

to cognition, creative work, and helping others every day” (331). Giving a new meaning to scarcity is an efficient means to overcome insecurity, which is one of the greatest obstacles—or even *the* greatest obstacle—for the expression of social and cultural activity and creativity. The authors survey a complicated phenomenon, bringing many distinct disciplines into conversation.

There are some points in the volume worthy of critique as well. The authors almost ignore modernity as a factor of change in the relationship between transcendence and scarcity. One might get the impression that interpretation of scarcity at the moral level is still being dominated by the notions of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. Although scarcity is only reflected in other noumena and does not have a shape itself, on choosing it as the target of research, the tendency of the discourse to turn it into an object approaching a noumenon could hardly be avoided. The editors’ attempts to encourage interaction among the essays or at least an indirect response to one another are quite obvious, but repetitions could have been more boldly blue-penciled, and cyclical reversion to the already discussed arguments could have been more strictly avoided in the synthesis. There is a perceivable stylistic dissonance between the authors who have chosen a strictly analytical position and those whose texts imply an effort to make an impact on social behavior and consciousness.

*The Phenomenon of Scarcity* is a worthwhile addition to ongoing debates about the transformation of scarcity and solutions to the inequality of opportunities, and about the contradiction of poverty and irresponsible waste coexisting in the world. The volume opens a perspective for finding rigorous new arguments from pro-free market positions about the limited possibilities of the state to alleviate scarcity. Moreover, the book is a useful tool for raising political consciousness of the fact that a complete overcoming of scarcity is not only a utopian idea but also basically a harmful populist claim that must be avoided irrespective of the disposition of views on the right-left spectrum.

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## The Spoils of War: Greed, Power, and the Conflicts That Made Our Greatest Presidents

**Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith**  
New York: PublicAffairs, 2016 (320 pages)

If one thing is clear about *The Spoils of War*, it is the self-characterized “cynical perspective” of the authors. Their subject is the human tragedy of war and what exactly leads American presidents to pursue it. Is not the cost of war virtually always so great as to deter even the boldest soul? Do we not honor our wartime leaders exactly because we know how dreadful war is and therefore we realize the strain borne by commanders in chief? Yet, these questions betray a completely different point of view than the one pursued by the authors. They believe that leaders do what will benefit them personally. And they have

come to the conclusion that war is one of the most efficient paths to historical renown (and indeed often to more short-term benefit).

While the book presents a clear and interesting thesis, I take issue, to some degree, with the authors' conclusions. They begin with a Wikipedia ranking of presidents, which is somehow derived from the combination of many previous rankings by experts. By sorting presidents into wartime presidents and those who did not preside over battle, they find that the wartime presidents are more likely to have high ratings than their counterparts. Given that finding, they believe that self-interested presidents (and they are all presumed to be self-interested in this analysis) elected to pursue war despite the existence of other plausible choices in order to bolster their own reputations.

Right away, one might think of George W. Bush, who clearly seems not to have benefited from going to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, but he is explained away as an outlier. Lyndon Baines Johnson would also have to be an outlier as his reputation was surely not enhanced by Vietnam. Instead, his legacy rests on more widely esteemed domestic achievements such as the programs of the Great Society.

Nevertheless, it is probably fair to accept the contention that wartime presidents end up higher in the rankings of historians. But one has to ask whether presidents could know that to be so when they made their decisions. Wilson, for example, was elected on the contention that "he kept us out of war." It would be hard to assume that sending American boys overseas to fight would be a big legacy builder or even at all popular in the short run. One could reasonably argue that what drove Wilson (an academic whose work is still read in the field of public administration) was not so much his desire to be seen as a successful wartime leader as it was that he had a powerful ideological belief in prospects for an international order based on democracy. But Wilson (probably another complicated case for the thesis) does not get a chapter as Washington, Lincoln, and others do.

An analysis based on earning the esteem of posterity through warfare is vulnerable to challenge as I have suggested, but the more direct causal connection for which the authors argue is that war provided a path for immediate benefit (financial, for example) to presidents. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith deserve credit for chutzpah as they take on the two presidents in American memory who seem to qualify for something like secular sainthood: George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

When it comes to Washington, the authors make something like a Charles Beard type of case that his motive for revolution (and that of other founders) rested in their enormous wealth. Now, obviously, Washington was not president during the Revolutionary War, but he was the stand-in for one as the supreme commander of the Continental Army who became the first commander in chief. While it is possible to make a case for the ways greater British control would endanger financial interests of men such as Washington, it seems that there is a substantial leap required to go from worrying about threats to one's fortune via taxation and attacks on currency to leading a revolution against probably the greatest military power on earth at the time. It is clear that victory for the Americans was an unlikely prospect. Events throughout the war indicate the enormity of the challenge and the nearness of defeat. Wasn't the likelihood of losing one's land (and one's life) *at least*

as large as the possibility of prevailing? Given that reality, wouldn't it have made more sense for calculating characters (such as Washington is presented to be) to have chosen a more conservative course than war with an incredibly strong opponent?

While there is lots of room to argue with the book, one of the hallmarks of an interesting academic volume is that it does offer a significant argument that encourages analysis and debate. There is substantial value with the authors' cynical perspective on the behavior of leaders. One who takes no account of such things is likely to find themselves gulled. But it is also true that there are times when self-interest is not in the forefront of decision. *The Spoils of War* may end up leading readers to think more about the ways such a pessimistic analysis can be misleading.

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## Max Weber's Economic Ethic of the World Religions: An Analysis

**Thomas C. Ertman (Editor)**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017 (368 pages)

This collection of essays takes up the unfinished work of the sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions* (*Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*), which was one of the two major projects left incomplete at the time of Weber's death. The other, posthumously published as *Economy and Society*, focused on one-half of what Weber would call the “reciprocal causal relationship” (322) between material, economic realities on the one side and spiritual, ethical realities on the other. If *Economy and Society* focused on how economic life impacted religious belief and moral activity, *Economic Ethic of the World Religions* took its point of departure in the impact of inner, ethical teachings on economic realities. Taken together, Weber's projects were grandiose and ambitious. Taken separately, they represent a partial and provisional, yet perhaps still inspiring, understanding of the development of the modern world.

Weber's approach in *Economic Ethic of the World Religions* was intended to be comparative and explanatory. That is, he was aiming at answering the question of why capitalism in its modern, Western form arose where it did and nowhere else. To address this, Weber looks at, in various works and in varying degrees of sophistication, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. In this volume, Thomas C. Ertman has brought together a wide variety of experts both in Weber's own life and work as well as in the history of the various religious traditions and academic fields on which Weber's projects impinged.

The volume opens and closes with excellent framing essays by Ertman, who notes that the idea of the collection is to “ask what is living and dead” in Weber's *Economic Ethic of the World Religions* (35). Part 2 of the volume includes two essays that analyze Weber's overall project. Wolfgang Schluchter masterfully presents the chronology and