes, and projects belong to bureaus, agencies and organizations that also have interests separate from the specific country emerging from war. Many have global mandates that limit what they can do in a specific case. Most depend on financing from others and for which there is steep competition. Protecting their operational autonomy, their budget, their status as lead agency in a sector, their lawyers’ interpretation of their charters, their donors’ conditions, and the rules and politics of individual promotion or contract renewal all must take precedence in operations.

The literature on humanitarian, development and peacekeeping operations is rich on the priority of these bureaucratic interests and constraints over actions, which research on the country, including the particular character and causes of its war, might recommend. Prominent is the sharp division within such organizations between the analytical and operational people and the tendency of the latter to resist knowledge coming from the former (Bebbington *et al.* 2004; Levine 2006). Also constraining are the formula and criteria of accountability by which logistical frameworks (logframes) and accountants govern what is done and how it is measured and assessed (Crawford 2003; Woodward 2001, 2002a,

2006a). The sectoral organization of bureaus, expertise and project design and implementation creates a 'silo' mentality that is in conflict with the interdependent social, cultural and political processes that cause and end war. In a 2005 study to prepare overall guidelines on peacebuilding, for example, the Best Practices Unit of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations alone identified 642 separate activity lines in their current programming.¹⁰ Like all bureaucracies, innovation to alter long-standing technical expertise, operating procedures, and crucial tacit knowledge carries high costs and risks (Pierson 2000). Individual practitioners do learn, but their knowledge is most often based on personal experience which tends, necessarily, to be *ad hoc* and usually tied to the country or locality of their most recent assignment.

Peace operations have a specific temporal component, moreover, which is particularly counterproductive for attention to root causes. The international focus on crisis response, the strict political limits from member states on UN contingency planning, the requirement of a UN Security Council resolution before budgets and their accompanying plans are created (whether by a coalition of the willing or the UN itself), and the emphasis in all peace operations on speed – rapid reaction, rapid deployment, peace dividends to the population in the first six months – have two bureaucratic consequences for taking the causes of a specific war into account. Organizations must rely on pre-set templates to be able to act quickly, and time pressures inevitably crowd out efforts to obtain local input and analysis in the design of a mission, strategy, plan, programmes or projects. Even those who are most open to learning about the particular case and the knowledge that academic research provides plead the overriding pressures of time.

Conclusion

Political activists in the 1990s transformed the normative environment in relation to civil war and associated gross violations of human rights and human security. The resulting consensus on the international right and, later, responsibility, to intervene has led to major innovations in the institutional capacity of governments and international organizations to implement these norms. Although issues of political will and strategic interest remain, such that action in some cases is more rapid and resourced than in others, the genuine success of this political movement on the issue of intervention has not been matched at the level of outcomes. A large number of interventions were failures and new interventions had to be mounted, or were longer-term engagements than intended for fear of the conflict resuming once troops withdrew, or created a frozen stalemate that stopped the killing but did not make life much better for the people at stake. The key policy question, therefore, is no longer whether to intervene, but how?

The primary answers in the 1990s for more effective outcomes of intervention focused on the lack of coordination among external actors who intervened and the failure to match resources to the complexity and needs of a particular conflict. This essay has addressed a different answer, one that hovers as a default

position to explain all ills of intervention, both for many in the target countries and among practitioners on the international side: the failure to address the 'root causes' of the conflict. This assertion is particularly amenable to examination with the substantial increase in our knowledge, through academic research, on the causes of civil war, the politics of intervention, and the consequences of currently designed policies of post-war reconstruction and stabilization. The result, this essay argues, is that this conventional explanation is wrong: addressing the 'root causes' of a conflict is not the way to think about greater success in ending civil wars.

First, policies currently designed to address the root causes are based on research in the 1990s that has largely been discredited or superseded, but the policy world has not adjusted to the criticisms and newer scholarship. If the analysis is wrong, it may be better not to address 'causes' at all. Moreover, a civil war is fundamentally a conflict over causes which does not end once the fighting stops, while key elements of a party's war strategy are aimed at persuading outsiders to support their interpretation of the war over those of their opponents.

Second, the newer academic literature on the causes of civil war, which is partly a reaction to the literature of the 1990s, argues on the basis of careful empirical research, case studies and theory that two other aspects are more important than 'root causes' in achieving a definitive end to the war: (1) the changes wrought by the war itself (the transformation of society, economy and interests, and the effect of violence itself regardless of initial motivation on lines of political cleavage and patterns of behaviour), and thus the conditions that exist at the time of a ceasefire or peace agreement, and (2) the political arrangements that can reduce the extreme uncertainty over power – who has it, who has a right to it, how access to it is regulated – that is the primary characteristic of civil war and thus restore local capacity, whether social, cultural, or governmental, to impose socially tolerable limits on the use of violence.

Third, the motivations for intervention by those who make the decision on intervention, provide resources and organize the field operations have nothing to do with the causes of a particular conflict and will always take priority. Where analysts would identify 'root causes' in external conditions and actors over which domestic actors have little or no influence, the prospects for addressing them are even smaller. One might still be able to argue that addressing 'root causes' (in those rare cases where agreement about them can be reached) will matter to success, but they will be ignored. That is, they do not matter to those who matter.

In sum, there are some very good reasons and some not so good why the 'root causes' do not matter in successfully ending a civil war. Those who use the concept and the underlying argument should specify more clearly why they matter and how outsiders can help address them productively. Others will find many ways that outside assistance can be productive, without confronting the invariably contested causes of the war, and try to meet the need for much more research on the causes of peace and the policy implications that should be pursued.

Acknowledgements

An early version of this essay was presented at the School of Advanced International Studies of The Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC, on 31 October 2005, and is based on a larger project on the knowledge base for post-conflict statebuilding funded by The Carnegie Corporation of New York and a second on state failure and the international security agenda funded by The Ford Foundation.

Notes

1 Continuing developments of this dataset are discussed regularly in the *Journal of Peace Research*.

2 Data are available on the website of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko>).

3 Data and details are available from: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/home.htm>.

4 Early warning research in Europe tended to be done instead by non-governmental organizations, such as the Forum for Early Warning and Response (FEWER) and International Alert.

5 This argument is developed in more detail in Woodward 2005a.

6 Those who form the far larger part of the commodity chain are then reminded of their 'corporate social responsibility'.

7 See the website of papers and conferences organized by the Laboratory in Comparative Ethnic Processes (LiCEP) at: <http://www.yale.edu/ycias/ocvprogram/LiCEP>.

8 Research by Séverine Autessere (2006) on eastern Congo demonstrates a direct link between an understanding of local sources of conflict and policies necessary to end a war, in contrast with the insistence of international actors on a national (or more accurately, capital-city) frame.

9 I argue this strongly on the Yugoslav cases in Woodward 1995.

10 I am grateful to Ed Rees for this information.

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