

# From Small Wars to Armageddon: Explaining Interstate War Duration and Severity

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Wars between countries are typically small and short—for interstate wars since 1815, median duration is less than five months, while death totals usually number in the thousands. The suffering imposed in such conflicts is far from trivial, but it pales in comparison to the tremendous destruction of the relatively few wars that endure for years at a cost of hundreds of thousands or even millions of lives. What distinguishes the few cataclysmic wars from the many that, while undeniably terrible in their consequences, are far less damaging? In this book, I argue that the primary source of variation in the duration and severity of interstate wars can be found in the logic of why they begin. Specifically, of the multiple pathways that can produce violent conflict, only one—credible commitment problems arising from shifting power—reliably produces the most severe wars. Other causal mechanisms by contrast produce more limited wars, as they push combatants towards a political conclusion. This document summarizes the motivation, significance, argument, and main findings of the manuscript.

## Why Another Book about War?

People have been studying war for millennia, but most political studies of conflict have been concerned primarily with the decision to start fighting rather than the eventual decision to end it. Thus, there are surprisingly few studies that explain the variation in the destructiveness of war. Traditional international relations scholars, although focused on explaining major wars, effectively ignore more minor conflicts, leaving them unable to explain what makes the most severe conflicts unusual.<sup>2</sup> Quantitative IR scholars do analyze this variation, but they focus more on the determinants of quick military victory or defeat rather than factors that render leaders more or less open to

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<sup>2</sup>Thus, for example, Waltz (1979) explains major war as a consequence of uncertainty and miscalculations, whereas Copeland (2000) argues that major wars are preventive conflicts driven by fear of decline. Neither considers minor wars, and thus neither has the evidence to demonstrate that the mechanism that he advances is not present in all wars.

a political settlement.<sup>3</sup> As most wars end short of the final collapse of one side, however, we need to know why leaders sometimes accept a negotiated bargain and at other times prefer to continue to fight. While recent game-theoretic work has generated possible answers to this central question, no consensus exists, and the existing answers typically have not been subjected to rigorous empirical tests.<sup>4</sup>

A few notable exceptions do stand out. Goemans (2000) combines a rationalist baseline model with a theory of leadership incentives to argue that leaders of losing partial democracies will be particularly resistant to settlement. He tests this argument both statistically and with in-depth case studies of World War I participants. Reiter (2009) similarly builds on a rationalist framework to consider the reasons why leaders might raise or lower their war aims in the course of a conflict, stressing the significance of credible commitment problems in producing higher war aims. He tests his claims on a wider range of cases than Goemans, finding that credible commitment fears are frequently associated with an increase in war aims. Both these studies significantly advance our understanding of the conduct and termination of interstate wars, yet they too have their limitations. Most importantly, although both are obviously closely related, neither directly addresses the central question of this study: Goemans is interested in testing a specific argument about how domestic politics may lengthen war, while Reiter focuses on the determinants of changes in war aims within war. Moreover, Reiter ultimately dismisses Goemans's central argument and findings, raising doubts (which I echo in my study) about the ability of an explanation grounded in domestic politics to account for the worst wars. At the same time, Reiter's focus on major wars combined with the absence of statistical analysis raises doubts about whether his argument can account for variation in the destructiveness of war. In short, because he does not look at wars that end quickly, he cannot convincingly explain why the leaders of the bad wars that he examines differ from the norm in their willingness to settle.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as I argue below, he lacks a convincing explanation for what I refer to as dispositional commitment problems, in which it is fears about the opponent's

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<sup>3</sup>See especially Bennett & Stam III (1996).

<sup>4</sup>For an example of the lack of consensus, see Fearon (2004) and Powell (2006), who argue that long wars are inconsistent with overoptimism, and Smith & Stam (2004), who disagree.

<sup>5</sup>Reiter does have one case study of a more minor conflict, the Russo-Finnish War, where he reaches conclusions similar to those advanced here. See also Iklé (1991) for a classic study of war termination that includes one case study of a minor war, oddly again the Russo-Finnish conflict.

character, not shifts in capabilities, that prevent settlement.

Thus, while we have elements of an answer, the existing literature does not provide a satisfactory explanation for what separates the many relatively short wars from the few that are far longer and more destructive. Yet this question is obviously important. History is replete with wars whose early stages looked similar, but whose ultimate duration and destructiveness varied dramatically. Thus, for example, Austria's war with Prussia in 1866 stayed limited, despite fears that it might expand into a general European conflict, while its war with Serbia in 1914 became total. Similarly, Stalin passed on an opportunity to turn a border conflict with China in 1929 into an ideological crusade while the Ayatollah Khomeini responded to Saddam Hussein's border incursion by launching an eight-year campaign to spread his revolution to Iraq. Understanding the sources of such variation will help us to understand why some conflicts prove so much more destructive than the rest.

To be convincing, the explanation for variation in war duration and severity that I offer in this book must do several things. First, it must provide an explanation both for smaller and for longer, more destructive conflicts. The absence of explanations for minor wars is a substantial limitation of most existing work. Second, this explanation must be tested over a range of cases that includes both smaller and larger wars. Such tests ultimately must combine large-N statistical analysis, which allows for extensive comparative analysis but must rely on less precise measures and cannot test some hypotheses, with close case analysis of a set of sufficiently varied wars from history.

While this book is aimed foremost at an academic audience, I have taken pains to ensure that it is accessible to a wide range of potential readers, including upper-level undergraduates or those whose interest is more in policy issues or in history than in political science debates.<sup>6</sup> In presenting the theory, I aim to avoid jargon and to ground arguments in illustrative historical examples. In the discussion of my quantitative analysis, I highlight the central assumptions, key findings, and strengths and (where pertinent) limits of my results in a way that makes them accessible to readers who lack a background in statistical methodology. Similarly, the case studies assume only a general familiarity with the broad outlines of international history over the past two centuries. Finally, the conclusion draws out broader implications of my findings for a range of significant policy issues,

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<sup>6</sup>These efforts have been facilitated by my experience teaching an undergraduate lecture on the causes of war and peace in which I cover much of the material discussed in the book.

including the management of civil wars, the implications of nuclear proliferation, and the future of the US-China relationship.

## The Argument

In developing an explanation for variation in war duration and severity, I build upon the growing literature on the bargaining model of war. This model treats war as a puzzle: given that fighting is costly and that opponents have the opportunity to adjudicate their differences peacefully, why are they sometimes unable to resolve their differences without resorting to force (Fearon 1995)? The bargaining literature has identified a number of plausible causal mechanisms that can answer this question. I focus on the three most significant such mechanisms: overoptimism associated with private information, principal-agent problems (i.e. leader misconduct) in domestic politics, and commitment problems associated with an inability to trust an opponent's intentions. Each mechanism provides a coherent explanation for the decision to use force, but I demonstrate that only the third provides a viable explanation for the most extended and costly wars. Moreover, I provide an explanation for a certain type of commitment problem—what I refer to as dispositional commitment problems—that thus far had been undertheorized in the literature, and that is associated with a complete refusal by one side to negotiate and hence with what are in effect wars to the death. The remainder of this document summarizes my argument and empirical tests in greater detail while providing an overview of the different chapters in the manuscript.

The first chapter introduces the book, presenting the central question, highlighting its significance and the limits of available answers, and summarizing my theoretical framework and main findings. The second chapter presents the theoretical explanations for limited wars. I first discuss the informational mechanism, in which leaders choose to fight because they are overoptimistic about the likely outcome of war. Building on existing work, I argue that surprises on the battlefield or at the negotiating table force leaders to revise their expectations and hence lower their demands, setting the stage for negotiated settlement. Because leaders typically expect not only to win but to win quickly, initial events must disappoint at least one side, and hence, I argue, settlement will typically occur in a matter of weeks or months rather than years. The chapter then turns to the

principal-agent mechanism, which unites a variety of domestic-political explanations for war. This mechanism relies on the leader's ability to mislead the public about the future course of the war, and hence is also internally limited, because the public will learn over time that the leader has been lying and, even in quite autocratic settings, ultimately forces an end to the war. I distinguish between two types of principal-agent conflicts—diversionary wars and what I refer to as “policy wars,” in which leaders use war to pursue ends other than their own hold on power that the public would not support if fully informed—and argue that diversionary wars are typically short, while policy wars can be longer, but only if fought at low intensity. Thus, this chapter ends without an explanation for long, high-intensity wars.

The third chapter provides that explanation. I argue that particularly severe wars occur when leaders fundamentally mistrust their opponents' intentions. The standard explanation for this mistrust in the bargaining model literature is shifting power: declining powers may fear that their opponents will demand painful concessions from them in the future and hence decide that war is safer than waiting, if war holds out the prospect of preventing the decline from occurring. This decision for preventive war is, I argue, rare, but when it occurs it often leads to wars that are both long and deadly. The second half of the chapter considers a different form of commitment problem, in which mistrust arises not from shifting power but from a belief that the opponent by nature prefers war to peace, as for example with the Allied distrust of Hitler in World War II. This belief, which logically implies that war can end only with the complete remaking of the opposing system of government (taking negotiated settlement entirely off the table), lacks an explanation in the bargaining model of war. I argue that it arises when the target of a preventive war misunderstands the rationale that led their opponent to attack, typically because they do not intend to do what the opponent fears. Failing to understand the situational fears that drove the decision to fight, the target of the preventive war concludes that its opponent is dispositionally aggressive, and hence that fundamental regime change is a prerequisite for a viable peace. It is this dynamic, I argue, that produced some of the most destructive interstate wars in history.

The remainder of the book tests the central arguments both quantitatively and qualitatively. Chapter four first summarizes the methodological approach of the study, explaining the need for

both quantitative and qualitative analysis, and then turns to quantitative tests. I first introduce the data, which combines information from standard datasets with data collected specifically for this project. I then turn to tests of hypotheses related to the duration and severity of war, as well as ancillary hypotheses about the nature of war termination. For the main argument, I find that pre-war shifts in relative capabilities, which I argue proxy for anticipated future shifts, are associated with significantly longer and also significantly deadlier wars, consistent with the argument that commitment problems produce wars that are particularly difficult to end. This measure is also associated with an increased probability that war ends through military conquest rather than settlement. I find support for the other two mechanisms, too. More democratic losers, whose leaders face greater constraints on their ability to set policy, tend to settle more quickly. Similarly, increased war intensity, which I argue proxies for the speed of information revelation, is associated with quicker settlement, although the effect is concentrated in the subset of relatively short wars, exactly as we would expect if wars driven by the informational mechanism tend to be short.

Subsequent chapters discuss the historical cases. Chapter five covers the understudied Paraguayan War of the 19th century, in which Paraguay—a buffer state between regional powers Brazil and Argentina—launched an aggressive war against both of its neighbors that ultimately killed over half the Paraguayan population and that has puzzled historians ever since. I find that this aggressive and risky policy followed from a fear of decline created by its neighbors' economic and military rise and by their incipient alliance. The case is particularly useful for the analysis of dispositional commitment problems, as Brazil, but not Argentina, refused to consider negotiation with Paraguay; consistent with my predictions, the historical record demonstrates that Paraguayan fears of Argentina were well founded, but that those of Brazil were, if not unfounded, in fact inaccurate.

Chapters six and seven discuss World War II, the deadliest conflict in history. I begin with Hitler's motivation for starting the war, which arose from his ideologically-based belief, as expressed in *Mein Kampf* and in private discussions throughout his time in office, that Germany faced irreversible decline absent the acquisition of most of Eastern Europe. Moreover, by the late 1930's, Germany's rearmament and Stalin's purge of the Red Army officer corps created a situation in

which Germany would never have a better opportunity to address Hitler's fears. Consistent with the commitment problem argument, Hitler had expansive war aims that he pursued through risky strategies and refused to abandon even in the face of military defeats. Chapter seven analyzes the Allied refusal to negotiate with Germany once the war was underway, focusing on the British decision not to negotiate after the fall of France in the summer of 1940 and the Allied decision to demand Germany's unconditional surrender. Again, the dispositional commitment problem provides a compelling explanation, as the Allies, who obviously did not share Hitler's ideological theories of international politics, did not understand the threat that he believed Germany to face and certainly did not intend to do what he expected. Given this disconnect, they concluded that Hitler sought to conquer the world, and hence that only a thoroughgoing reform of the German social and political system after Germany's unconditional surrender would produce sustained peace.

Chapter eight presents shorter case studies of additional major wars, including the Crimean War, the Pacific War in World War II, and the Iran-Iraq War. These cases, although presented in substantially less detail than the Paraguayan and European World War II cases, provide an additional opportunity to see the commitment problem arguments in action. In the Crimean case, the British had strong preventive motivations for war that arose out of the fear that Russia was on the verge of acquiring Constantinople; their aggressive war aims and reluctance to settle followed from this fear. The Russians, however, understood the British concerns and thus remained open to negotiation, exactly as I would predict. In the Pacific War, the Japanese concluded that significant expansion was necessary to forestall decline; the Americans, who failed to understand this fear, responded to the Pearl Harbor attack with the conclusion that negotiation with Japan was futile. Finally, in the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein attempted to take advantage of a temporary window of opportunity associated with the Iranian Revolution; the Iranian response was to launch an ideological crusade designed to remake the Iraqi state and thereby eliminate the dispositional threat that they associated with Saddam. All three cases thus provide further support for the arguments about preventive war and dispositional commitment problems advanced in chapter 3.

Chapters nine and ten turn to case studies of more limited conflicts. Chapter nine covers two wars that I argue are best explained by the informational mechanism. The first is the Persian Gulf

War of 1991, in which Saddam Hussein underestimated his opponents' resolve and capabilities; consistent with expectations, once the resort to force made these errors evident, the Iraqis reduced their demands substantially, permitting a negotiated peace. The second case is the little-known Anglo-Iranian War of 1856-1857, in which Iranian underestimation of the importance that Britain placed on the independence of the city of Herat led to a conflict that ended in only a few months, as the Iranians backed down as soon as British resolve became clear.

Chapter ten presents similar case studies of two conflicts that I argue are best explained by the principal-agent mechanism. The Falklands War constitutes the prototypical diversionary war, although a closer analysis demonstrates that the Argentine junta likely would not have invaded the islands had they not underestimated British willingness to fight to recover them. This case demonstrates quite clearly the significant limitations leaders face in their ability to continue such wars when fighting goes poorly. The second case is the Franco-Turkish War in Southern Anatolia immediately after World War I. In this war, which provides an example of the "policy wars" I discuss in chapter 2, a French colonial faction pursued policies that would not have been supported by the French public more generally, but because they could limit the flow of information back to Paris they were able to sustain the war for some time, only however because the fighting was not particularly intense. Chapters nine and ten thus both illustrate the way in which the logic of the informational and principal-agent mechanisms leads inexorably to a political settlement well before the war becomes as destructive as the conflicts examined in the previous three chapters.

Finally, chapter eleven concludes. I first recapitulate the central question, main argument, and primary findings of the study. The remainder of the chapter highlights implications of my findings for a number of significant topics, including the study of civil wars, policies for encouraging the political settlement of ongoing conflicts, and the possibility for conflict in the future, both between the United States and China and as a result of the continued spread of nuclear weapons.



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