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**Rachel M. Stein, *Vengeful Citizens, Violent States. A Theory of War and Revenge.*  
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From the very outset, Western civilization postulated revenge as a significant cause of armed conflict. The *Iliad's* storyline, the first extant literary text in our Western tradition, revolves around the concept of a Greek retaliatory military campaign against a foreign enemy. The Greeks sail to Priam's city, intending to make the Trojans pay for the abduction of Helen.<sup>1</sup> The first historiography work in the Western canon (Herodotus' *Histories*) posits a framework of an eternal cycle of revenge between East and West. The "Father of History" structures the narrative at the beginning of his work as a cycle of abduction of women in mythical times, culminating in the Achaemenids' imperialist expansion that led to the Persian Wars. Thus, as many scholars have pointed out, the concept of retribution (τίσις, *tisis*) is pervasive and accounts for the most crucial factor for historical explanation in the *Histories*.<sup>2</sup> Revenge would play a vital role in the classical Greek culture of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE.<sup>3</sup> Retribution is also a motivating factor in multiple events in universal history across time — from the history of the Crusades to the 9/11 attacks.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary empirical research about revenge and the initiation of war has grown in the last twenty years. Several scholars have put forward innovative work connecting retribution to the escalation of violence in international politics.<sup>5</sup> However, to this point, no political scientist or military historian has tried to articulate that intuitive and literary, so-to-speak, belief (that revenge plays a key role in interstate relationships) into a complete and coherent IR theory. That is the utmost merit of Rachel Stein's remarkable book, *Vengeful Citizens, Violent States*. Stein successfully develops a theory that fully considers revenge as a root cause of violence in human society and ambitiously explores the role of retribution in the use of military force in contemporary democracies.

Stein's theory starts by linking national revenge to individual beliefs — that is, she locates her theory's "micro-foundations at the individual level" (p. 3). While traditional scholarship made either the leader or the state as the units of analysis, Stein shifts the approach and makes a nation's population the locus of the desire for revenge (pp. 5-6). Thus, the vengefulness of a country's population is an indicator of the state's propensity to use force against other states.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lendon 2000.

<sup>2</sup> De Romilly 1971; Lateiner 1991, 196-205; Gould 2000, 63-85.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen 1995; Herman 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Pagden 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Among others: Liberman 2006; Skitka et al. 2006; Löwenheim and Heimann 2008; Liberman and Skitka 2017. See Stein 32-5.

According to Stein, revenge is better understood as “a core value — rooted in the belief that those who hurt others deserve to be hurt in return” (p. 2). Thus, “Going to war against an evildoer,” she postulates, “is more than a matter of security; it is a matter of justice” (p. 9).

Albeit simple, these concepts are major steps towards a functional understanding of the role revenge plays as a mechanism in interstate conflict. I wholeheartedly agree with Stein’s three initial premises:

1. That revenge, today, is a core value within Western society, not a “primitive, backward” belief that has been suppressed and tamed.
2. That the locus of revenge is to be placed at the “individual-level micro-foundations.”
3. That there is a linkage in the mind of the vengeful individual between revenge and justice. As Stein writes: “For those who hold revenge as a core value, the use of violence in response to a perceived harm or injury is seen as an act of moral virtue .... [T]he return of harm for harm and suffering for suffering is necessary to balance the scales of justice” (8). That is, according to Stein’s mindset, “revenge” is equivalent to what traditional moral and legal thought calls “retribution.”

Stein structures her book into six chapters. The “Introduction” puts forward a summative, sweeping presentation of her theory’s major postulates. Chapter 2 (“Linking Individual Vengefulness to State Violence”) develops Stein’s theoretical argument in detail and reviews the growing empirical literature on revenge. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are empirical chapters testing the three central hypotheses Stein’s theory puts forward.

Chapter 3 (“Wrongs Must Be Repaid: Revenge as a Core Value”) tests the “core value hypothesis.” This hypothesis proposes that “Vengeful individuals will be more supportive of punitive violence than non-vengeful individuals across a wide variety of contexts, regardless of their personal involvement” (p. 61). Stein finds strong support for the “core value hypothesis” by analyzing data from two nationally representative surveys of attitudes towards the use of violence in the United States. One is the Attitudes toward Punitive Violence survey conducted in 2010 (see pp. 66-71). The other is the Justifying Violence Survey conducted in 1969 through the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center (see pp. 71-85).

Chapter 4 (“Framing War as a Punishment: Rhetoric, Revenge, and Public Support for War”) tests the “framing hypothesis.” This hypothesis suggests that “Vengeful individuals will be more supportive of the use of force than non-vengeful individuals when (and only when) that use of force is framed as a punishment” (p. 61).

The national leaders' framing of military action as punishment comprises three key elements: a clear act of wrongdoing that causes unnecessary harm to a victim or victims; an apparent perpetrator who is responsible for the act of wrongdoing; and a proposed military response that will cause some harm or injury to the perpetrator (p. 92). Stein analyzes two contemporary American conflicts, the 2003 War with Iraq and the 1999 Intervention in Kosovo. Her study confirms that the presidents' framing is the key to forging a connection between endorsement of revenge and support for those wars. The lack of popular support for the Kosovo intervention correlates with Clinton not framing the intervention in Kosovo as punishment. In contrast, popular support for the Iraq invasion was boosted by G.W. Bush clearly and consistently framing the use of force against Iraq as a punishment (pp. 106-135).

Chapter 5 ("Dangerous Democracies: Cross-National Variation in Revenge and Conflict Initiation") tests the "conflict initiation hypothesis." The hypothesis postulates that "Democracies with more vengeful populations will be more likely to initiate the use of military force than democracies with less vengeful populations" (p. 62). Because of the lack of consistent, multi-country survey data on revenge, Stein uses the legal status of capital punishment as a proxy for cross-national variation in vengefulness. She assumes that retentionist democracies (i.e., democracies that retain capital punishment for ordinary crimes) are more likely than abolitionist democracies to have populations that broadly endorse revenge (pp. 136-7). Stein cross-compares the retention of the death penalty with a database on all militarized interstate disputes from 1945 to 2001 (the Correlates of War Project). She concludes that "death penalty retention has a substantial impact on the likelihood of conflict initiation." Most vengeful democracies "are more than twice as likely to initiate a militarized dispute compared with the least vengeful democracies" (p. 155).

Chapter 5, along with Chapter 3, raises some interesting methodological issues. For example, how reliable are surveys in measuring vengefulness? In the end, surveys are measuring "intention," not the actual carrying out of revenge. In the two surveys used in Chapter 3, "vengefulness" is measured by agreement or disagreement to the question, "In order for justice to be served, violence must be repaid with violence" (p. 96). Furthermore, examining public support for the wars in Iraq and Kosovo, Stein uses death penalty opinions as a proxy for vengefulness (p. 106). She operates thus because of the absence in public surveys of the abovementioned question. Stein's use of "predictors of vengefulness" to assess and measure vengefulness has limitations and is probably insufficient, primarily the reliance solely on capital punishment as a proxy for measuring revenge sentiments within a country. At the same time, as Stein points out, we lack accurate and comprehensive tools to measure vengefulness within democratic populations. In this regard, the devising of faithful tools to measure the vengefulness of democratic populations will be a significant step forward in studying the role of revenge in conflict initiation.

A final chapter (“Conclusion”) reaffirms that, yes, revenge plays a role in fomenting international conflict, “provided that we locate the desire of revenge in the proper place” (p. 166). However, according to Stein, “The vengefulness of a country’s population is best understood as an underlying factor rather than a proximate cause of war.” Her conclusion also opens new paths of discussion in various related issues and suggests implications on the critical role of revenge for American foreign policy. Notably, Stein suggests new avenues of research relating to four issues: the persistence of revenge within the development of enduring international rivalries; the links between revenge, nationalism, and war; the connections between revenge and perennial types of violence — civil war, terrorism, and genocide; and the role of revenge in post-conflict processes.

Stein’s prose is clear and efficient. However, repetitions abound, making the reading unnecessarily redundant. By the end of the second Chapter, I had stopped counting how many times Stein had repeated that “revenge is best understood as a core value” (p. 2, 7, 17, 19, 22, 23, 30, 60, 61, 63, *passim*). The same is true of the idea that “revenge should be placed at the individual level.” Stein should trust her readers and move on to a more succinct and targeted explanation of her core ideas.

In that regard, I felt some opportunities were lost. Stein indeed focuses on American military policy. It was beyond her scope to go into international case studies. However, those are some of the most exciting and riveting pages of her book. On page 44, she explores the possible role of revenge in Jordan’s anti-terrorist military reaction in 2015 to ISIS’s execution of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh. Her narrative, and the references she provides, point to the perfect confirmation of the theory she is putting forward. Unfortunately, a half-a-page paragraph is all we get into this possibly fascinating case study.

Similarly, after her captivating, summary exploration of her theory applied to the 2003 Iraq War,<sup>6</sup> I longed for a similar analysis of the U.S. national decision-making to the War in Afghanistan as a reaction to 9/11. The only mention of this conflict is to affirm that there is a lack of public opinion surveys on the international move to go into Afghanistan. However, one can argue that the decision to attack the Taliban in Afghanistan is a clear case of American international retributive justice. It holds true to the three critical elements of the punishment frame: (1) A clear act of wrongdoing that causes unnecessary harm to a victim or victims (the 9/11 attacks). (2) An apparent perpetrator who is responsible for the act of wrongdoing (bin-Laden). (3) A proposed military response that will cause some harm or injury to the perpetrator (the demise of the Taliban and the destruction of bin-Laden’s network in Afghanistan). In the same line, Stein mentions the importance of cyclical history in international retaliatory patterns.

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<sup>6</sup> “Example 1,” 41-44. She then contrastively explores “Example 2: The 1999 NATO Intervention in Kosovo” 44-48.

Nevertheless, none is explored in-depth — i.e., an overview of a possible application of her theory to, say, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could enrich her exploration of the subject.

However, my criticism is minor and secondary. Stein's book is an invaluable piece of scholarship. Stein shows perspicacious insights into the function and nature of revenge in war and societies throughout the book. Far-reaching is her attempt to give a systematic account of how revenge transfers from individual belief to international, state-sponsored policy. Her thinking is creative, interdisciplinary, and straightforward. Her thesis is ambitious and all-encompassing. Her methodology is impeccable. Her command and range of the scholarship are astonishing. The bibliography is exhaustive and will open to the reader new avenues of study and thought. *Vengeful Citizens* is not of interest exclusively to political scientists.

Without a doubt, students from a range of different fields will find something stimulating in this volume. For the student of democratic leadership in general and presidential rhetoric in particular, the pages on “framing” narratives will be of great interest (pp. 35-41). The student of military history will find provoking material for her or his general study on the causes of war and, in particular, to the question of whether democracies are especially prone to war. Social scientists will probably agree that revenge plays a vital role in forming public opinion towards a range of political and societal issues (p. 24).

Stein insinuates that feelings of revenge affect various issues in American society that range from economic policy to justice and equity (i.e., the use of police force; parenting norms; gang violence; the application of federal economic subsidies like food stamp programs; etc.). For, as she writes, “endorsement of revenge [is] a powerful and consistent predictor of attitudes toward the use of punitive violence in a variety of forms and contexts, as well as toward the criminal justice system more generally” (p. 81). Further exploration of the issue by social scientists is an exciting field of research. The historian of different periods, in general, will automatically make mental connections to other periods of history in which revenge was at the root of conflict and military action. As a classicist, I can see a fruitful exploration of her theory in the well-researched field studying revenge in classical Greece — and democratic Athens in particular.

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