The war between Paraguay and its neighbors, which was fought from 1864 to 1870 and which ended with the utter destruction of Paraguay, is one of the great unknown wars in history, little studied despite being at a per capita level quite possibly the deadliest conflict in the past two centuries. While disagreement exists about the exact numbers of dead, it is undeniable that Paraguayan human losses were huge, by some estimates as high as two-thirds of the prewar population. For outsiders, the sketch of the war makes the Paraguayan president—Francisco Solano López—appear frankly insane. As leader of a small buffer state whose independence was far from assured or even fully acknowledged, he attacked both Brazil and Argentina, the great powers of South America. He then refused to back down, fighting against worsening odds for six years, in the process dragging his country to ruin. Traditional histories generally portrayed López as a psychopath, a nineteenth-century Hitler determined whatever the odds to turn his country into an empire or to destroy it in trying. Such a man seems well outside the ken of rationalist theories of war.

Closer examination, however, shows that López had clear and reasonable justifications for engaging in the war that he undertook. While the course he chose was risky, he believed for understandable reasons that inaction was also quite risky. Brazil posed a constant creeping threat to Paraguay’s survival, while Argentine leaders in Buenos Aires had never truly reconciled themselves to Paraguayan independence. Historically, Paraguay had survived, like most buffer states, by playing off the two powers against each other, but the rapprochement of Argentina and Brazil, associated most strongly with Bartolomé Mitre’s acquisition of power in Argentina, fundamentally reshaped power politics in the region.
Brazil’s intervention in Uruguay, supported by Argentina and justified on flimsy pretexts, was not unsurprisingly interpreted as the first step in the annexation of Uruguay and Paraguay. Paraguay’s only real access to the outside world—essential for supplies both military and mundane—was through the various rivers that fed into La Plata; all ran through Argentina, Uruguay, or both. The loss of a Uruguayan ally thus weighed more heavily than Uruguay’s slight capabilities might have indicated.

Had he recognized how the war would go, López likely would not have chosen to start it. However, the decision to attack was less insane than it at first appears. Paraguay by most accounts had the best army in the region and thus had a reasonable chance of defeating the Brazilians in open battle. Moreover, one of the apparently most inexplicable decisions of the war—attacking Argentina when already at war with Brazil—becomes much more understandable when we recognize that it was far from certain that all Argentina would rally against him. The country was deeply divided, and influential figures—most notably Justo José de Urquiza, the governor of Entre Ríos Province—had more in common with López than they did with Bartolomé Mitre in Buenos Aires. An alliance with important Argentine Federalists was definitely a possibility, and had it occurred the war could easily have followed a very different path. When he launched his attack, therefore, López was less crazy than in retrospect he appears to have been.

Given the strategic problem posed by the gradual increase in Brazilian and Argentine ability to project power into the interior and the closer relations between the two traditional rivals, López needed a significant victory to force his opponents to abandon their claims to Uruguay and to force a final delineation of the disputed border. When his initial attack miscarried, therefore, he was willing to continue to fight. Once the Allies forced their way onto Paraguayan territory, however, it was clear that the best possible military result for Paraguay would be a successful defensive war, which would not address the sources of Paraguay’s strategic decline. It was only at this point, then, that he began to demonstrate willingness to negotiate on terms in line with the military situation on the ground. This behavior accords closely with what we would expect were a fear of future decline to be the primary motivation for war.

Yet here the logic of the dispositional commitment problem intervened to assure a war to the finish. Deeply offended by Paraguayan policy, key Brazilian officials, central among them Emperor Pedro II, had concluded that a viable peace required the expurgation of López and the entire system of caudillo politics that he represented. Indeed, this case provides crucial evidence for the unconditional surrender mechanism. The Brazilians, who appear not to have intended to do what López feared, concluded that the Paraguayan leader was a menace with whom negotiation
was impossible, whereas the Argentines, who actually did want to annex Paraguay, understood his motivations and hence were willing to negotiate. In the end, convinced of López’s iniquity, the Brazilians rejected entreaties from all quarters to negotiate, instead carrying the war forward at high cost until the Paraguayan defenses crumbled, Asunción was occupied, and López himself fell on the field of battle.

The History and Anomalies of Paraguayan Policy

Under the Spanish Empire, Paraguay was part of the same viceroyalty as what ultimately became Argentina, with effective power centralized in Buenos Aires. Following independence from Spain during the Napoleonic period, the Paraguayans resisted attempts to bring them under the auspices of a new government in Buenos Aires and declared independence, although no power recognized them as independent for thirty years. Indeed, at this time and continuing through the Paraguayan War, it was unclear which regions (if any) would remain independent and which would be absorbed under the control of Buenos Aires or Brazil. Paraguay and Uruguay ultimately emerged as independent (if highly constrained) states from this process, but others in similar positions—such as Corrientes, Entre Ríos, and Rio Grande do Sul—did not. The new Paraguayan state had disputes, including large border disagreements, with both its larger neighbors, and following the classic strategy of a buffer state, it played each against the other to secure its own independence.

This approach worked well when both Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro lacked the capacity to project significant power into the South American interior, and it remained functional even when that guarantee vanished so long as the Paraguayans could ensure that each of their larger neighbors would oppose any unilateral move by its rival. Paraguayan strategy was undermined, however, by a rapprochement between Brazil and Argentina that began with Bartolomé Mitre’s accession to power in Buenos Aires in 1860. The primary manifestation of this rapprochement was agreement on affairs in Uruguay, where liberals (Colorados) under Venancio Flores had rebelled in an effort to overthrow the conservative Blanco regime. The Argentines stood by passively, even aiding Flores behind the scenes, while the Brazilians provided increasing support, ultimately intervening directly. The Blancos appealed to López for assistance, and he remonstrated with the Brazilians, but to no effect. At this point, therefore, he decided to go to war.

Geography posed a significant obstacle to direct assistance, however, as figure 3.1 illustrates. Paraguay and Uruguay lacked a common border,
Figure 3.1 South America prior to the Paraguayan War. Reprinted from The Paraguayan War, Volume I: Causes and Early Conduct by Thomas L. Whigham by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 2002 by Thomas L. Whigham.
and passage through Brazilian territory would have been extremely difficult. López’s first move was therefore to attack northeast into the Brazilian province of Mato Grosso, which allowed him to capture a large cache of arms and had the potential to divert the Brazilians from their interference in Uruguay. His incursions succeeded militarily but failed strategically, as the Brazilians did not significantly oppose the Paraguayan advance into the province, instead pressing the attack on Montevideo in Uruguay. López then turned south and requested permission from Buenos Aires to cross the province of Corrientes, which was frequently rebellious but generally acknowledged to be Argentine territory. Mitre in Buenos Aires refused, prompting López to declare war. By this point, however, the Brazilians had taken Montevideo and installed Flores in power; the Paraguayans advanced down the Uruguay River to reverse the decision, but ultimately failed and were forced back to their territory.

In response to the Paraguayan attack, Brazil, Argentina, and a now-occupied Uruguay formalized their alliance through a treaty signed on May 1, 1865 (hence the common name “the War of the Triple Alliance”). In this secret alliance, Brazil and Argentina each agreed to permit the other to satisfy the full extent of its claims on Paraguayan territory. Achieving these goals required that the Allied forces advance into Paraguay, a task that proved far more difficult than expected, as rough terrain and stiff Paraguayan resistance slowed progress. After a buildup, the Allies forced their way across the Paraná River into Paraguayan territory in April 1866. The subsequent advance toward the main Paraguayan defensive fortifications at Humaitá was slow and costly, and it stopped completely following a significant Allied defeat in September at Curupaytí, which, when combined with domestic unrest, forced Argentina to withdraw the bulk of its army from the war effort. The scale of this defeat forced the war into a pause of almost a year during which the Allies brought forward reinforcements; during this time, the front did not move, although Paraguayan forces constantly harassed their opponents. The Allies began to move again in August 1867 and, after hard fighting, eventually circumvented the Paraguayan defenses and captured Humaitá; its fall doomed Asunción, which fell on January 5, 1869. At this point, López transitioned to a strategy of guerrilla war, reforming his army (which by then consisted almost entirely of the very old and the very young) and fighting the Brazilians on the run. The war thus continued for more than a year, ending only when Brazilian forces tracked down and killed López on March 1, 1870.

That the war continued this long militarily was a function of difficult terrain, Allied disorganization and strategic errors, and the conviction and ability of Paraguayan soldiers. Yet politically there were many
opportunities to end the war far earlier. Although international involvement was limited, American representatives made a number of serious attempts to mediate, while representatives of European powers made some more half-hearted tries. Moreover, at several points in the later portion of the conflict, including a well-known meeting at Yataity-Corá just before the Battle of Curupaity as well as in response to several mediation offers, López indicated a willingness to negotiate. Throughout the war, however, the Brazilians consistently rejected all talk of negotiations or peace, even on quite advantageous terms. This resolution to carry the fight through to the finish was not shared by the Argentines or the Uruguayans, and indeed after Curupaity the two countries withdrew all but a token force. In the end, therefore, the conflict became a war to the death between Paraguay and Brazil.

Ultimately, this case contains a number of important puzzles. Why would López pick a fight with the region’s greatest power when his ability to defeat his opponent was quite questionable? Why, having done so, would he then decide to go to war against the other regional power as well? Why would he continue to fight even after the fall of Uruguay, when the military odds were stacked against him? Why, in other words, would he precipitate and then fight a serious war in which Paraguay’s chances seemed so poor? On the other hand, once López began to demonstrate a greater willingness to negotiate, why were the Brazilians so implacably opposed to talks, especially considering the high costs and limited material benefits of a war to the finish?

As I detail below, the answer to the questions about Paraguayan intentions hinged in part on the fact that López had reasons for optimism that are not immediately apparent, largely because some of them did not work out the way that he (not unreasonably) expected. A larger part, however, was structural: Paraguay was in a dangerous position that threatened only to get worse, and given reasonable fears about the intentions of his opponents, López decided that Paraguay’s choice was between fighting an unattractive war or waiting for its neighbors to partition the country at a later date. In this context, he was willing to accept even a fairly risky and costly war, given what he saw as the alternative. He failed, however, to anticipate the nature of the Brazilian response, and as a result the war that he got resulted in the utter destruction of Paraguay.

**Divergent Expectations: Necessary but Not Sufficient**

One of the more obvious puzzles of the Paraguayan War is why López decided to challenge either one of South America’s great powers, let
alone both. While the decision to start a war against both Brazil and Argentina has led some to question López’s sanity, the Paraguayan leader’s behavior was less utterly inexplicable than it initially appears. Paraguay was far more capable than would have been expected from its isolated geography and relatively small territorial size. Moreover, López started the war with the ultimately incorrect but hardly unjustified belief that he would have important allies on his side. From this perspective, the informational mechanism has at least a partial claim to explaining the decision to start the war.

Consider first Paraguayan capabilities. Under Carlos Antonio López, the father and predecessor to Francisco Solano López, the country moved away from its previous autarchy, importing both goods (including weapons) and advisers from Europe. When combined with the imposition of a universal draft, the creation of a domestic capacity to produce munitions, and a strong state role in the economy that facilitated extraction, these policies meant that Francisco Solano López inherited a surprisingly capable army upon assuming power. By contrast, Paraguay’s two main opponents were unprepared for war. While Brazil had a huge national guard, that force was poorly equipped, untrained, and effectively useless—when the war began, the government created a new army rather than rely on the guard—and the standing army was a small, ill-trained force that consisted largely of press-ganged vagrants. Moreover, the conservative elites who dominated the country viewed a strong army as a threat to the existing social order. In Argentina, there was no national army, as the political divide between Buenos Aires and the provinces (discussed in greater detail below) was paralleled in the military. While Mitre was taking steps to develop a national army centered on Buenos Aires when the war began, this process had only just begun. Uruguayan forces, on either side of the Blanco-Colorado political divide, were experienced but few in number and poorly trained. Overall, therefore, Paraguay had the largest and best-equipped army in the region, while its opponents would need more than a little time to make up the gap. Indeed, in the opening stages of the war, Mitre apparently worried that the invading Paraguayan armies would join up at the junction of the Uruguay and Paraná rivers to directly threaten Buenos Aires.

As for the apparently inexplicable decision to provoke a war with Argentina when already at war with Brazil, here hindsight is a hindrance to our ability to accurately understand López’s decision. In brief, he had good reason to believe that were Argentina to get involved in the war much of the country would fight on Paraguay’s side. The country was split between Federalists, led by Justo José de Urquiza of Entre Ríos province and disproportionately populated by the rural caudillos, and centralists led by Mitre and concentrated in Buenos Aires, although also
present elsewhere. Attempts immediately after independence to impose a centralized government run from the capital encountered significant resistance that ultimately forced the adoption of a federal constitution. For more than twenty years, Juan Manuel de Rosas effectively ruled the country as governor of Buenos Aires, but he had to contend constantly with regional caudillos and ultimately angered enough people domestically and internationally to generate a coalition that rallied behind Urquiza to overthrow him. For six years after the overthrow Buenos Aires was legally independent from the rest of Argentina, until Urquiza, recognizing that the provinces were dependent on revenue from the main city’s trade, invaded in 1859 and reestablished the political link. When Mitre took power as governor of Buenos Aires in 1860, therefore, he was in a decidedly secondary position. It was only when he successfully fought off yet another invasion by Urquiza in 1861 and then was elected the first president of the Argentine Republic in 1862 that he had any serious claim to ruling the country, and even then he could not count on Urquiza’s loyalty. To say that López attacked Argentina is thus to give the country greater fixity than it actually possessed at the time.

This situation was integral to López’s planning. When he requested permission to cross Corrientes, he believed that, should war happen, Urquiza would side with him. Indeed, he had good reason for believing this, as Urquiza had said he would: during the Mato Grosso campaign, the caudillo allegedly told López’s representative that “he favored Paraguay in its war against Brazil and that if it were to go through Corrientes to invade the empire, he would personally come and offer himself as a volunteer.” Moreover, Urquiza’s followers, and even his son, were incensed with Mitre’s Uruguay policy and thus were pressing him to back Paraguay. While Urquiza began to backtrack prior to López’s request, he could not undo the effect that previous signals of support had had on López’s calculations. Even after Urquiza’s loyalty to Mitre became clear, internal unrest posed a significant obstacle to Argentina’s vigorous prosecution of the war.

Overall, therefore, to use the words of one of the foremost experts on the war, “the marshal’s plan was ambitious but not insane.” López was clearly gambling, and arguably gambling at fairly long odds, when he took his country to war against the two foremost powers of the region, but it was not wishful thinking for him to have hoped that his gamble might pay off. He was ultimately mistaken in his expectations, particularly with respect to Urquiza, and had he better understood the situation in Argentina he probably would have been more cautious in taking his country to war. It is thus impossible to account for his behavior without recourse to the informational mechanism.
That said, there are significant limits to the informational mechanism. To say that López’s plan was not insane is not to say that it was necessarily a good idea. If López had reason for optimism, a war with Brazil was nonetheless a significant risk, and his declaration of war on Argentina likely made it easier for Urquiza to stay loyal. Moreover, throughout the period of the Paraguayan offensive against Brazil and Argentina, López did not articulate clear political demands of the sort that his opponents might conceivably agree to, nor does he appear to have scaled back his ambitions in response to the unfavorable revelation that Urquiza would not back him. In addition, the decision to push Paraguayan troops far outside his country’s territory entailed significant risks that, from the perspective of the informational mechanism, were unnecessary. Simply holding Mato Grosso, the Brazilian province captured in the initial months of the war, might well have been sufficient to induce Brazil to negotiate a final delineation of the two countries’ borders, long a Paraguayan objective. In all, based solely on expectations, it is hard to understand why López felt the need to launch a risky military adventure to assist an ally (the Uruguayan Blancos) of dubious loyalty and minimal capacity when a more limited policy might have achieved significant gains, nor can the informational mechanism explain why he did not try harder to escape from the war as Paraguay’s diplomatic situation deteriorated. To understand these decisions, we must turn to the preventive war mechanism.

Paraguay’s Perilous Position and Fears of the Future

Ultimately, an explanation for López’s ambitious foreign policy and his willingness to run acknowledged risks must take into account the difficult, and worsening, position in which Paraguay found itself. The basic problem was that the country was surrounded by expansionist neighbors whose refusal to guarantee Paraguay’s borders or at times even acknowledge its independence prompted fears that any passive policies would merely acquiesce in the gradual dismantling of the country. Traditionally, and again after the war, Paraguayan leaders had dealt with this problem by playing the two powers off against each other. Mitre’s rise and the subsequent Brazilian intervention in Uruguay fundamentally undermined this strategy and raised the specter of a blockade of the Paraná River—Paraguay’s outlet to the sea—that by cutting off access to Europe would slowly strangle López’s country and set the stage for an eventual partition. In this context, continuation of current trends threatened Paraguay’s survival, while war provided the only available option to upset those trends. This interpretation thus explains why López

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adopted such a risky strategy and made such apparently extreme demands. Ultimately, of course, Paraguay failed militarily and had to revert to a defensive posture. Consistent with the preventive war argument, López refused to negotiate until it was clear that there was absolutely no hope of achieving the kind of victory that would be necessary to prevent Brazil from consolidating its position in Uruguay.

To understand the dangers that López confronted, it is necessary first to briefly review his country’s history. In the final decades of the Spanish Empire, Paraguay was united administratively with Argentina and Uruguay under the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. In this context, Buenos Aires used its favorable geographic position to impose shipping taxes that stifled Asunción (as well as the Argentine interior). Following the break with Spain in 1813, the Paraguayans established an effective independence that was, however, only tenuously acknowledged by its neighbors, who advanced significant territorial claims that were the basis for persistent border disputes. Repeated attempts to resolve the disputes under Francisco Solano López’s predecessors—José Gaspar de Francia and Carlos Antonio López—ended in failure, with the Paraguayans typically given little evidence that opposing interlocutors were willing to negotiate in good faith.

The Brazilians, who inherited the Portuguese strategy of encouraging settlement to subvert legal border agreements by changing the facts on the ground, were pushing settlers into Mato Grosso, an isolated interior province that was almost impossible to reach except along the river through Paraguay. From there, geography provided a clear motive for a policy of gradual expansion: “from the Brazilian point of view, Paraguay was the natural extension of Mato Grosso, and any geographer could see that the republic stood poised like a dagger at the entrails of the empire.” Meanwhile, the Paraguayans were exercised by the shipment of cannons into Mato Grosso that, while in reality of limited military utility, provided apparent evidence of hostile intentions. López could thus be forgiven for concluding that inaction merely invited the Brazilians to subvert his country’s independence gradually.

Meanwhile, Paraguay and Argentina disputed ownership over a large, if sparsely populated, region. The real danger here, however, was that many in Argentina, Mitre among them, had never reconciled themselves to Paraguayan independence and hoped to reunify the disparate territories of the old Spanish viceroyalty in a large Argentine state that would constitute a true rival to Brazil for hegemony in South America. In this context, a centralized government dominated by Buenos Aires would pose the greatest threat (influential provinces like Entre Ríos and Corrientes frequently shared interests with Paraguay and indeed contemplated independence). As head of the porteños—the inhabitants of
Buenos Aires who tended to favor a strong, centralized government—Mitre thus posed a threat purely from the perspective of Argentine-Paraguayan relations.

That said, the threat posed by a centralized Argentine government was dwarfed by the danger associated with Mitre’s improved relations with the Brazilian Empire. Paraguay was a buffer state, and buffer states—generally unable to guarantee their independence through force of arms alone—have always had to rely for their survival on their ability to manipulate tensions between their stronger neighbors. Should such tensions vanish (or should the rivals work out an equitable plan for partition), even simple survival cannot be guaranteed; it is thus unsurprising that buffer state status is the strongest predictor of state death in the international system. Geopolitically a buffer state, Paraguay was however unusual in that in 1864 it had the means plausibly to do something to address the problems created by an Argentine-Brazilian rapprochement.

Internal Argentine divisions, discussed with reference to López’s bases for optimism above, were at the center of the issue. Mitre’s hold on power was threatened by opposition from the Federalists, many of whom felt greater affinity to the Paraguayans than they did to the citizens of Buenos Aires. Thus, for example, Ricardo López Jordán, who ultimately would assassinate Urquiza in 1870 in large part in response to his policies in the war, appealed to him at the time, saying, “You call us up to fight in Paraguay. Never, General: those people are our brothers. Call us up to fight against porteños or Brazilians. We are ready. They are our enemies. . . . This, I’m sure, is the true sentiment of the enterrriana people.” Given these internal divisions, Mitre saw an alliance with the Brazilians as a means to cement his authority and that of his faction. This political situation thus served as the basis for cooperation in Uruguay, where Brazil intervened directly while Argentina funneled weapons and supplies to Flores. From Paraguay’s perspective, of course, a strategy of playing the two rivals off each other ceased to work if the rivals became friends. López had two options available to him: to wait and hope that opposition within Argentina to cooperation with an old enemy would bring about Mitre’s fall, or to take action to break up the incipient alliance and perhaps precipitate that fall directly. Both options were risky; he chose the latter.

Reasons and Aims: López’s Decisions for War

The final piece of the puzzle was the Brazilian intervention in Uruguay. British intervention in the Cisplatine War of the 1820s, undertaken
to protect trade throughout the region, was the original reason why Urugua
y attained independence.  

Uruguay’s independence thus benefited Paraguay, as it complicated any attempt to bottle up Paraguayan trade and contact with the outside world. Indeed, over time Paraguay became increasingly dependent on international trade, both for economic development and for the military supplies that would be needed to fend off encroachments into Paraguayan territory.  

When Argentina and Brazil turned away from their traditional rivalry to jointly back Flores and the Colorados in Uruguay, however, the specter of encirclement came fully into view. With Uruguay under hostile control, there was little that the Paraguayans could do to prevent Argentina and Brazil from simply shutting off commerce to Asunción to slowly but surely strangle Paraguay, especially as the Argentine occupation and fortification of the island of Martín García in the context of the Uruguayan intervention increased the direct control that the Argentines could exercise over the Paraná River delta.  

Nor did the participants do much to allay Paraguayan fears. The Brazilians never provided a satisfactory explanation for the buildup of military forces in the Mato Grosso, nor did either Brazil or Argentina give good reason why a final delineation of the borders was impossible.  

When López sent his ultimatum to the Brazilians, the Brazilian ambassador in Asunción took it on himself to reply snippily that Paraguay’s involvement in the Uruguayan affair was not needed.  

Caricatures of López that appeared in the press in both Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro certainly did not help: from his perspective, not only did his neighbors ignore his legitimate concerns; they belittled him for raising complaints.  

All of these developments could only have added to López’s concern that, if Paraguay wished to remain independent, it would need to act quickly.  

To the extent that they have survived, López’s public and private statements are consistent with the view that a fear of future decline drove his policy decisions. In his ultimatum to Brazil, he closed by stating that

the government of the Republic of Paraguay will consider any occupation of the Oriental territory [i.e. Uruguay] as an attempt against the equilibrium of the states of the Plate which interests the Republic of Paraguay as a guarantee for its security, peace, and prosperity; and that it protests in the most solemn manner against the act, freeing itself for the future of every responsibility that may arise from the present declaration.  

Likewise, one of López’s European advisers reported that, when deciding whether to seize the Brazilian ship Marqués de Olinda—the first Paraguayan act of war—López averred that “if we don’t have a war now with
Brazil, we shall have one at a less convenient time for ourselves.” More generally, throughout the war he accused the principal Allies of aggression despite the fact that neither of them had directly attacked him.

Paraguayan war aims are similarly consistent with what we would expect from the preventive motivation for war. Although significant dispute exists as to exactly what López hoped to achieve, his minimal aims seem clear. By invading down the rivers, he hoped ultimately to reach Uruguay, where he would then restore the Blancos to power. This action would restrict the Brazilian and Argentine influence in Uruguay, preventing the anticipated shift in capabilities that their domination over Uruguay would ultimately imply. This goal was audacious: Paraguay did not share a border with Uruguay, and thus the Paraguayan army had to advance through several hundred miles of non-Paraguayan territory and then reverse the status quo by taking a city that not many years earlier had successfully withstood a nine-year siege. This plan thus involved sending his best units far forward, where they were in danger of being cut off and forced to surrender, as indeed ultimately happened. As a military plan, it was thus far riskier than a more defensive strategy, such as seizing Mato Grosso and then waiting to repel the Brazilian counterattack. Only this aggressive strategy held out any prospect of dealing with the problems that motivated López to start the war in the first place, however: if Paraguay simply occupied Mato Grosso and waited, nothing would prevent Brazil from simply waiting until a blockade had crippled Paraguay, or from reaching an agreement only to abrogate it later.

As long as the phase of Paraguayan offensive operations continued, López never raised the prospect of negotiations. The naval defeat at Riauchuelo and the subsequent capitulation of the forward armies, most notably the surrender at Uruguaiana in September 1865, blunted the Paraguayan ability to attack, however, and once the allies forced their way across the Paraná into Paraguayan territory López had to admit that his war aims were no longer achievable. It was thus not until 1866 that he began to show an interest in negotiations. Historians have debated the degree to which these offers were sincere, with both detractors and admirers of López frequently arguing that they were intended only to buy time for his army to build up their defenses. Yet there is good reason to believe that he was genuinely interested in peace, should peace be available on reasonable terms. He was the leader who proposed the discussions at Yataity-Corá, and in the discussions he was willing to entertain a range of proposals, although the refusal of the Brazilian representative to talk (and the Allied refusal to scale down territorial demands) constituted an insuperable bar to any agreement. At later points, he was willing to discuss specific bases for peace with American and European
representatives who might serve as mediators with the Allies. What he was not willing to do was to sign over his country’s independence when the Allies were not yet in a position to compel him to capitulate. Aware that Paraguay was bottled up with no prospect for escape, he nonetheless sought to use Paraguay’s still-considerable capacity to resist invasion to save his country at least for the time being. His position at this point was quite reasonable: the Allied territorial conditions went well beyond what they could reasonably demand given the military situation prior to the fall of Humaitá in late 1868. Throughout this period, therefore, Paraguayan policy was consistent with what we would expect from a country responding to an anticipated adverse shift in relative capabilities.

Summary of a Preventive War

The puzzles of the length and destructiveness of the Paraguayan War are in many ways closely connected to the puzzles of its onset. Why did the leader of a buffer state start a war with not just one but two regional powers? Why adopt a risky and aggressive military strategy when a more limited approach would have increased the challenges for his opponents? Why were the Paraguayans and López willing to fight so fanatically, literally to the death? The willingness to adopt an aggressive military strategy and to countenance high costs in the pursuit of victory was closely connected to the extraordinary destructiveness of this war. As with any war, the answer to these questions is nuanced, but the broad theoretical predictions from chapter 1 are borne out quite well. A full understanding of López’s strategy must draw on both the informational and the preventive war mechanisms. The informational dynamic is particularly pertinent for López’s decision to attack Argentina when already at war with Brazil: given the expectation that Urquiza and much of rural Argentina would rally to his side, it was far from clear that the invasion of Argentina would greatly worsen Paraguay’s strategic position. The aggressiveness and urgency of Paraguayan policy can be understood only given the understanding of Paraguay’s perilous and, more important, worsening strategic position. Intervention to prevent Brazilian and Argentine domination of Uruguay was reasonable given the inference that Paraguay was a logical next target and that undermining Paraguayan independence would be easier once Brazil and Argentina were in a stronger position cut Paraguay off from the outside world. Moreover, war with Argentina, by provoking civil unrest in that country, had a good chance of unseating Bartolomé Mitre and thus addressing the primary source of Paraguay’s strategic decline, which was the rapprochement between Brazil and Argentina under Mitre. In this context, an
aggressive war, even at relatively long odds, made sense. It was this strategic setting that provoked López into launching an unusually aggressive and risky war and that helped to ensure that Paraguayan resolve would be so high: although the aggressor in this conflict, the Paraguayans sincerely believed that they were fighting for their independence.

War to the Death

An explanation for why and how the war started and the way in which it was initially waged starts, therefore, from the Paraguayan fear of decline. Yet Paraguayan fears, and the policies that followed from them, cannot account fully for the way in which this war ultimately was fought. By the midpoint of the war, López began to indicate a willingness to settle the war on terms that were reasonable given the military situation. At this point, then, we might have expected to see the war move to a close. Indeed, on behalf of Argentina, Bartolomé Mitre repeatedly indicated his willingness to negotiate, both in talks with López and in discussions with potential mediators.43

The Brazilians, however, were resolutely opposed to peace. In November 1865, Emperor Pedro issued an order that formally “forbade any meeting with López or one of his representatives . . . and decreed that any proposals of peace, or of an armistice, should immediately be rejected, no matter what the circumstances in which they were made.”44 Brazilian commanders consistently obeyed both the letter and the spirit of this command. Thus, in the negotiations at Yataity-Corá, the Brazilian general refused to shake López’s hand and departed before any negotiations could begin. Likewise, several American offers of mediation foun-dered on the refusal of the Brazilians to contemplate negotiation.45 This attitude was also in evidence after the fall of Asunción, which constituted the effective military denouement to the war: for Brazilian political leaders, including Emperor Pedro, as long as López remained in Paraguay the war was not over.46 It was for this reason that the war could only end when the Brazilian army tracked down López’s remaining force—by now consisting almost exclusively of the very young and the very old—and killed the Paraguayan leader on the field of battle. By this time, Paraguay had been utterly destroyed, while the costs of fighting the war had led to extensive internal rebellion in Argentina and had forced significant social changes in Brazil that eventually would lead to the overthrow of the monarchy.47

If Brazil had been committed to conquering and annexing Paraguay, this decision might have been understandable, although the war would still have been extremely costly. In reality, however, their actions after the
war demonstrated quite clearly that the Brazilians had no intention of annexing or partitioning Paraguay. This situation thus raises a number of important puzzles. Why were the Brazilians so adamantly opposed to negotiation, especially when their ultimate political aims were in many respects quite limited? And why was their opposition to negotiation not shared by the Argentines?

In this section, I argue that unconditional surrender occurred in this case by the logic of the dispositional commitment problem: facing an unexpected, and unexpectedly ambitious, military attack, the Brazilians were unable to comprehend López’s decisions and thus concluded that their adversary was implacably aggressive and that a sustainable peace would require regime change in Paraguay. This inference followed centrally from the disconnect between Paraguayan fears and Brazilian intentions: although López’s belief that the Brazilians sought to extinguish Paraguayan independence was reasonable given the available evidence, it was incorrect. By contrast, available evidence indicates quite clearly that the Argentines did desire to annex Paraguay. In this context, however, they had a better understanding of López’s decisions and thus did not reach the extreme conclusions of their allies.

Explaining a War to the Finish

Hypothesis 2b predicts that the target of a preventive war will be more likely to demand unconditional surrender when it does not intend to do what the initiator fears. López feared that his opponents were conspiring to extinguish Paraguayan independence and launched an aggressive war in an attempt to address that threat. Actions prior to, during, and after the war clearly indicate that his suspicions about Argentine intentions were largely correct, whereas his beliefs about the Brazilian intentions, if not unfounded, were untrue. There is good reason to believe that it was this difference that drove the variation in Argentine and Brazilian policies.

Consider first the evidence that the Argentines, or more accurately the porteños under Mitre, had never reconciled themselves to Paraguayan independence and would, given the opportunity, happily have extended their domain to Asunción and beyond. Under the Spanish Empire, Paraguay had been governed from Buenos Aires, and while internal disunion in the decades after independence militated against an attempt at restoring control, they retained a formal claim to Paraguay. Thus, for example, when Austria (at Brazilian behest) recognized Paraguayan independence in 1848, Juan Manuel de Rosas in Buenos Aires sent a long protest in which he asserted that “the Argentine Republic always preserved its rights over the territory of Paraguay and regards it as one of the
Argentine provinces.” In the negotiations over the terms of the Treaty of Triple Alliance, the Argentines were greatly frustrated by the (minimal) restrictions that the Brazilians wished to impose on Argentine demands, with Foreign Minister Rufino de Elizalde observing to the British representative in Buenos Aires that he “hoped he should live to see Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the Argentine Republic united in one Confederation.” Once the fighting stopped, Argentine territorial demands were limited only by opposition of the Brazilians, who as the primary occupying power were however in a position to significantly limit Argentine territorial gains. The Argentine leaders thus cannot have been overly surprised when López accused them of seeking to subvert his country’s independence.

The discussion in the previous section demonstrated that López also had good reason to fear Brazil, given how little the Brazilians had done to allay Paraguayan concerns over the years. Yet with the benefit of hindsight we can see quite clearly that the Brazilians did not in fact intend to partition or annex Paraguay. The aforementioned negotiations over the Treaty of Triple Alliance provide one relevant data point: although the Brazilians have been criticized for their territorial promises to the Argentines, they held the line on maintaining Paraguay as an independent state. More important, once the war was over, the Brazilians were the primary occupying power, a result of their willingness to continue to fight after the Argentines had withdrawn all but a token force. In a position to impose whatever settlement they desired, they instead quickly signed a separate deal with the Paraguayans in which they were granted their relatively limited territorial demands and then backed Paraguay in forcing Argentina to accept less than had been promised under the Treaty of Triple Alliance. Under these circumstances, it is far from surprising that when López justified his war by claiming to be the target of Brazilian aggression, the Brazilians reacted with incomprehending rage.

And it is not an overstatement to say that the Brazilians responded with rage. Facing López’s invasion, the Brazilians discounted his stated concerns and convinced themselves that he must be some sort of miniature Napoleon, bent on continual expansion and hence a threat to peace as long as he remained in office. More specifically, they concluded, and publicly averred, that “they were fighting the unbridled ambitions of a tyrant and no one but they themselves could guarantee his extinction.” Given that inference, peace short of complete victory was folly: in short, in the assessment of one expert on the war, the Brazilians were motivated by an “ideological conviction . . . that López, and those like him, must go.” Subsequent historiography built on these wartime views, in part, as one scholar points out, because “[López’s] own explanation for
his actions—that he was responding to aggression by Brazil which constituted a threat to Paraguay’s survival—has not been taken seriously, on the ground that later history proves that Brazil was not the menace to his nation that Solano López imagined it to be”; this interpretation, as this scholar points out, is “hindsight with a vengeance,” as it neglects the good reasons López had to suspect the Brazilians. 55

Consistent with hypothesis 2c, this assessment contrasts sharply with the way the Brazilians had viewed López and Paraguay prior to the war. In the past, of course, the Brazilians had worked with Paraguay to check Argentina and had appreciated Paraguayan support for the overthrow of Rosas in 1851. 56 Prior to becoming president in 1862, López had been heavily involved in policy, for example mediating a peaceful solution to a dispute between Mitre and Urquiza in 1859 that brought him a brief period of general acclaim. 57 Before the Paraguayan declaration of war, few in Brazil had even heard of López, and the few who knew of him thought of him as the unimportant leader of an economically backward state, far from the monster he was eventually seen to be. The central role of the Brazilian inference that the cause of the war was the aggressive character of the Paraguayan leadership can also be seen in the disappearance of almost all animosity toward Paraguay once López and other high-ranking individuals had been replaced. 58

The findings from this case thus strongly support the argument that “innocent” targets of preventive wars are more likely to demand unconditional surrender. In particular, the contrast between Brazil and Argentina is unusually illuminating: within the context of the same war, Brazil, which did not intend to do what Paraguay feared, demanded unconditional surrender, while the Argentines, whose motives were more in line with López’s expectations, did not. Moreover, the trajectory of Brazilian beliefs accords with the expectations of the theory advanced here: it was only after his preventive attack that he came to be seen as an aggressive monster whose removal was a necessary precursor to a sustainable peace.

The Alternative Explanations

The three main rationalist explanations cannot provide a convincing account of unconditional surrender. While one could certainly attribute initial Brazilian intransigence to overoptimism, the difficulties that they encountered along the way to victory, and in particular the significant delay and escalation of costs following the disastrous Battle of Curupayty, provided ample opportunity for updating prior beliefs. That the Brazilians continued to refuse to negotiate beyond this point cannot be attributed to excessive optimism. There is also no great evidence that
they were more optimistic about the ease of victory than were the Argentines.

Similarly, a domestic political story has significant weaknesses, except insofar as it acknowledges Emperor Pedro’s ability to impose a policy that at least some in Brazil may have thought overly harsh. Of all the interested factions relevant for this conflict, the Unitarians in Argentina arguably benefited the most, as the country’s unity was far greater after the war than it had been before, but Mitre was consistently open to negotiation. By contrast, Emperor Pedro ultimately weakened his hold on power by insisting on the prosecution of the war to the finish, most notably by freeing slaves who were willing to fight and by opening the army—traditionally the prerogative of the nobility—to the lower and middle classes. These changes turned the army into a significant force in domestic politics, one that was ultimately able to launch a coup in 1889 that overthrew Pedro and ushered in a federal republic.

Nor can commitment problems grounded in a fear of decline provide a convincing account. The Brazilians appear to have recognized that the tide of history was on their side, and they certainly did not believe that Paraguay was headed for a significant expansion in capabilities, especially after the defeat of the forward Paraguayan army. The constant harping on López’s iniquities contrasts with the absence of any commentary focusing on shifts in future capabilities. Certainly the refusal to consider the war over even following the fall of Asunción cannot be understood on the basis of fear of an imminent increase in Paraguayan capabilities.

Overall, then, this case provides strong support for my theory. Consistent with the argument, López initiated the war out of a preventive motivation, based on the fear that Paraguay’s larger neighbors were conspiring to partition his country. The Argentines, who genuinely desired to annex Paraguay, understood these fears and thus treated López as a normal politician with whom negotiation was entirely possible. The Brazilians, by contrast, had no intention of taking over Paraguay; they misinterpreted López’s behavior and concluded that only a complete victory could bring a sustained peace.