

Brief essay: Warmongering and Related Concepts.
4/13/07 version. William A. McConochie, Ph.D.

Four concepts are related but different in important ways: warmongering as defined in a dictionary, warmongering behavior, warmongering as a psychological concept or trait, and warmongering-proneness as a psychological concept or trait.

Dictionary definitions of warmongering typically include one or both of the following: a person who advocates war, and a person or group that stirs up war. The advocating of war can be considered a psychological process: expressed attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and ideas about the desirability of promoting war. More specifically, it is reasonable to consider this to consist of aggressive war, waging war as an offensive act rather than simply to protect one's nation from invasion. Stirring up war may be considered actual overt behavior, such as seeking political or military power and engineering the development and use of armaments and armies to wage aggressive war.

Warmongering behavior. Warmongering behavior is the actual overt behavior of one or more persons who are advocating or stirring up aggressive war. This behavior can consist of public speeches, private negotiations with other persons or organizations that can promote war, and writing and planning in the interest of promoting war. It can include efforts to gain political or military power that will enable one to promote war directly by commanding military forces to aggress against groups or nations.

Warmongering as a psychological concept or trait may be defined as the psychological processes reflecting desires to promote aggressive war. As a science, psychology requires that such concepts be operationally defined, that is, defined by a reliable and valid measuring instrument, such as a questionnaire. Such a questionnaire can consist of statements reflecting feelings, beliefs, attitudes, etc., reflecting such desires.

Warmongering-proneness as a concept or trait may be defined as attitudes, beliefs and behaviors directly related to warmongering as a psychological trait. Warmongering-proneness embodies the assumption that persons high on this trait are more likely to endorse warmongering itself and are more likely to promote warmongering if and when they gain political or military power. If such attitudes, beliefs, etc. are publicly observable, such as reflected in attending certain types of church services, associating with certain types of groups, and making certain types of public statements, then one can develop a rating scale by which to assess the warmongering-proneness of a well-known person, such as a political figure. A well-known historical figure also could be rated by such an instrument.

Consider an example. U.S. President George W. Bush could defend himself as not fitting a dictionary definition of warmonger, denying that he advocates aggressive war. He could argue that he is merely reflecting his nation's concerns for self-preservation when he orders war that he defines as defensive. He could refuse to complete a psychological questionnaire measuring the psychological trait of warmongering and thus evade assessment on this specific concept. His overt behavior, requesting money from Congress to wage war and ordering military forces to do so, he could defend also as simply defensive in essence and thus not reflecting warmongering behavior as an aggressive trait. However, journalists could rate him on a reliable and valid measure of warmongering-proneness consisting of publicly observable behaviors shown by research to be related to the psychological concept of warmongering. If these journalists consistently rated him as very high on the trait of warmongering-proneness, he would warrant the label of "warmongering-prone". He would be expected in the future to behave in a manner consistent with this definition, promoting the development and use of military power to wage aggressive war. Whether he actually was successful in this would be a function of many things in addition to his own warmongering-proneness, including support or opposition to his efforts by other elements of political power, such as the U.S. Congress to which he is accountable. Even if he were not successful in promoting war, he could still be very high on the trait of warmongering-proneness.

Technical points:

Would President G. W. Bush's efforts to reduce the threat of North Korea as a warmongering nation prove that Bush himself is not a warmonger?

No, for if he is high on warmongering-proneness, this trait does not change just because of one or another of his political behaviors. This trait is considered to be rather deep-seated, as are many other psychological traits, such as intelligence and the Big Five personality traits, which are rather stable, especially in adulthood. Historical examples of leaders who probably had this stable trait, which persisted in spite of "punishment" and "peaceful" behavior include Napoleon Bonaparte, who after many years as an aggressive military leader of France was imprisoned. He escaped and resumed his warmongering, ending in defeat at Waterloo and imprisonment until his death. Hitler negotiated a peace treaty with Stalin in August of 1939 but then invaded Russia less than 24 months later in June of 1941.

If a rating scale of warmongering-proneness does not include items reflecting possible peace-promoting behaviors by a leader, is the rating scale defective or otherwise inadequate?

No. A warmonger can appear to promote peace in some activities but still be a warmonger at heart. Political lying and conniving are consistent with warmongering, as noted in Hitler's behavior, above. If a rating scale of warmongering-proneness consists of enough good items to render it technically reliable, and if studies confirm that it is valid (correlating as expected with other evidence of warmongering), then it is a dependable and viable scientific instrument.

If a rating scale of warmongering-proneness does not include items about content that some experts think should be a part of the concept, is the scale inadequate?

No. No scale measure of a trait will include all possible items that could be reliable and valid contributors to the scale. No intelligence test includes all possible items that measure intelligence. Two different intelligence tests can include no items in common but both be reliable and valid measures of intelligence, just as distance can be measured in terms of meters or yards with equal accuracy.

Are raters' judgments of warmongering-proneness hopelessly biased by media coverage, historical information or other biased information, rendering any attempts to rate a trait such as warmongering-proneness inaccurate and thus useless?

No. Indeed, the more accurate information that is available to raters the better, and the longer the rating scale, the better. A reliable and valid scale of warmongering-proneness will consist of many valid items, each consisting of an observable characteristic, such as religious beliefs, foreign policy attitudes, human rights policies, and policy statements about military armaments. The more information journalists or other raters have about these behaviors, the more accurately they can rate them on a given leader. Individual raters may have biases. However, these biases can be neutralized by taking the mean score across several careful raters. This mean score very reliably differentiates leaders with different amounts of this trait. For example, many different political and military leaders active in World War II are reliably differentiated with the author's warmongering-proneness scale. Roosevelt, Churchill and Eisenhower have scores much lower than those of Patton, Stalin and Hitler.

But if these ratings all were done by Americans, might not their leanings favor Americans over German and Russian leaders?

Perhaps. But this would not explain how they would reliably rate Patton higher than Eisenhower, both American Generals, or Stalin, over Churchill, both foreign allies. More comparative studies are certainly appropriate to see if leader scores hold up when done by careful raters from different nations. But the possibility of contrary results in future studies does not negate the value of results from initial

studies. The fact that the Wright brothers' Dayton Flyer airplane was flimsy and could only carry a light load over a limited distance did not render it an invalid contribution to the studying of aerodynamics. Indeed, one can argue that putting an end to war is as worthwhile a goal as enabling humans to fly and that identifying potential warmongers and keeping them out of political power is a practical approach to this end.

End.

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