Additional Commitment Problem Cases
The Crimean, Pacific, and Iran-Iraq Wars

In-depth case studies of the Paraguayan War and of World War II in Europe both have provided support for my central explanations for the particularly deadly wars that I am most interested in explaining. This chapter supplements those case studies with minicases of the Crimean War, World War II in the Pacific, and the Iran-Iraq War. Although these cases are presented in far less detail than the previous two, they provide an additional opportunity to see both the preventive war and the unconditional surrender mechanisms in action. In all three wars, one participant had significant preventive motivations for fighting that contributed both to their decision to fight and to the way in which they conducted the war. Moreover, in the Pacific and Iran-Iraq Wars, the target of this preventive war refused to negotiate with its opponent, justifying its position in dispositional terms. The Crimean War by contrast provides a useful negative case, in that the preventive motivation behind British policy did not lead the Russians to refuse to negotiate, for reasons that turn out to be consistent with my theoretical argument.

The Crimean War

Although the diplomacy preceding the fighting was unusually complex, the Crimean War was a relatively straightforward case of a conflict driven largely by preventive motivations. The British observed Russia’s seemingly inexorable expansion with trepidation, and for strategic reasons related to the Black Sea Straits found the logical next steps in that expansion extremely worrisome. When the Russians made an attempt to start to formalize their influence over the Ottoman Empire, the British
saw a possibly final opportunity to stem the Russian tide before the Russians maneuvered themselves into Constantinople. They thus launched an aggressive war, with highly ambitious war aims that would have placed a clear limit on Russia’s future ability to encroach on British interests. Although the British did not achieve their greatest aims, they did manage to force the Russians to step back from the kind of expansion that they might otherwise have achieved. This behavior is consistent with the preventive motivation for war.

In contrast to the other cases of preventive wars discussed in this book, the Russians did not respond to the British policy by demanding unconditional surrender. This development is consistent with hypothesis 2b, as the Russians clearly desired to do what the British feared and hence, although angered by British policy, did not explain British policy in dispositional terms and consequently remained open to a negotiated settlement.

A Quick Review of Events

As I discuss in further detail below, the central fact leading to war was the slow but sure decline of the Ottoman Empire, which raised the prospect of its eventual collapse.

The actual path to war was convoluted, proceeding from a French-initiated dispute over the Holy Lands through Russian counterdemands that, to outside eyes, seemed designed to render the Porte—the Ottoman court—a protectorate of Russia. Britain and France offered support to the Turks, who, emboldened, refused to back down even after the Russians without resistance occupied the Ottoman principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. When the Russians refused to evacuate the principalities, the sultan declared war in October 1853, and a few months later the British and French followed suit.¹

An Austrian ultimatum convinced the tsar to pull Russian troops out of the principalities, and as a result the Crimean Peninsula ultimately became the primary locus of fighting. After an extended siege, the French and British managed to capture the city of Sevastopol in late 1855; the Russians offset this defeat slightly with the capture of the Turkish fortress of Kars, east of the Black Sea. With Austria threatening to enter the war and with France quite ready to exit it, the two sides were finally able to agree on an armistice followed by a peace conference. The resulting conference consisted primarily of all other involved parties conspiring to force concessions on Britain, which by then constituted the primary obstacle to peace but was unable to continue the war without French support. In the final agreement, Russia returned Kars in exchange for Sevastopol, relinquished influence in the Ottoman Empire,
and agreed to the neutralization of the Black Sea and to free transit on the Danube. These terms involved significant and painful Russian concessions that limited their direct influence over the Ottoman Empire, although they fell short of the more extreme war aims held by some in Britain.

Preventive Motives for British Policy

The basic problem in the Crimean War was not that the central participants were unsatisfied with the status quo, but that they feared with good reason that the status quo could not survive. In particular, both Britain and Russia (the actors on whom this discussion will focus) had reason to worry about the impending collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Russia was the dominant land power of Europe, having demonstrated in living memory the ability to project power all the way to Paris, but its navy, although not irrelevant, was weak. The Russians thus benefited from the existence of a large but weak and internally divided buffer to the south in the form of the Ottoman Empire; indeed, at the tail end of the successful 1828–29 Russo-Turkish War the Russians concluded that it was in their interest to limit their own territorial gains so as to preserve the Ottoman Empire, a policy that they retained up through the Crimean War. From their perspective, the Black Sea Straits provided a useful defense against the naval power of Britain and France.

For the British, the straits also provided a useful defense. Britain had built a worldwide empire on the strength of its naval power; maintenance of that empire required that naval routes remain open. Russia was not an immediate threat to British naval preeminence—to take one example, Nicholas’s renunciation of the favorable treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi, signed after Russia came to the Porte’s aid in a crisis in 1833, constituted a realistic assessment that Russia gained nothing from having the option of sending its fleet into the Mediterranean. This situation, however, merely acknowledged that geography had granted Russia limited opportunities for an active use of its fleet—the British feared that granted a warm-water port the Russians would gradually build up their navy to the point that it would threaten British dominance in the Mediterranean. From the British perspective, the Mediterranean was strategically significant not only because of the importance of the territories that directly bordered the sea but because it provided the most direct route for British connections to India. Indeed, significant Russian territorial gains in Anatolia, even in the absence of a significant fleet, would have threatened the overland route to India even had Russia not acquired a significant fleet—at a time when the Suez Canal had yet to be built. Moreover, by the time of the Crimean War British commerce had developed extensive interests
in the Black Sea region that would have been directly threatened should the Russians gain the ability to close off the straits.  

Thus from both sides’ perspectives there were reasons to desire that the Ottoman Empire hold on, as a weak power unable to use its control over the straits to the detriment of anyone. The problem, however, was that the Ottoman Empire was obviously dying. Internally decrepit and incapable of serious reform, the empire had suffered a serious blow to its prestige with Greek independence in 1830 and was threatened to the core immediately thereafter by an Egyptian rebellion, which returned as a serious threat a few years later. At the time of the war, then, few would have guessed that the Ottoman Empire was destined to survive another sixty-five years. At the same time, the strategic significance of Ottoman territories raised the specter of a serious war in the event of the Porte’s collapse. In this context, it was unsurprising that all the Great Powers favored the preservation of the Ottoman Empire.

That said, Russia’s desire for Ottoman survival was driven by balance of power concerns rather than sincere preferences: as I discuss in more detail in the next section, the Russians had both ideational and strategic reasons to want gains at Turkey’s expense, with gains in Ottoman Europe, including Constantinople, the most salient. In this context, Tsar Nicholas’s history of ruminating publicly on the consequences of Ottoman collapse—on the ostensible grounds that it was better to be prepared when the inevitable happened—tended to unsettle his neighbors. In early 1853, his repeated return to the issue in discussions with the British ambassador, Lord Seymour, raised the concern that Nicholas sought an agreement on partition as a prelude to actually carrying it out. The subsequent Menshikov Mission to the Porte, in which the Russians used threats of force to try to get the Turks to abrogate promises extorted from them by the French, further raised these concerns, especially as the Russians advanced views of their own capitulatory rights in the Ottoman Empire that were not supported by prior treaties. An Austrian attempt, in consultation with Britain and France, to advance compromise terms faltered when Russian foreign minister Nesselrode advanced what came to be known as the “Violent Interpretation” of the Austrian proposal, which insisted on Russia’s right to intervene in the Ottoman Empire to protect the Orthodox population, a right that others feared would render the Porte a direct protectorate of St. Petersburg.

This sequence of events thus convinced the British that Russia aimed at the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, from which it hoped to benefit by the acquisition of Constantinople and the straits. In the words of the Duke of Argyll, a member of the Aberdeen cabinet, “There was in the mind of all of us one unspoken but indelible opinion—that the absorption by Russia of Turkey in Europe, and the seating of the Russian
emperor on the throne of Constantinople, would give to Russia an over-
bearing weight in Europe, dangerous to all the other Powers and to the
liberties of the world." 7 This logic is what we would expect were the
preventive motive for war in action: the British feared that left unchecked
the Russians would precipitate the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and
benefit from the consequences, putting themselves in a position to
threaten British interests around the world. War then was worthwhile if
it could forestall such gains. The problem, however, was that under the
status quo Russia already held an overbearing position with respect to
the Ottoman Empire; if the tsar was committed to undermining the Otto-
man Empire, the only way to prevent him from doing so would be to
force Russia back. 8 British decision makers thus pursued war aims that
would have involved a major reduction in Russian influence over the
Ottoman Empire. 9 While the British ultimately had to abandon their
most aggressive aims, they did so only once the departure of the French
made it militarily impossible to impose the kind of defeat on Russia nec-
essary to secure such gains, and even so they were able to force through
terms such as the neutralization of the Black Sea and the limitation of
Russia’s ability to intervene in Ottoman domestic affairs that greatly re-
stricted Russia’s ability to impose unilateral changes. Indeed, the
Crimean War marked the end point of Russian territorial aggrandize-
ment into the Balkans; subsequently, Ottoman losses in Europe led to
the emergence of new states whose loyalty to Russia was not guaran-
teed. British behavior was thus clearly consistent with a preventive
motivation. 10

The Absence of Unconditional Surrender

According to the theory advanced here, demands for unconditional
surrender are typically made in the context of preventive wars, when the
target misunderstands the initiator’s behavior. This section thus exam-
ines that theoretical claim, as well as the broader linked question of why
the Russians remained open to negotiation. Historians unsurprisingly do
not generally spend much time evaluating nonevents, and thus there is
no historical consensus (or even discussion) of why the Russians re-
mained willing to consider negotiation. That said, consistent with my
theoretical expectations, there is good evidence that the Russians sin-
cerely desired to do precisely what the British feared. As a result, it is not
surprising that Russian aims remained limited. 11

That the Russians were open to negotiation throughout the war can be
readily demonstrated, even if specific Russian war aims were not always
clear. 12 Prior to the war, the Russians were consistently open to negotia-
tions; for example, formally accepting the Vienna Note (albeit subject to
Nesselrode’s “violent interpretation”). Once the war began, the Russians recognized that they would be forced on the defensive in the Black Sea but hoped to press an advantage in the Balkans; an Austrian ultimatum—made because of fears that a Russian advance would lead to uprisings of Slavs in Turkish territories that then would spill over into Austrian territory—compelled the Russians to abandon that aim. Rich, quoting Russian prince Gorchakov, summarizes Russia’s war aims as the relatively limited desire “to reaffirm on a solid basis the religious immunities of our brothers of the Orthodox Church,” which would require effective guarantees beyond just the highly debased word of the Porte. At no point in wartime negotiations did the Russians indicate any refusal to negotiate, instead simply rejecting the terms that the British were willing to accept.

The Russians had extensive experience with realpolitik, which aided them in understanding British policy. Perhaps the most critical figure here was Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode, whose steady hand helped to limit the damage done when Tsar Nicholas entertained one of his speculative flights of fancy in which ideology trumped reality. Nesselrode’s accurate prognostications even well prior to the start of the war, which were based on a deep understanding of international politics accrued over four decades of high-level service, provide a remarkable testament to his understanding of the working of international politics. Thus, for example, early in 1853 he predicted that if Russia went to war it would have no allies and would end up fighting a difficult war against both France and Britain (whose involvement at that date was far from obvious). He was fully aware of the fears that Nicholas’s speculative flights of fancy might provoke and worked assiduously behind the scenes to provide less unsettling interpretations of his monarch’s more intemperate statements. As for the tsar, despite his tendency for verbal faux pas, he also fully understood that the collapse of Turkey would create many more problems than it would solve; he simply had come to believe that Turkey’s collapse was imminent, whatever outsiders did.

At the same time, however, the Russians sincerely desired Constantinople, which had strong historical, geographic, and cultural attractions. The tsars considered themselves to stand at the head of the “Third Rome,” successor to the Roman and Byzantine empires; possession of Constantinople, capital or co-capital of both empires, thus held strong religious overtones. Possession of Constantinople would also have provided substantial prestige to a country that saw itself very much as on the margins of Europe. Moreover, the Russians saw themselves as the leaders of the Slavic peoples and thus took an active interest in the Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire; conquest of Constantinople would perforce bring about the end of Ottoman control over the Slavic
populations of Europe. Finally, for reasons articulated above, the Russians had a strong strategic interest in acquiring Constantinople and the straits. Overall, then, the British fears of Russian intentions had merit. In this context, Norman Rich asks “How justified were Turkish and Western fears of Russia?” and answers, “As the Turkish experience over the previous two centuries had shown—and as had the experience of almost every other neighbor of Russia—they were very justified indeed.”

In this context, it is unsurprising that Nicholas responded to the dispute with Turkey by formulating a plan that would have involved a quick naval strike to capture Constantinople and the Bosporus, with a force sent out shortly thereafter to secure the Dardanelles. While military warnings about the improbable success of such an endeavor convinced him to abandon these plans for the eventual decision to occupy the Principalities, he retained the hope that the war might liberate Constantinople up until the combination of Anglo-French intervention and the Austrian ultimatum forced Russia entirely onto the defensive. Given this desire, rather than view British statements about the Russian threat to Constantinople as pretexts, the Russians took them at face value.

Overall, then, this case fits the commitment problem arguments well. The British had a clear preventive motivation for war, and consistent with that motivation they pursued large war aims that they were reluctant to abandon even in the face of military and diplomatic setbacks. As with the Argentines in the Paraguayan War, however, the Russians wanted to do exactly what the British feared and hence understood the British motivation for fighting. Given this understanding, they had no need to resort to a dispositional explanation for British policy and hence remained open to negotiation throughout the war.

World War II in the Pacific

The puzzle of the Pacific theater in World War II is why Japan started a war with the United States, an opponent that had an economy over five times Japan’s size and a population nearly twice as large, especially when the Japanese were already stretched by an ongoing war in China and when they combined the attack on the United States with the invasion of British and Dutch colonial possessions in Southeast Asia. Although some have attributed this decision to simple irrationality, a more convincing explanation is that by 1941 the Japanese believed that peace with the United States was if anything riskier than war. This logic fits perfectly with the preventive explanation for war, as does the audacity of the subsequent Japanese attack. At the same time, the American response
to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was to conclude that the Japanese must be insane. This inference led naturally to the conclusion that sustained peace with Japan would require the remaking of the Japanese political system; it was thus only when the Japanese surrender guaranteed that such a degree of reform would be possible that the war ended.

Japanese Expansion and the American Response

After the forced opening of Japan to the world in 1854, the Japanese launched an accelerated program of modernization that within a few decades would put them in a position to win wars against China in 1894–95 and against Russia in 1904–5. These victories established Japan as a great power with a sphere of influence on the Asian continent. In the 1930s, the Japanese began to expand that sphere through repeated incursions into Chinese territory in Manchuria, culminating in the 1937 invasion out of Manchuria into mainland China. That war ultimately turned into a quagmire for the Japanese, as they controlled large parts of mainland China but could not impose a final defeat on their Chinese opponents. Moreover, the Chinese adventure generated rifts with the rest of the world, and in particular with the United States, which by the second half of 1941 was the only great power not committed to the war in Europe. Cursed by dependence on the United States for resources, in particular oil, the Japanese eyed expansion into British and Dutch colonial possessions (most significantly present-day Indonesia, which had significant oil reserves), but feared that such a move would bring the United States into the war. An American oil embargo in the summer of 1941 changed the strategic calculus. Intense internal discussions that fall ultimately produced the decision that Japan would attack the United States absent an agreement that reopened the oil supply. When the United States demanded a complete withdrawal from China as a prerequisite for such a move, the Japanese decided that they had no choice but to invade the European colonial possessions. Given that decision, they decided also to attack the Philippines (an American possession) and the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

The Japanese war plan called for a lightning strike south to acquire the colonies, after which they, conscious that they could not conquer the United States, would pursue a negotiated settlement on terms that would effectively exclude the United States and its allies from East Asia. On the military side, their plans worked well: the Japanese rapidly overran Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, carried out a damaging attack on Pearl Harbor, and were quickly moving into the Dutch East Indies. Diplomatically, however, the strategy failed, as the United States refused to negotiate, ultimately deciding to demand Japan’s unconditional
surrender. While the Allies put primary importance on winning the war in Europe, they also prosecuted the Pacific campaign with increasing success and were poised by the summer of 1945 to launch an invasion of the Japanese mainland. The combination of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet entry into the war convinced the Japanese government that defeat was inevitable, and they thus surrendered, subject to the proviso, which the Americans accepted, that the emperor remain in at least a figurehead position. The war thus ended with the Allied occupation of Japan, which set the stage for the complete reform of the Japanese political system.

Japan’s Preventive War

The puzzle of Japanese policy has been the ambition of its aims when contrasted to the relative pessimism that Japanese officials expressed about the likelihood of victory in a war with the United States. Thus prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, key military figures acknowledged that Japan lacked the capability to force the Americans to surrender, while Admiral Yamamoto advised Prime Minister Konoe that Japan would fare well in the initial six months to a year of war but that he had “no confidence, however, if the war continues for two or three years.” The navy—which would bear primary responsibility for fighting a war against the United States—remained skeptical throughout the critical discussions, with Admiral Nagano for example observing immediately after the imposition of the oil embargo that even in the event of an immediate attack “it was doubtful whether or not we would even win, to say nothing of a great victory as in the Russo-Japanese War.”

The problem, however, was that peace was no more attractive. Japanese scholars had long argued that the continual growth of American power into East Asia meant that Japan needed to expand simply to maintain the current level of relative capabilities. By the late 1930s, the Japanese had a number of immediate reasons to believe that they were confronted with a narrow window of opportunity in which to act. Perhaps most significantly, the war in Europe effectively removed a range of probable opponents: both the British and the Soviets were fighting for their lives, while the French and the Dutch were occupied and hence ill-equipped to resist Japanese expansion into their colonies. An end to the war in Europe would greatly reduce the Japanese opportunity to address its resource problems. Moreover, those resource problems had worsened dramatically with the inability to bring an end to the war in China. The urgency of addressing the resource problems increased markedly when the United States imposed the oil embargo, as the Japanese were
now confronted with a situation in which whatever slender chance of victory they enjoyed was vanishing rapidly. At the same time, however, the American price for dropping the embargo—a complete withdrawal from China—stood to weaken Japan substantially, raising fears that the Americans would simply pocket the concession and then return to attack a few years later.

At a number of points, Japanese leaders advanced arguments that could serve as textbook examples of the preventive motivation for war. In a critical discussion on October 30, 1941, the Japanese leadership was almost unanimous in its assessment that acceptance of American terms would eventually relegate Japan to the status of a third-rate power, economically dependent on the United States and its allies; doves were overwhelmed by the argument that “it [was] better to go to war now than later.” Similarly, a document prepared in consultation between the government and the military leadership prior to a meeting on September 6, 1941, argued that war was inevitable and that Japan was better off fighting soon:

It is historically inevitable that the conflict between [Japan and the United States] . . . will ultimately lead to war. It need not be repeated that unless the United States changes its policy toward Japan, our Empire is placed in a desperate situation, where it must resort to the ultimate step—namely, war—to defend itself and to assure its preservation. Even if we should make concessions to the United States by giving up part of our national policy for the sake of a temporary peace, the United States, its military position strengthened, is sure to demand more and more concessions on our part; and ultimately our Empire will have to lie prostrate at the feet of the United States.

The same document advocated expansive war aims, specifically the elimination of all British, American, and Dutch influence in East Asia. Such a development would allow Japan to escape its resource predicament and would protect it even should American power continue to grow in the future. Indeed, the simultaneous attacks on the Malay Peninsula, the Philippines, and Pearl Harbor constituted an audacious undertaking that the Japanese recognized was quite risky. While the Japanese clearly contemplated a compromise peace, it was understood that this peace would be on terms that would involve American capitulation after serious setbacks in the war. These ambitious aims, in contrast with the pessimism about Japan’s military prospects, are clearly inconsistent with any explanation grounded in optimism, but they are what one would expect from a preventive war driven by fear of decline.
Additional Commitment Problem Cases

Unconditional Surrender

The Japanese strategy thus failed not because they overestimated their military chances but because their political gambit—hoping that the United States would lack the stomach to carry out the costly war to defeat Japan—did not pan out. Indeed, the American response was not only to refuse to negotiate on Japanese terms but to refuse to negotiate at all. Chapter 4 lays out the background to the decision to demand unconditional surrender, in which Allied discussions quickly concluded that negotiation with either Germany or Japan was unacceptable, although they waited some time to publicize that position and debated thereafter whether the public announcement was in fact the correct move.36

This case provides support for all of the hypotheses derived from the dispositional commitment problem. Consistent with hypothesis 2a, the US demand for unconditional surrender arose in response to Japan’s preventive war. The justification for unconditional surrender was consistently advanced in dispositional terms. Thus, in his 1942 State of the Union address, Roosevelt observed “the militarists in Berlin and Tokyo started this war” and that the war would end only with “the end of militarism” in those countries; “there never has been—there never could be—successful compromise between good and evil.” Elsewhere he promised that the United States was going to “strangle the Black Dragon of Japanese militarism forever.”37 The immediate reaction to Pearl Harbor, in Congress and among the public, was to conclude that the Japanese must be insane; this point was made most strongly by the isolationists who had previously opposed American entry into the war.38 In contrast to Germany, where the obvious evils of the leadership seemed to provide some defense for ordinary German citizens, the American public saw all the Japanese people as fundamentally aggressive.39 In this context, both the public and the leadership repeated the theme that there could be no negotiation with such an opponent throughout the war.

This argument is also borne out by the way in which the war ended. As the war turned against them, the Japanese, like the Germans, tried repeatedly to convince the Allies to reduce their war aims.40 In the final months of the war, this strategy focused in particular on convincing the Soviets, who were still upholding an April 1941 neutrality pact, to serve as mediators, a strategy that was undermined by Stalin’s interest in ensuring that the war lasted long enough to permit the Soviets to intervene and thereby gain a share of the postwar spoils.41 The attempt to gain Allied concessions seemed to have some chance of success, given the extremely high expected costs of an invasion of the Japanese home islands. The Soviet entry into the war, which directly followed the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, undercut this strategy, however, and forced
the Japanese to capitulate. That said, the role of the emperor—who was philosophically the center of the Japanese political system—remained a potential sticking point. The initial Japanese acceptance contained the stipulation that the emperor would retain his political position in post-war Japan. Consistent with the dispositional argument, the Americans rejected this condition, despite the desire to avoid the horrendous losses of an invasion of Japan and to limit Soviet gains in East Asia, requiring instead that the emperor be subordinate to the Allied Supreme Commander. It was only when Emperor Hirohito accepted this demand—abandoning his political role so as to at least save the imperial house—that the war actually ended.

Overall, then, the Pacific War provides a further example of both commitment problem arguments in action. The Japanese launched an aggressive war, despite prevailing pessimism about their military prospects, because they believed that the decline that they would experience under peace would be if anything more risky. Consistent with the logic of preventive war, the Japanese aimed high and were willing to accept a startling amount of risk in pursuit of a peace that would inoculate them against decline, although they would have been open to negotiation on terms that prevented the decline from occurring. The Americans, however, inferred from the Japanese attack that they were confronted with madmen who could not be reasoned with. Given this conclusion, peace could come only through the reform of the Japanese political system, and the Americans consequently rejected any Japanese terms that preserved anything more than a figurehead role for the emperor. The war thus ended only with the surrender and military subjugation of Japan.

The Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq War, fought between 1980 and 1988, is one of the longest and, at a per capita level, deadliest wars of the last two hundred years. What started nominally as a border war escalated into a conflict that proved remarkably difficult to end, with the Iranians in particular consistently rejecting settlement proposals. Eight years of fighting ultimately demonstrated that neither side had the ability to impose a decisive defeat on the other: although the Iranians managed to contain the initial attack and force the Iraqis back into their own territory, they were unable to achieve the sort of breakthrough that would allow them to dictate peace. Ultimately, then, the Iranians were forced to abandon their long-standing refusal to negotiate and accept a cease-fire.

This case presents a number of analytical difficulties. Given both the recency of the war and the autocratic nature of the participants, we do
not have access to the sorts of details about each side’s decisions that are available for most of the other case studies in this book. Most notably, information on the Iranian decision to negotiate, after years of rejecting talks, is largely limited to public statements in which the incentive for rhetoric is clear.44 From a theoretical perspective, this case occupies a somewhat ambiguous (although for that reason potentially informative) role with respect to the dispositional commitment problem argument, as the Iranians clearly framed their eight-year refusal to negotiate in dispositional terms but ultimately backed off of their demands and accepted a negotiated settlement. That said, while the limits of available evidence mean that we cannot distinguish among competing explanations as definitively as we would like, the available evidence is certainly consistent with my argument.

A Brief History of the War

Iran and Iraq had long contested the exact location of their border, especially along the strategically significant stretch near the Persian Gulf. The 1975 Algiers Agreement between Saddam Hussein and the shah of Iran, at a time when Iraq was confronting a significant Kurdish uprising backed by Iran, appeared to settle this dispute in Iran’s favor.45 When the Iranian Revolution in 1979 deposed the shah, however, Saddam saw an opportunity to revise the settlement in Iraq’s favor and thus launched an invasion. Although the Iraqis made significant initial gains, the Iranians managed to stop the Iraqi advance within the first few months, and by 1982 pushed the war back into Iraqi territory.

As Iraq’s fortunes turned, Saddam began to signal a greater interest in peace. The Ayatollah Khomeini—the supreme ruler of the new Iranian government—categorically rejected negotiation, however, from the outset of the war averring that “we will not negotiate with them because they are corrupt. . . . Only if they surrender, for the sake of Moslems, we might consider something.”46 The international community initially viewed these statements as rhetoric, but the continued Iranian refusal to negotiate even after the Iraqis were expelled from Iran demonstrated Khomeini’s sincerity. The war thus stretched on for eight years, during which the Iranians launched a series of offensives with the goal of ultimately imposing regime change on Iraq. The Iraqis, backed by the United States and by Middle Eastern powers anxious to limit the influence of revolutionary Iran, managed to hold off the Iranian invasions and achieved a significant strategic victory in 1988 by recovering the Fao Peninsula, the site of Iran’s most significant victory. Shortly after this setback, the Iranians began to signal a greater willingness to negotiate; the war ended with Iran’s acceptance
of a UN Security Council resolution that called for a return to the pre-war status quo.

Saddam Leaps through the Window of Opportunity

Studies of this war are nearly unanimous in their agreement that Saddam launched a preventive war, although they also note that he overestimated the ease of Iraqi victory. Iraq was substantially smaller than Iran both demographically and economically, and moreover was threatened by internal tensions related to both the recently rebellious Kurds and the majority Shi’a population. This disadvantage was central to the humiliating Algiers Agreement, and it could certainly be expected to be a feature of relations with Iran in the indefinite future. Meanwhile, intemperate Iranian commentary about spreading the revolution focused in particular on Iraq, given its proximity to Iran and its large Shi’a population, which could be expected to be more sympathetic to Shi’a Iran than the Sunni populations of the Gulf monarchies. The Iranian Revolution certainly seems to have emboldened religious dissidents in Iraq. These statements, combined with evidence of violent intentions such as the attempted assassination of Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz (which may or may not have had direct Iranian backing), appear to have convinced the Iraqis in the first half of 1980 that war with Iran was inevitable. At the same time, the failure of internal coups and of the American attempt to rescue the hostages in Iran demonstrated that Saddam could not count on anyone else to eliminate the Iranian regime for him.

If war was inevitable, however, then there were strong reasons to prefer to fight sooner rather than later. Attempted counterrevolutionary coups forced the new government in Iran to purge both the military and the civil service, depriving the state of many of its most qualified leaders. Even before the purges, the revolutionary government had stripped the military of much of its advanced technology while overseeing widespread desertions. The resulting chaos presented Iraq with an opportunity to achieve the sort of victory that would not be possible at any other time. At the same time, Iran was diplomatically isolated, having alienated the United States—its traditional superpower ally—through the taking of a large number of American hostages at the same time that it objected publicly to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Moreover, Saddam had managed to put down challenges from the Shi’a and Kurdish populations in Iraq, leaving Iraq well positioned to fight.

Debate exists about the exact extent of Iraqi war aims. Saddam’s stated goals included Iraqi control over the Shatt al-Arab—the strategic waterway that had been in dispute with Iran prior to the 1975 agreement—and over several Persian Gulf islands as well as autonomy for several
minority groups in Iran, most notably the Arab minority in Khuzistan. The territorial gains would have addressed a central strategic problem—Iraq had only thirty miles of coastline and thus was vulnerable to attacks on its oil exports. Moreover, several commentators have argued that the demand for autonomy for Iranian minority groups, which might appear as mere window-dressing, was a harbinger of plans to establish an effectively or juridically independent region including Khuzistan, which contained most of Iran’s oil wealth, with the goal either of permanently weakening Iran or of precipitating the overthrow of the Khomeini regime. Saddam explicitly disavowed any specific limits to Iraqi war aims, claiming that Iranian actions in border skirmishes prior to the war granted Iraq “additional rights,” the extent of which he would only disclose at a later date.

Unconditional Surrender Pursued and Abandoned

If the war initially arose primarily because of incentives to engage in preventive action, for much of its duration the primary obstacle to settlement was the Iranian refusal to negotiate. The most common explanation for this refusal is a domestic political one: fighting the war allowed the regime to consolidate the revolution, and they thus continued to fight until evidence of public unrest indicated that the war was no longer serving this purpose. This unrest in turn is supposed to have followed from the high costs of the war and the military reversals that Iran suffered in 1987 and 1988. This argument is of course inconsistent with my theoretical arguments in multiple ways. For one, I argue that domestic politics cannot account for extended, high-intensity wars because society will catch on to the leaders’ misbehavior and force a settlement. Moreover, I argue that this sort of nonnegotiation will follow from a sincere belief in a dispositional commitment problem. In this case, that argument would imply that the Iranians inferred from Iraq’s preventive war that Saddam Hussein was by nature aggressive and hence that some degree of regime change was a prerequisite for settlement. Unfortunately, we do not have access to internal Iranian discussions of policy, meaning that a definitive resolution between these two explanations is impossible. That said, I highlight several reasons to believe that my argument provides a more convincing account of Iranian behavior than one grounded in domestic politics.

It is undeniably true that the war facilitated the consolidation of the revolution in Iran. The theoretical discussion in chapter 1 nonetheless raises two questions about a domestic-political explanation for Iranian behavior. First, did the Iranian leadership choose not to negotiate because they expected that war would help them to consolidate power, or did
they prefer continued war for other reasons and gain a stronger hold on power as an ancillary benefit? Given that the regime would never admit this aim publicly, and given that we lack information about internal debates, we have no direct evidence that this motive drove the government’s behavior. The existence of an alternative explanation for the decision to keep fighting thus could seriously undercut the domestic-political one. This point is especially true in light of the second question theory leads us to ask: if the regime was fighting for domestic political reasons, why was the Iranian public willing to put up with this behavior for so long?

The revolutionary regime certainly did not downplay the extent of suffering that was going on in the war with Iraq. Instead, it drew attention to its citizens’ sacrifices, hailing the many dead as martyrs and even maintaining a “fountain of blood” (complete with dyed water) in Tehran to honor the fallen. Indeed, Iranian tactics, which frequently relied on human wave attacks that used young men in the Basij as cannon fodder to offset Iraq’s qualitative technological advantage, seemed almost designed to impose a high cost on society. Yet the majority Persian population remained broadly supportive of the war, with thousands volunteering for the Basij, even as military reverses meant that the date of final victory stretched ever further into the distance. That they did so suggests that they shared the government’s goals and were willing to pay the price necessary to achieve them. The continued popularity of the war, despite the leadership’s openness about its high costs, provides a reason to believe that the regime was not continuing the war primarily for domestic-political reasons.

My argument by contrast would claim that the Iranian refusal to negotiate followed from a sincere belief that Saddam was dispositionally aggressive, which in turn was motivated by Iraq’s preventive war. Again a definitive conclusion about the validity of this interpretation is impossible given the dearth of evidence, but there are a number of suggestive points. The Iranian leadership certainly justified the war in dispositional terms, repeatedly referring to Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath Party as “corrupt” and un-Islamic. Moreover, its demands were consistent with the dispositional commitment problem. From the opening days of the war, the Iranians specified that a minimal condition for peace would be that Saddam Hussein be tried as a war criminal, for which his removal from power would be an obvious prerequisite. As the war continued, the Iranians demanded the purging of the entire Ba’ath Party from the Iraqi government, a requirement consistent with the belief that the Ba’athists were dispositionally aggressive—indeed, Foreign Minister Velayati repeatedly compared the Iranian efforts to the Allied policy of unconditional surrender during World War II. More generally, they clearly
preferred to try to spread the revolution to Iraq by not only removing the offending regime but replacing it with a kindred Islamic government. Moreover, after accepting the cease-fire, Khomeini repeatedly warned the Iranian people that the matter was not closed and that the Iranian people should be prepared for another attack, consistent with the belief in a dispositional commitment problem.\(^62\)

As for the origin of the belief that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was by nature aggressive, the preventive nature of Iraq’s attack is obviously consistent with my argument. My theory contends further that this sort of inference is particularly likely when the target of the preventive war does not intend to do what the initiator fears. Saddam’s most central fear was that once consolidated in power the Iranians would seek to actively spread the revolution through an invasion of Iraq. This fear was not unreasonable given the stated Iranian desire to see their revolution spread throughout the world and given the support and encouragement that the revolutionary regime provided to disaffected groups in Iraq. Thus, for example, on the day that the revolution triumphed, the Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed, “We will export our revolution to the four corners of the world because our revolution is Islamic; and the struggle will continue until the cry of ‘There’s no god but Allah, and Muhammed is the messenger of Allah’ prevails throughout the world.”\(^63\) That said, the Iranian regime repeatedly consistently disavowed any intention to spread the revolution through force, instead claiming that they merely wished to see others achieve an Islamic revolution in their own countries.\(^64\) Skeptics of course will observe that the Iranians likely would have made this claim whatever their true intentions, although it is true that they did not take advantage of subsequent opportunities to attack Iraq, for example during the period immediately after the Persian Gulf War when Saddam’s hold on power was threatened. Absent better information about their ultimate plans, therefore, it is impossible to prove definitively that they were innocent in the sense meant by hypothesis 2b. It is not implausible that they did not intend to do what Saddam feared, however, and my argument predicts that were more information on Iranian intentions to emerge, it would turn out that they did not have the intentions that Saddam ascribed to them.\(^65\)

The obvious puzzle for this perspective is why the Iranian government abandoned its refusal to negotiate and accepted a resolution that left Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist Party in power. Here again the answer must be speculative, but the best available explanation is that the Iranians came to realize that they simply lacked the capacity to impose the defeat that was necessary to force Saddam from power. After five years of seeking to break through Iraqi defenses, the loss of their most significant military gain—the Fao Peninsula—and the evidence of
renewed Iraqi strength in 1988 indicated that Iran would never break through and achieve the military victory it sought. To the extent that we have information about the internal discussion prior to the cease-fire, it is consistent with this interpretation: the Ayatollah Khomeini described accepting the peace as “drinking a chalice of poison,” which he did only because victory was impossible without a major military buildup and the development of “laser and nuclear weapons” of the sort that were entirely out of Iran’s reach.

Overall, then, although the limits of available evidence mean that conclusions cannot be as definitive as they are in other cases, the Iran-Iraq War is certainly consistent with my argument. Presented with a window of opportunity, Saddam Hussein launched a preventive war that held out the potential to lock in Iraq’s historically unprecedented relative advantage over Iran. When this attack miscarried, the Iraqis found themselves fighting a defensive war against an adversary that refused to contemplate settlement with the existing Iraqi government, claiming that it was corrupt and hence not an acceptable negotiating partner. While the Iranians ultimately abandoned their aims and accepted a compromise peace, they did so only after five years of enormously destructive warfare when it became apparent that they could never impose the regime change that they sought.