Why did the United States get involved in Vietnam, and why did it stay in the war long after U.S. leaders knew we could not win? Why did the Soviets invade Afghanistan when they well knew that others’ attempts to conquer that country had repeatedly failed? Why did Hitler attack the Soviet Union despite the fact that no outside power since the 15th century had succeeded in subduing Russia?

History and contemporary international relations are replete with examples of the risks, costs and difficulties of attacking and invading other states and intervening militarily in the politics and conflicts of others. This course will explore the question of why nations go to war when survival is not at stake. There will be many case studies, but the focus will be on theories that help us understand this puzzling behavior on the part of states and those who determine or influence national policy. We will be examining the impact of individual leaders, their personal characteristics, beliefs, perceptions and misperceptions, as well as decision-making groups, government bureaucracies, national values and belief systems, and the nature and functioning of various kinds of political systems. A role-playing exercise at the end of the semester will give students an opportunity to simulate national decision-makers confronting the question of whether or not to use force.

The course requirements will be two exams (short answer and essay questions), two short papers and participation in class. No textbook will be used. All readings will be available on Oncourse and possibly in the form of a course packet.

Key words: foreign policy, international relations, war, force, intervention, leaders, decision-making, simulation