Peace, Prosperity, and Politics

EDITED BY

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In August 1990 Iraq attacked and conquered its neighbor Kuwait. The Iraqi government provided a justification: “Kuwait is part of Iraqi territory that was severed at some point in the past.” This had been done “by the British occupation authorities,” and thus, the annexation of Kuwait eliminated “a trace of Western colonialism.”

By 1941, U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt was committed to entering the ongoing war in Europe but believed he needed a justification. In August, he met British prime minister Winston Churchill to hammer out joint war objectives. Churchill noted FDR’s plans: “The President . . . said he would wage war, but not declare it, and that he would become more and more provocative. If the Germans did not like it, they could attack American forces. . . . Everything was to be done to force an ‘incident.’ . . . The President . . . made it clear that he would look for an ‘incident’ which would justify him in opening hostilities.” As Roosevelt had told much of his staff even earlier, he believed that the United States would eventually join the war, but he wanted his hand forced.
On November 18, 1967, at 9:30 on a Saturday evening, the British Treasury announced a devaluation of the British pound. The event culminated weeks of meetings and discussions with other nations’ central bankers and finance ministers, as well as officials of the International Monetary Fund. British officials had justified their decision and took the steps they thought proper and required. They notified the IMF and awaited its approval of their new exchange rate before officially announcing the devaluation. As British Prime Minister Harold Wilson noted in his memoirs, “Devaluation was forced upon us, the whole world recognized that there was no alternative—central banks and governments accepted the decision as necessary.”

* * *

In each of these cases, a state either justified or looked for justification for its actions, and in each case it is not immediately clear why. When Iraq attacked Kuwait, an entrenched dictatorship that had previously attacked one of its neighbors (Iran) turned on another. Why justify its action? To what end? And to whom? Equally puzzling is the case of FDR, committed to one side in an ongoing war, already supporting that side in every way he could short of cobelligerency, aware of his country’s interests, yet looking for a pretext to justify full-fledged military involvement. For whom was the justification needed? After the British had staved off devaluation for years, why had Prime Minister Harold Wilson wanted the world to recognize his country’s actions as necessary? Why did he need anything more than his own government’s assessment of what Britain required? Why the need for others to recognize that logic?

These are just a few examples of the justifying state, a sovereign state justifying its international behavior. Why do states explain themselves, and to whom do they justify their behavior? What values do they emphasize? And what are the implications of such behavior for our understanding of international politics?

The Expectation That States Should Not Justify Themselves

Anarchy means not having to explain yourself. Or it should. Sovereignty means not having to say you’re sorry. Or it should.

The conventional understanding of international politics generates an expectation that there should be no justification of foreign policy. In the traditional vision of international politics, that of interacting independent states in an anarchic realm, states are autonomous, sovereign, and self-reliant. They fend for themselves; no one else assures their survival, meets their needs, or enforces their rights. International politics is about power,
not rights and obligations. States assess their power relative to others’ power. Might alone makes right.

In such a setting, states neither apologize for their behavior nor explain it. Power and interest explain the behavior of states. Self-interest is the sole justification. Unlike interpersonal relations and domestic society, international relations should have no role for justification. Sovereign states should not explain themselves, justify their behavior, or make excuses.

For what would be the point of justifying state behavior in a world guided solely by self-interest? The only justification states could provide for their behavior would be self-interest, and others would already presume that motive. No other rationale would be credible. In short, explaining oneself and one’s actions should not be an element of international politics.

Yet history is replete with examples of states justifying their behavior to one another, especially in the modern world. All types of states provide rationales, and they do so in a variety of issue domains. The United States and the Soviet Union justified virtually all their military interventions during the Cold War, usually by explaining that a local client or faction had invited them in. Major economic steps, such as changing exchange rates or altering the rules for cross-border flows, are usually accompanied by justifications. Small states justify their actions, and so do great powers. They justify military as well as economic measures. Allies explain themselves to one another, and so do rivals and antagonists.

I argue that the existence of justification reveals important insights about the nature of international politics. That states justify their actions does not imply the existence of a cooperative world and the absence of conflict. Rather, it explains much about how nations manage the processes of international conflict and cooperation—both at home and abroad. This paper argues that, at the very least, justification in international politics demonstrates that states recognize the centrality of domestic politics for foreign policy. It also highlights the incompleteness of realist theory. Most broadly, justification points to the existence of an international society with common global values.

Justification for Domestic Mobilization

Justifications are directed at audiences, and one such focus is internal. Mobilizational justification matters when governments need to mobilize their people. In fact, governments often provide reasons to make their actions acceptable or understandable to ordinary citizens. Bothering to explain implies recognition that people will either tolerate state actions or deem them unacceptable as a function of the reasons provided for them.
States justify their foreign policies to their own citizens when those policies require popular support—when society and economy must be mobilized but when the people would not automatically back their government without acceptable grounds. Governments that must mobilize citizen armies rather than mercenaries, for example, depend on internal support. Representative governments especially rely on popular backing for their foreign policies. "What a President says and thinks is not worth five cents unless he has the people and Congress behind him," President Lyndon Johnson told Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban in the days before the Six-Day War of June 1967. "Without the Congress I'm just a six-foot-four Texan. With the Congress I'm President of United States."

Classic liberals criticized monarchies and advocated representative governments precisely because they could not envision democracies ever waging needless war, since their citizens would not agree to risk their lives or empty their pockets without cause. However willing they might be to give even their lives for beliefs they hold dear, they might not be animated to sacrifice in order to maintain the balance of power. People can be mobilized to defend their homelands, to fight for country and a way of life. But mobilization on behalf of expansive aggression or intervention in foreign lands is not self-evidently defensive and requires special justification. At one meeting during the Gulf crisis in 1990, Senator William Cohen (Republican, Maine) cited Mark Twain's observation that people would fight to defend their homes but might have a different view towards their boardinghouse. And, he argued, the American people saw Kuwait and Saudi Arabia as "the equivalent of the boardinghouse."

U.S. entry into war requires justification, and American presidents have typically found the best case for war to be when others attacked U.S. citizens, property, or the nation itself. In 1812, President Madison sent Congress a message that, although not requesting a declaration of war, made the case that Britain was already waging an undeclared war against the United States: "We behold . . . on the side of Great Britain a state of war against the United States, and on the side of the United States a state of peace toward Great Britain."

President James Polk went even further by attempting to instigate an incident that would have the United States responding to provocation rather than initiating the hostilities that he wanted to occur. Polk came to power in 1845 as a dedicated expansionist whose vision for the country included acquiring Texas, Oregon, and California. When diplomatic attempts failed to get Mexico either to accept the U.S. claim that the Rio Grande marked the border of Texas or to sell New Mexico and California to the United States, Polk ordered troops into the disputed area. He instructed them to march to the Rio Grande, but not to initiate hostilities.
They were, however, to treat any Mexican incursion into the disputed territory as an act of war.

In Washington, President Polk and his Cabinet anxiously awaited news from the Southwest, hoping that Mexico would commit an act of "aggression." Tired of waiting, the Cabinet prepared a war message anyway, one justifying war on the grounds that Mexico refused to negotiate and had failed to fulfill promises to U.S. claimants. Still, Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft thought it would be preferable had a hostile act occurred on the border. And in fact, the arrival of U.S. forces at the Rio Grande had already brought Mexican reinforcements, generated a sequence of actions and reactions, and a skirmish. General Zachary Taylor notified Washington, "Hostilities may now be considered as commenced." His note, which took two weeks to arrive, finally got to Polk right after the cabinet decided on Saturday to send a war message to Congress by Tuesday. Polk, given the stronger justification he wanted, wrote his message to Congress in strong terms: "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil. . . . War exists, and notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico." He did not even ask Congress for a declaration of war, but simply for recognition that Mexico's actions meant that a state of war already existed between the two governments.

President Polk had searched for a peaceful resolution consistent with U.S. territorial demands of Mexico, but he was prepared to go to war. Even then, he preferred to await an incident that would make the United States the responder rather than the initiator. When Mexico obliged by reacting to U.S. provocations, Polk had his incident, and Congress responded predictably, approving the war message overwhelmingly and swiftly.

Almost a century later, FDR faced different circumstances that delayed U.S. entry into World War II. In the 1930s, FDR wanted to oppose Nazi Germany's expansion in Europe but confronted a Congress dominated by isolationists intent on keeping the United States out of any European war and prepared to keep the president from even assisting those trying to deter German aggression. He struggled against the constraints that Congress and public opinion imposed, and he constantly qualified his commitments to European leaders with references to the constraints under which he labored. Even as he moved the nation toward rearmament and the support of one side in the European conflict, he believed that the nation's actual entry into war would require the justification that it had been attacked first. Ironically, Hitler understood this and decided not to oblige FDR, ordering his navy not to fire on U.S. ships in the Atlantic. Only the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Germany's subse-
quent declaration of war on the United States made possible full-fledged U.S. entry into the European war.  

The United States has often intervened overseas for a variety of economic, strategic, and ideological reasons, but short of an attack on U.S. soil or U.S. troops, the justification that has resonated most strongly at home has been an attack on U.S. citizens. A common justification for overseas intervention that has great domestic salience, therefore, is the need to save American lives. Ronald Reagan, for example, explained the U.S. intervention in Grenada and the toppling of its regime as necessary to save the lives of American medical students on the island.

Sometimes, however, the government has had to search for a justification that the American people would find sufficiently credible to generate the domestic support needed. George Bush tested a series of rationales for sending troops to the Persian Gulf in the wake of the Iraqi absorption of Kuwait. The president emphasized oil, the protection of Saudi Arabia, Iraq’s being on the verge of deploying nuclear weapons, Saddam Hussein’s taking Americans and other foreigners in Iraq hostage, the brutality of Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, and the importance of demonstrating that naked aggression would not go unpunished. The president “kept shifting his emphasis among various justifications for the U.S. military deployment in the Gulf, as if he were market-testing ads for a new deodorant.”

That representative governments might lie or mislead their populations in order to secure support for an otherwise insupportable policy has led some to emphasize the role of an elected legislature and a free press as checks on executive power. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black held that “Paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell.”

Governments whose audience is solely domestic can base their justification on narrow, parochial values. They can mobilize on such grounds as nationalism, racism, ethnic solidarity, or religion—on the basis of values that are not universal and, especially, not shared with the nation being opposed. It is a form of justification that can exist in worlds in which domestic societies matter but in which no international society (or only a limited one) exists.

Justification intended for domestic consumption affirms, contrary to the conventional realist wisdom, the centrality of domestic politics for international politics. That view is built on the presumption that states are capable of acting in an interstate arena devoid of domestic constraints. It posits security against outside attack as the key reason for the existence of the state (raison d’état), holds that states act in self-interest, and presumes their ability to mobilize support and resources. Yet a state’s need
to justify behavior implies the existence of domestic constraints on foreign policy. The need to justify means that states cannot just do whatever they want and then argue simply that they acted in the interests of the country. This limitation is especially strong now. The growth in the number of states with representative governments and of literate and knowledgeable citizenries, together with the role of modern communications, translates into a growing need for states to justify their foreign policies in order to obtain domestic support.

**Justification As Pretext**

Justification does not always address an internal audience. Even when the most totalitarian of regimes have had no domestic reason to do so, they have justified their foreign policies to external ears. Unlike rationales intended for domestic consumption, however, justification to foreigners is not inconsonant with the conventional realist view of a conflict-ridden interstate system populated with autonomous self-interested states. States wage war for a variety of reasons, from self-defense to self-aggrandizement. Nevertheless, states still rationalize their decisions to each other, sometimes creating elaborate ruses before the fact in order to go to war in the first place. They need pretexts to fight even when they believe war is in their interest. Justification is then simply a facet of their cynical, self-serving behavior.

**Inhibiting Justification: Signaling Limited Aims**

Explaining the need for justification in a way consistent with standard (realist) views of international politics requires arguing that states explain themselves to others in order to get away with aggression. That is indeed one reason states explain themselves: Justification in these cases is intended to make aggressive actions appear reasonable and limited in the hope of preventing the emergence of a countervailing coalition intended to contain the aggressor's future expansion or force it to give up its gains.

Hitler, for example, provided reasons for each predatory step Germany took in the 1930s; he wanted each move to appear reasonable, limited, and certain to be his last. Such measures had the intended effect of delaying the consolidation of a balancing coalition. Astonishingly, Nazi Germany was trying to justify its aggression as late as September 1939 by claiming that its attack on Poland was a response to border violations.

During the Cold War, the superpowers justified their interventions, when they could, by arguing that they had been invited in. The Soviet Union, for example, used this excuse to explain its intervention in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.
Iraq’s explanation of its conquest of Kuwait exemplifies the use of limited-aims justification to divide other states and minimize the adverse consequences that aggression might otherwise generate. Iraq knew it could conquer Kuwait and take control of its oil fields easily only if others, especially the United States, refrained from entering the fray. But the Iraqis also knew that U.S. involvement was almost certain if its aggression looked like a first move toward taking control of much of the world’s oil supplies—if the invasion suggested, for example, that Saudi Arabia was next on a hit list. Iraq accurately saw its ability to get away with its aggression as depending on its successfully signaling that it had limited ambitions and so dissuading others from a military reaction. So Iraq justified its behavior by arguing that Kuwait had always been considered part of Iraqi territory and was, in fact, its nineteenth province. Making the attack on Kuwait appear the forcible resolution of a long-standing territorial dispute was intended to ease others’ fears about subsequent Iraqi behavior. The rationalization did not have to placate all concerned nations, only enough of them to prevent the emergence of a viable countercoalition. This kind of divide-and-conquer strategy is predicated upon the ability of aggressors to generate sufficient uncertainty about their future intentions to prevent the formation of a countercoalition.

Nations justify their behavior by appealing to others in terms that are understandable, if not always acceptable, to their audience. The more values shared among justifier and relevant third parties, the more important the need to justify a norm-breaking action. Thucydides relates that Sparta, having chosen war with Athens, spent “the period before the outbreak of war . . . in sending embassies to Athens with various complaints, so that there should be a good pretext for making war if the Athenians paid no attention to them.”

This eminently realist explanation for the justifying state reveals some important aspects of international politics. Revisionist actions by states do not automatically generate countervailing coalitions, which often arise because of their members’ expectations about the revisionist’s future behavior (its intentions) rather than its past actions. Not only do states not automatically balance adverse shifts in the balance of power, they do not always create balancing coalitions in response to actual aggression. Balancing requires not just revisionist behavior that brings change to the balance of power, but depends critically on threat perception and the expectation of future aggression.

Pretexts are therefore useful even in a realist world, because states not only assess one another’s power and look at one another’s actions, but evaluate intentions and draw inferences about other states’ types and their prospective behavior. Pretexts then play the role of signaling limited aims and ambitions. They minimize the import of aggression. They make
states’ actions appear to be responses to their environment rather than autonomously driven and chosen.

In this way, justification adds an interesting wrinkle to arguments in psychology about attribution and the actor/observer disjuncture. Experiments show that people see themselves as having less choice than others. They attribute others’ actions to their attributes, choices, preferences, and predispositions, but their own actions to the pressures of external forces. Pretexts are a social device by which actors, aware of others’ likely attributions, signal that they are in fact reacting to others rather than making independent choices.

Justification as pretext implies that the meaning of actions are not self-evident, but contingent and open to interpretation. States evaluate discrete actions as part of a pattern and remain as concerned about future consequences as immediate ones. Justification plays a role in contextualizing one state’s behavior for others. Justifications may be accurate or they may be ruses, and they may or may not succeed, but there is no question that they play a role in international politics.

**Defanging Justification: Justifying to Others’ Citizens**

Justifications as signals of limited ambition can be directed at the citizens of other countries as well as their governing elites. Justification can be useful in affecting the responses of other countries that are constrained by their domestic societies.

A state can signal limited aims in order to make it difficult for other states to mobilize in response when state-society relations in those other states require rationalization for such mobilizations. Even if Saddam Hussein, as an autocrat, did not require a domestic political cover to attack Kuwait, convincingly justifying his actions might have made it more difficult for other countries to mount an opposition. Calling the invasion a response to a long-standing territorial dispute might have made it harder for the democratic great powers to mobilize their populations to expel him from Kuwait. The citizen-audience for justification in such cases is not one’s own population but those of relevant others.

Justifying to other countries’ citizens need not be solely to prevent unwanted reaction but may also be intended to elicit sympathy. Even when states have good reasons for their actions, they may concoct justifications that get them greater, and more certain, popular sympathy from other countries. The 1967 Israeli attack on Egypt came in response to Egyptian actions that included the closure of an international waterway, an adequate *casus belli* in international law. But since U.S. President Lyndon Johnson had personally impressed upon Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban that Israel should “not be the one to bear the responsibility for any
outbreak of war," 22 Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol had delayed the attack, "using time as currency to secure ultimate political support." 23 When Israel did attack on June 5, the first two cables to Washington said that fighting had been initiated by Egyptian forces that had struck Israel. When that story was quickly challenged, the Israelis amended the rationalization and claimed that Egypt had been on the verge of attacking. Israeli officials, who later acknowledged that they had not expected an Egyptian attack at all, feared that even an acceptable casus belli under international law would not be enough to secure support. And indeed, President Johnson's first question when informed of the fighting was, "How did it start? Who fired first?" 24

Justification aimed at others' citizens implies the existence of values that transcend state boundaries. Explanations of foreign policies intended to affect the way in which they are viewed and the nature of the responses to them must be done in terms of common values. Such appeals must be framed in encompassing terms, not exclusionary and narrow ones. Because the justification is nothing less than a claim that one's actions are just and appropriate, securing the understanding and sympathy of other nations' citizens requires that the justification be cast in terms they accept and according to values they share. 25

The existence of justification and its implications about engaged citizenries and common international values does not assure cooperation and can be consistent with realism. It may indeed be that states must appeal to their own populations and can try appealing to others on the basis of mutual values. Nevertheless, as some of the above discussion implies, states can justify their behavior quite cynically in order to undertake the kind of autonomous and conflictual behavior that realism implies. Realism still describes state interests and choices, but ones whose implementation may require justification. In other ways, world politics remains unchanged.

In important ways, however, an understanding of the uses and roles of justification does in fact change our understanding of international politics. In certain circumstances, justification implies the importance of domestic politics, the existence of shared values, and the contingency of balancing responses to aggression.

**Justification and International Society**

There is an additional, critical reason for the justifying state, one that must be conjoined with those adduced above: the rise of an international society that tolerates justifiable defections. The growth and changing nature of justification in the past half century both illuminate the development of a community of countries in which the reasons for state actions are as im-
portant as actual behavior in determining how other states respond. This emergence of an international society is an important phenomenon, one that makes international politics more like domestic society.

One clear implication of explaining oneself to others is that there must be generalized norm-based expectations for behavior. Justifications and rationalizations represent attempts to explain deviations from others’ expectations—from assumed norms. It suggests that the justifying actor recognizes others’ expectations and preferences as regards its behavior and realizes that violating them may have adverse consequences that rationalization can mitigate.

States justify in order to get other nations to acquiesce in, if not to support, their actions. Providing a rationale involves explaining behavior in such language and invoking values that others understand and even accept. Obtaining others’ understanding can mean avoiding opprobrium or worse; gaining acceptance can even mean securing support. When Great Britain devalued the pound in 1967, the British government worried that important European nations would simply devalue their currencies in turn and negate the consequences of the British devaluation. The British had experienced such reactions before and wanted to make certain that others found the devaluation justified by circumstance rather than an attempt to gain an advantage, because the latter would more likely be countered.

States also justify their behavior in order to avoid punishment for deviating from expected patterns of behavior. Here, international politics resembles civil society. Whether a particular killing is deemed murder or justifiable homicide depends on circumstance and the nature of the justification provided. Societies establish judicial procedures for ascertaining, on a case-by-case basis, whether deviations from code are justified or punishable. When the circumstances are deemed exigent, a nominal offense may be accepted as excusable or even appropriate. Civil societies recognize that some individual departures from customary and expected behavior do not violate norms. They do not fear that leaving the deed unpunished will invite further miscreant behavior by either the same person or others. There is no sense that the failure to punish will create a new calculus that will embolden anyone to flout the rules in dissimilar situations. The social fabric does not unravel as long as behaviors can be distinguished from one another and only justified defections from social norms are left unpunished. Even as simple and straightforward a rule as “thou shalt not kill” can be violated under certain circumstances. Societies consist not only of rules, but of rules for violating rules and procedures for adjudicating individual violations on their merits.

Something similar is at work in international relations. States acting in violation of others’ expectations justify their actions in the hope of avoid-
ing punishment. There exists, as discussed below, something akin to an international society with norms of appropriate state conduct.28

Prisoners' Dilemma and Justified Defection

By presenting the argument in terms of values understandable to the target audience, the justifier intends to generate a response that is less conflictual and hostile than would occur absent the justification. Imagine a system of self-interested actors interacting in a repeated prisoners' dilemma. At each point in each bilateral relationship, each player has a dominant strategy of defecting. But every actor in every dyadic interaction is better off at every point if both cooperate. In such a system, cooperation can be maintained by everyone's commitment to a grim-trigger strategy: Every actor will defect against any actor who has defected against anyone. One defection unravels such a cooperative world, and cooperation is sustained by the threat that such defection will bring a punishing counterdefection by the victimized state. There is also linkage in such worlds, for others punish the opportunistic defector, approximating what happens in domestic societies. The victims of crime do not themselves punish criminals; not even their immediate families do so.29 Rather, members of the civic society who typically know neither criminal nor victim punish.

The grim-trigger strategy is a problematic way to sustain cooperation. A single defection unravels everything. Yet the incentives for defection vary, and without some mechanism for distinguishing between cases of situationally induced defection and those caused by wanton greed, cooperation will dissolve at the first defection. The actual payoffs in real world repeated prisoners' dilemmas change—leaving actors to confront situations that magnify their fear and greed and so create exceedingly great pressures for defection. It is important to recognize that defection in the prisoners' dilemma can be explained either by the fear of being taken advantage of (and receiving the worst payoff when the other defects in the face of cooperation) or by the desire for the gains to be made through defecting when others cooperate. Defection can rest on either greed or fear, and there is no way to separate those sentiments and identify the motivation simply by observing defection in the prisoners' dilemma.

Yet social cooperation requires distinguishing between a wanton rule-breaking and a situationally exigent and temporary departure from accepted norms. The former involves actors who do not see themselves as bound by the rules and who cheat opportunistically if they find it worthwhile—if, that is, they deem the odds of punishment sufficiently slight or the severity of retribution sufficiently inconsequential that they expect a net benefit. Situationally exigent defections, on the other hand, involve
actors who accept the rules, are prepared to enforce them for others, and recognize them as binding upon themselves. Exceptional circumstances, however, make their continued adherence suddenly costly. An ability to apprise others of the changed situation and gain their acquiescence for departure is desirable, because by taking into account exigent circumstances, it sustains the system of rules that all want maintained in the longer term.

Sustaining international cooperation, therefore, requires some mechanism for distinguishing between justified and unjustified defection. Indeed, the absence of such a mechanism can prevent the consummation of international agreements when farsighted states, recognizing the potential need for defection at some future time, eschew international agreements in the present. If the international world approximated civil society, states would be assured that their agreement to cooperate would not bring punishment should circumstances require their temporary departures from expected behavior. Thus, a world that tolerates justifiable defection makes possible higher levels of cooperation by ensuring that not every defection unravels systemic cooperation.

Exculpatory Justification: International Society and Sanctioned Departures

Indeed, the realm of international relations has increasingly come to resemble civil society. States reach cooperative agreements that stipulate what exigent circumstances would make defection acceptable, and they establish procedures for adjudicating culpability.

This evolution has been particularly dramatic in the international economic arena during the twentieth century, as illustrated by the marked contrast between the pre- and post-World War II eras. During the Great Depression, nations defected from the economic order by raising tariffs and devaluing their currencies. A vicious circle of defections set off the downward spiral of the world economy, as the system of international exchange and finance collapsed in the wake of beggar-thy-neighbor policies. The U.S. depression spread throughout the world. Both criticisms of U.S. policy and analytic arguments about the necessity of hegemons not adopting others’ policies in such dire circumstances implicitly recognize the failure of tit-for-tat in sustaining cooperation in such cases and commend an alternative in which a great economic power tolerates others’ cheating for its own and everyone else’s good.

The construction of the post-World War II world included plans to revive international trade and capital flows. International agreements struck to govern both recognized that dire circumstances might arise. Individual states would confront balance of payments and trade crises and
want desperately to alleviate them. No state could be expected to live by the rules in all circumstances. Moreover, the system would collapse if punishment followed every deviation. Hence, these agreements specified conditions that would constitute exceptions to typically expected compliance. They also established procedures by which states could obtain approval for their defections.

The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), for example, delineates the conditions under which states can defect from trade agreements and impose trade restrictions without retaliation. GATT rules prohibit states from imposing unilateral quotas, but provide an exception when imports threaten “market disruption.” It also outlines procedures by which disputes involving defections can be adjudicated. States have a forum in which to complain about others’ practices and seek permission, as it were, for imposing countervailing measures.

Similarly, in the immediate postwar period, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) established rules for acceptable changes in exchange rates and for the imposition of exchange controls. Its Articles of Agreement includes specific language allowing exchange rates to be changed if the IMF agreed that a country’s balance of payments was in “fundamental disequilibrium.” Countries experiencing balance-of-payments crises could impose controls as well as devalue their currencies. Indeed, states could get prior private international agreement allowing them to depart from the normally expected and enforced rules.

Modern international agreements are facilitated and sustained by escape clauses that stipulate justifiable and excusable defections from them. States concerned about future contingencies can therefore sign agreements in the knowledge that situations requiring their defection will be recognized and tolerated without retribution. In this way, fears of the future do not derail agreements in states’ current interests. Moreover, the occurrence of exigent circumstances leads not to an unraveling of the agreement but to the accepted and excused defections of a few.

Justification and Apologies

The phenomenon of the justifying state is only one indication of the rise of an international society in which states do not just explain their behavior, but even apologize for it. In a striking historical development, governments have apologized to one another and to one another’s people. Some fifty years after World War II, for example, Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama personally apologized to Korea for his nation’s occupation of the region in the first half of the twentieth century. But this initial apology was seen as personal, not official, and as insufficiently contrite. Hence, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung’s later
state visit to Japan was preceded by extensive intergovernmental negotiations in order to generate a public apology that would facilitate intersocietal reconciliation; it had to be sufficiently remorseful to satisfy Koreans and not too excessive for Japanese sentiment.35

Retrospective apologies for past behavior exemplify an altered international environment in which domestic populations play important roles in constraining and shaping state policy. Apologies reflect the continuing centrality of peoples’ feelings toward other countries and the importance of easing their anger and hurt in order to move contemporaneous relationships forward. This is a striking development in the evolution of international politics.

Justification: Types and Implications
States, despite sovereignty, justify their behavior. The examples provided above illustrate the types of justification, which vary by purpose, audience, and values emphasized. In turn, the different forms of justification differ in their implications for our understanding of international politics. Tables 12.1 and 12.2 lay out the essential points.

Audience: Justification and Domestic Politics
The need for some governments to mobilize their citizens underlies two reasons that governments provide rationales for their actions. The audience for a justifying state may be its own society, the society of other countries, or other governments. When the audience is a society, the point of justification is mobilization, either to facilitate or to impede the mobilization of social forces. When aimed at a state’s own society, the intent is to secure the domestic support needed for the state’s foreign policy. When aimed at another country’s people, justification is meant either to mobilize foreign support or to prevent a foreign government from mounting an opposition. Justification may make it more difficult, for example, for other states to punish miscreant behavior. At the extreme, a state can hope to generate sufficient internal pressure on foreign governments to obtain the support of those governments that would otherwise have opposed it.

That states justify their actions underlines the importance of domestic politics for international relations. Were governments certain of domestic support for their policies, justification would be irrelevant. States engaged in revising the status quo can most easily mobilize internal support if they cast their actions as reactions to the provocations of others. Yet states engaged in the balancing responses described by realist analyses of international politics also find the need to offer reasons for mobilizing—citizens do not sacrifice for the balance of power alone. State-society relations are essential elements of the strategic interaction of countries.
TABLE 12.1 Justification: Types, Audiences, Values, and Purposes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Values appealed to</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobilizational</td>
<td>Own society</td>
<td>Typically exclusive (can be inclusive)</td>
<td>Obtain domestic support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhibiting</td>
<td>Other governments</td>
<td>Typically exclusive (can be inclusive)</td>
<td>Preclude opposition by signaling limited aims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defanging</td>
<td>Other societies</td>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>Prevent other countries from mobilizing opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exculpatory</td>
<td>Mostly other governments, but also their societies</td>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>Obtain others’ acquiescence and approval for norm-breaking behavior or defections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values

Justification entails an appeal to values and to circumstances. It is an attempt to get others to understand the logic of a state’s actions, to see them as appropriate and necessary given some set of basic values, the situation, and the choices available. The presumption is that others can recognize and accept the bases of the state’s behavior.

When the support of the target audience is at stake, the values appealed to are inclusive, ones shared by justifier and audience. When such appeals are made internationally, there must be some common values held across national boundaries. Probably the most fundamental value is the right to self-defense against unprovoked attack.

Justification also relies on exclusive values, ones not shared. Domestic appeals to mobilize one’s own society against foreigners typically do rely not on universal values but on such parochial ones as religion, ethnicity, race, and nationality. Not surprisingly, therefore, the most virulent forms of racism and nationalism are evident during wartime and comparable extremes of domestic mobilization.36

Reliance on exclusive values for international as opposed to internal justification is intended to demonstrate the self-limiting nature of one’s expansive interests. States signal to one another, for example, that they want to expand only in order to absorb coreligionists or members of their people’s own race and ethnicity. Here, the emphasis on self-limiting rather than universal values is essential to prevent the development of a balancing countercoalition. In contrast to expansion in the service of sup-
TABLE 12.2 Justification: Types and Implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Implications for our understanding of international politics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobilizational</td>
<td>Domestic support not presumable, must be acceptable to populace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhibiting</td>
<td>Opposition to revisionist behavior not automatic; balancing not automatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defanging</td>
<td>Balancing not automatic, depends on others’ ability to mobilize support internally; common values exist that can be appealed to across countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exculpatory</td>
<td>International society exists; cooperation does not unravel from every defection; retaliation and punishment a function of explanation and circumstance and not just a response to any action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

posedly universal values, which scares all others in the system who do not share those values, expansion in the service of parochial values is inherently limited and does not threaten everyone else.

**International Society**

Sustained international cooperation depends not only on the existence of mutually beneficial exchanges and agreements, but on the expectation that states will not be adversely affected in the future by the commitments they make today. Like individuals and firms, states cannot draft contracts that include every foreseeable contingency. But they can delineate the foreseeable circumstances of the need to punish hostile transgressions and the need to excuse exigent circumstantial departures. States want to be free to violate their commitments in order to punish miscreants, but they also want to be free to violate their commitments out of necessity without retribution. Both elements are essential to the creation and maintenance of an international order. Without such agreement on acceptable and unacceptable defection (or some mechanism for ascertaining them), many agreements would not be viable. Without such agreement, all accords would be destroyed by the first appearance of difficulty.

The creation of terms of acceptable defection and of institutions for corporate sanctioning (in both its senses, punishment and acquiescence) generates an important international equivalent to domestic society. Domestic social compacts are not just about authoritative enforcement in one entity, they are also about mutually acceptable rules for behavior that excuse cheating and entail mechanisms to determine when and what
punishment is appropriate. This development constitutes an important element in the emergence of an international society.

**Conclusion**

Justification in international politics tells us that the international state system is not composed of autonomous independent entities simply pursuing their interests without needing to obtain domestic support or to explain and justify their actions to foreigners. Justification is an important element in ascertaining the existence of an international society with intersubjectively recognized and accepted guidelines for behavior, in which departures will be punished unless justified. It implies a world in which sustainable cooperation exists. Such cooperation can weather the vicissitudes of circumstance. It also implies the existence of shared values (even if used merely instrumentally) and their effacement (whether justified, excused, or not) in order to pursue contrarian activity.

Justification is of growing importance in a world of more nations with representative governments whose citizens’ preferences can allow or scuttle the pursuit of foreign policies. Foreign policy is increasingly a product of domestic politics, and so justification targeted at both one’s own and other societies becomes part and parcel of foreign policy.

Justification has also been fundamental to the emergence and maintenance of global interdependence. The very international agreements and institutions that have both made interdependence possible and have dealt with its fallout depend critically on provisions that provide escapes from commitments in exigent circumstances. The possibility of justifiable defection has made possible the gradual construction of global order with rule-governed relations.

Justification confirms the occurrence of important changes in the nature of international politics. The views of citizens matter in the formulation of many countries’ foreign policies, and so governments justify their behavior to their own citizens and those of other countries’. Intersocietal justification presumes the existence of common values to which states appeal. Finally, the growth of international agreements depends upon socially sanctioned departures from expectations. In short, the international system increasingly resembles a society in which normative behavioral expectations exist and in which states justify their actions to avoid sanction for their exigent defections.

**Notes**

1. My thanks to Elizabeth Matthews and Joel Scanlon for research assistance, and to Amy Davis and Cherie Steele for comments and suggestions.


4. For a compilation of the evidence for Roosevelt’s desire to be forced into war, see Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 347, n. 38.


6. Justification is also problematic for rational-choice explanations of social and domestic life. If behavior were solely guided by self-interested calculation, then justification would be unnecessary, since the only justification, self-interest, would already be recognized as such by others.


14. Some stories of Iraqi brutality turned out to be fabricated products of a Kuwaiti public relations campaign intended to assure public support for military action to oust Iraq from Kuwait.


17. For the role of these factors in international politics, see my *Blood and Power: Culture and International Politics*, in progress.
18. Alternatively, such particularistic justifications can be consistent with international societies that are really regional subsystems. In ancient Greece, the Peloponnesian League, the Delian League, and what is sometimes called the Hellenic League included somewhat overlapping memberships and were all justified on the grounds of making common cause against the Persians. The initial justification for one league did not, therefore, pose a threat to the others. Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

19. Iraq also listed a set of old grievances against Kuwait and generated new ones. First, it argued, Kuwait was helping keep world oil prices low and thus hurting Iraq. This explanation did not, however, act to separate Kuwait from Saudi Arabia, since the Iraqis could make a similar claim against the Saudis. Second, Iraq argued that Kuwait was siphoning off Iraqi oil by pumping from a pool lying under their common border. Third, Iraq claimed two islands in the Persian Gulf held by Kuwait. Finally, Iraq resurrected its claim that Britain had inappropriately created Kuwait as an independent nation from historically Iraqi territory. On the Gulf crisis, see Freedman and Efrain, *The Gulf Conflict: 1990–1991*.


21. The prospect that not all aggression is comparably threatening implies that not all aggression should generate the same response. See Kristen Williams, “Nationalist Conflicts: Threats to International Peace?” (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 1998). Moreover, the threats (perceived and real) themselves vary. See Stein, *Blood and Power*.


25. Propaganda efforts intended to obtain outside intervention in war or civil war, for example, have this character.

26. This paper does not distinguish between justifications and excuses. In moral theory, justified actions are warranted, and therefore can be performed by others, should not be interfered with, and should be assisted. Excuses may relieve an actor of blame, but do not make the action appropriate and warranted in the above sense. The argument developed in this paper is that excused defections are indeed deemed warranted, could be performed by others, and are assisted in the sense that they are excused. But unlike justifications, excuses recognize a norm that is being broken for exigent circumstances. For the classic paper, see John L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956): 1–30. The ethical distinction is often difficult to make in the law; see Kent Greenawalt, “The Perplexing Borders of Justification and Excuse,” *Columbia Law Review* 84 (1984): 1897–1927.


29. Though families have punished in some societies.

30. For this problem, monitoring and transparency are inadequate to generate cooperation.

31. An undefined condition usually interpreted to mean unusual surges in imports that threaten the survival of an entire industry.

32. Another undefined condition meaning that a country has experienced a permanent shift in the international demand for its products.

33. Terms that allow exit and renegotiation can also facilitate agreement in an uncertain environment. But excused cheating is preferable in that the occurrence of exigent circumstances is less likely to unravel agreements.

34. In a similar vein, the Soviet government apologized in 1989 for a host of earlier actions; this apology was offered, however, by a new regime distancing itself from past regimes.


36. This pattern has been repeatedly evident in U.S. history. For one example, see John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Parthenon Books, 1986).

37. Stein, “Governments, Economic Interdependence, and International Cooperation.”