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## Why is the foreign policy community so scared of numbers?

Posted By [Daniel W. Drezner](#) ▪ Thursday, March 4, 2010 - 4:15 AM ▪ [Share](#)

Steve Walt alerts us to a curious post by CNAS' Andrew Exum -- a.k.a., Abu Muqawama -- intended to create a "[manifesto... for those using quantitative analysis to study war.](#)"

Steve thinks these are "[wise words indeed.](#)" I think... well, let's go through Exum's rules, shall we?

War is a human endeavor. I recognize that it is a phenomenon that does not conform to neat mathematical equations.

Sure.

I will use quantitative analysis in conjunction with theory and qualitative analysis to describe what I see as phenomena in war and peace. I will be honest about the limits of both my theory and my analysis

Of course. Good job nailing the compulsories so far.

In war and peace, the variables are infinite, and not everything can be measured or assigned a numerical value

Um... the variables are infinite on just about every dimension of life. No operationalization, econometric equation or formal model is going to completely capture reality. I *guarantee* you, however, that no qualitative analysis will perfectly capture reality either (I will further note that qualitative scholars often fool themselves into believing this is not the case, which gets them into all sorts of trouble -- but some quant jockeys commit this sin as well). This doesn't mean you give up on explanation -- it just means you acknowledge the limitations of your approach.

I will not use numbers to signify what are fundamentally qualitative assessments without acknowledging to my reader that I have done so in order to satisfy a departmental requirement, gain tenure, or get published in the *APSR*. Or because I have been in graduate school for so long that I have forgotten how to effectively write in prose.

Yeah, this is where Exum's manifesto departs from the land of common sense and enters the world of unadulterated horses\*\*t. First, [I've occasionally used this kind of data](#), and I sure as hell didn't do it to get tenure -- I did it because I thought it was a good way to test my explanation. Second, whether someone can write clear and crisp prose has nothing to do with whether they use quantitative methods or not. That Exum seems not to know this is the first sign that we're dealing with some very muddled thinking.

I recognize there are no mathematical equations in *Vom Kriege* and that it is nonetheless unlikely that my legacy will transcend that of Clausewitz.

Um... I could provide the undisputed, univerally-hailed-by-all explanation for why the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 and my legacy wouldn't transcend Clausewitz. Or Thucydides. But that's a *really* high bar to set.

Just to turn things around, there are plenty of mathematical equations in *Strategy of Conflict* and it is nevertheless likely that Exum's -- or your -- legacy will never transcend that of Thomas Schelling.

And finally:

I recognize that very few squad leaders in the 10th Mountain Division have ever taken a course in statistics yet probably know more about the conduct and realities of war than I do.

I think there is some truth to this statement. It is also a fair statement, however, that very few graduate students in security studies have ever served a day in uniform yet probably know more about the causes of war than those squad leaders do.

As [Drew Conway points out](#), it takes a special kind of chutzpah for [someone who admits that they don't "get" quantitative methods](#) to write something like this.

Be sure to read [the rest of Conway's post](#), as well as [Cato's Justin Logan](#).

UPDATE: Also check out [Kindred Winecoff](#) and [Henry Farrell](#) on Exum's post as well. Farrell's concluding point about the value of social science is worth repeating in full:

In my opinion... the most important lesson that the social sciences have to offer to policy makers - *be careful about selection bias*. Policy debates in Washington DC are rife with selection effects, with advocates highlighting convenient cases for a particular policy argument and hiding inconvenient ones. I'm co-teaching a big MA intro course on IR theory and international affairs practice with a practitioner this semester. If I can get this

one single point across to my students, so that they really understand it, I think I'll have given them good value for money.

Quite true. Sophisticated qualitative scholars are quite adept at coping with this issue. But there's a lot of hackwork that misses this point entirely.