

Teaching Guide for
*Gambling and War: Risk, Reward, and Chance in
International Conflict*

Justin Conrad

Gambling and War: Risk, Reward, and Chance in International Conflict is the first book to use gambling analogies to illustrate popular concepts and debates in international relations. The book provides examples from a variety of games, including poker, blackjack and roulette. It is therefore intended to present concepts and theories in an entertaining way that makes them accessible to a larger audience. As such, the book can easily be incorporated into the classroom setting and will likely provide a more stimulating approach to standard treatments of international relations.

This guide is intended only as a set of suggestions, should instructors consider incorporating the text into their classes. I provide recommendations for using the text in two different kinds of classes. First, I show how it might be used in a traditional course on international conflict, taught at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Second, I outline how an entire course (“Gambling and War”) can be designed around the book. In each case, I provide a sample course outline, indicating which chapters in the book match up with the topics in the sample course. I then provide examples of how specific weeks/topics might be approached, including suggested discussion questions and activities that will help tie the book into the course topics.

Even if instructors do not wish to incorporate the book throughout a full semester, the “teaching ideas” below demonstrate how it can be a useful supplement in approaching some of the more standard topics.

Sample Course Outline: International Conflict

A standard offering in many college and university catalogs is a course on International Conflict. While many variations on this kind of course exist (including courses that place heavier emphasis on international cooperation), the central questions covered are often the same: why do nations (or non-state groups) fight each other? How do they fight? And/or why do they stop fighting?

These are also the central questions addressed in *Gambling and War*, so the book can be a useful addition to an existing International Conflict course. The themes in the book serve several important pedagogical functions to enhance such a course. First, the book presents a comprehensive view of conflict processes, incorporating the role of strategy, psychology and basic probability. This holistic view should help students think about conflict in a broader way. Second, by presenting many conflict analogies involving games of chance, the information is intended to be more accessible and to stimulate student interest, providing a fresh perspective on what are often stale topics (especially from the instructor's perspective). Instead of just assigning and discussing standard treatises on military power and conflict, for instance, instructors can demonstrate these concepts with the many gambling examples included in the book. Instructors might even give students a chance to experience the principles first-hand by playing structured games of poker, blackjack, etc. during class. Such in-class games are a central feature to the "Gambling and War" class outlined later in this document, but they can easily be incorporated into a traditional course on a more limited basis.

Below is a sample course design for an International Conflict course, which lists the book chapters that are most relevant for each week. Chapter 1, for instance, can be assigned in several different weeks, as it covers a range of topics. Because many of the subjects included in this sample course outline are also typically included in introductory international relations courses, the book is ultimately useful in any course that includes conflict as a central topic.

Week 1: Course Introduction & History of International Conflict

Readings: Gambling and War, Introduction & Ch. 5

Week 2: Approaches to Conflict: Realism

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 1 & 2

Week 3: Approaches to Conflict: Liberalism

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 3 & 6

Week 4: Approaches to Conflict: Bargaining

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 1 & 2

Week 5: Approaches to Conflict: Leaders and Institutions

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 1 & 3

Week 6: Power and Preferences

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 1 & 2

Week 7: Power Transitions

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 1 & 2

Week 8: Offense and Defense

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 3 & 4

Week 9: Military Alliances

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 1 & 2

Week 10: Economics and Security

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 4

Week 11: Intrastate Conflict

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 2 & 3

Week 12: Intrastate Conflict

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 2 & 3

Week 13: Bargaining during Conflict

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 3

Week 14: Ending Wars

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 3

Week 15: International Institutions

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 6

Teaching Ideas: Approaches to Conflict: Bargaining (Week 4)

Many contemporary courses on international relations and international conflict devote at least some time to understanding the “bargaining” model of war. Critical to the bargaining model is an understanding of two characteristics of states: their capabilities and their resolve. These concepts lend themselves nicely to the game of poker, where a player must consider both the capabilities of their opponent (the cards they are holding) and their resolve (how much they are willing to spend to win the game). The fact that the player does not know this information, and can only estimate it, emphasizes another important concept in the bargaining approach: the role of incomplete information. And finally, players base their beliefs about an opponent on their current behavior, as well as their previous behavior. This helps students understand the concept of “credible commitments,” an important part of the bargaining literature.

Chapters 1 and 2 use poker scenarios to emphasize all of these concepts. The chapters also provide more accessible visualizations of the basic bargaining model (and extensions of it) than are available in standard textbooks. The figures included in the chapter involve states bargaining over a tangible good, territory, instead of presenting more abstract models. Some instructors may wish to incorporate a game of poker into their class sessions, but the lessons learned from poker and their real-world consequences can also be emphasized through the use of other tools. For instance, videos are available online of the 1998 World Series of Poker

game between Scotty Nguyen and Humberto Brenes (discussed in Chapter 1). Having the students watch the final stages of this game is an entertaining way to illustrate the dangers and potential benefits of bluffing behavior.

Discussion Questions

Some sample questions that can help strengthen the link between the poker examples included in the book and analogous situations in international conflict:

1. In a game of poker, if you draw a full house (a very good hand), how would you convince your opponents that you have a very good hand? Would you announce that you were holding a full house? Why or why not?
2. When states try to coerce other states, is it enough to simply threaten war? Why or why not?
3. What can a state do to make their threats of war more believable?
4. What can a poker player do to make their threats of winning more believable?
5. Are there any times when it would be beneficial for a player to appear like they have a worse hand than they actually do?
6. Are there any times when it would be beneficial for a state to lie about their capabilities or their resolve?

Teaching Ideas: Intrastate Conflict (Weeks 11 and 12)

Although the book deals largely with examples and lessons from interstate conflict, it can also be useful as a supplement for lessons on civil conflict. In particular, Chapters 2 and 3 focus heavily on how power asymmetries influence the tactics and strategies of actors. Once again, poker provides a useful comparison. One of the reasons why poker is such an attractive game for players with a wide range of skill levels is that it offers opportunities for players holding objectively weak hands to defeat their stronger adversaries. Likewise, rebel groups and terrorist organizations are often much weaker than the governments they are

fighting. They often choose tactics and strategies that avoid direct, head-on conflicts with their adversaries (analogous to the “showdown” in poker, where they would undoubtedly lose), and instead focus on misrepresenting their own capabilities and resolve.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss many of the approaches that weak actors can use to overcome stronger opponents. There are many possible in-class exercises and games that can help emphasize these concepts. Again, the instructor does not necessarily need to schedule in-class poker tournaments, as there are many other ways to connect the lessons from the book. For instance, Chapter 2 delves into the usefulness (and difficulty) of randomizing one’s strategy. The chapter uses some simple illustrations involving coin tosses, that can be easily replicated in the classroom setting. Such a simple illustration can serve to better engage the students and demonstrate how true randomization is problematic for insurgent groups in civil wars.

Discussion Questions

Some sample questions that link gambling to the points about intrastate conflict included in Chapters 2 and 3:

1. In a game of poker, if you draw an objectively weak hand (for instance, a pair of nines), how would you convince your opponents that you are actually holding a good hand?
2. Rebel groups and terrorist organizations are almost always weaker than the governments they target. How do they convince their opponents to take them seriously?
3. How does a weak actor, like an insurgent group, apply the concept of “implied odds” in their fight against a government?
4. Why is the use of implied odds a risky strategy for groups to use?
5. Draw a map of a fictitious piece of territory. Indicate on the map the locations where 10 terrorist attacks have occurred, assuming that the group committing the attacks perfectly randomized their target choices. Now draw the same map and locate the attacks if the group chose their targets strategically. What is the difference between the two maps? Why did you expect the two maps to look different?

Sample Course Outline: Gambling and War

While the text can be incorporated into just about any course on international relations, its ideal use is as the central text for a course specifically linking gambling to war. Such a course allows for much more in-depth explorations of the topics raised in the book. The goal of the course, and the book itself, is to demonstrate how strategy, human error and randomness jointly influence the occurrence, intensity and termination of war.

Such concepts can be effectively illustrated through the gambling analogies used throughout the book. Instructors might consider teaching the class in a way that gives equal attention to understanding and learning games of chance. And one natural way to design the course would be to allow students opportunities to play games against each other in class. Such games can be incorporated into any class where the text is being used, even in a limited way. In a class devoted entirely to the study of gambling and war, however, regular use of in-class games can be particularly effective. Weekly or bi-weekly games are probably the best option, though instructors might incorporate them less frequently. If possible, providing real rewards for beating opponents (or perhaps for being the top winner in the class) helps to emphasize the actual risk-reward tradeoffs in gambling and war. One idea is to keep a running log of student winnings over the semester, and then reward specific students at the very end of the semester. Although the use of games at some level is recommended, the class can of course be taught without them.

Below is a sample outline for a Gambling and War course, using the book as the central text. Supplementary readings can also be used throughout the proposed course, but are not necessary. The course follows the schedule of a typical 15-week semester, but can be altered for shorter semesters.

Week 1: Course Introduction & A Short History of Gambling and War

Readings: Gambling and War, Introduction

Week 2: Betting on War and the Preflop

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 1

Week 3: Information, Credible Commitments and Bluffing

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 1

Week 4: Strategy

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 1 & 2

Week 5: How Weak Players Win

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 2

Week 6: Implied Odds

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 2

Week 7: Randomization and Bluffing in Civil Conflicts

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 2

Week 8: Game Flow and Reputation

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 3

Week 9: Ending the Game

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 3

Week 10: Offense, Defense and Blackjack

Readings: Gambling and War, Chs. 3 & 4

Week 11: Losing the Hand

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 4

Week 12: Sources of Misperception and Bias

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 4

Week 13: The Role of Chance

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 5

Week 14: Russians and Roulette

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 5

Week 15: Managing and Preventing War

Readings: Gambling and War, Ch. 6

Teaching Ideas: Betting on War and the Preflop (Week 2)

An important part of understanding why states and non-state organizations fight each other is how they interact under incomplete information. Chapter 1 examines strategic interactions in such limited-information environments, using the analogy of two poker players playing one another for the first time. In such a case, how do they view each other? How do they place bets without any information about their opponent? In addressing these questions, the chapter also examines a much larger question (which is the central theme of most conflict studies): why do nations and groups fight each other *if war is so costly?*

By focusing on the lack of information (credibility is addressed in later chapters), the chapter offers a unique perspective on why gamblers and nations risk so much, and how they do so. This approach allows instructors to build an understanding of the bargaining model “from the ground up,” in an entertaining way.

Using In-Class Games

This week offers an opportunity for students to become comfortable playing the game of poker. Ideally, they will have learned the rules of the game during the introduction week of the course. But like the scenarios discussed in Chapter 1, the students will be unfamiliar with one another, emphasizing the limited-information environment (in other words, they won't have detailed information on how the other students have played in the past, etc.). Before beginning the in-class games, the instructor should emphasize to the students that they will be asked to answer questions about their perceptions and actions during the *first* round of betting (also known as the preflop) specifically. The instructor should also observe

the games and keep his/her own notes about how the students are playing in this early round.

Discussion Questions

In order to tie the in-class games to the course's learning outcomes, students might be asked to respond to a series of questions following the games. These would ideally focus on 1) the student's experience, 2) their perceptions of how other players behaved and 3) how the events of the game relate to the course materials. It is recommended that the questions be circulated to the students *before* the games, so they know which information to focus on. Some sample questions are included here for the Week 2 discussion:

1. In your very first hand, how much did you bet in the preflop? Which factors determined the size of your bet?
2. What was your best guess regarding your opponent's cards in that first hand? How did his/her initial bet influence that perception?
3. Can you think of an example where the perception of a nation's power has been influenced by something that they've done or said, short of war?
4. Did your betting decisions change as you played more hands? If so, how?
5. Did your opponent's betting strategy seem to change as you played more hands? If so, how?
6. Can you think of an example where two nations have treated each other differently over time?

Teaching Ideas: Offense, Defense and Blackjack (Week 10)

A popular topic in courses on international conflict (as well as military studies courses) is the advantage of offense vs. defense. As such, this is one of the topics in the course that begins to move the discussion from "why go to war?" to "how wars are fought." Chapter 4 covers these topics from the perspective of prospect theory and the endowment effect,

arguing that armies fighting on defense are likely to be more committed to their cause than invading armies. But Chapter 3 covers the offense/defense debate using blackjack to explain how those on defense (the dealer or the “house”) have built-in advantages over those on offense (the player).

With the combined focus on prospect theory (Chapter 4) and the practical implications of offense/defense (Chapter 3), the book presents an examination of these issues in a manner that lends itself well to the in-class games.

Using In-Class Games

The rules of blackjack are simple, relative to poker, so the students shouldn’t need an extensive introduction to the game. During the games, several of the students will be chosen to be the dealer, so they will be provided with a separate set of instructions (for instance, hitting on ‘17’ or higher would be prohibited). At some point, the dealers should be rotated so they have chance to “play the house” as well. Students who are not the dealers may be allowed to use a “strategy card” to assist them with their decision-making, because this will not change the overall conclusions of the game. Players should be provided with a limited amount of chips, but the dealers will theoretically be given an endless amount of money.

Discussion Questions

Some sample discussion questions for Week 10:

1. As a player, did you earn money or lose money overall? Did you feel that you had an advantage over the dealer?
2. Which kinds of hands were you most likely to lose on? Which kinds of hands were you most likely to win with?
3. Did you use a strategy card? Do you think it provided an additional advantage for you?
4. Provide an example of an army that successfully defended itself against an invading force. What advantages did the defender have?

5. Provide an example of an army that successfully conquered another nation while on offense. What advantages did the invader have?