

Correspondence

Defensive Realism and the “New” History of World War I

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To the Editors (Jack Snyder writes):

Keir Lieber argues that new historical research undermines the claims of defensive realists and offense-defense theorists about the origins of World War I.¹ Because those theories have relied heavily on the war as an illustrative case, Lieber says this “new history” undermines their persuasiveness more generally.

Lieber does a service by alerting *International Security* readers to these recent historical works. There is nothing in this new historical research, however, that undermines the “cult of the offensive” interpretation of the origins of World War I or defensive realism generally. The most important finding of the new research is that German military planners were well aware that their offense strategy might not end the war quickly. The literature on the cult of the offensive made the same point in 1984 and incorporated the implications of this into its overall arguments. Indeed, Stig Förster, the most important source for this claim, explicitly endorses my argument about the origins of the offensive German plan in the military’s self-serving organizational ideology.²

Lieber asserts that “common depictions of World War I being triggered by a ‘cult of the offensive,’ a ‘short-war illusion,’ spiral dynamics, or preemptive strike incentives do not accord with the empirical record. Instead, the evidence suggests that German leaders went to war in 1914 with eyes wide open. They provoked a war to achieve their goal of dominating the European continent, and did so aware that the coming conflict would be long and bloody. They neither misjudged the nature of modern military technology nor attacked out of fear of Germany’s enemies moving first” (p. 156).

What the cult of the offensive literature actually argued is that European militaries promoted a belief in the necessity of the offensive strategies, which increased both security fears and the lure of conquest among European military strategists, political lead-

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1. Keir A. Lieber, “The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 155–191. Further references appear parenthetically in the text. The most important work bearing on these theoretical debates is Stig Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914,” in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1999), pp. 343–376. As Lieber notes (p. 175 nn. 73 and 74), many historians feel that Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871–1914* (Oxford University Press, 2002), exaggerates the significance of his arguments, some of them not new and others not true.

2. Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” p. 360, citing Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 122–124.

ers, and publics. My book *The Ideology of the Offensive* noted that the German general staff had a good appreciation for the tactical power of the defensive and worried about the danger of a long war, but these concerns were submerged under the broader assumption that there was no alternative to offensive operations at the strategic level. Stephen Van Evera and I argued that these assumptions increased the chance of war by exaggerating Germany’s incentive for preventive war in response to Russia’s rising power, by tempting would-be expansionists, by creating incentives for unconditional alliances, by encouraging secrecy, by encouraging bullying diplomacy, and to a modest and debatable degree by putting time pressure on crisis diplomacy.³ These strategic assumptions stemmed from the professional biases of the German military, weak civilian authority over the military, and the role of nationalist and imperialist ideologies in the domestic politics of some of the European powers, especially Germany. These arguments all hold up well in light of recent historians’ accounts.

Revisiting these issues provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the theoretical differences—and areas of surprising overlap—between offensive and defensive realists. In the wake of the Iraq War, which the vast majority of academic offensive and defensive realists opposed, realists of all kinds have been trying to figure out why the George W. Bush administration strayed so disastrously from realism. John Mearsheimer, the most prominent proponent of offensive realism, joins his defensive realist coauthor Stephen Walt in blaming domestic pressure-group politics for Bush’s strategic mistakes.⁴ This is striking, because domestic explanations for strategic errors are more characteristic of defensive realism. Below I revisit the debate about World War I to clarify the areas of theoretical divergence and convergence among realists.

DEFENSIVE REALIST ARGUMENTS AND EVIDENCE

Lieber argues that the cult of the offensive school (and therefore defensive realism) is wrong because World War I was not caused by a preemptive attack, because top German military planners understood the tactical advantages of the defensive, and because German planners expected a long war. In fact, these assertions do not refute the cult of the offensive interpretation or defensive realism, whose claims about these issues remain well supported by recent historical writing.⁵ First, the cult of the offensive literature laid considerably greater stress on preventive motives for war than on preemptive ones, and in any case, preemptive explanations have highly respectable

3. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 7; Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, chaps. 4–5; and Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 137–168.

4. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), pp. 229–262.

5. Lieber is mainly criticizing Van Evera and me, since ours are the works that deal most extensively with offensive military strategies as a cause of World War I. He also mentions Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; and defensive realists such as Charles L. Glaser, whose work shaped the concepts of offense-defense theory but who discussed World War I only in passing. Lieber does not discuss another seminal work on military bias for offensive strategies—Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984)—because it says little about World War I.

proponents among contemporary historians. Second, the cult of the offensive account recognized that German military planners understood the tactical advantages of the defensive, but these planners were nonetheless biased in favor of the offensive at the strategic level. Third, the cult of the offensive literature showed that top military planners understood that the offensives could bog down into a long war, but these biased planners decided there was no acceptable defensive alternative. Far from refuting defensive realism, this evidence supports it and instead undermines the offensive realist claim that the war was caused by a supposed German belief in a tempting opportunity to achieve regional hegemony.

PREEMPTIVE ATTACK. Lieber quotes Barbara Tuchman and a host of other historians who have claimed that time pressure to mobilize first during the July crisis produced an inadvertent war. He then states that Van Evera and I are wrong because the war was not caused by a perceived first-strike or first-mobilization advantage. Although Van Evera placed more emphasis on preemption as a cause of the war than I did, neither of us is out of step with current historical scholarship. At the end of a long, balanced discussion of the issue, Van Evera concluded in 1984 that “the war was in some modest measure preemptive,” for example, because of the Germans’ concern not to be slow in attacking the Belgian rail bottleneck at Liège.⁶ In his 1999 book, Van Evera repeated the substance of these arguments but omitted this qualifying phrase.⁷ My own argument was that the Germans were tense about the timetable for their attack on Liège, but this was not decisive for them. I also argued that the Russians were eager to mobilize first to gain a couple of days on the Germans, but they did this only when they concluded that war had already become inevitable (and in that sense they felt that their mobilization would not cause the war).⁸ Marc Trachtenberg, while arguing against those who see World War I as “inadvertent,” makes the same argument that I do and acknowledges that Van Evera and I are “moderate” in our claims about “preemption.”⁹ Lieber acknowledges this, too, near the end of his article (p. 189), but he does not reflect sufficiently on how this undermines his broader claims.

That said, recent historians continue to take seriously the view that time pressure to mobilize or attack first cut short last-minute diplomacy that might have averted a continental war. Annika Mombauer’s excellent biography of German General Staff Chief Helmuth von Moltke, cited approvingly by Lieber, shows that the German military was anxious that Belgium’s decision to mobilize its defenses was closing Germany’s window of opportunity to seize the Liège fortress.¹⁰ Moltke told his personal adjutant on

6. Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), p. 79.

7. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 64–65.

8. Those who see the war as caused by preemption pressures think the Russians were premature in concluding that diplomacy could not succeed in averting a major war. Jack Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 112–115; and Jack L. Snyder, “Perceptions of the Security Dilemma in 1914,” in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, eds., *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 178.

9. Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 68.

10. Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 203–204.

the night of July 30, "If we hesitate with mobilization, our situation will worsen day by day and may lead to the most fatal results."¹¹ Mombauer argues that "in the last days of July, when first the Kaiser and later [Chancellor Theobald von] Bethmann got 'cold feet,' the military began to dominate decision-making as they pushed for mobilization as soon as possible, fearing that yet another change of heart might jeopardize their plans at the last minute."¹² Mombauer says that Bethmann was reluctant to permit German mobilization on July 29 and 30 for two reasons: he wanted to make Russia appear the aggressor, and he was unnerved by news that Britain would join the war if Germany invaded Belgium. She portrays Bethmann and the kaiser as entertaining diplomatic and military options to keep the war limited to eastern Europe.¹³ Prominent historians continue to hold varying views on whether time pressure to mobilize significantly curtailed the exploration of these diplomatic options.

PREVENTIVE WAR. Rather than overemphasizing time pressures for preemption, the cult of the offensive literature claimed that the perceived feasibility of the offensive increased Germany's incentive for preventive war in the face of a potential rise in Russia's relative military power. The cult of the offensive made preventive aggression seem more possible and increased the perceived security risk of not taking preventive action. If the German military had been willing to seriously consider a strategy of defending against France while undertaking limited counteroffensives against Russia (as they eventually did in 1915), it could have successfully defended itself despite the anticipated growth in Russian military power.¹⁴

Most scholars now accept that Germany's most urgent motivation for war in 1914 was in some sense preventive. There is some dispute, however, whether Germany's principal motive was to gain security against a future Russian attack or to greedily seize its last clear chance to assert European hegemony, or both. Dale Copeland emphasizes the former;¹⁵ Lieber, though relying heavily on Copeland's historical analysis, stresses the latter (p. 156).

Although Van Evera and I have generally emphasized security fears, we do not see these as mutually exclusive alternatives. We have argued that belief in the feasibility and necessity of offensive strategy entices both fearful and greedy aggressors to attack.¹⁶ It erases the distinction between security and expansion, which the cult of the offensive sees as going hand in hand.¹⁷ As the Fritz Fischer historical school put it long ago, German leaders felt that they faced a choice between world power decline; a sim-

11. *Ibid.*, p. 206. Mombauer, p. 211, takes into account Förster's research. For a range of views on the preemption question, see Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), chap. 4; Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 151–186; and Marc Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 120–150.

12. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 185.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 207, 219.

14. Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," pp. 79–85; and Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," pp. 114–115. Here again Trachtenberg agrees, in *History and Strategy*, p. 70.

15. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, p. 117.

16. Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," pp. 63–65.

17. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 121.

ple defense of the status quo was not an option. In this worldview, national security, the glory and lucre of conquest, and the spread of one's culture and ideology were all seen as mutually reinforcing.¹⁸

As Lieber notes, Robert Jervis and I have written more recently that a security dilemma, in which any move to increase the security of one side reduces the security of the other, can occur not only between two status quo actors but also between a limited-aims predator and its prey.¹⁹ This was not an afterthought. In 1985 I wrote about the "imperialist's dilemma" in 1914, whereby states adopted offensive stances in part for purposes of greedy, but limited expansion, but then became trapped in a security dilemma caused in part by these offensive postures. Offensive military capabilities and plans raised the stakes to an all-out contest for survival.²⁰

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT OFFENSIVE ADVANTAGE AND EASY VICTORY. Lieber, following Förster and Terence Zuber, argues that German military planners did not think that offense would be easy or cheap. The German General Staff, he says, did not have a rosy view of the feasibility of offensive tactics; nor did they foresee a short, victorious war based on the Schlieffen Plan (p. 54). I agree with these specific points, and I said so in 1984. I argued that Schlieffen devised a wide flanking maneuver around the French strongholds because he understood the tactical stopping power of defensive fire. Moreover, despite Schlieffen's determined efforts to devise a workable formula for an offensive two-front war, he recognized that this was "an enterprise for which we are too weak."²¹ He foresaw in a staff game how the French could use the advantages of the defender to quickly redeploy forces to cover their exposed left flank, precisely as they did at the Marne.²²

None of this means, however, that Schlieffen and Moltke were objective in their assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of offensive and defensive military strategies. Schlieffen worried that the offensive might bog down, leading to a long war, but he refused to allow military and economic planning based on this assumption.²³ His successor in the German General Staff, the younger Moltke, paid more attention to planning for a longer war, as Förster and Lieber note (p. 181). Moltke had his staff study the problem, invested in material preparations for a somewhat extended fight, and avoided violating Dutch neutrality so that Germany could maintain a "windpipe" for international trade in a long war, even at the cost of compromising the strength of the Schlieffen Plan's right wing.²⁴ Nonetheless, Förster notes, "Even if the General Staff held pessimistic (and quite realistic) views about the probability of a long war, they nei-

18. More broadly, see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

19. Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara F. Walter and Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 15–37.

20. Snyder, "Perceptions of the Security Dilemma in 1914."

21. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 112.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 108, 139. See also Holger H. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War' Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?" *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (July 2002), pp. 681–693.

24. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 153–155.

ther had any idea about its full implications nor did they get the funds to prepare for it, and they certainly had no clout to ensure the full mobilization of state, economy, and society. Jack Snyder may therefore be right in arguing that, under these circumstances, all the General Staff could do was to concentrate on its own immediate concern: planning for the campaign of the first couple of weeks in a war.²⁵

For the most part, Schlieffen and Moltke disparaged defensive strategies rather than exaggerated the feasibility of offensive ones. Double standards and logical inconsistencies riddled their comparisons of these alternatives.²⁶ In war games, for example, Schlieffen permitted the attacker to thin its center to strengthen its flanks but denied that the defender could do the same. In a 1905 exercise in which Germany defended against France in the west and attacked Russia in the east, Schlieffen arbitrarily added the British, Dutch, and Belgians to the attacking forces even though only a German attack in the west might have brought these states into the war.²⁷

Moreover, broader military and diplomatic circles, not privy to the secret planning of the General Staff, typically held more optimistic views about the ease of a German offensive victory.²⁸ Mombauer notes that Moltke "did not make his fears about the prospects of a long-drawn-out war widely known."²⁹ German civilian officials gained the impression that "the mood in the military circle here is one of complete confidence."³⁰ Trachtenberg, no easy audience for the cult of the offensive argument, concludes: "That a 'cult' existed, in the sense of a set of military practices more extreme than what the objective situation truly warranted, seems to me beyond question."³¹ In short, although some German military strategists understood the possibility that their planned offensives could lead to a long war, they forged ahead because they remained biased against defensive military strategies whose adoption might have helped to avert the war.

SOURCES OF THE CULT OF THE OFFENSIVE. Why did the German military hold such biased views on offense and defense? If I understand Lieber correctly, he believes that Germany had an offensive war plan for the simplest of reasons: because German leaders wanted to conquer much of Europe, which he sees as a consensus aim of Germany's military and its civilian politicians. They realized that this would be a long, costly ordeal, fraught with political peril on the home front, but for reasons that Lieber does not explain, they wanted to do it anyway. As in World War II, he says, the Germans were "less driven by fears of encirclement and more motivated by a desire to expand" (p. 191).

Van Evera and I, in contrast, explained that both fears and temptations arose from the strategic consequences of militarism, weak civilian control over the military, and the broader politics of imperial nationalism.³² Europe's militaries, and especially

25. Förster, "Images of Future Warfare," p. 372.

26. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 116–124, 134, 139.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

28. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 18–19, 195, 204.

29. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 211.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 212, quoting Hugo Lerchenfeld, Bavarian envoy in Berlin, August 2, 1914. See also *ibid.*, pp. 209–211.

31. Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy*, p. 65.

32. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, chaps. 4, 5. Van Evera argues that European militaries

Germany's, owed their professional, political, and social prestige to the image of military might as an effective problem solver that could cut through the tangles of politics and deliver what the nation ostensibly needed and wanted. The cult of the offensive was an ideology that served these professional and organizational objectives. It created a climate in which offense was the unquestioned coin of the realm, notwithstanding its operational difficulties. As Holger Herwig has put it, "To concede that the vaunted Prussian General Staff could no longer conduct short wars of annihilation was to admit that war had ceased to be a viable option for the state."³³ Similarly, Förster cites my book in arguing that "the 'demigods' inside the General Staff simply could not afford to accept . . . that war had ceased to be a viable option of policy. Otherwise, not only they but also the whole army would lose their elevated position in German society."³⁴

The cult affected not only discourse and ideas, but also plans and force structures. By 1913 the German general staff had given up on maintaining any defensive variant of its plan. A Schlieffen-type plan throwing the bulk of the German army westward, which exacerbated Germany's vulnerability to the expansion of the Russian army and hence its need for preventive war, had become the only option.

More broadly, Van Evera and I have written that self-defeating overexpansion also was caused by civilian nationalist and imperialist mythmaking that portrayed aggression as the best antidote to security threats.³⁵ It would be wrong, however, to argue that the offensive strategies of 1914 were designed simply to carry out the civilian nationalists' aggressive aims.³⁶ Militarists were in the vanguard of the war party, spreading their strategic ideology in a way that deepened the security dilemma. Mombauer portrays the younger Moltke as highly influential in political circles, an earlier adopter than civilian leaders of preventive war thinking, and at odds with Foreign Minister Gottlieb von Jagow, who urged scrapping the Schlieffen-type plan because of its crippling diplomatic disadvantages.³⁷ Schlieffen, writing in the widely read *Deutsche Revue* in 1909, fueled a nervous popular nationalism by arguing that Germany was surrounded by implacable enemies, its defenses were vulnerable, and offense was the best defense.³⁸ Security fears played into the hands of illiberal elites who used nationalism to drive a wedge between the patriotic middle class and the more skeptical working class, lest they unite in a pro-democracy coalition. Whenever Wilhelmine elites fought

caused the pre-1914 cult of the offensive in Stephen Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," in Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 80–117, at pp. 83–84, 95–98; and in Stephen Van Evera, "Causes of War," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 298–319. For a recent archival work on German militarism making related points, see Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

33. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War' Illusion," p. 688.

34. Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," p. 360, citing Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 122–124.

35. In addition to Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, and Van Evera, *Causes of War*, see also Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), chap. 3.

36. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 120.

37. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 6, 159, 285–286.

38. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 107.

elections on military, colonial, or cultural nationalist issues between 1870 and 1914, they gained more votes, enjoyed tighter coordination among pro-government parties, and won substantially more seats.³⁹ The cult of the offensive and the myths of empire were all part of the Wilhelmine system of rule. World War I was their waste by-product.

In short, nothing that Lieber cites from recent historical research undermines the cult of the offensive interpretation of the causes of World War I. Defensive realists' balanced statements about preemptive attack are not out of line with current historical research, and our more central arguments about preventive war are well supported by recent historical work. Moreover, the findings that some German General Staff officers anticipated a long war and understood the tactical advantages of the defense were already integrated into the cult of the offensive argument in 1984. In contrast, Lieber fails to support his argument that the offensives and the war simply reflected a cost-defying preference for expansion. This assertion begs the question of how such a preference could emerge and hold sway. Defensive realists have a theory about that; in contrast, the arguments of Lieber and the offensive realists are logically incomplete and unsatisfying. Notwithstanding Lieber's claims about a "new history," World War I strongly confirms defensive realism's theoretical arguments, including those rooted in the cult of the offensive and in broader theories of national mythmaking.

OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE REALISM: OVERLAPS AND DIVERGENCES

Lieber's confusion about what defensive realists have argued about World War I reflects what may be a broader confusion about the theoretical debate between offensive and defensive realists. This is not a debate about the motivations of states. Both offensive and defensive realists believe that states are motivated by both expansionist and security goals. To some extent it is a debate about the incentives that international anarchy creates for states. Offensive realists tend to believe that offensive action is more necessary for self-defense than defensive realists believe it is, but the two schools' divergence on this point should not be exaggerated. A final debate concerns the defensive realists' introduction of perceptual and domestic political factors to explain choices that are anomalous or causally underdetermined by the strategic circumstances facing states. Even here, however, offensive realists may be converging toward the defensive realist view.

THE MOTIVES OF STATES: SECURITY, POWER, OR CONQUEST? A superficial reading of Lieber's article might create the impression that defensive realists see states, including pre-World War I great powers, as mainly motivated by the desire for security, whereas offensive realists see them as motivated by the need to maximize power or simply by a desire to expand (p. 165). This impression would be incorrect. As a closer reading of Lieber's article reveals, everyone on all sides of this debate portrays states as having a range of motivations in which security, power, and expansion are interrelated.

Defensive realists are well aware that states expand to increase their power and wealth when they can. In a footnote, Lieber quotes me as saying: "Much imperial expansion is unproblematic: the strong conquer the weak because it pays" (p. 166 n. 36,

39. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, pp. 109–110; and Brett T. Fairbairn, *Democracy in the Undemocratic State: The German Reichstag Elections of 1898 and 1903* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 48.

quoting *Myths of Empire*, p. 10). He also notes Van Evera's argument that the cult of the offensive encouraged both the greedy and the fearful to attack, but Lieber says that defensive realists see Germany as mainly driven by fear. Lieber claims that "offensive realists, on the other hand, find the root cause of World War I in Germany's pursuit of European hegemony," which "was indeed security-seeking behavior, but not of the variety identified by the defensive-realist security dilemma/spiral model" (pp. 165–166).

In fact, offensive and defensive realists do not differ fundamentally in the motives that they ascribe to states. Mearsheimer says that "survival is the primary goal of great powers."⁴⁰ "The 'security dilemma,'" he continues, "reflects the basic logic of offensive realism."⁴¹ In this situation, states strive to "maximize relative power . . . because power is the best means to survival in a dangerous world."⁴² Therefore, "only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to become a hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive."⁴³ Of Germany's motives, Mearsheimer says that "the German decision to push for war in 1914 . . . was, as noted, a calculated risk motivated in large part by Germany's desire to break its encirclement by the Triple Entente, prevent the growth of Russian power, and become Europe's hegemon."⁴⁴

Defensive realists do not normally use the language of "maximizing relative power," but there is no reason why they could not. When states form balancing alliances against an aggressor, they are simultaneously increasing their chance of survival and increasing their power relative to what it would have been without the alliance. In contrast, launching a preventive war risks undermining the attacker's relative power. Otto von Bismarck, for example, argued that preventive war would weaken Germany by unnecessarily provoking powerful enemies. As for the claim that only a foolish state would pass up an opportunity at hegemony (even regional hegemony), the rub is what constitutes an opportunity. This brings us a bit closer to the heart of the dispute between offensive and defensive realists.

INCENTIVES FOR AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN ANARCHY. In *Myths of Empire*, I defined the central difference between offensive and defensive realism in terms of their views of the structural incentives for aggression in anarchy: "'Aggressive [i.e., offensive] Realism,' asserts that offensive action often contributes to security; . . . 'defensive Realism,' contends that it does not."⁴⁵ Still, the difference on this score should not be exaggerated. Defensive realists acknowledge that circumstances sometimes allow conquest, as when the strong conquer weak states that lack allies. That is why initiators, especially democratic ones, usually win their limited wars.⁴⁶ Grandiose hegemonic bids almost never succeed, however, because they nearly always provoke insurmountable resistance.⁴⁷ Defensive realists also concede that expansion may be needed for the sake of security in

40. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 31.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

45. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 12.

46. Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 29.

47. A major exception is the conquest of the Chinese Warring States system by Chin. See Victoria

some unusual conditions (e.g., if military technology really does make offense easier than defense, if relative power is dramatically shifting, or if limited conquests can achieve autarky or geographically defensible borders).⁴⁸ Conversely, an offensive realist such as Mearsheimer readily points out that states are not constantly on the attack because circumstances often make it imprudent to do so. Prudent, which is to say power-maximizing, states are aware of the limitations of their power, he says. They anticipate the possible balancing reactions of other states; they avoid arms races that would leave them worse off; they are stopped by water; they bide their time until they are stronger; and they look for opportunities to pass the costs of balancing aggressors onto others.⁴⁹ In other words, much of the time states behave exactly as defensive realists say they should. "There is no question that systemic factors constrain aggression, especially balancing by threatened states," Mearsheimer notes, and adds: "But defensive realists exaggerate those restraining forces."⁵⁰

This is a dispute not about theoretical principles but about empirical probabilities. It is as if defensive realists think the offensive glass is 20 percent full and the offensive realists think it is 30 percent full. They may read incentives differently one time out of ten, but in most situations they agree about how a smart state should and will behave. That is why both offensive and defensive realists typically favor a strategy of offshore balancing for the United States, why they both tended to oppose the Iraq War, and why defensive realist Walt has no trouble writing books and articles with offensive realist Mearsheimer.

Nonetheless, on World War I Mearsheimer does differ substantially with the defensive realists and even with other strictly structural realists such as Copeland, who calls it a preventive war instigated by Germany to forestall Russia's impending rise. Mearsheimer, denigrating Russia's army as only "the fourth best" in Europe before 1914, mainly argues the opposite, claiming that Germany was so strong after 1903 that it could make a grab for regional hegemony, the offensive power-maximizer's Holy Grail.⁵¹ He admits that this gives rise to a puzzling anomaly: Why did Germany not gamble on a war for hegemony during the 1905 Moroccan Crisis, when Russia's revolutionary turmoil created the prospect of an easy German victory over France? All he can say is that Germany made a mistake.

In contrast, defensive realism has a ready explanation: in 1905 German strategic mythmaking was still largely in the hands of cynical manipulators such as Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, who played the nationalist card for public consumption but never confused the myths of empire with his real foreign policy assumptions.⁵² After 1911, however, Germany's new generation of leaders had internalized more of this nationalist rhetoric and become increasingly entrapped in the mass nationalist mobilization that

Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

48. Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Realism and America's Rise: A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 175–176.

49. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 37, 157–162.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 188, 304.

52. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 86; and Volker R. Berghahn, "War Preparations and National Identity in Imperial Germany," in Boemeke, Chickering, and Förster, *Anticipating Total War*, p. 315.

they and their forebears had spawned. They got caught in the rhetorical blowback as well as the strategic logic of the Schlieffen Plan.

PERCEPTUAL AND DOMESTIC ORIGINS OF STRATEGIC BIASES. If the debate between offensive and defensive realism is not about motives and is only partly about incentives, what then is it about? An additional point of contention is that defensive realism introduces perceptual or domestic political factors to explain why states deviate from what structural logic would dictate, in particular why they often behave too aggressively for their own good, and offensive realists criticize defensive realists for taking this approach.⁵³ It is true that defensive realists often do this. Robert Jervis brings in cognitive biases that exacerbate the security dilemma or other conflict spirals. Van Evera and I introduce self-serving organizational and domestic political ideologies. But now, with the Israel lobby argument, Mearsheimer is doing exactly the same thing. And Randall Schweller, a critic of defense realism's status quo bias, brings in domestic variables to explain why states sometimes are not aggressive enough.⁵⁴

John Vasquez and others have argued that introducing domestic politics and perceptions represents a "degeneration" from structural realism's ultraparsimonious explanatory hard core.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, it is a complication that explains a lot with a theoretically coherent amendment that retains realism's focus on calculations about the implications of anarchy and power relations. These strategic ideas feed back into the structural hard core when misperceptions of power incentives create facts on the ground that have real strategic consequences. Germany's Schlieffen-type posture actually did make Germany more vulnerable to the rise of Russian power than it would have been if it had prepared to fight according to a more defensive plan. And of course the misperception of offensive advantage had real consequences when the offensives bogged down in the reality of trench warfare. Moreover, defensive realists argue that states with open public debate learn to correct their strategic errors when the facts pour in. Thus, defensive realism depicts a close relationship between structural power realities and perceptions of them. If this is a degeneration, it is a small and productive one that lies close to the theoretical hard core.

A theoretical mistake worse than adding perceptual factors is causal underdetermination. That is the characteristic mistake of offensive realism: circumstances that might plausibly lead toward one behavior (say, gambling on war) might just as plausibly lead to the opposite behavior (say, prudent self-restraint), yet no additional variables are adduced to explain why the former is chosen. Mearsheimer's explanation for German behavior in World War I is a good example. A powerful, prosperous, largely secure state

53. Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 177–198; Van Evera, *Causes of War*; and Christensen and Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks."

54. Randall L. Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 90–121; and Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2006).

55. See John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 899–912, and various responses in that issue, all reprinted in Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2003).

goes out of its way to make enemies of all of its neighbors, provokes a simultaneous land and naval arms race that it cannot win, refuses to give up on a hegemonic contest that is bleeding it white, and ultimately succumbs when the strongest power in the world throws its weight on the scales against it. Why does it do this? Nationalism? Militarism? Strategic misperception? No, nothing so complicated. It is just that Germany was strong enough to think that it had a chance for regional hegemony, and it would have been foolish to let the opportunity pass by. Even without the benefit of hindsight, offensive realist reasoning seems incomplete to explain Germany's gratuitously self-defeating behavior.⁵⁶

Realism is thriving, both in theory and in practice. Theoretically, realism has adapted creatively to illuminate such diverse, timely topics as civil war, mass killing, unipolarity, U.S. foreign policy, and terrorism.⁵⁷ Realists of various stripes (neoclassical, structural, offensive, and defensive) retain a common core of insights that has proved its continuing relevance. In practice, realism's commitment to the politics of prudence now has greater currency after all too much recent experience with a different approach. Defensive realism occupies the territory at the center of this realist terrain with its characteristic policy preference for offshore balancing, its deep theoretical foundations, and (*pace* Lieber's claims about the "new" history) its track record in producing sound explanations for important historical events.

—Jack Snyder
New York City, New York

Keir A. Lieber Replies:

I welcome the opportunity to respond to Jack Snyder's critique of my recent article.¹ We both appreciate the power of realist theory, as well as the enduring relevance of the causes of the Great War for contemporary international security scholarship and policy. Although we find much to disagree about, I hope our exchange will encourage others to probe the emerging historical evidence for relevant theoretical implications.

My article examines the new and significant historical research on World War I and shows how the new history is challenging defensive realism, one of the most prominent bodies of international relations theory. Snyder, a prominent defensive realist, offers two reactions to my article. First, he sees nothing in the new historical research that

56. For this argument, see Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp. 70–75.

57. Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 27–47; Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004); Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2006); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); and Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

1. Keir A. Lieber, "The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 155–191.

undermines the defensive realist belief that World War I was caused by a “cult of the offensive.” Specifically, he argues that I have mischaracterized defensive realist arguments about the war; when the cult is properly understood, the new history supports that perspective. Second, he asserts that offensive realism is moving closer to defensive realism because the latter theory provides a better explanation for the great power strategic misbehavior witnessed in 1914 and in other cases.

Both claims are unconvincing. I did not mischaracterize the cult of the offensive explanation advanced by Snyder and Stephen Van Evera, the two leading proponents of this perspective. Furthermore, the new history contradicts the main pillars of their explanation. Regarding defensive realism and offensive realism, there are important theoretical differences between the two theories, Snyder’s claims notwithstanding. These differences are clearly highlighted by the new history.

THE CULT OF THE OFFENSIVE AND THE NEW HISTORY OF WORLD WAR I

Snyder and Van Evera argue that a highly exaggerated faith in offense led Germany to adopt an enormously risky war plan, which exacerbated the European security dilemma, curtailed diplomatic options during the 1914 crisis, and provoked Germany into launching an unwanted preventive war.² As Snyder writes, “Military technology should have made the European strategic balance in July 1914 a model of stability, but offensive military strategies defied those technological realities, trapping European statesmen in a war-causing spiral of insecurity and instability.”³ This cult of the offensive rests on four pillars: the belief in offensive advantage, the centrality of the Schlieffen Plan, preventive German aggression, and preemptive war dynamics.

BELIEF IN OFFENSE. Defensive realists argue that a cult of the offensive—“a highly exaggerated faith in the efficacy of offensive military strategies and tactics”—was a taproot cause of the war. German leaders believed that conquest would be easy and wars would be short and decisive.⁴ German war planners were not ignorant of tactical defensive advantages, but they were unduly optimistic about the choices of their own offensive plans.⁵ The problem in 1914, Snyder suggests, was that war occurred “because of an erroneous belief that a disarming, offensive blow [was] feasible and necessary to ensure the attacker’s security.”⁶ For Van Evera, “most German officers and civilians believed they could win a spectacular, decisive victory if they struck at the right moment.”⁷

The new history shows that German war planners were neither blinded by an erro-

2. Jack Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 108–146; Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 58–107; Jack Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), chaps. 4–5; and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 7.

3. Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” p. 108.

4. Stephen Van Evera, “Why Cooperation Failed in 1914,” *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (October 1985), pp. 80–117, at p. 81; and Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 193–194, 238.

5. Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 22.

6. Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” p. 112.

7. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 204.

neous faith in offensive strategies nor deluded by the expectation of a quick and decisive victory for the attacker. In fact, they were aware before 1914 that any European war would almost certainly be long and bloody.⁸ All of the key chiefs of the German general staff leading up to the war—the elder Helmuth von Moltke, Alfred von Schlieffen, and the younger Helmuth von Moltke—were cognizant of recent battlefield outcomes fought with modern arms and expressed the view that a coming war would likely be protracted.⁹ “Even with the most offensive spirit,” Schlieffen’s quartermaster noted in a newly discovered memo concerning an attack on France, “nothing more can be achieved than a tedious and bloody crawling forward.”¹⁰ In 1905 the younger Moltke warned that even a one-front war against France “cannot be won in one decisive battle but will turn into a long and tedious struggle.”¹¹ By 1912 Moltke believed that a long war on both fronts against France and Russia was the most likely future scenario, and (in a newly discovered document) warned, “We will have to be ready to fight a lengthy campaign with numerous hard, lengthy battles until we can defeat *one* of our enemies.”¹²

THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN. The cult of the offensive account holds that Germany’s “wildly over-ambitious” Schlieffen Plan served as the linchpin connecting erroneous beliefs in offense with the outbreak of war.¹³ Although disastrous in the end, the highly offensive-oriented strategy was, in Van Evera’s words, “a sensible response to the offense-dominant world imagined by many Germans.”¹⁴ For Snyder, the plan was an “all-or-nothing” gamble designed “to achieve a decisive victory by the rapid annihilation of the opponents’ military forces.”¹⁵ Within a month, the French Army would be encircled and destroyed.¹⁶ After this, as Van Evera writes, Germany would “finish off the rest of the Triple Entente [Britain, France, and Russia] in four months. Other Germans talked of victory in eight or ten weeks.”¹⁷ By gambling everything on a fleeting chance for quick victory, Snyder argues, “the Schlieffen Plan was the main-spring tightening the European security dilemma” and “an important and perhaps decisive cause of the war.”¹⁸

This crucial link in the cult of the offensive causal chain—Germany’s adoption of an all-or-nothing offensive strategy that trapped Europe in a war-causing spiral of insecurity

8. The most important new work is Stig Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914,” in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1999), pp. 343–376.

9. For further discussion, see Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 88–97.

10. Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” p. 355.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 363.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 365 (emphasis in original).

13. Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” p. 110.

14. Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” pp. 89–90.

15. Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” pp. 115–116.

16. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 108–109.

17. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 19.

18. Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” pp. 108, 112, 115–118.

rity and instability—is also severed by the new history. It would be odd if most German officers expected a grim and protracted war and yet gambled everything to knock out Germany's enemies with a quick and dramatic military campaign. We now know that this was not the case.

Terence Zuber's work is central to this new history of the German war plan.¹⁹ His findings have generated tremendous attention, and most historians now agree that the traditional depiction of Germany's Schlieffen Plan requires alteration.²⁰ Virtually everything scholars have previously assumed about the German war plan is based on a single document: Schlieffen's famous memorandum of 1905. Zuber's analysis is based on key newly discovered sources, including internal German Army histories of war planning and intelligence estimates, several major war games and staff rides, and parts of the actual war plan of 1914.²¹ These new documents show that the German war plan of 1914 was substantially different—and perhaps completely unrelated—to the Schlieffen Plan depicted in the 1905 memo.²² The real war plan, both as conceived and tested by Schlieffen and as further developed by Moltke, appears to have been aimed not at rapidly encircling and annihilating the French Army deep inside French territory in a matter of weeks in a desperate bid to knock France out of the war. Instead, the goal was to destroy a portion of the French Army wherever it could be found so as to give Germany an initial advantage in a protracted conflict.

PREVENTIVE GERMAN AGGRESSION. Proponents of the cult of the offensive explanation contend that German military leaders would not likely have contemplated preventive aggression—and the war might never have occurred—had German leaders realized the actual power of a defensive strategy.²³ Had those realities been understood, Germany could have successfully protected itself against both current threats and any future threat from a rising Russia without adopting the ambitious and risky Schlieffen Plan, which (by front-loading an attack against France) only served to make Germany more vulnerable to a Russian attack.²⁴ As Snyder writes, "The Schlieffen Plan trapped Germany in a situation where preventive war seemed like the only safe option."²⁵ Because the overriding motive of German planners was protection against conquest, not the lure of conquest, their aggression "was largely an artifact of the Schlieffen Plan."²⁶ In other words, if no Schlieffen Plan, then no war; if no cult of the offensive, then no Schlieffen Plan.

This view fails to appreciate that German leaders were ultimately driven by the de-

19. See Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and works cited in Lieber, "The New History of World War I," p. 167 n. 39.

20. Yet Snyder simply ignores Zuber's evidence and arguments.

21. Translations of these and other materials appear in Terence Zuber, *German War Planning, 1891–1914: Sources and Interpretations* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell, 2004).

22. As I discuss in my article, Zuber believes that Schlieffen wrote his famous memo to argue for a massive increase in the size of the German Army and the implementation of universal conscription.

23. Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 15, 17, 22.

24. *Ibid.*, chaps. 4–5.

25. Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," pp. 129, 138.

26. Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 9, 15–16; and Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 72.

sire to provoke a hegemonic war, not by the fear of a future Russian attack, and a defensive strategy would not have served their ambition. As I discuss below, defensive realists argue that the source of the cult of the offensive—and thus the ultimate cause of German aggression—lies at the domestic level, with a theory about military organizations gone wild. However, the idea that Germany's aggressive behavior was driven not by offensive political aims, but rather by offensive military bias, reverses cause and effect. As Annika Mombauer, Stig Förster, and other new historians assert, the bulk of Germany's civilian leadership needed little convincing that the crisis in the summer of 1914 offered an opportunity to launch a bid for European domination. Both civilians and military planners desired that goal, sought a plan that would offer the best prospects for victory in what was expected to be a titanic struggle, and rolled the dice when the balance of power and continental politics provided a good opportunity. To seek to explain "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," as one defensive realist article is titled, is to address the wrong question. Hegemony, not cooperation, was Germany's desired outcome.²⁷

PREEMPTIVE DYNAMICS. The final pillar of the defensive realist account is the argument that the exaggerated faith in offense and the Schlieffen Plan exacerbated preemptive war incentives in the July crisis and curtailed the exploration of diplomatic options that might have averted war. According to Van Evera, European leaders perceived sizable preemptive incentives in 1914; they "thought that a mobilization by either side that was not answered very quickly could affect the outcome of the war." German officials "foresaw dire consequences if Germany fell much behind its enemies," and falling behind was measured in days or even hours.²⁸ Van Evera concludes that if statesmen had understood the real power of defense, they would have conceded the initiative more easily.²⁹ Snyder blames military planners for undermining Germany's broader diplomatic strategy. The civilian leadership pursued a policy of brinkmanship and controlled coercion, but military time pressures created by the Schlieffen Plan reduced the coercive bargaining leverage available to German diplomats.³⁰ This "nightmare of strategic instability," as Snyder describes it, culminated in "a slide towards war that the diplomats did not foresee."³¹

The new history indicates that Germany desired rather than feared that its enemies would mobilize first in the summer of 1914. Civilian and military leaders alike manipulated the crisis as a means to launch the war they wanted.³² Germany was not caught off guard by British nonneutrality; it was not compelled to launch its war plan for fear of Russian mobilization or French attack; and it was not wracked by weak civil-military relations that allowed the generals to pursue an independently hawkish strategy. Instead, German leaders expected British intervention in any continental war (and based

27. Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914."

28. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 207, 208–209.

29. Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," p. 75.

30. Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," p. 129.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 128.

32. The latest evidence thus reinforces previous critiques of the role of preemptive dynamics. See Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 56–117; and Marc Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 120–150.

their military planning on that assumption); they feared that Russia would not mobilize first (which would have possibly robbed Germany of the opportunity to launch the war it wanted or, at a minimum, would have complicated Germany's effort to pin the blame for war on its enemies); and they were united to a remarkable degree about Germany's political and military objectives.

The evidence undermines the idea that war might have been averted if diplomatic options had been less constrained by military mobilization pressures. Moltke's war plan and Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg's diplomacy were geared toward the same end: conquest. As Mombauer writes, in a passage that equally applies to preemptive and preventive war incentives, "Berchtold's famous question 'Who governs in Berlin—Moltke or Bethmann?' is perhaps best answered in light of [their] similarities, for, in the end, it was almost immaterial who was in charge. The two men at the summit of military and political decision-making in those crucial months essentially shared the same aims and were motivated by the same desires, not only in July 1914, but also in the months preceding and following the outbreak of war. Post-war attempts by the military leaders to blame civilians and vice versa have confused the issue by suggesting that differences of opinion existed where there was in fact a great resemblance."³³

OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE REALISM: BIRDS OF A FEATHER BUT NOT TOGETHER

Snyder seeks to collapse the distinction between offensive and defensive realism. Defensive realism, he argues, can readily explain instances of expansionist behavior in international politics that offensive realists are quick to claim as within their purview. Moreover, he argues, offensive realists have been abandoning whatever real differences exist between the theories by adopting defensive realist arguments to explain the kind of gratuitously self-defeating behavior exhibited by Germany in 1914 and the United States in 2003.

To be sure, the two versions of realism share similar starting assumptions about the structure of the international system. However, Snyder ignores important differences between offensive and defensive realism on three key questions: What motivations are produced by the structure of the international system? What explains aggressive behavior by states? And does aggression makes sense?

WHAT DOES STRUCTURE MANDATE? Beyond the noncontroversial assumption that states are motivated to survive, realists disagree about how much power states should want. Offensive realists believe that states are primarily motivated to expand their power over other states, whereas defensive realists believe that states are primarily motivated to maintain the balance of power. Offensive realism holds that the ultimate goal of maximizing security pushes states to behave aggressively. Defensive realism holds that the ultimate goal of maximizing security almost always encourages nonaggressive behavior. The key to understanding these differences lies in competing conceptions of the structure of the international system.

Offensive realists believe that structural factors such as anarchy and the distribution

33. Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 285–286.

of power among states, as well as inherent uncertainty about state intentions, matter most in explaining the behavior of states. When the distribution of power offers a good opportunity for a state to gain power at the expense of another, the first state will typically seize the opportunity. The possibility of achieving a dominating position over all potential rivals within a region of the world is especially attractive because of hegemony's extraordinary security payoff. Great powers are willing to countenance great costs and risks in pursuing these rare opportunities to achieve regional hegemony. Domestic factors such as individual misperceptions, ideology, and interest group politics exert far less influence on the foreign policies of states. On the few occasions when these factors override structural incentives and constraints, state behavior is anomalous for offensive realism.

Defensive realists view most aggressive behavior as anomalous for a purely structural theory because the international system provides great powers with little motivation to seek additional increments of power. First, expansionism promotes efficient balancing by other great powers, which usually leaves a state worse off than if it had been willing to settle for the status quo ante. Second, defensive realists believe that the fine-grained structure of power—above all the offense-defense balance—is far more important than the gross distribution of aggregate capabilities. Because the offense-defense balance almost always favors the defender, objective security is usually plentiful for great powers. After reviewing all modern instances of great power expansionism, Snyder concludes, "In no case can the adoption of a strategy of security through expansion be explained by the international conditions facing the state."³⁴ Unfortunately, the benign structure of power as perceived by states and their leaders is often malignant, thus accounting for a good deal of aggressive behavior and war.³⁵ If structure were accurately perceived, much great power expansionism would cease to occur.

WHAT EXPLAINS AGGRESSION? Because great powers have frequently pursued expansionist policies, defensive realists turn to nonstructural explanations for that behavior.³⁶ For example, Snyder's 1984 book claims that military institutional and cognitive biases led to Germany's self-defeating aggression in World War I. Snyder's 1991 book explains the "overly" aggressive foreign policies of several great powers through the prism of domestic coalitional politics. And Van Evera's 1999 book argues that most wars in modern times were fueled by false perceptions of the feasibility of conquest caused by professional military biases and chauvinist myths embedded in nationalist ideology.

According to defensive realism, virtually all of the great power wars in the last two hundred years were driven to a significant degree by such nonstrategic, domestic pathologies. Defensive realists certainly view World War I as such a case. The misguided cult of the offensive that was a master cause of the war was itself caused by a combination of toxic domestic forces: most importantly, weak civilian control over self-serving military organizations and political domination by logrolling interest groups. According to offensive realism, the strategic logic of the international system compels great powers to try to dominate their regions when the opportunity arises. German

34. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 307.

35. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 6.

36. As Snyder writes, "Great powers in the industrial age have shown a striking proclivity for such self-inflicted wounds." Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 1.

leaders provoked war in 1914 because they saw just such an opportunity. Aggression was caused by Germany's interpretation of international strategic imperatives, not by its domestic pathologies.

DOES OFFENSE MAKE SENSE? Finally, offensive and defensive realists disagree about whether aggression pays. For defensive realists, the international structure is so primed against offense that aggression rarely succeeds. As Van Evera writes, offense is rarely advantageous in the real world: "Aggressors are more often punished than rewarded. Even successful aggression offers few benefits. Moreover, aggression seldom succeeds. Aggressor states usually are constrained or destroyed."³⁷ Similarly, Snyder argues that "situations of global offensive advantage are rare. . . . Technological conditions aiding the attacker may exist in isolated instances and therefore may help explain some cases of expansionist strategies. Overall, however, they have not been common enough to account for the more general inclination toward such strategies."³⁸ For defensive realists, aggressive great powers invariably end up on the ash heap of history because offensive action does not contribute to security. As Snyder writes, offensive realism "asserts that offensive action contributes to security," whereas defensive realism "contends that it does not."³⁹

The starkly contrasting picture of the benefits of aggression painted by offensive realists is at odds with Snyder's suggestion that the two theories perceive only minor differences in the wisdom of state aggression. For defensive realists, the offense-defense balance usually makes conquest very difficult, and most great powers most of the time would be happy to live in peace if their leaders only perceived the balance correctly. For offensive realists, the offense-defense balance is a deeply flawed concept that explains little about actual combat outcomes and, thus not surprisingly, almost nothing about military planning and political decisionmaking.⁴⁰ Furthermore, statistical analyses and historical case studies alike provide little support for the argument that offense rarely succeeds.⁴¹ At bottom, the evidence that suggests German leaders approached war in 1914 with eyes wide open does not surprise offensive realists. German leaders had a reasonably good idea of the European balance of power and the nature of modern warfare, and they decided that the potential costs of a world war were offset by the potential benefits of achieving continental hegemony. That Germany nearly prevailed in the conflict at least suggests that German leaders were not nearly as misguided as defensive realists have portrayed them.⁴²

CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC LOGIC VERSUS STRATEGIC BIAS

Snyder argues that defensive realists introduce "perceptual or domestic political factors to explain why states deviate from what structural logic would dictate, in particular why they often behave too aggressively for their own good." The main problem with this move is not that it signifies theoretical "degeneration." Rather, the defensive realist

37. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 6, 9, 190–191, 225.

38. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 23.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

40. Lieber, *War and the Engineers*.

41. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), pp. 39–40.

42. See *ibid.*, pp. 213–217, 253–254.

amendment is empirically unfounded and unnecessary. For example, in the classic case for defensive realism, Germany behaved "too aggressively" in launching World War I because it could have successfully defended itself against the anticipated growth in Russian military power if it had adopted a defensive strategy years earlier. This claim assumes that Germany would have preferred to preserve the status quo of a multipolar Europe; that international structural imperatives—properly understood—discouraged expansionist policies; and that Germany's military defeat exposed the irrationality or nonstrategic nature of German behavior.

The outcome of a war does not, however, determine whether a state's decision to launch that war was strategically wise or sensible. Military defeats do not prove strategic bias, just as military conquest does not validate strategic logic. The key to determining whether the decision to initiate war was a reasonable response to strategic conditions depends on the decisionmaking process itself. Defensive realists have relied on a body of historical evidence concerning German decisionmaking before World War I to conclude that it was fraught with misperceptions, mistakes, biases, and illusions. To the extent that German aggression was a reasonable response to strategic circumstances, defensive realists believe that those strategic facts on the ground were themselves a regrettable and entirely unnecessary consequence—"a waste by-product"—of Germany's initial misperceptions, cognitive and organizational biases, and other warped domestic forces.

The defensive realist account is not consistent with the new evidence. Germany sought to establish regional hegemony, not to defend itself against any change in the status quo. Both older and newly discovered documents make clear that German decisionmaking was not nearly as warped by misperceptions of offensive advantage and other biases as defensive realists have suggested. German leaders understood the reality of their strategic circumstances—the balance of power, power trends, and the reality of modern warfare—and decided that the prospect of attaining European hegemony was worth the risk of a long and costly war. To label Germany's actions as "gratuitously self-defeating" from the start is to ignore the logical basis of German decisionmaking in the face of intense structural forces.

Snyder concludes his letter by returning to what he portrays as a surprising "convergence" among realists he noted at the beginning: John Mearsheimer (an offensive realist) and Stephen Walt (a defensive realist) joined together to oppose the 2003 Iraq War and subsequently argued that a domestic interest group (i.e., the "Israel lobby") was largely to blame for the war's occurrence, which is difficult to explain in structural realist terms.⁴³ "This is striking," Snyder writes, "because domestic explanations for strategic errors are more characteristic of defensive realism." With this example, Snyder appears to be identifying the conversion of one prominent realist, rather than the convergence of two strands of realism, but either conclusion would be a mistake. First, there is nothing extraordinary about realists of different stripes reaching similar conclusions about the wisdom of contemporary foreign policy. Both Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz were adamantly opposed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, yet nobody

43. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), chap. 8.

would argue that they held the same theory of international politics or that one scholar was forced to adopt the other's theory in the process of taking a similar policy stance. Second, the Israel lobby argument is aimed at explaining what Mearsheimer views as an anomalous case for offensive realism.⁴⁴ All theories face anomalies. The problem arises when many real-world cases or a small number of crucial cases—or, perhaps, a single paradigmatic case—proves anomalous.

—Keir A. Lieber
South Bend, Indiana

44. I disagree with Mearsheimer and Walt's assessment of the role of the Israel lobby in causing the Iraq War and am unconvinced that the war poses a major theoretical challenge to either offensive or defensive realism.