

How to Get Bogged Down in a Civil War

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Schulhofer-Wohl, Jonah. 2020. **Quagmire in Civil War**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 317 pp., £24.99 paperback (ISBN: 978-1108486767).

In 1965, Pulitzer-prize winning author David Halberstam used the word “quagmire” to describe the American entrapment in the Vietnam war. Fifty-five years later, Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl sets out to uncover the phenomenon of quagmire. Why, the author asks, do some civil wars last longer than expected, even in the face of rising costs of fighting? The answer, he argues, lies in the strategic structure of conflict and in the associated decision-making problems that emerge for belligerents and foreign sponsors.

In common parlance, quagmire often refers to any long-lasting civil war. Schulhofer-Wohl, instead, defines quagmire around the central idea of entrapment. A civil war experiences quagmire if “for at least one of the belligerents, continuing to fight costs more than its expected benefits, but withdrawing will *increase* rather than avert these net costs” (p. 4). Schulhofer-Wohl argues that quagmire is not a by-product of the initial decision to start fighting, but the result of strategic interaction between armed groups and their foreign backers.

The prevailing narrative in the civil war literature is that belligerents will stop fighting when the costs of war become too high or when the benefits are low. In Chapter 2, the author develops a formal model to explore the conditions under which, counter to established wisdom, belligerents choose to prolong fighting even as the costs rise or the stakes of the conflict decrease. This happens if a belligerent expects to receive foreign assistance and can switch from territorial warfare to guerrilla fighting. Because the backer absorbs a portion of the belligerent’s costs, the latter uses this subsidy to remain an active party to the conflict. Yet, the belligerent has little incentive to escalate the war and achieve a quick victory, engaging instead in low-cost non-territorial warfare. As a result, the war is harder to conclude, peace attempts get spoiled, and quagmire ensues. The appendix derives the full set of quagmire equilibria.

Chapter 3 and 4 examine the theory through an analysis of the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990. Chapter 3 presents an overview of the main actors and cleavages of the conflict, as well as the alternative explanations for why belligerents might keep fighting: ideological commitments, polarization, and foreign manipulation. Chapter 4 contains the bulk of the theory testing effort. Drawing on 120 hours of interviews conducted in Arabic with former combatants across multiple armed groups, Schulhofer-Wohl describes the rationale behind four episodes in which the weaker party kept fighting in the face of an unfavorable balance of power: the LNF’s decision to continue fighting in January 1976; a second attempt to restart fighting in 1978; Amine Gemayell’s shunning of a political settlement in favor of the forceful expansion of government control between 1982 and 1984; and General Aoun’s rejection of the Taif peace accord in fall 1989. Quite convincingly, the author shows how these factions deepened their participation in the war based on the availability of external support and the opportunity to de-escalate to non-territorial warfare. While some key elements of the strategic interaction are left uninvestigated – for instance, an untested assumption of the model is that expectations of foreign support would not be sufficient to justify continued fighting had the belligerents not believed that the other side would refrain from escalating the war – the wealth of empirical and anecdotal evidence makes this chapter the highlight of the book.

Chapter 5 and 6 assess the external validity of the theory. Chapter 5 identifies a strong statistical link between quagmire and the strategic interaction between belligerents and foreign backers by regressing the residuals of a survival analysis of civil war on different measures of foreign interests, the stakes of the conflict, and escalation costs. While the research design is innovative, the analysis is hindered by the high likelihood of omitted variable bias (for example, foreign support is not included in the duration model) and the use of mostly pre-conflict covariates to test a theory about endogenous dynamics of civil war. Chapter 6 tests the quagmire theory against alternative explanations by comparing Lebanon with a very different civil war that experienced quagmire (Chad) and one that, despite similar strategic conditions, did not (Yemen).

Building on his extensive knowledge of civil wars in the Middle East and combining the literature on rational explanations for war with that on war economies, Schulhofer-Wohl provides the first academic study of quagmire, developing an illuminating theory and convincing empirical backing. Still, some parts of the theoretical model might oversimplify the relationship between foreign backing, war type, and duration. For example, foreign support might not be the only, or even the main, reason behind the choice to fight a given type of warfare. Belligerents cannot always choose how to fight due to capability gaps. Also, there could be cases in which foreign backers prefer low-cost fighting (e.g. they might value the secrecy of low-cost warfare, which grants them plausible deniability). Finally, the book is belligerent-centric, and except for Chapter 2, the sponsor's position remains largely overlooked. For example, do all types of foreign backing have the same effect? Sponsors could use some forms of support to exert more leverage over the belligerent.

Nonetheless, *Quagmire in Civil War* represents a groundbreaking contribution to the study of war duration and foreign involvement. The book will be appealing to a variety of audiences in political science, conflict studies, and international relations. The chapters on the Lebanese civil war will be of particular interest to scholars working at the intersection of Middle Eastern studies and political science. Policymakers, too, could use this book to learn how great powers get bogged down in a civil war, from Vietnam in the 1960s to Syria today.

Reference

Halberstam, David. 1965. *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era*. New York: Random House.