Introduction

In the summer of 1866, Prussia and Austria went to war to determine who would be dominant in Germany; one battle, on July 3 at Könniggrätz, was sufficient to resolve the issue, and the war ended less than two months after it started. In the summer of 1914, Austria again went to war, this time to establish dominance over the South Slavs; this conflict lasted more than four years, with deaths in the millions rather than the thousands. The contrast between these two conflicts—wars that appeared quite similar at the outset but differed dramatically in their eventual duration and destructiveness—is hardly unique. To cite another example, in 1929, the Soviet Union invaded China, which was riven by internal conflict, to secure its hold on the Russian Manchurian Railway; this conflict ended quickly and at low cost. In contrast, Saddam Hussein’s effort in 1980 to take advantage of Iran’s temporary weakness following the revolution in 1979 to advance territorial claims along the Iran-Iraq border dragged his country into what turned out to be an eight-year war in which hundreds of thousands of people died.

With the benefit of hindsight, the relative severity and length of these wars may seem intuitive, yet for contemporaries there were good reasons to expect quite different outcomes. The outcome that occurred in 1914—expansion of a localized dispute into a general European war—was possible in 1866: Bismarck’s policies were heavily influenced by the possibility that France or Russia might intervene on the side of Austria.\(^1\) On the other hand, the conventional view of World War I has been that the initial participants expected the war to end quickly and decisively; from this perspective, the trench warfare that developed was a complete surprise.\(^2\) In the Sino-Soviet case, Stalin apparently considered using the conflict over the Manchurian railway as a pretext to launch a broader war with the aim of replacing the Nationalist government in China with a communist one; Iran in fact (unsuccessfully) used the conflict with Iraq as an opportunity to spread the revolution.\(^3\) Thus wars that appear quite similar at the outset
ultimately diverged dramatically, with some ending quickly and at low cost while others dragged on for year after painful year.

Indeed, the extremely destructive conflicts like World War I or the Iran-Iraq War are remarkably unrepresentative, as figure I.1 demonstrates. This figure differentiates between long and short wars, where long wars last over a year, and between low- and high-intensity conflicts, where intensity references the rate at which deaths accumulate. Most wars are short, lasting less than a year; indeed, median war duration is about four months. Very few are both long and intense, as was the case in the World Wars and the Iran-Iraq conflict. Yet these few wars are responsible for a disproportionate amount of human suffering: the 10 percent of wars that are both long and intense are responsible for 86 percent of all deaths in battle over the past two centuries.

What separates the few unusually destructive wars from the many that are limited, either in duration or in intensity? The primary goal of this book is to answer this question.

**The Argument Writ Short**

My answer to this question relies on the observation that there are multiple logics of war. In the jargon of academia, war is characterized by equifinality—there exist multiple independent causal pathways that can lead to war. We can think of all of these paths as containing individual causes of war, with each cause being a reason why the adversaries in the conflict would rather fight than accept peace on the opponent’s terms.
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Each of these causes thus is individually sufficient to bring about fighting, although multiple causes may be at work in any real-world case. When we move from the question of why war begins to examining variation in its destructiveness, however, not all causes of war are equal. Some are relatively easily dealt with, as leaders or publics come to realize that the war that they expected is not the one that they are going to get. Others push leaders toward increased war aims and a higher tolerance for the costs of war, with the result that it may take many battles and much suffering before settlement can be achieved. In rare cases, one side in a war takes settlement entirely off the table, guaranteeing that war will continue until one side subjugates the other militarily.

Thus I argue that unraveling the logic of different causes of war allows us to explain the variation in war duration and severity. In developing this argument, I work from the bargaining model of war, which I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. In particular, I examine three causal mechanisms that are believed to be particularly important in bringing about violent conflict: divergent expectations and mutual overoptimism, principal-agent problems in domestic politics, and commitment problems that generate an inability to trust one’s opponent to live up to a political agreement. None of these causes are new—it would be highly disconcerting if in the more than two millennia that war has been studied major causes had eluded our attention. That said, our understanding of the implications of these causes of war for war’s duration and deadliness remains imperfect. As it turns out, each is associated with a unique path from peace to war and back to peace, with the result that the wars that they bring about look dramatically different.

In particular, I argue, and find, that commitment problems produce unusually long and deadly wars. Most explanations for commitment problems focus on shifting power: a country that anticipates relative decline in the future must fear that its opponent’s rise will eventually allow that opponent to impose painful political concessions, as once the opponent’s rise is complete the now-weaker declining power will be more reluctant to fight. If the rising opponent is unable to allay those fears—a difficult proposition given the incentive for even hostile rising powers to claim that their intentions are benign while the rise is occurring—then war to prevent the rise from occurring may be an attractive option. The problem, however, is that if fear of decline is a cause of war, then war will continue until that fear is addressed, which will typically require either that the decline be prevented or that it come into being. Short of preventing the decline from occurring, a militarily undefeated declining power will typically prefer to continue to fight rather than settle. Moreover, preventing a decline from occurring will typically require an unusually large victory, meaning that the declining power’s aims in these wars will
be unusually high. As a result, these wars can endure for a long time, even when fighting is quite intense.

Moreover, I identify a different type of commitment problem, which I refer to as the “dispositional commitment problem,” in which the belief that no agreement is credible exists not because of shifting power (a situational commitment problem) but because leaders conclude that their opponent simply is not deterred by the costs of war. An opponent that is by nature aggressive presents tremendous problems for war termination, however, as she can be expected to break any agreement as soon as it is convenient for her to do so. Thus leaders who sincerely believe that war is a consequence of an opponent’s character will resist settlement on any terms that do not permit the replacement of the opposing leadership and, frequently, the remaking of the opposing society. This dynamic is thus associated with demands for unconditional surrender, which, although rare, are a feature of some of the worst wars in history.

I argue that the dispositional commitment problem—and hence a categorical refusal to negotiate with the existing regime—arises in a consistent fashion across cases. First, leaders who fear relative decline launch a conventional preventive war out of a belief that the target of their attack would otherwise attack them or impose unpalatable concessions in the future. In these cases, the belief in the opponent’s hostile intentions, while often understandable, turns out to be inaccurate. Attacked by an aggressive opponent who claims that her aggression is justified by intentions that do not in fact exist, the target of the attack concludes that the stated justifications are simply rhetorical cover for a preference for naked aggression. Thus what starts as an aggressive war—given the initiator’s preventive motivations—becomes a war to the death.

That commitment problems, either situational or dispositional, have the potential to produce unusually destructive wars is the central argument in this book. That said, a convincing account of the variation in interstate war destructiveness must also explain why noncommitment problem conflicts tend to be limited. I thus examine two additional mechanisms, which I argue are the most salient alternative logics of war. Both provide theoretically coherent explanations for costly conflict, but I argue that the wars that they produce inevitably will be limited in either duration or intensity. In the informational mechanism, fighting arises because the two sides have differing expectations about how the war will go: for example, because they disagree about relative strength or resolve, and hence are unwilling to agree to each other’s demands. Once war begins, however, these expectations are put to the test, and at least one side inevitably must be disappointed by events on the battlefield or in the diplomatic arena. This disappointment forces leaders to revise expectations, and hence demands, bringing them closer until settlement is
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reached. Fighting thus inevitably leads toward settlement, more quickly when fighting is intense.

Wars driven by domestic politics—in which leaders resort to war to pursue policies that the public would not have chosen in their stead—are similarly limited. The most prominent example of this sort of behavior is diversionary war, in which leaders attempt to use external conflict to distract attention from internal problems and thus improve the leader’s hold on power, but this logic also covers situations in which leaders pursue policies that represent a definite minority interest in society more generally. While leaders can start wars that are not in the general interest, their ability to continue them depends on whether they can hold onto power and avoid being forced into a settlement that would, after all, be in the interests of the leader’s constituents. A leader’s ability to sustain this kind of war thus depends critically on her informational advantage over her citizens: if she can claim convincingly that continued war is in the general interest, then fighting will be unlikely to end. As in the informational mechanism, however, the revelation of information as the war continues limits the degree to which the leader can plausibly claim that further fighting is in the general interest; beyond a certain point, orders to continue fighting will be ignored or overridden, or the leader will be replaced by someone more willing to negotiate. Once again, this process will happen more quickly when fighting is more salient, implying that wars driven by this mechanism can be either long or intense, but not both.

The Contributions of This Study, or Why Another Book About War?

Given the number of books that have been written about war, what can another one add to what we already know? I argue that this book makes a number of significant contributions to our understanding of war. Most important, it addresses a question for which the field does not yet have an established answer. Political scientists and historians have long been interested in determining the causes of big wars: the events of July 1914 or the Munich Crisis in 1938 have been minutely dissected and reinterpreted. They have shown by contrast less interest in relatively minor wars, given their more limited consequences. Yet by focusing primarily on the big wars, they have, ironically, limited their ability to determine what it is that makes those wars so destructive. Similarly, because it focuses more on the onset of war than its conduct or termination, existing work is poorly positioned to explain why it is that particularly deadly wars were so hard to resolve.
This point becomes clear if we think about how existing work would lead us to answer this question. Clausewitz notes that left to its devices war tends to the extreme, but he provides little insight into why some wars become more extreme than others. The Realist focus on systemic wars leads to a standard assumption that great power wars are unusually destructive, while non–great power wars are not. To a certain extent this observation is true, of course, simply because the great powers have tended to have larger populations and thus be able to inflict and suffer greater numbers of deaths. Yet not every major power war is particularly destructive: France and Austria fought a war in the nineteenth century that lasted less than three months and brought about “only” twenty thousand deaths, while the Soviet Union and Japan fought two border wars in 1938 and 1939 that have been all but forgotten by history.

More recently, a statistical literature has emerged that directly contrasts wars of differing duration and severity, but it has done so at the expense of compelling theory. Thus, for example, Bennett and Stam find that realist variables have the greatest influence over interstate war duration, while domestic political variables play a secondary, but still important, role. With respect to war size, Cederman builds on an earlier finding that deaths in war follow a power law distribution to argue that war size is essentially random. While empirically quite interesting, both these studies, and several others like them, do not address the central question of why leaders sometimes decide to settle wars and sometimes decide to continue fighting: for Bennett and Stam, the central question is how long it takes one side to triumph militarily, while for Cederman there seem to be no political decisions whatsoever.

Yet the question of why some wars end quickly while others drag on for years is extraordinarily important. A tremendous amount of work has been put into understanding how policymakers might prevent wars from occurring or promote peace in ongoing conflicts, yet without an understanding of why it is that wars differ in their duration and severity we are limited in our ability to develop definitive recommendations for how to promote peace most effectively. This point is especially important given the observation that war is characterized by equifinality: a strategy that works quite well for dealing with one cause of war may be ineffective or even counterproductive for another. Similarly, a better understanding of the implications of different causes of war for war duration and severity may allow for better advice when it comes to the use of force. If we know, for example, that a given logic of war tends to produce
conflicts that are particularly bloody, we may be more willing to seek peaceful alternatives when that logic drives us to consider going to war.

At a far more prosaic, if still important, level, this study helps to fill a gap in the scholarly study of war more generally. In the past fifteen years, theorists have developed an impressive structure of theoretical work based on the bargaining model of war; it is largely because of the attractiveness of this theoretical logic that this model has become so prevalent in the academic study of violent conflict. That said, empirical applications and tests of bargaining model predictions have not kept up with the theoretical advancements.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, we have not resolved disagreements among different theorists, as with the question—discussed in the next chapter—of how long a war driven by divergent expectations should last. Moreover, an increase in the range of studies that test key claims from the bargaining model empirically will generate greater confidence that the entire theoretical framework is useful. From this perspective, then, positive findings in this study can help to increase confidence in a whole range of findings that are similarly grounded in the bargaining model of war.

\textbf{Clarifying Terminology}

There is a significant potential for terminological confusion in this project, so it makes sense to define some of the key terms. With respect to theory, I discuss four different causal mechanisms, all of which bring together a number of related concepts. The situational commitment problem, which I also refer to as the preventive war mechanism, involves declining powers starting wars to forestall the undesirable implications of decline. The dispositional commitment problem, also referred to as the unconditional surrender mechanism, involves actors refusing to negotiate because they believe their opponent is by nature predisposed to aggression. In the informational mechanism, overoptimistic actors fight because of their divergent expectations about how the war will go. Finally, in the principal-agent mechanism, misbehaving leaders make use of their advantages in domestic politics to pursue wars that serve their interests rather than those of their constituents; this mechanism includes diversionary wars, but also other conflicts (which I refer to as “policy wars”) in which the leader pursues an interest other than improving her hold on power.

On the empirical side, I use the term \textit{destructiveness} to refer to all forms of suffering and devastation imposed by war. The most obvious indicator of destructiveness is total deaths (which I treat as synonymous to war severity), but I also examine war duration and the economic cost of fighting.\textsuperscript{16} The argument that certain mechanisms are logically limited
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focuses on both duration and intensity, where intense wars are characterized by frequent significant military clashes, or in other words by higher death totals per unit of time. This concept is thus distinct from war severity (deaths for the war as a whole): a war could be intense but not particularly severe, as for example in the Arab-Israeli Six Day War, if the period of fighting is relatively brief. Finally, I distinguish between limited and unlimited wars, where wars can be limited either because they are fought at a relatively low level of intensity (e.g. the Vietnam War) or because they are relatively short, while unlimited wars are both intense and long.

Chapter Outline

The remainder of this book consists of three broad sections: theoretical arguments about the determinants of war duration and severity, quantitative statistical tests of hypotheses drawn from those arguments, and case study tests of both those hypotheses and further inferences that are not amenable to statistical tests. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical argument, starting with a summary of the bargaining model of war and then advancing my explanations for both unlimited and limited wars. I begin with preventive wars driven by the situational commitment problem, explaining why these wars will tend to be difficult to resolve once they have begun. I then turn to the dispositional commitment problem, which leads to sincere demands for unconditional surrender. I first explain why this behavior is a logical consequence of the belief that one’s opponent is dispositionally aggressive—in short, that the opponent enjoys war—and then provide a novel explanation for this belief, grounded in the way that the targets of preventive war interpret their opponents’ attacks. The final section of this chapter examines the other two mechanisms, in each case explaining both the logic of the decision to fight and the reason why wars driven by the mechanism will be limited in duration, intensity, or both. In addition to advancing general predictions about whether wars driven by the different mechanisms will be limited, I also derive specific hypotheses for each mechanism that allow for more convincing empirical tests.

Chapter 2 presents the quantitative analysis. This chapter begins with a discussion of the appropriate research strategy for testing the hypotheses developed in chapter 1, focusing in particular on the decision to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis. I then introduce the dataset used in the quantitative analysis, which combines standard international relations data with information collected specifically for this project. The main section of this chapter presents the statistical tests. I
start by examining variation in war destructiveness, measured in three
different ways (duration, battle deaths, and total spending), and then
turn to more specific tests that examine the speed of settlement or con-
quest, the choice of military strategy, and the nature of war termination.
The most important finding is that larger prewar shifts in relative capa-
bilities, which I argue are proxies for anticipated future shifts, are associ-
ated with unusually destructive wars, in particular because these wars
are unusually difficult to settle. Other results suggest that noncommit-
ment problem wars will tend to be either intense or long, but not both.

The remaining chapters present my case studies. Chapter 3 examines
the understudied Paraguayan War of the nineteenth century, in which
Paraguay—a buffer state between regional powers Brazil and Argen-
tina—launched an aggressive war against both of its neighbors that
ultimately killed over half the Paraguayan population and that has puzz-
led historians ever since. I find that this aggressive and risky policy fol-
lowed from a fear of decline created by its neighbors’ economic and
military rise and by their incipient alliance. The case is particularly use-
ful 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.

The next chapter examines World War II in Europe. The first section
focuses on the sources of German expansion, which I argue arose from
the belief, grounded in Nazi ideology, that Germany faced irreversible
decline absent the acquisition of most of Eastern Europe. Moreover, by
the late 1930s, 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. The second half of the chapter 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 sum-
mer 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 Hit-
ler’s ideological theories of international politics, did not understand the
threat that he believed Germany faced and certainly did not intend to do
what he expected. Given this disconnect, they concluded that the Ger-
mans were fundamentally aggressive, and hence that only a thoroughgo-
ing reform of the German social and political system after Germany’s
unconditional surrender would produce sustained peace.
Chapter 5 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 situational and dispositional commitment problems.

Chapters 6 and 7 address the concern that a convincing explanation for large wars should also be able to explain small wars by examining four relatively small wars, which turn out to be driven by the informational and principal-agent mechanisms. Chapter 6 contains case studies of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the 1856–57 Anglo-Persian War, both of which match the expectations of the informational mechanism. In both cases, war occurred because the participants disagreed about relative strength or resolve, and in both cases the recognition of its errors forced the loser to make rapid political concessions that allowed for a quick negotiated settlement. Chapter 7 turns to two cases—the 1982 Falklands conflict and the 1919–21 Franco-Turkish War—that were driven by domestic politics. In each case, the domestic political constraints identified in the discussion of the principal-agent mechanism for war prevented the responsible national leaders from escalating the war as they might have wanted to do and ultimately forced a political settlement long before the war produced destruction on the level of the large wars discussed in chapters 3 through 5.

Finally, in the Conclusion, 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.