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Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Wars

War is, if not common, a persistent feature of international politics. Most wars between countries are, however, limited, lasting days, weeks, or months rather than years, and killing thousands rather than hundreds of thousands or millions. The few conflicts in which intense fighting persists for years, which I call unlimited wars, are thus responsible for a highly disproportionate amount of suffering. I argue that a good explanation for the most destructive conflicts should account both for why these wars did not end more quickly and for why other wars remained more limited. My argument is that unlimited wars are driven by a different mechanism—a different logic of war—from most limited conflicts. In particular, the commitment problem mechanism lacks an internal logic that guarantees that opponents in the war will reach a negotiated settlement after some period of fighting, whereas under the two most prominent alternate logics of war, which I refer to as the informational and principal-agent mechanisms, the revelation of information through fighting ultimately creates a situation in which a mutually agreeable settlement is reached.

In the discussion of the commitment problem mechanism, I distinguish between two types of commitment problems, which I refer to as situational and dispositional. Situational commitment problems are associated with shifting power: in a situational commitment problem, declining powers fear the implications of their decline and thus launch aggressive revisionist wars to prevent the decline from occurring. Given the centrality of preventing decline in this argument, I often refer to this explanation as the preventive war mechanism. The basic logic of this mechanism is quite well understood, although some of its implications are less well appreciated, and even well understood implications have not necessarily been subjected to rigorous empirical tests. Because
the mechanism is well understood, however, my theoretical discussion is relatively short.

The second—dispositional—type of commitment problem is less well understood, however, and thus merits closer analysis. In this case, leaders decide to fight not because of fear of relative decline but because of a sincere belief that they face an opponent who is by nature committed to aggression, and thus that a viable peace requires at a minimum the replacement of the opposing leadership and possibly a thoroughgoing reform of the opposing society. This belief logically implies that almost any political settlement is unacceptable, with the consequence that only the opponent’s unconditional surrender is an acceptable basis for war termination. While the commitment problem logic here is clear, the reason why people come to believe that their opponents are implacably aggressive is less obvious. I argue that these beliefs emerge when the targets of preventive wars misattribute the motivation for the initial attack. In these cases, one side initiates a war out of fear that impending decline will force unpalatable political concessions on it in the future. Their opponents, however, believe that the stated preventive motivation for war is merely rhetorical cover for a war of expansion, motivated not by the situation that confronts the declining power but by the character of the opposing leader, regime, or society. This belief is most likely when the target of the preventive war does not in fact intend to do what the declining power fears. It is this process that produces the refusal to negotiate that is a characteristic of some of the worst wars.

For both the informational and principal-agent mechanisms, the central dynamic keeping war limited concerns information. In informational conflicts, the two sides in the war disagree about the likely consequences of fighting. Events on the battlefield and at the bargaining table confront combatants with developments that contradict their expectations, forcing them to revise their expectations of victory and to accept political concessions that ultimately allow for settlement. In principal-agent conflicts, leaders must lie to their publics to maintain support for the war, but their ability to do so diminishes as others in government and the public more generally observe developments in the war that contradict the leader’s claims. The internal limitations in both these mechanisms imply that, while they may account for many of the wars that we observe, they will not be individually responsible for the long, high-intensity wars that produce a disproportionate amount of human suffering.

The chapter begins with a short summary of the bargaining model of war, from which the three mechanisms are drawn. I then turn to explanations for unlimited wars, starting with the situational commitment problem and preventive wars and then turning to the dispositional
commitment problem and unconditional surrender. This discussion identifies both general hypotheses about the destructiveness of these conflicts and more specific hypotheses that widen the range of possible empirical tests, ultimately allowing for greater confidence in the general argument. The final section examines the two mechanisms that are associated with more limited wars, focusing in particular on the informational dynamics that ultimately lead to settlement in each case.

The Bargaining Model of War

The arguments in this book are developed out of what has come to be the dominant framework used in the study of war in the international relations field, the bargaining model of war.¹ This model starts from a few central assumptions about the nature and purpose of war and derives the important implication that most of the time there should be political agreements that both sides in a dispute prefer to the costly gamble of war. From this perspective, a cause of war is something that prevents a settlement from being reached; theory has identified a range of such potential causes.

The core assumptions of the bargaining model are that war is political and that fighting is costly. Both of these assumptions are generally accepted. Thus, for example, Clausewitz started his magisterial study of war with the observation that “war is merely a continuation of policy by other means”; in other words, war is the attempt to gain through force what could not be acquired through diplomacy.² But if war is fought to divide a political stake, and if diplomacy could also divide that stake without imposing the costs of fighting, then even people who disagree vehemently about the appropriate division have a strong reason to resolve their dispute without resorting to war. This finding accords with the empirical observation that there are many more political disagreements in the world than there are wars. In contemporary politics, we have disagreements over territory (Israel and Syria or Bolivia and Chile, among many others), the pursuit of nuclear weapons (opposition to North Korea and Iran), economic or environmental policies (e.g., disputes about plan to dam rivers like the Nile or the Jordan), access to natural resources (e.g., disagreements over access to oil and other resources in the South China Sea), the treatment of ethnic minorities (e.g., ongoing tensions related to the treatment of ethnic Serbs, Albanians, Hungarians, and others in Eastern Europe), and many other issues, yet wars arising from these disputes are rare. The puzzle of war, then, is why leaders sometimes fail to agree on a division of the political stake and instead opt to resort to force, with the costs that that decision entails.

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Many logically coherent answers to this question exist. Leaders might choose war because they disagree about the likely result on the battlefield, because they doubt that an agreement today would be upheld in the future, because they simply cannot divide the issue at stake without destroying its value, because they do not suffer the costs of war personally and thus do not share their constituents’ preferences, because they are unusually acceptant of risk, because they (or their constituents) actually enjoy the experience of fighting, because they fail to coordinate on an efficient equilibrium settlement, or because the costs of maintaining a suitable deterrent are higher than the costs of war. That said, some of these explanations are empirically more important than others. The remainder of this section thus discusses these different logics, explaining why I choose to focus on the three that are central to my analysis while disregarding the others.

The three mechanisms on which I focus have been the subject of significant scholarly research. The idea that war may happen when leaders disagree about how the war is likely to go draws strength from Blainey’s finding that mutual overoptimism has been present in a tremendous number of wars through history; it is thus unsurprising that this explanation for war has received more attention than any other. Similarly, the idea that fears associated with decline may bring about war has a long history, traced back to Thucydides’ argument that the Spartans started the Peloponnesian War because they feared the rise of Athens. Arguments about a link between domestic politics and war likewise have a long history, drawing on Kant’s argument that war happens because leaders do not suffer its costs, and building on a range of cases in which diversionary motives or other domestic political processes are believed to have accounted for one side’s decision to fight. All of the mechanisms that are discussed in this project thus have been the subject of intensive prior inquiry, largely because scholars believe them to be quite important in the real world.

The remaining potential explanations do not meet this standard, and moreover for several there are significant obstacles to their identification in individual cases. Issue indivisibilities likely constitute the most controversial omission from this study. In practice, however, few issues are truly indivisible—even something like control over government can be divided through power-sharing—and even a dispute over truly indivisible issues can be resolved short of war if leaders have recourse to side payments. The stance that indivisible issues are not particularly important has met some criticism, but from an empirical perspective an approach grounded in indivisible issues faces the significant challenge that actors frequently claim that stakes are indivisible but subsequently proceed to divide them. Thus, for example, rebel groups such as the
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Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia or the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka long insisted on independence as an indivisible and nonnegotiable position only to backtrack to accepting autonomy once war turned against them. Given that people are ingenious enough to find ways of dividing even the most apparently indivisible of goods, in practice convincing demonstrations that indivisible issues prevent settlement are rare and typically arise not because a good is actually indivisible but because it comes to be seen as such. Relatively few examples of this process have been observed, however, and existing examples are drawn almost exclusively from internal conflicts. In a study of interstate wars, therefore, this mechanism can be safely discounted.

A number of other potential mechanisms exist, but all are ultimately problematic. Explanations grounded in a positive utility for the experience of fighting or risk-acceptant preferences both dramatically overpredict the frequency of war and are thus theoretically unconvincing. For example, if war occurred because people enjoyed fighting, we would expect war to be a constant feature of politics, at least wherever those who enjoy fighting are found. From a more social scientific perspective, scholars have typically found explanations for inefficient behavior such as war that are grounded directly in preferences—people fight because they enjoy fighting, or because they like risk—to be theoretically unsatisfying. At base, they explain away outcomes that we believe to be undesirable by claiming that the people involved actually enjoyed them, an unsatisfying and, for an empirical perspective, typically unconvincing approach. In this sort of case, it would be better if the preference were explained by a more general theory, as for example is done later in this chapter by demonstrating that the preventive logic of war provides a rationale to engage in more risk-acceptant behavior. Empirically, I am unaware of any cases in which scholars have made convincing arguments that a preference for war or a simple preference for risk led to war in the modern international system absent other, stronger explanations.

The remaining possibilities also have not been demonstrated to account for many wars empirically. The possibility that difficulties coordinating on an efficient equilibrium might lead to war, while theoretically coherent, relies on the existence of multiple equilibria, making it very difficult to sort out empirically; it is unclear why leaders would ever coordinate on an equilibrium that is nonobvious even for game theorists. Likewise, the argument that the cost of maintaining a deterrent might be high enough to justify going to war is unconvincing at least for the modern era given the extraordinarily high costs of war, especially of a war that would be sufficient to allow a country to abandon the need for significant spending on deterrence.
Chapter 1

EXPLANATIONS FOR UNLIMITED WARS

The central argument in this book is that the most destructive wars are driven by commitment problems. I start by discussing the best-known source of commitment problems, in which a declining power fears that its rising opponent will make intolerable demands in the future and launches a war to prevent the decline from occurring. After discussing the reasons why starting a war under these circumstances may be rational, I examine the ways in which such a war might end, highlighting in particular the absence of reasons why a negotiated settlement should necessarily become more likely over time. This argument, which implies that preventive wars driven by shifting power can be unlimited, has a number of testable implications for the destructiveness of war as well as the conduct of the war and the way in which it is ended.

The second half of this section then turns to a novel commitment problem logic that leads to a categorical refusal to negotiate with one’s opponent despite unusually high costs. I argue that this behavior arises when targets of preventive wars conclude that the initiator of the conflict is a war lover who will repeatedly attack absent a fundamental revision of its government or society. This inference occurs when the target of the preventive war does not in fact want to do what the initiator fears; given the inference, no negotiated settlement to which the initiator would ever agree is acceptable, leading to a sincere demand for unconditional surrender. Again, this argument identifies a number of testable implications about when unconditional surrender demands will arise.

Shifting Power and Preventive War

The idea that fear of decline might lead someone to launch a preventive war is certainly not new: Thucydides famously attributed the Peloponnesian War to “the growth of Athenian power, and the fear which this inspired in Sparta,” and just about every systemic war in the modern state system has been attributed to one side’s belief that time favored its opponents. The rise and decline of great powers lies at the core of the power transition theory of war and of related cyclic theories of international politics. There is thus precedent for believing that power transitions will tend to be associated with great power wars. More recently, work on the bargaining model of war has built on this logic, clarifying the reasons why war might be a rational response to decline.

Historical examples of the preventive motivation for war are easy to find. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 clearly fits with this preventive logic: convinced that “time is not on our side” and that the danger
“only grows worse with time,” the government could not afford to wait for definitive evidence of Iraqi duplicity that might come “in the form of a mushroom cloud.”\textsuperscript{15} Nor is this example unique in American history: one can point to preventive motivations in the American entry in World War II, and several leading military, political, and intellectual figures contemplated preventive war against either the Soviet Union or China after the war.\textsuperscript{16} Innumerable examples from other countries and other eras provide further evidence that preventive motives, while often not acted on, are frequently present.

To understand why war might arise out of shifting power, it helps to start from the basic bargaining model observation that even countries with diametrically opposed interests will prefer to resolve their disagreements politically rather than militarily: with the right settlement, both sides will prefer the political status quo to the costly gamble associated with war.\textsuperscript{17} If power is shifting, however, the knowledge that your opponent prefers the status quo to war today does not guarantee that she will hold the same preferences in the future. If over time one side is becoming more powerful relative to the other, then as time passes it likely will demand more as a condition for not going to war. Indeed, a significant literature has focused on the role of shifting power over time—largely as a consequence of differential economic growth—as a determinant of change within the international system.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, for example, once a unified, powerful Germany supplanted the muddle of small principalities that preceded it, German demands grew to encompass things in which they previously had shown no interest, such as African colonies (Germany’s “place in the sun”). This situation need not imply that war would inevitably happen in this scenario; indeed, it may well not. However, once the shift has occurred, the declining side will find that it is in its interest to acquiesce in response to demands that it initially would have rejected. Thus, to continue the example, the other European powers found it prudent not to directly oppose the German acquisition of colonies in Africa and elsewhere, with the result that Germany had assembled a significant empire by World War I. In other words, once the power shift has taken place, the declining power has a choice between unpalatable concessions and war on more difficult terms.

Given the concerns that relative decline generates, the rising power—which prefers to experience its rise unmolested—will often be trying to signal its peaceful intentions as clearly as possible, as for example China appears to be doing today. Yet precisely because the rising power wishes to be left alone until its rise is complete, even hostile rising powers will want to signal benign intentions; this possibility for duplicity means that the declining power may doubt the authenticity of the signal. Moreover,
in some cases rising powers may be unable or unwilling to signal peaceful intentions, even when an opponent’s fears are unjustified. Prior to the Paraguayan War, discussed in chapter 3, the Brazilians did not signal benign intentions toward Paraguay, apparently because they believed their lack of hostility to be self-evident. Prior to World War II, Germany’s opponents—in particular the Soviets—failed to successfully reassure Hitler in part because they did not share his view of the world and thus did not recognize the threat that he perceived. And more recently, Saddam Hussein apparently felt unable to signal the absence of a WMD program convincingly prior to the 2003 US invasion without simultaneously signaling weakness to Iran and thus inviting attack.

Thus leaders who anticipate relative decline must decide how to respond, often without knowing for sure what the rising power intends to do once stronger. In this context, there typically are no perfect policy options. If the declining power is confident that the rising power’s intentions are benign, or if the anticipated shift is relatively small, it typically will make sense simply to accept whatever limited concessions are associated with decline. Thus, for example, when initial expectations after World War II that Britain would be just as influential as the United States and the Soviet Union proved impossible to sustain, the British came to accept an apparently inexorable decline that saw the liquidation of the largest empire in history and increasing deference to the United States. In some cases, as with the construction of NATO in response to the rising Soviet threat after World War II, it may be possible to build an alliance strong enough to deter core demands even after a shift has occurred. An alliance strategy is risky, however: history is replete with shocking reversals in alliance structure, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact or the Sino-American rapprochement in the 1970s. Alternately, internal balancing—shifting production from domestic consumption to military power—might allow a declining power to keep pace for a time, but in a competitive environment there may be little room for additional military expansion, while excessive production can have significant economic costs.

From a formal perspective, a deal in which the rising power commits to an indefinite continuation of the status quo—assuming that each power prefers the current status quo to war today—in return for being left alone will be preferable on each side to the expected utility of going to war. The problem, however, is that this agreement is not credible. In effect, the declining power is making an immediate concession—re refraining from using force while it is relatively strong—in return for the rising power’s promise of future concessions—not taking advantage of its increased strength once its rise is complete. Having received what it wants from the agreement first, however, there is nothing to prevent the
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rising power from refusing to make its concessions in return; indeed, given the pressures of the international system, it may well be stupid for it not to. An intelligent leader of the declining power, however, must recognize these incentives and thus assume that no bargain of this sort with the rising power will actually work. In the end, then, declining leaders often expect diplomacy to yield the same outcome as simply permitting the rise to occur and accepting the consequent loss of influence.25

Given the limitations to diplomatic strategies, in at least some cases leaders will conclude that war is an attractive policy option. Specifically, a big enough victory in war potentially can resolve the declining power’s problem by preventing the power shift in the first place. The declining power can aim to acquire militarily strategic territory that would make an attack by even a stronger opponent extremely difficult, or it could acquire territory that is critical for the other side’s industry. Thus, for example, one solution that the French pursued in the aftermath of the First World War to overcome the problems associated with the superior German economy and larger German population—which implied that Germany would inevitably recover from its defeat—was to either annex or render independent the Rhineland, which was the territory through which any German attack would have to come and which furthermore was the center of German industry. From a purely military position, the size of the Entente’s victory and especially the dissolution of the German army after the signing of the armistice meant that they were in a position to impose such terms; however, opposition from their Allies forced the French to settle for the demilitarization of the Rhineland.26 Had they been successful, it would have been significantly harder for Hitler to break out of the Versailles straightjacket and turn Germany once again into the sort of country that could threaten all of Europe. In general, if the declining power believes that it still has a reasonable chance of achieving a victory large enough to permit it to impose these kinds of concessions on its opponent, then going to war will be a potentially attractive option. This belief that recourse to arms may forestall the anticipated decline constitutes the preventive motivation for war.

To summarize, declining powers have few good options when faced with a potentially antagonistic rising power. Because of international anarchy, diplomatic solutions are unreliable, while doing nothing invites eventual demands for concessions that the declining power either must accept or must oppose militarily from a position of relative weakness. In this context, forcibly imposing a significant defeat on one’s opponent holds out the potential to resolve the entire problem in one quick move. Thus while power shifts need not necessarily cause war, they provide a potent motivation for fighting.

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Chapter 1

**How Do You End a Preventive War?**

In those cases in which the declining power opts for war to prevent decline, however, they create a conflict that is unusually difficult to bring to an end. For war to end, it is necessary that the problem that led to fighting be resolved. Thus, in this case, for the two parties to agree to a settlement it must be the case that the motivation to fight a preventive war either disappears or diminishes to the extent that disincentives to fight trump the desire to prevent the decline from occurring. As I discuss below, there are ways in which the motivation for preventive war might diminish or disappear, but none are guaranteed to occur. Indeed, in most formal models of war, when shifting power brings about war, the participants end up fighting to a final military outcome in lieu of reaching a political settlement. 27

For the war to end, it must be the case that the power that anticipates decline either be unable to continue to fight or see fighting as no longer in its interest. In a basic formal model of bargaining within a commitment problem war, a round of fighting either renders one side in the conflict militarily victorious over the other or leaves the actors confronting the exact same situation as before, having simply suffered the costs of fighting. In this sort of model, if fighting was rational in the initial stage, it will remain rational in any subsequent stage (as the costs of fighting are sunk and should not influence prospective decisions), implying that commitment problem wars will only ever end when one side loses the ability to continue to fight.

In reality, of course, battles can change the relative situation of the participants without inflicting a decisive defeat on either side. The question is how much change would be necessary for settlement to be reasonable. Typically, addressing the sources of relative decline will require a major revision to the status quo, such as alienating productive, populous, or militarily strategic territory from an opponent’s control, replacing an existing government, or greatly weakening an enemy’s military. Thus, for example, the German fear of increasing Russian power prior to 1914 could be assuaged only through a dramatic revision of territorial control in Eastern Europe, as ultimately happened in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, in which the Russians ceded Finland, the Baltic States, Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine to German control or annexation. In the Crimean War, discussed in chapter 5, the British believed that preventing the Russians from gaining control over the Black Sea Straits, which would have uncorked the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean and thus threatened British overseas interests, required that Russia cede most of its territorial gains around the Black Sea from the previous hundred years.

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Such expansive war aims will be hard or impossible to achieve through a single battle. In 1914, the first major battle on the Eastern Front—the surprise German victory in the Battle of Tannenberg—did little to address the sources of Russian rise, which hinged on the potential power implicit in Russia’s population as well as military recovery from the significant defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. It was only after several years of persistent defeats that the Russians could be convinced to make the concessions that the Germans saw as necessary for peace. Absent such a victory, an end to the war on intermediate terms would simply have returned Germany to the strategic situation that had existed prior to fighting, when war was seen as preferable to peace.

This point should not imply that settlement is impossible. Large victories may address the concerns about decline that initially motivated the war, as the Eastern Front in World War I demonstrates. Alternately, a series of victories may put the rising power in a position to impose today the concessions that the declining power was fighting to prevent, or may render it impossible to achieve the victories necessary to prevent the rise from occurring. Once such a point is reached, there is nothing to be gained from further fighting, and the defeated declining power logically should be open to settlement. In the Paraguayan War, for example, Francisco Solano López demonstrated increased willingness to negotiate once repeated defeats demonstrated that Paraguay was not going to achieve the significant victories he had initially sought. A similar situation could logically arise if the feared shift occurs in the course of the war, as, for example, in a case in which the target of a preventive war demonstrates that it has acquired the nuclear arsenal that the war was designed to prevent it from getting. Another logical possibility is that if fighting destroys the value of the good over which participants are fighting, settlement may eventually become possible as the future concessions become relatively painless.

Any of these scenarios could potentially arise, and indeed in some cases may arise relatively quickly. It is also, of course, possible that one side in the conflict quickly achieves a decisive military victory, as with the American conquest of Iraq in 2003, which allowed the Americans as occupiers to address their concerns about the Iraqi pursuit of nuclear weapons. None, however, are necessary: if the military course of the war is such that the declining power fails to achieve the revisions necessary to prevent the decline from occurring and yet still believes those revisions to be possible, it is likely that they will wish to continue the war. Moreover, the expansive war aims that are typically required to prevent the feared decline imply that even fairly significant military victories may be insufficient to address the commitment problem concerns. At some point, of course, the participants will exhaust themselves—in the
limit, everyone will be dead—but well before this point is reached the war will have graduated from the limited to the large.

It is important that I be explicit about one aspect of this argument. I am not claiming that preventive wars are necessarily unusually destructive—cases like the conventional phase of the 2003 Iraq War provide obvious counterexamples to such a hypothesis. Instead, my argument is that there is nothing in the logic of this mechanism that prevents these wars from being so destructive. Figure 1.1 illustrates this argument graphically: in an interstate context, commitment problem wars will be fought intensely, but may not be long if one side is able to achieve a quick and decisive victory. By itself, therefore, this argument implies only that the commitment problem mechanism provides a logically coherent explanation for unusually destructive wars. The stronger argument that unusually destructive wars will tend to be driven by the commitment problem mechanism thus is incomplete without the argument, which I advance in the final section of this chapter, that alternate logics of war are necessarily limited. In this sense, the logic behind the core argument that commitment problem wars will tend to be unusually destructive is as yet incomplete; I nonetheless present that argument here while acknowledging the need for further discussion of other mechanisms.

Hypothesis 1: Preventive wars will frequently be unusually destructive.

In addition to this central prediction, a closer examination of the logic of preventive wars uncovers a number of additional hypotheses; while the most important predictions in this book concern the destructiveness of

![Figure 1.1 Commitment problem wars and war duration and intensity](image-url)
war, support for these ancillary hypotheses should increase our confidence in the explanation for particularly destructive wars by demonstrating that the preventive war mechanism is operating in the manner that theory predicts. Thus one relatively straightforward implication is that in preventive wars the declining power will frequently have unusually large war aims. 32 Addressing the preventive motivation, as noted above, will typically require substantial modifications to the status quo that address the source of the feared rise; absent such success, the problems that led to war in the first place will not be resolved. This requirement is a reason why such wars will tend to be rare, but it also provides a rationale for relatively large war aims, as with the German desire in 1914 to make major territorial gains at Russia’s expense. The contrast between American war aims in the Persian Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq is also informative. In the former case, as discussed in chapter 6, the informational mechanism accounted for fighting, and the United States, although committed to limiting the threat Iraq posed to its region, restricted its war aims by refraining from deep drives into Iraq or direct attempts to topple Saddam. In 2003, however, the fears associated with the belief that Iraq was nearing acquisition of nuclear weapons could be addressed only through occupation and regime change, hence the coalition’s willingness to pursue goals that had been seen as too costly or risky twelve years previously.

Hypothesis 1a: In conflicts driven by the preventive war mechanism, the declining power’s war aims will tend to be unusually large.

These large aims, however, are often beyond what the declining power would expect to achieve in a typical war. Thus, for example, in the Paraguayan War case discussed below, a fear of future decline led Francisco Solano López to launch a highly aggressive war against both Brazil and Argentina, the great powers of South America; although he had some reasons for optimism, such a war would not typically be seen as a good gamble for a buffer state like Paraguay. Leaders thus will frequently need to resort to unusually risky war plans to have a reasonable chance of achieving such goals. In the Paraguayan War, these risks manifested as deep incursions into hostile territory, where elite forces were at risk of being cut off and forced to capitulate, as well as a risky diplomatic strategy of provoking war with Argentina in the hope that several disaffected Argentine provinces would rally to Paraguay’s side. Similarly, the conventional interpretation of German strategy in World War I highlights the riskiness of the Schlieffen Plan, in which the Germans left the eastern frontier weakly defended while striving to knock France out of the war in the first six weeks; the subsequent shift in 1917 to unrestricted
submarine warfare was also recognized to involve great risks for Germany.33

Hypothesis 1b: In conflicts driven by the preventive war mechanism, the declining power will tend to adopt unusually risky strategies.

All the previous hypotheses in turn imply that conflicts driven by the preventive war mechanism will tend to end in military conquest rather than a negotiated settlement. Most obviously, resistance to voluntary war termination—negotiated settlement—makes involuntary war termination—conquest—more likely. The recourse to risky strategies amplifies this point, as the risky strategies that the declining power is willing to adopt may produce decisive military breakthroughs or catastrophic defeats. Relatedly, these arguments imply that the increase in the destructiveness of preventive wars will be primarily a consequence of the difficulty participants face identifying a mutually agreeable settlement rather than anything about the speed with which one side conquers the other militarily; indeed, if anything, these wars should manifest faster conquest.

Hypothesis 1c: Conflicts driven by the preventive war mechanism will be unusually likely to end through military conquest as opposed to settlement.

Hypothesis 1d: Preventive wars will take an unusually long time to reach settlement, but will if anything be associated with quicker military conquest.

Before moving on, I need to briefly distinguish among several different ways in which shifting power might be associated with war, only some of which are likely to produce these sorts of high-cost, high-risk conflicts. The most obvious scenario is one in which one country is consistently rising in power relative to another, as with the rise of China relative to the United States today. Alternately, one country’s sudden decrease in relative capabilities may create a temporary window of opportunity for an opponent, as with purges after the Iranian Revolution that weakened Iran relative to Iraq. A third possibility covers situations in which control over a particular good—most frequently strategically located territory—could generate a discontinuous shift in relative capabilities. The Crimean War provides a pertinent example: the British feared that Russian acquisition of Constantinople would dramatically shift the regional distribution of power by allowing Russia to exclude enemies from the Black Sea and to project power into the Mediterranean. All of these situations produce incentives to engage in the sorts of preventive war described here.
By contrast, two other scenarios in which anticipated power shifts may influence policy do not produce the dynamics that I describe here. Preemptive wars, in which one side begins a war to take advantage of first-strike advantages because it expects its opponent to attack in a matter of days, logically involve shifting power—the first-strike advantage—in the decision to start the war. That said, preemptive wars are empirically rare and occur only when war was already very likely to occur. The way in which the war is fought thus depends on what mechanism brought the opponents to the brink of war initially: preemption in the context of the preventive motivation for war may produce a large conflict, but preemption when the initial motivation for fighting is disagreement about relative strength or relative resolve is likely to be associated with a more limited war. Second, sometimes developments within a war create an anticipation of future military shifts, for example because one side’s army is vulnerable. In this situation, the side with a military advantage will have an additional incentive not to settle until after the anticipated defeat has been imposed. Thus, for example, once the Soviets encircled the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad in World War II, they would have resisted a settlement that allowed the Germans to escape. Similarly, the seizure during war of strategic territory whose full utilization would affect the future balance of power, as with the American seizure of the Philippines in the Spanish-American War or the Iraqi control of Kuwait (and hence Kuwaiti oil) in the Persian Gulf War, can complicate negotiations by rendering some possible agreements unsatisfactory, but leaders will be much more willing to negotiate away these advantages when they are not the central problem at stake in the war. While these sorts of developments may marginally lengthen a war, the broader dynamics of the war will again depend on the mechanism that led to fighting in the first place.

Commitment Problems, Evil Dictators, and Unconditional Surrender

The previous section argued that a leader who believes that a hostile opponent is rising in power relative to her country at times will decide to launch an aggressive war that can end up being extremely destructive. This preventive war mechanism constitutes what I refer to as a situational commitment problem: because the opponent is rising in power, the declining power cannot trust its promises not to seek political concessions at a later time. In some cases, however, the concern that an opponent cannot commit to the status quo is grounded in a different logic: rather than mistrust arising out of a logical response to shifting power, leaders simply conclude that the opponent is by
nature (i.e., dispositionally) committed to war. As I discuss below, this sort of belief is at odds with the conventional bargaining model of war, and existing studies have not deeply analyzed either the sources of such beliefs or their implications for foreign policy.

In this section, I examine dispositional commitment problems in greater detail. I first discuss why the belief that one’s opponent is dispositionally committed to war is problematic for standard bargaining model approaches. I then turn to the implications of such beliefs for wars in which they arise. If one side sincerely believes that war is a consequence of an opponent’s innately aggressive character, such that any peace agreement will merely set the stage for a new attack, then the only path to a viable peace is the reformation or removal of the offending actors on the opposing side, be they an individual leader, a broader government, or even the entire society of the opposing country. In practice, this sort of goal can only be achieved through a total military victory, rendering any possible political settlement unacceptable. Thus when leaders conclude that their opponent is dispositionally committed to war, they categorically reject negotiation, even in the face of high costs and uncertain military outcomes. I refer to this behavior as a sincere demand for unconditional surrender.

The remaining question, however, is where this sort of belief comes from. While one could imagine a variety of different possible sources, I argue that interstate wars in which this sort of behavior has arisen have followed a common mechanism. Specifically, a declining power launches an aggressive preventive war, based on the belief that its rising opponent will impose painful concessions on it once its rise is complete. In some cases, however, the rising power lacks the intentions that the declining power ascribes to it and as a result often fails to appreciate the true motivation behind the declining power’s aggressive war. In short, confronted by an opponent who justifies an aggressive war by reference to a threat that the target of that war knows to be nonexistent, the target concludes that the stated justification for war is merely cover for some other motivation. Given this disjuncture, leaders may reasonably conclude that only a character-based explanation can account for their opponent’s aggression. In summary, a declining power launches a preventive war in response to a feature of its environment—relative decline with respect to a presumed enemy—but that enemy misinterprets the attack as evidence of a dispositional commitment to aggression that in turn poses an insuperable obstacle to any possible political settlement. I thus argue that this process, which links situational and dispositional commitment problems, is responsible for the most destructive interstate wars.
Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Wars

Stage Two: From Evil Dictators to Unconditional Surrender

Political scientists have noted the existence of the dispositional commitment problem. Thus, for example, Reiter attributes the British refusal to negotiate with Germany in the summer of 1940 to the fact that they simply “did not trust Hitler to adhere to any war-ending commitment,” not because Germany was growing stronger but because Hitler was fundamentally untrustworthy.\textsuperscript{35} To date, however, no one has provided a convincing explanation for the belief that an opponent cannot be trusted to live up to \textit{any} possible peace agreement.

Indeed, such a belief is at odds with the basic logic of the bargaining model to a degree that has not been fully acknowledged. The best extant explanation for such mistrust is that it is a consequence of the uncertainty associated with international anarchy.\textsuperscript{36} On closer examination, however, this argument is unsatisfying. Setting aside situations of shifting power (situational commitment problems), and assuming that other mechanisms for war are not in play, mistrust alone should never provoke war. Mistrust is the assumption that one’s opponent’s intentions are hostile when they may not in fact be so. Even if we assume the worst-case scenario of maximally hostile opponents (i.e., those with perfectly opposed preferences over the political stakes), the bargaining model predicts that given the costs of war each should prefer a political settlement along the lines that would be reached through fighting rather than going to war. In other words, the worst assumptions about your opponent’s interests should not mean that you are unwilling to negotiate. In these cases, however, as I discuss further below, the mistrust is associated with a categorical refusal to negotiate.

That said, certain types of actors might theoretically fit the depiction in the dispositional commitment problem. An opponent who was undeterred by the costs of war, for example because she enjoyed the experience of fighting, might be expected continually to start new wars, even in the absence of any standard war-producing mechanism. Alternately, if one side in a war is by personality congenitally overoptimistic, such that it consistently holds reasonable political proposals by its opponents to be worse than what could be achieved through war, then that power might consistently launch new wars.\textsuperscript{37} International relations theorists generally resist including such actors in their theories, as such actors would never cease fighting—a prediction that is at odds with the observation that even the most aggressive states have been open to political compromise.\textsuperscript{38}

Yet in rare historical cases people do come to believe that they are faced with such an opponent, even if (as I argue below) the opponent’s motivations are frequently more complicated. Thus, speaking of the
main Axis powers in World War II, Franklin Roosevelt averred unless disarmed “they will again, and inevitably, embark upon an ambitious career of world conquest,” at least unless the Allies forced them to “abandon the philosophy which has brought so much suffering to the world.”  

Similarly, in the Paraguayan War the Brazilians justified their refusal to negotiate with the claim, apparently sincerely believed, that they were facing a tyrant with unlimited ambitions; in the Iran-Iraq War the central problem from the perspective of the Iranian leadership was that their opponents were “corrupt.”

The implications of this sort of conclusion are stark, as is apparent if we return to Blainey’s dictum that any cause of war must have an associated cause of peace, or in other words that for a war to end, the problems that led it to begin must be resolved. If your opponent’s evil nature is the cause of your war, then peace cannot be restored so long as that evil nature is a concern. In general, this sort of observation has tended to lead IR scholars to discount rhetoric about the evils of the opponent: leaders always allude to evils on the other side, but most wars end without fundamental political change in either side’s regime. But this point should not blind us to the implications that arise when one side concludes that war is a consequence of the opponent’s character. If evil dispositions are a cause of war, then fundamental change will be needed for peace.

What is required to solve this problem will depend on how deep-seated the commitment to aggression is believed to be. It is conceivable, especially in more personalistic dictatorships, that the problem would be believed to lie solely with the individual leader, in which case the replacement of that leader might be sufficient to bring peace. In the Paraguayan War, discussed in chapter 3, it is quite possible that the Brazilians saw Paraguay in these terms. In other cases, however, all members of the governing regime, the military, or even the entire population of the country may be implicated, as was the case for Allied leaders trying to determine what to do about Germany. In this case, viable peace will require more thoroughgoing reform. In any case, however, leadership change is going to be seen as a nonnegotiable prerequisite to peace. That requirement in turn makes a mockery of negotiation with the existing government, and thus justifies a stance of simply refusing to negotiate so long as that government is in power. To the extent that the source of the aggressive disposition is believed to lie deeper in society, negotiation with any possible interlocutor will be similarly unacceptable, and thus the only viable peace will be one that permits complete reform of the offending country. Thus from a theoretical perspective there is a logical connection between the belief in the dispositional commitment problem and a refusal to negotiate: if you are unwilling to accept any
peace deal that could possibly be accepted by the opposing government, what purpose is there in holding talks?

In short, if leaders on one side believe that war follows from the character of the opposing leader, government, or society, then the only reasonable policy response is a war explicitly fought for regime (or even societal) change, in which they refuse to countenance any form of negotiation. I refer to this behavior as a sincere demand for unconditional surrender. By “unconditional surrender,” I refer to a demand that the opponent’s military surrender in its entirety and that the opponent accept complete loss of control over territory and government. As Franklin Roosevelt said during World War II, unconditional surrender meant that he was “not willing at this time to say that we do not intend to destroy the German nation.” This stance thus effectively forecloses political settlement as an option for ending the war.

The focus on sincere demands for unconditional surrender highlights an additional requirement: that the side demanding unconditional surrender be willing to stand by this demand even in the face of high costs and an uncertain outcome from continued fighting. References to the iniquity of one’s opponent are common in war, as are claims that one will never negotiate. In most cases, however, leaders are not willing to stand by such demands when costs are high or when victory is uncertain. In some cases, as for example in the latter phases of the Russo-Hungarian conflict of 1956 or at points during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, leaders refuse to negotiate because they believe their side to be so overwhelmingly militarily dominant that limited fighting will permit the dictation of terms without negotiation. In these sorts of cases, available evidence suggests that unexpected military setbacks will be associated with a new openness to negotiation, something that one does not see in cases of sincere demands for unconditional surrender. This definition also excludes limited military demands for unconditional surrender, as with American demands that Spanish forces on Cuba (but not elsewhere) surrender unconditionally during the Spanish-American War, or the British demand that Argentines occupying the Falkland Islands (but not those on the mainland) surrender unconditionally during the Falklands War. Limited unconditional surrender demands arise quite frequently within the context of war and do not follow the logic discussed here. Instead, a sincere demand for unconditional surrender constitutes a refusal to contemplate a negotiated end to a war, even in the face of high costs in the pursuit of uncertain military victory.

Hypothesis 2: Dispositional commitment problems—the belief that one’s opponent is by nature committed to aggression—will be associated with
sincere demands for unconditional surrender, which produce wars to the death.

Sincere demands for unconditional surrender are thankfully rare—most wars end in a negotiated settlement, typically fairly quickly, and even in extended wars leaders are typically open to some political settlement, if not one that their opponent would also accept. Indeed, by the standards described above, only four interstate conflicts since 1816 fit this description: the nineteenth-century Paraguayan War, the Pacific War in World War II, the European War in World War II, and the Iran-Iraq War. At a per capita level, however, this list of wars comprises some of the bloodiest conflicts over the past two centuries, as might be expected from what are effectively wars to the death.

Stage One: From Preventive War to Evil Dictators

The discussion until now has assumed the existence of a sincere belief that one’s opponent is irrevocably committed to aggression. As was noted previously, however, the existence of such an opponent seems at odds with the assumptions of the bargaining model. More important, these beliefs simply are inaccurate. Franklin Roosevelt may have sincerely believed that Hitler was planning to invade the Americas via Brazil, but subsequent historical studies—many intended precisely to demonstrate Hitler’s global intentions—have turned up no credible evidence of such intentions. Similarly, whatever the Brazilians believed about Francisco Solano López’s worldview, he was consistently willing to discuss peace with outside mediators, who complained more about Brazilian intransigence than about any Paraguayan commitment to war. The question, then, is where the belief in the dispositional commitment problem comes from.

While there are a variety of ways in which this belief might arise, I argue that a similar process drove all of the cases discussed here. Specifically, demands for unconditional surrender have arisen historically when the targets of preventive war have misinterpreted the motivations behind the attack. Attacked by an opponent who fears future decline, leaders attribute the attack to an innately aggressive disposition. This section details the reasons why one might expect such a misattribution to occur, as a prelude to any attempt to draw specific hypotheses about the circumstances in which it is more or less likely.

The first step in this process is preventive war. Indeed, preventive motivations played a significant role in the initiation of all wars in which demands for unconditional surrender were made. This connec-
tion makes sense: as I argued above, in wars driven by a preventive motivation, the initiator tends to have particularly high war aims and is willing to adhere to those aims even in the face of initial military defeats. By contrast, informational and principal-agent conflicts are internally constrained: initial war aims are typically more limited, and leaders either choose to or are forced to scale back their demands relatively quickly, especially if the war goes poorly.\footnote{From the perspective of the target of a preventive war, however, large or poorly expressed war aims that do not seem closely bound to military developments are particularly compatible with a view of the opponent as a war lover. Not every preventive war involves this sort of misunderstanding, however. Thus the British preventive motivation in the Crimean War—to prevent Russia from acquiring control over the strategically significant Black Sea Straits—was basically understood in Moscow, with the result that the Russians remained open to negotiation. It is thus worth exploring in greater detail the reasons why such a misinterpretation might occur.}

Hypothesis 2a: Sincere demands for unconditional surrender occur in wars in which preventive motivations provided the primary reason to fight, but the demand will be made by the target of the preventive attack.

A rationalist explanation would start from the assumption that leaders believe that a small but nonzero proportion of other leaders are war lovers who will continue to launch aggressive wars until they are removed from power. Given that the behavior of some past leaders—most obviously Hitler—is popularly interpreted in precisely this way, such a belief would be reasonable, even if it accords poorly with the basic logic of the bargaining model. Starting from these prior beliefs, leaders would then revise their understandings of their opponent in response to the opposing leader’s policies. Given the low prior probability that any particular leader is a war lover, simply being attacked would not be sufficient evidence to conclude that one’s opponent was a war lover. By contrast, attack by an opponent who espouses grandiose war aims—especially relative to her military capabilities—and who contends that those war aims are justified by the prospect that you will engage in actions that you do not in fact intend to undertake will be seen as stronger evidence of a dispositional commitment to aggression.

The key element here is the disjuncture between one side’s fears and the other’s intentions: an attack justified by fear that you will do something you do not intend to do will seem far more unreasonable than one justified by fears that are in fact correct. Thus the central prediction is that sincere demands for unconditional surrender—which follow from
belief in a dispositional commitment problem—are more likely when the target of a preventive war does not intend to do what the initiator of the war fears it will do.\textsuperscript{50}

Hypothesis 2b: Sincere demands for unconditional surrender are more likely when the target of a preventive war does not harbor the intentions ascribed to it by the initiator.

This argument, however, just redirects the question to how such an unnecessary preventive war might arise: under what circumstances might we observe a leader launching an aggressive war to prevent something that in fact was not going to happen? The security dilemma—the problem that actions taken to advance one’s own security may inadvertently threaten others—provides the most likely answer to this question.\textsuperscript{51} The critical point here is that given uncertainty about intentions, each side may undertake actions that are basically defensive in nature but that appear to its opponent as evidence of aggressive intent. Indeed, people frequently fail to appreciate the degree to which their intentions are unclear to others. For example, in the early Cold War, the Soviets installed undemocratic communist governments in Eastern Europe, a move that they believed provided the only reliable guarantee of a friendly buffer against a future invasion from the West; Western powers, however, saw the move as evidence of Soviet expansionism. Both sides saw the other’s stance as threatening, in large part because they failed to understand the other side’s reasoning.\textsuperscript{52} The security dilemma is particularly salient in the context of shifting power, as rising powers have strong incentives to conceal any hostile intentions while they are still relatively weak, making it difficult or impossible for a rising power with genuinely benign intentions to make those intentions clear. In this context, a declining power may mistakenly come to believe that a rising neighbor with benign intentions is in fact hostile and may come to believe that war is an appropriate response to such hostility. The target of such an attack, knowing that its intentions are benign, could be forgiven for putting little credence in the declining power’s stated fears.\textsuperscript{53} As I discuss in chapter 3, this dynamic was likely at play in the Paraguayan War, in which Brazilian leaders appear to have been completely unaware that Paraguayans might view what appeared to be quite expansionist policies as threatening.

If this argument is correct, an additional implication is that interpretations of the opposing side’s motivations will change in response to its preventive policies. In other words, rather than always believing the opponent to be dispositionally committed to war, leaders will come to this conclusion in response to the opponent’s aggressive expansion. Thus, for
example, while Churchill consistently warned about the danger posed by Hitler’s Germany, the logic behind that warning changed over time, from a basically Realist argument that a stronger Germany would naturally expect some political concessions to a dispositional argument that Hitler was uniquely aggressive.

Hypothesis 2c: In cases of sincere demands for unconditional surrender, the conclusion that the opposing leadership or regime is ineluctably aggressive will develop in response to the opponent’s preventive policies.

To summarize, I argue that leaders demand unconditional surrender when they conclude that they have been attacked by a country whose leadership is dispositionally aggressive and hence would attack again if given the chance. The context for this development is preventive war, in which the initiator attacks out of the belief that war today is preferable to permitting a presumed-hostile rising neighbor to complete its rise and then demand concessions or fight a war from a position of relative strength. The target of that war may in turn attribute this attack not to the situation of shifting power but to a predisposition toward aggressiveness, thus producing the belief that justifies unconditional surrender. This inference is in turn more likely, I argue, when the target of the preventive attack does not actually harbor the hostile motivations ascribed to her by the rising power. Given the rarity of sincere demands for unconditional surrender, the hypotheses that follow from this argument cannot be tested quantitatively. It is possible, however, to test them through careful case studies, as I do in later chapters.

I thus argue that commitment problems, under two different guises, produce particularly destructive wars. This argument gains strength, however, to the extent that other mechanisms that can bring about fighting cannot account for wars that are both long and intense: given that commitment problem wars can be either short or long, depending on whether one side is able to achieve a quick and decisive military victory, the argument that the commitment problem mechanism provides the primary explanation for the most severe wars is credible only to the extent that alternative logics can account only for limited wars. This section thus examines the two primary alternative mechanisms: overoptimism arising out of private information, and principal-agent problems in domestic politics. Both provide a credible explanation for why war would
begin, but I argue that in both the revelation of information from in-
trawar diplomacy and events on the battlefield ultimately will lead to a
settlement before the war becomes unusually destructive.

Limited Wars I: Overoptimism

Overoptimism on at least one side about the probability and ease of
victory is easily the most common nontrivial feature of the start of war.\textsuperscript{55}
It is easy to understand why overoptimistic leaders might demand too
much at the bargaining table and hence conclude that the use of force is
preferable to the bargain that the other side is willing to accept. As Geo-
frey Blainey notes, if disagreement over the likely outcome of war leads
to fighting, then in general a necessary condition for war termination
will be that the two sides come to agree. Indeed, the bulk of work on ra-
tionalist explanations for war has focused on this hypothesis, which I
refer to as the informational mechanism.\textsuperscript{56}

One potential explanation for long wars, then, is that for some reason
the participants took a particularly long time to change their beliefs. In
practice, however, I argue that overoptimism arising from private infor-
mentation cannot reliably explain long wars. A number of studies have
noted that fighting reveals information, forcing leaders to update their
expectations and revise their demands; these revisions lead to conver-
gence in political demands and thus provide the basis for peace. Indeed,
I argue that this process will generally happen quite quickly, especially
when fighting is intense. This argument implies that informational wars
must be limited in either duration or intensity.

Divergent Expectations and the Decision for War

The basic intuition of the informational mechanism is straightforward:
if leaders on both sides believe that victory will be achieved easily,
then they will prefer war to what their opponent will be willing to con-
cede at the bargaining table.\textsuperscript{57} Because each side’s bargaining position is
a function of its expectations, we would expect that when both sides
think that they will win, their demands will differ substantially, and
thus may be mutually incompatible even considering that a prewar deal
has the benefit of avoiding the costs of war.\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, it is not even neces-
sary that both sides think that they can win, so long as their predictions
for the course of the war differ markedly. Thus, for example, in the Viet-
nam War, the North Vietnamese did not necessarily believe that they
could inflict a decisive military defeat on the Americans, but they did
believe that American demands were based on an overestimation of the
ease with which they would be able to defeat the Viet Cong militarily.
For this reason, they were unwilling to make the concessions that the Americans would have demanded as a condition for the end of the war; ultimately, the Americans abandoned their demands and withdrew even though their military was undefeated and remained by most standards far superior.59

Divergent expectations can arise from a wide range of possible sources. At the simplest level, participants may simply disagree about the likely course of events on the battlefield. The conventional view of World War I, for example, holds that both sides believed that their superior militaries would permit them to punch through the enemy defenses and impose a decisive defeat in short order. Similarly, in the 2003 Iraq War, confidence in the ease with which Saddam Hussein could be overthrown (and the anticipated positive implications of regime change in Iraq) led American policymakers to believe that even quite revisionist demands were appropriate, while Saddam’s confidence that he could embroil the invaders in a costly urban war was one basis for his decision to stand firm.60 Military strategy provides another potential basis for divergent expectations about battlefield prowess. German generals drew confidence prior to their stunning defeat of France in 1940 in part from the knowledge that their opponents were expecting an attack at the wrong point and thus that there was a chance for an immediate and crushing breakthrough.61 In 1967, the Israelis were confident that a first strike—which their opponents did not expect—could destroy the Egyptian and Syrian air forces, dramatically shifting the balance of capabilities in that war.62 And in 1991, the first Bush administration gained confidence, and increased its demands, as it became apparent that a flanking attack west of Kuwait would allow coalition forces to avoid the extensive frontal defenses that the Iraqis had established. In all of these cases, knowledge of one’s strategy provided a reason for optimism that could not be credibly conveyed to the opponent without prompting the opponent to take countermeasures that would eliminate the advantage.

Relatedly, in some cases the two sides disagree about the likely behavior of external actors. Thus, for example, the German willingness to attack France and Russia in 1914 is often credited in part to miscalculations about British intentions.63 Similarly, in both 1848 and 1864 Denmark adopted an aggressive bargaining position in a dispute with Prussia, in large part based on an overoptimistic reading of the probability that the British would intervene on their behalf.64 More recently, as detailed in the case study of the Persian Gulf War in chapter 6, one reason why Saddam Hussein believed that an invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was a worthwhile gamble was the ultimately erroneous expectation that the Saudis would not permit American forces to operate out of their territory. As with
disagreements about relative capabilities, divergent expectations about the likelihood of external support can lead to drastically different beliefs about the likely outcome of fighting, which in turn provides reason for each side to believe the other’s political demands to be unjustified.

Finally, expectations may diverge because of misperceptions about relative resolve, with one side underestimating the importance of the issue at stake for its opponent and hence the opponent’s willingness to fight, either at all or for an extended period of time. Formally, an actor’s resolve will be influenced both by her valuation for the stake—how much she cares about the issue in dispute—and by her valuation for the likely costs of war: the more she values the stake, and the less importance she places on the suffering imposed by war, the more resolved she is. Leaders could miscalculate about either of these components to resolve. Thus, for example, in the Anglo-Iranian War of 1856–57, which I examine in chapter 6, the Iranians recognized that they could not win a war against Britain but believed that changes in the strategic environment meant that the British no longer had any reason to care about the independence of Herat: the British were believed to be irresolute because their valuation for the stake was believed to be low. Alternately, there are cases in which one side miscalculates the willingness of the other to absorb punishment. Thus, for example, one reading of the Vietnam War is that the United States dramatically underestimated the willingness of the Viet Cong to absorb incredible amounts of punishment without capitulating on the political issue at stake. More recently, Saddam Hussein appears to have relied in both 1991 and 2003 on the expectation that Americans would not have the stomach for the deaths on both sides that would accompany urban warfare, an estimation that likely followed from the perception of American, and more generally democratic, casualty aversion.

The bases for disagreement about the likely outcome of a war typically lie in the different information available to the two sides: each knows more about its own capabilities, resolve, and strategy than it does about its opponent’s. For this reason, I refer to this explanation for war as the informational mechanism. As expectations diverge, leaders on both sides may come to believe that war is preferable to any negotiated resolution to their dispute that the other would be willing to accept. Once this conclusion is reached, war becomes a logical choice.

Overoptimism and Reality Once War Begins

If divergent expectations account for the decision to go to war, then what happens once the war begins? Prior to fighting, negotiations
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are complicated by the incentive an irresolute or weak actor has to claim to be resolute and strong to get a better settlement. Leaders may lie. War, however, does not. Once fighting begins, the two sides’ divergent expectations are put to the test. A leader who adopted an aggressive bargaining position out of the belief that her opponent lacked the resolve to fight can be presented with immediate disconfirmatory evidence when the war begins. If the two sides disagree about whether or not a third power will intervene in the conflict, at least one is likely to be surprised by that power’s behavior when the request for assistance goes out. And if the two sides disagree about the relative quality of their fighting forces or of the strategies that those armies implement, events on the battlefield necessarily must be at odds with at least one side’s expectations. In Blainey’s words, when both sides are optimistic about the likely course of conflict, “war itself . . . provides the stinging ice of reality” that forces expectations to converge until the two sides’ beliefs are close enough to permit a settlement. 68

In building the intuition for this argument, it is useful to contrast it to an earlier claim that new information such as unexpected battle results might lead each side to adjust its expectations equally, so that the loser might make concessions that previously would have ensured peace but still end up fighting when the winner no longer is willing to accept those terms. 69 Where these two arguments diverge, and where the earlier argument is flawed, is in the source of divergent expectations, which likely concern exactly the things that are revealed in war. The loser of a battle is likely to be more surprised by its results than the winner, and thus will update her beliefs to a greater extent, meaning that expectations, and hence political demands, are closer after the battle than they were before. Even in those cases in which success in battle surpasses the victor’s prior expectations, she will still end up updating her expectations by less than her opponent, as the opponent is substantially more surprised. Thus, in some cases, as with the Israelis in 1967, one side’s demands may be greater at the end of the war than they were at the beginning, but overall convergence still occurs as the defeated opponent scrambles back from demands that battlefield events have proven to be entirely unachievable.

Updating is neither instantaneous nor perfect, of course. The knowledge that NATO was willing to carry out a bombing campaign against Serbia in the Kosovo War did not necessarily give Slobodan Milosevic insight into whether his opponents would be willing to launch a ground war. And new private information is undoubtedly generated within war, as with the British development of the tank in World War I or the success of the Manhattan Project to construct the first nuclear weapons in World War II. On average, however, the trend is toward settlement. If a
bombing campaign is not proof of complete resolve, it certainly belies any prior belief that the opponent is completely unresolved. Likewise, there is no reason why new private information will consistently be good. For every technological innovation in war, there are programs like the Nazi search for a superweapon in World War II that deliver less than was expected. In other cases, governments have learned before their enemies that their publics are more war weary or their armies less loyal than previously believed. For new private information to prevent convergence of beliefs, it would have to be consistently positive to an extraordinarily improbable degree so as to offset the inevitable disappointments on the battlefield and at the negotiating table.

The Franco-Austrian War of 1859, in which France aided Sardinia-Piedmont in seizing Austrian territory in Italy, provides a useful example of this process in action. Both sides in this war expected to win quite quickly. The Austrians initially expected to overrun Piedmont before the French could supply effective assistance, and they thus expected to humble the upstart Sardinians and secure their position in Italy; their opponents expected victories that would permit them to detach the Austrian provinces of Lombardy and Venetia. The fighting went unexpectedly poorly for the Austrians, however, convincing them that their initial aims were unrealistic; at the same time, increasing agreement over the probability that Prussia would intervene on the Austrian side (thus shifting the balance of capabilities) convinced the French to abandon the demand for Venetia. After a few months of fighting, therefore, it became possible for the two sides to reach a settlement in which Austria gave up Lombardy but kept Venetia.

This example is far from unique. In the 1939 Nomonhan border war between Japan and the Soviet Union—a little-known but quite intense conflict—the Japanese were quite confident that Soviet logistical problems, command deficiencies resulting from Stalin’s purge of the army, and the inherent superiority of Japanese troops would force the Soviets to back down. An intense Soviet offensive in August 1939 demonstrated the inaccuracy of this assessment, and by the middle of September the Japanese were forced to admit that “the enemy had won, and everybody knew it.” The Soviets were on the opposite side of the overconfidence ledger later that year, however, when they dramatically over-estimated the ease with which they would be able to force Finland to capitulate in the Russo-Finnish War. While numerical superiority ultimately permitted the Soviets to make territorial gains at Finnish expense, Stalin had to abandon plans to impose a communist government on Finland. In each case, intense battles quickly brought expectations into line and hence brought about a political settlement in a matter of months.
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It is by this process, then, that a war driven by the informational mechanism logically will come to an end. The question from the perspective of this project is how long this process is likely to take. In formal models, bargaining typically results in a settlement within a small number of rounds of interaction, but nothing within the model dictates how long a single “round” would last. As a result, formal theorists have disagreed about this question, with Powell arguing that settlement will typically occur quickly, while Smith and Stam argue that leaders who operate on the basis of divergent theories of war may alter their beliefs only slowly, with the implication that the informational mechanism can account for quite extended wars.73

Resolving this apparent dilemma requires adding just one additional piece of information. As Blainey observes, overoptimism typically appears not simply in the expectation of victory, but in the expectation that victory will come quickly and at relatively low cost.74 This observation is unsurprising from a theoretical perspective: as anticipated costs grow, the incentive to resolve a dispute politically likewise increases, meaning that a greater disparity in military expectations is necessary for war to occur, and hence that even substantial variation in expectations about the eventual result frequently will be insufficient to bring about violence. For such optimistic expectations to be reasonable, leaders must have theories about how the war will proceed, which predict for example that the superiority of their armed forces will manifest itself in the initial battles and soon put them in a position to dictate terms, or that the costs imposed by the initial few clashes will break the opponents’ resolve and force them to sue for peace. When both sides have such optimistic beliefs, not only will war ultimately belie expectations on at least one side (and quite possibly both), it will do so before costs have mounted unduly. Thus, for example, scholars who have advanced an informational interpretation of World War I have argued that the participants saw war as attractive because they expected to win “by Christmas”; it is hard to imagine how leaders on both sides would have been both expecting an intense, multi-year war and so confident of ultimate victory that fighting was preferable to a negotiated settlement.75 This observation, however, points to a central weakness of informational explanations for World War I—why did the war continue past Christmas 1914?

Hypothesis 3: Wars driven primarily by the informational mechanism will be limited.

Tests of hypothesis 3 must confront two unfortunate complications. The first is that there is no direct quantitative measure of whether a war was driven by the informational mechanism. Thus while case studies can
examine the validity of this hypothesis for a smaller sample of wars, quantitative tests must make use of a more indirect testing strategy. In particular, the statistical tests rely on identifying an empirical relationship that would be expected to hold within the subset of informational conflicts.

The speed of settlement in informational wars depends on two factors: how far apart the two sides’ initial expectations were, and how quickly they converge over time as new information is revealed. Of these two factors, the rate of information revelation is the more theoretically appropriate, as it avoids selection effects that arise for variables that act prior to the onset of fighting. The problem for tests based on the divergence in initial beliefs, which must necessarily be measured through proxies, is that leaders take readily observable information into account in deciding whether or not to go to war in the first place. This point is clearest in the context of a specific variable, so to that end it is worthwhile to consider the contention that relative capabilities proxy for the degree of uncertainty in a conflict. According to this argument, when the contending parties in a war are relatively evenly matched, both can believe themselves likely to win, allowing for wide variation in beliefs, whereas when one side is substantially stronger than the other, the range for disagreement is much narrower. This claim, although difficult to evaluate directly, is plausible; the important point is that its effects should be felt not with respect to war duration or severity but with respect to war onset. Thus, if beliefs vary more widely in relatively equal dyads, then those dyads should be more likely to fight, but in those rare cases in which war occurs in unequal dyads it will be happening because the beliefs diverge to an unusually substantial degree. As a result, despite the population-wide variation in uncertainty between equal and unequal dyads, in the limited sample of dyads that go to war the degree of divergence will not differ markedly, meaning that the expected time to settlement also should not differ greatly. This point will apply to any variable that might proxy for the general degree of variation in expectations in a disputing dyad.

The speed at which updating occurs is more tractable, however. Under the informational mechanism, participants update their beliefs in response to events on the battlefield and in the diplomatic arena. Updating occurs as leaders learn that their beliefs about relative capabilities, resolve, strategies, or the intentions of outside actors are incorrect. Measuring the degree of updating about the intentions of third parties is not possible in a statistical context, unfortunately: observed interventions may not be informative if both sides expected them to occur, as for example with the German knowledge that France would inevitably come to Russia’s aid in 1914, while noninterventions can be quite
informative if one side believed that it was likely to get help, as with the aforementioned Danish disappointment with British neutrality in the Schleswig-Holstein Wars. For capabilities, resolve, and strategies, however, information is revealed as military clashes occur. Competing beliefs about the relative capabilities of different armies and the superiority of generals’ strategies are put to the test in battle, while beliefs about relative resolve are confirmed or belied by the opponent’s willingness to keep fighting once costs start to be imposed. Thus we can expect that once the fighting begins, updating will quickly ensue.

Moreover, more intense fighting will typically lead to faster updating. Limited clashes reveal less about capabilities, strategy, or resolve than full-scale battles, while a series of battles in a short period of time will be more informative than a single one. In the extreme of a very intense war like the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, a few days of fighting may suffice to bring the two sides’ expectations into alignment. The opposite extreme is provided by a case like the Russo-Polish War of 1919–21, in which the new Polish government and their Bolshevik opponents effectively put their war on hold shortly after it started so that the Bolsheviks could fight the mutually detested Whites in the Russian Civil War. Because fighting between the two sides was extraordinarily limited in the initial phases, both sides could persist in mutually incompatible expectations for some time. These observations thus imply that more intense fighting—more frequent and deadlier battles—will be associated with quicker

Figure 1.2 Informational wars and war duration and intensity
Chapter 1

settlement, at least when the informational mechanism is involved. Figure 1.2 illustrates the realm in which wars driven by the informational mechanism will typically be found—intense wars will reach settlement quickly (and hence be short), while less intense wars may be longer but, because they are less intense, are still limited.

Hypothesis 3a: Wars driven by the informational mechanism will reach settlement more quickly when fighting is more intense.

The identification of a quantitatively tractable hypothesis for the informational mechanism brings us to the second complication for empirical tests, however. While intense informational wars will reach settlement quickly, the same relationship between war intensity and the speed of settlement will not necessarily apply to commitment problem wars. The inclusion of long, intense commitment problem wars in the same empirical sample as informational conflicts thus may disguise the relationship between war intensity and war duration in the informational conflicts. Chapter 2 examines this problem in greater detail and identifies a strategy using the interaction between war intensity and the proxy for the presence of commitment problem wars to more accurately test hypothesis 3a.

Limited Wars II: Misbehaving Leaders

A third logic of war starts from the observation that, because the people are the ones who, through conscription and through taxes, pay the costs of war, they should naturally be disinclined to wage it. If war happens nonetheless, this argument supposes that it may be because the people are not ones who decide whether or not to fight. War may simply be the “sport of kings,” or it may be that leaders use war to achieve personal objectives, whether to improve their hold on power or to achieve political goals domestically or abroad that could not be achieved without recourse to war. From this perspective, one might argue that wars, whether limited or unusually large, occur because leaders are attracted by their benefits and simply are not deterred by their costs, which they after all do not have to pay.

On closer analysis, however, I argue that leaders are far less free than this initial perspective implies. All political systems constrain the freedom of leaders to impose preferred decisions unilaterally, whether through institutional checks like the oversight of democratically elected legislatures or practical obstacles like the obstinacy of recalcitrant generals. In the extreme, leaders must worry about being displaced, while publics always have the extreme option of simply refusing to fight. From this perspective, war remains a feasible policy option only so long as the
leader can convince her constituents that doing so serves their interest. The leader may, of course, resort to all manner of rhetoric and lies in an effort to convince the constituents that launching and continuing the war is worthwhile, but her account of why the war is worth fighting must be reconcilable with publicly known events from the war. To the extent that the leader’s accounts of ongoing successes and promises of eventual victory are contradicted by the observation of military stalemate or defeat and the demonstrable falsity of past promises, public and institutional constraints will begin to bind more tightly, until the point at which the leader must either acquiesce to a settlement or be evicted from office and replaced by someone else who is willing to do so.

Ultimately, I argue that the precise path of a war driven by this mechanism is determined by the reason why the leader resorted to war in the first place. In diversionary wars—in which leaders attempt to use war to improve their hold on power—the requirement that the war be politically salient (so as to divert public attention) means that leaders are more constrained in their ability to systematically misrepresent the way that the war is going; as a result, these wars tend to be short. By contrast, when leaders use war to pursue parochial policy objectives such as colonial gains overseas or domestic political programs that would be undermined by defeat abroad, they can afford to limit public attention to the war and hence in at least some cases may be able to systemically misrepresent how well the war is going to a far greater degree. These conflicts, which for shorthand I refer to as “policy wars,” thus can last much longer, but only to the extent that the leader can keep the public distracted, which in turn implies that the war cannot be particularly intense. Thus I argue that both types of principal-agent wars necessarily will be limited.

Principal-Agent Problems in Domestic Politics

Historians and political scientists have identified a range of domestic political explanations for war. Diversionary war—in which leaders use war either to distract the public from other troubles or to stave off challenges to their hold on power—provides likely the best-known example. Leninists famously argued that the aggression associated with imperialism arose because the state, which represented the interests of the capital-owning minority, sought to address those capitalists’ demands for new markets. Other studies have focused on the way in which domestic coalition-building has contributed to external aggression, as with the argument that a coalition of industry and Prussian agriculture led Imperial Germany to a counterproductive policy that alienated both Russia and Britain. Alternately, in some cases domestic
political pressure has forced reluctant leaders into war, as with the Spanish-American conflict, in which popular pressure for war with Spain, famously encouraged by Hearst’s newspapers, ultimately overcame President McKinley’s reluctance to fight. Similarly, Fidel Sánchez Hernández, president of El Salvador during the 1969 Football War against Honduras, claimed after the conflict that public pressure for war in response to Honduran mistreatment of Salvadoran nationals was so high that, had he not ordered the invasion when he did, he would have faced a coup within twenty-four hours.

Ultimately, these arguments about domestic politics can be divided into two camps. On the one hand, those in which a reluctant leader is forced by domestic pressure into war ultimately rely on some other mechanism to explain why the public believes war to be in its interest. By contrast, those in which the leader, or an unrepresentative coalition that forms the government, is more war prone than the public can be captured by the logic of the principal-agent problem. This problem was first identified in economics in the relationship between an employer and an employee: at its core, the problem is that the employee—the agent—is being paid to perform certain tasks for the employer—the principal—but has incentives to shirk, reducing effort or engaging in activities of which the principal would not approve, if she can get away with doing so. Shirking in turn is possible because the agent is better informed about her effort and the difficulty of the task that she is undertaking than is the principal. Applied to politics, the principal-agent logic starts from the observation that although effective political rule requires the centralization of power, rulers must always worry about the final sanction of (potentially violent) removal by the public. In this context, we can think of the leader as the agent, empowered by the public to adopt and carry out policies on its behalf. This possibility means that even the most institutionally unconstrained leader must concern herself to some degree with the preferences of her constituents (even if she refuses to think of them in those terms). Thus there are risks to deviating from the preferences of constituents, even at the same time that deviation may be personally rewarding. It is this tension between the potential benefits and costs of hewing to the socially optimal strategy as opposed to deviating for personal gain that lies at the core of principal-agent theory.

When thinking about what goals leaders might have when diverting policy away from socially optimal strategies, the natural starting point is to assume that leaders wish to maintain and strengthen their hold on power. In any system, retaining power carries with it personal benefits that leaders are loath to surrender, while in many political systems loss of power may be associated with exile, loss of freedom, or even death.
Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Wars

Because regular people care relatively little about the specific identity of their leader in contrast to the quality of that person’s leadership, there is a natural divergence of preferences between governor and governed. As the leader, in the course of carrying out her responsibilities, has access to information not available to the regular public, she has an opportunity to shirk, claiming that policy decisions serve the general interest when in fact they are undertaken to serve her interests: for example, by strengthening her hold on power, or by pursuing policy interests that benefit a small coterie of supporters but not society more generally.

Misbehaving Leaders and the Conduct of War

The best-known argument about domestic politics and war duration and severity builds on this intuition. Goemans argues that, while all leaders fear that losing a war will have negative consequences for their hold on power, leaders of partial democracies have reason to be particularly concerned.\textsuperscript{88} Leaders of full democracies expect that defeat in war will result in the loss of power, but they are protected by the democratic rule of law from worse consequences. Leaders of autocracies, on the other hand, expect punishment (exile, imprisonment, or death) should they lose power, but their hold on power is generally sufficiently secure to ensure that they need not fear the consequences of a lost war. Thus it is the leaders of partial democracies, where the move toward democratic rule has left leaders less secure in their hold on power without providing them with guarantees of personal well-being once they leave office, who have the greatest incentive to gamble for resurrection, refusing to settle a losing war in the hope that a miracle will restore their fortunes.\textsuperscript{89} This argument thus constitutes a potential explanation for long, bloody conflicts: such wars occur when leaders reject settlements that their constituents would accept, if equally informed and empowered to negotiate, because they believe that doing so is in their own interest. More generally, a domestic-political explanation for unusually destructive wars would simply observe that, because they are insulated from the immediate costs of war, leaders may choose to continue wars that their publics would bring to an end.

This argument focuses on the incentives leaders have to implement socially suboptimal policies. The logic of principal-agent problems demonstrates that the agent’s (i.e., leader’s) incentives are only part of the story: leaders are monitored by society, which can impose constraints on leaders’ ability to continue wars against constituents’ interests. These constraints come in a number of forms. At one extreme, if a war is sufficiently unpopular (as happened to some degree with the Russians in
World War I) or a leader is sufficiently despised (as happened in Idi Amin’s Uganda during the Uganda-Tanzania War), the population may simply refuse to fight.90 This option is obviously used rarely, as its adoption effectively grants victory to an opponent that is likely to have preferences that diverge sharply from those of the local population. That said, this possibility is frequently a concern for leaders even when it does not arise. Thus, for example, by the end of World War I the troops of all the major participants demonstrated sufficient unrest to seriously concern their leaders, including the often-forgotten mutinies among French troops at the time of the Nivelle Offensive in spring 1917 on top of the revolutions in Russia and the Kiel mutiny in Germany.91 Leaders may also find themselves directly constrained by other significant figures or branches of government. Congress’s power of the purse makes it possible for the legislature to refuse to fund efforts in an ongoing conflict, in effect forcing the president to find a way to bring a precipitous end to fighting. In practice, these types of constraints too are exercised rarely, as any politician will be extremely chary of taking actions that can be portrayed as beneficial to the “enemy.” That said, in both cases the knowledge that such actions can be taken can force leaders to adopt different policies from the ones that they would choose were they entirely unconstrained. To cite a recent example, it is likely that the American surge in Iraq, undertaken in 2007 after significant domestic debate, would have been both quicker and larger had President Bush not had to worry about substantial Democratic opposition in both houses of Congress.

More frequently, leaders may simply be removed from power. Indeed, leaders on the losing side of a war are frequently replaced prior to war termination. War termination is often preceded by a shift in the ruling coalition on one side, as with the two revolutions that preceded Russia’s withdrawal from World War I or the shift from the Truman administration to the Eisenhower administration that arguably hastened the end of the Korean War.92 Even when leaders end a war prior to removal from office, they may do so because they fear that further fighting would only weaken their hold on office. Thus, for example, a significant motivation for Emperor Hirohito’s decision to call for an end to Japanese resistance in World War II was his desire to preserve the institution of the emperor and the imperial house.93 Similarly, in the Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was willing to accept humiliating conditions imposed by the coalition in part because he needed to redirect his efforts to put down the developing revolt against his rule.94

A close examination of existing work on domestic politics and war provides reason to think that these constraints are quite active. Quantitative studies have found far more limited evidence for diversionary war than early work expected.95 In particular, while domestic political factors
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often are related to the use of force, the relationships typically are not what the diversionary hypothesis would predict. Thus in contrast to the expectation that presidents facing reelection would be more likely to start a foreign conflict to secure their hold on power, presidents have in fact been substantially less likely to begin foreign adventures as elections approach. Indeed, in a more general study, Chiozza and Goemans find that conflict initiation is substantially higher when leaders have a secure hold on power, precisely the opposite of what one would expect from the diversionary hypothesis. Similarly, the tremendous boosts in popularity that leaders sometimes gain from crises such as the September 11 attacks on the United States turn out to be less manipulable than initially might have been thought. On average, these gains are quite small, while the big gains in popularity—the conventional “rally ‘round the flag” effect—occur only in cases in which the country was subject to an unambiguous external attack of the sort that leaders simply cannot engineer whenever it would be convenient.

One could of course argue that the constraints that appear to limit the ability of leaders to resort to diversionary war are lifted once war begins; after all, it has long been a truism that the nation rallies behind the leader once war has begun, and hawks opposed to settlement repeatedly have used this expectation to accuse moderates of treason. Yet a closer examination reveals reasons for caution here, too. To the extent that the public rallies behind the executive, they often do so because society generally accepts (without substantial misrepresentation by the leadership) that war is in the national interest. Thus, for example, while there existed a substantial isolationist sentiment prior to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese attack genuinely convinced a broad range of Americans that Japan and Germany represented serious threats, and therefore that fighting a long, difficult war to remove those threats was a worthwhile task. Just as large rallies in popular support for the president may occur in response to genuine external threats, we may observe the coincidence of a free executive and a long war in a case in which the people are willing to grant the leader freedom to act precisely because the threat is so obvious that there need be no fear that the executive is extending the war unnecessarily.

More important, the common argument that society inevitably rallies behind the government in war is simply historically incorrect. Indeed, in no recent American war has the US government been free from criticism. Eisenhower won election in 1952 in part by criticizing the Truman administration’s policy in the Korean War, while Vietnam of course grew tremendously contentious over time. In the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the congressional resolution to use force passed by only a narrow 52–47 margin, and absent the quick and decisive victory that coalition forces
achieved the Democrats undoubtedly would have returned to public criticism quite quickly. Republicans repeatedly insinuated that the 1999 Kosovo War was undertaken to deflect attention from the Monica Lewinsky scandal and Clinton’s subsequent impeachment. More recently, the 2003 Iraq War was consistently divisive, with John Kerry heavily criticizing Bush administration policy in the 2004 election and a quite public debate over the wisdom of Bush’s proposed “surge” in 2007. When presidents hearken back to the bipartisan accord of the World War II period, therefore, they are skipping over half a century in which the occurrence of war hardly guaranteed domestic agreement. Nor is public opposition restricted to the United States. While there almost always are majorities supporting the leader’s policies, especially early in wars, minorities in opposition are frequently vocal and sometimes surprisingly effective. Even the paragon of totalitarian control over his country—Adolf Hitler—faced an assassination attempt, which came remarkably close to success, by an opposition that hoped to negotiate a separate peace with the Western powers.

Given the ability of other actors in government, the army, or society in general to reign in misbehaving leaders, the question is when they will choose to do so. If they had perfect control over the leader’s activities, principal-agent wars would never occur. In reality, of course, leaders have significant advantages. The first is that imposing constraints on leaders in the context of war is risky and potentially costly: generals and politicians who oppose orders face charges of treason, and soldiers who refuse to fight may be shamed or even executed. People who are uncertain about whether the leader’s decisions are reasonable thus face incentives to stay quiet. The second advantage is that leaders are better informed about the true situation in the war that most or all of their potential opponents—they have private reports from the battlefield and know the details of secret negotiations with the enemy. The existence of this information gap is critical. When the principal-agent mechanism is responsible for war, fighting is not in society’s interest; leaders therefore can avoid resistance only by lying. So long as the leader can convince her supporters that her publicly professed optimism is justified, or that the opponent is as resistant to settlement as she claims, she will be able to continue the war unconstrained.

Thus, just as in the informational mechanism, the continuation of principal-agent wars over time requires that expectations about the future course of the war not converge: the more that society knows about the true state of affairs, the harder it will be for the leader to avoid the imposition of constraints that force her toward a settlement. As a result, the revelation of information through fighting and negotiations will steadily undercut the leader’s narrative about why the war is in the
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national interest, ultimately bringing about war termination when either the leader is replaced by someone more amenable to peace or is backed into a corner and forced to agree to settle. As in informational conflicts, the faster that information is revealed, the faster that we would expect to see war end.

To summarize, leaders start principal-agent wars because they hope to achieve personal benefits, but they can continue them only so long they can convince society to back them, by maintaining a plausible story about why further fighting will be in the national interest. As the war continues, however, the leader’s misrepresentations will become increasingly apparent, as past promises are not achieved and battlefield setbacks make the opponent’s terms seem more reasonable. As time passes, therefore, the leader will be increasingly constrained in the positions she can advance; ultimately she will either be forced into an undesired settlement or replaced by a leader who is willing to end the war. This argument thus implies that principal-agent wars will be limited in duration, intensity, or both.

Hypothesis 4: Principal-agent wars will be limited.

Indeed, there are two differentiable types of principal-agent wars, distinguished by the end that the leader is pursuing. The first are diversionary wars, in which leaders see external conflict as a means to improve their hold on power. The second, to which I refer as “policy wars,” cover conflicts in which the leader pursues a specific policy interest that the public

![Figure 1.3 Principal-agent wars and war duration and intensity](image-url)
either does not support or would not be willing to pay the costs of war to achieve. While the basic logic of the principal-agent mechanism is the same in each case, the difference in the leader’s goals turns out to have important implications for the way in which the conflict is conducted and hence for the nature of the war. Figure 1.3 illustrates my predictions for where each type of principal-agent war will typically fall in the theoretical space, again identifying a basic trade-off between intensity and duration that keeps these conflicts limited.

The point of diversionary wars is to divert attention from the reasons why leaders might have lost popularity or come to face threats to their hold on power. As such, the war must be a public event: the people cannot be distracted by something that they do not know about. More precisely, if the war is intended to distract focus from other matters, it must be more salient than those matters; if it is a forum for demonstrating the leader’s capabilities, the public must be able to observe the leader in action. By raising the salience of the conflict, however, the leader loses much of her ability to misrepresent how it is going. As a result, when things go wrong—as they quite often do, given that the leader typically is adopting a risky policy in the hope that it will salvage her position—it will be hard to present the available facts in a good light. Consequently, she will have a hard time making a convincing case that the war should continue, and if she tries she may find her ability to do so effectively quite constrained. The Falklands War, discussed in chapter 7, provides an obvious example of this dynamic. In another case, Idi Amin’s invasion of Tanzania in 1978 is frequently attributed to his belief that the army was about to overthrow him and thus that by manufacturing a territorial dispute with Tanzania he might succeed in distracting the army and thus securing his hold on power. In the event, when the Tanzanians launched a counterinvasion, the soldiers of the Ugandan army simply refused to fight, with the result that Amin was rapidly driven from power and the war ended in a matter of months. In short, if a diversionary war starts poorly, the public will quickly realize that the leader has been lying to them; in the less-likely scenario in which it begins well, the leader will usually have achieved her goal and be open to settlement. In either case, diversionary wars will typically be short.

Hypothesis 4a: Diversionary wars will typically be short.

Leaders can also start wars to pursue idiosyncratic personal interests of which society would not approve. Because the goal of these wars is not to influence public opinion, it is not necessary that the public be able to observe them. Indeed, these leaders will benefit from having an uninformed public that is unable to critically evaluate their claims about the
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necessity and course of fighting, as an uninformed public will be more likely to give the leader the benefit of the doubt when she asserts that fighting is in the national interest. As a result, we can expect that leaders in these conflicts will make an effort to limit the availability of information about the war effort, and in particular to limit critical perspectives. Thus, for example, several scholars have argued that Lyndon Johnson escalated the Vietnam War because he believed that allowing South Vietnam to go communist would torpedo his ambitious domestic agenda, headlined by his Great Society program, much as the “loss” of China had hamstrung President Truman before him. Johnson thus authorized a steady expansion of the Vietnam War, consistently misrepresenting increased efforts that were designed simply to keep the situation in Vietnam from completely falling apart as the last pieces necessary to achieve a final victory, while discouraging coverage of events on the ground. 107 This situation could also arise when leaders believe that the public does not accurately perceive the national interest, as for example when Franklin Roosevelt deliberately misled the American public about the extent of the assistance that he was providing to Britain in the months prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor.108

There are limits to what leaders can hide from their constituents, of course. Modern media and a free press mean that events anywhere in the world can be reported quickly and in detail, so that no country now can wake up one morning to discover, as Britain repeatedly did, that it has acquired a new colony of sometimes dubious actual value in a distant part of the world.109 The emergence and spread of this technology thus has undoubtedly limited the ability of leaders to fight wars that their publics would not endorse.110 There is, however, still substantial variation in the speed with which publics will learn about ongoing wars and the urgency with which constraints on leaders may be imposed. In general, members of the public tend to be better informed and to care more about things that directly affect them or people whom they know.111 From this perspective, the more salient a war is and the easier that it is to understand and interpret events within it, the quicker the public will develop clear ideas about what is happening and thus the less leeway that leaders will have for continuing wars that their constituents would not endorse.

Salience in turn can come in multiple forms. An increase in death tolls, conflict over highly symbolic or strategically important stakes, and fighting within the territory of the country in question would all tend to increase the salience of a particular conflict, thus hastening the speed at which the public learns and limiting the leader’s flexibility. The observation that Americans who know someone who was injured or killed in the 9/11 attacks or in the Iraq War were more likely to disapprove of
President Bush is consistent with this argument. Differences in the speed of learning can also arise from variation in the nature of the war, with the distinction between conventional wars and insurgencies particularly important here, as citizens (and even governments) have to identify alternate methods for assessing how well the war is going. Whereas in conventional wars the participants generally fight distinct battles that provide an obvious focal point for attention, in insurgencies such battles are far rarer. From this perspective, the quintessential low-salience war would be a low-intensity guerrilla conflict in a peripheral part of the world fought over stakes of little importance to regular people. These sorts of principal-agent wars thus will be largely the prerogative of great powers, which have the wherewithal to undertake military interventions in far-off lands even over issues of relatively low immediate importance.

Hypothesis 4b: Policy wars may be of extended duration, but only if they are not particularly salient.

Case studies, especially in chapter 7, shed light on several of these hypotheses. As with the informational mechanism, however, statistical analysis is complicated by the lack of any *ex ante* quantitative indicator of whether a war was driven by the principal-agent mechanism, which forces me to resort to indirect tests. Two additional testable hypotheses follow from the theoretical discussion above. The first, already discussed, is that quicker information revelation should be associated with quicker settlement. The second is that wars will tend to be more limited the more tightly leaders are constrained. Constraints come from several different sources, including the army, other centers of power within the government, and at an extreme the citizenry as a whole. In practice, most of these constraints (such as the presence of additional centers of power) are more likely to exist, or are likely to take on a more substantial form, in democracies. Some of course exist in every political system: soldiers can always refuse to obey orders, and people can always engage in strikes, large protests, or revolutions. However, even in these cases, democratic leaders will have fewer options in responding to such actions: an autocrat has the option of killing dissidents en masse and without trial, something a democrat will have much more trouble doing. Thus one prediction of this model is that increased democracy will result in reduced opportunities to pursue personal gains at public expense. Most obviously, this argument implies that democratic leaders will have greater difficulty in refusing to settle an unsuccessful war, meaning that wars in which the loser is more democratic will tend to be more limited. In addition, a number of scholars have argued that democratic leaders, anticipating greater constraints, are more cautious when initiating wars,
which should imply that the wars that they initiate will be more limited.¹¹⁵

Hypothesis 4c: Principal-agent wars will end more quickly when fighting is more intense.

Hypothesis 4d: More democratic war losers and war initiators will be associated with quicker settlement.

What separates the few unusually destructive wars from the many that either end more quickly or are fought less intensely? This chapter argues that the most destructive wars are typically driven by commitment problems. Specifically, I argue that preventive wars driven by situational commitment problems—in which a power anticipating relative decline starts a war to stop the decline from occurring—are unusually difficult to resolve, because the drive to prevent the decline entails large war aims that the declining power is reluctant to reduce, even in the face of military difficulties. In addition, I identify a novel mechanism, which I refer to as the dispositional commitment problem, in which targets of preventive wars attribute aggression not to the initiator’s fear of decline but to an aggressive disposition, with the implication that the initiator will continue to launch unprovoked attacks if given the opportunity. Given these beliefs, no negotiated settlement can be expected to last, and thus it makes sense to pursue the opponent’s unconditional surrender.

This chapter also examines in detail two other mechanisms that can produce wars but that for related reasons do not produce unlimited wars. In the informational mechanism, wars begin because leaders have divergent expectations about how fighting will go. Once fighting starts, those expectations begin to converge, more quickly when fighting is more intense, until they are close enough that settlement becomes possible. In principal-agent conflicts, leaders start wars that serve their own interests, but not those of their constituents. These wars are sustainable, however, only to the extent that the leader can hold onto power and avoid pressure to settle. Constraints on leaders in turn become stronger as their constituents realize, again on the basis of events on the battlefield and at the negotiating table, that they have been misrepresenting how well the war can be expected to go. This argument thus implies that both informational and principal-agent wars can be either long or intense, but not both.