Logics of War

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Chapter 6 analyzed one kind of limited war, conflicts driven by the informational mechanism. This chapter examines a different kind, namely wars driven by principal-agent problems—in other words, misbehaving leaders—in domestic politics. In these wars, leaders adopt policies that are designed to serve their own interests rather than those of their constituents. I argue that these wars, like informational conflicts, are internally limited: the war will continue only so long as the leader is able to avoid censure, most likely by limiting the information available to opponents. As it becomes apparent that the leader is overstating the probability of victory and understating the costs of the war, opposition will grow and ultimately impinge on the leader’s ability to continue the war. I further argued that in diversionary wars this process will typically occur quickly, because the very act of using the war to divert attention from other issues means that the leader will have difficulty lying effectively about how well it is going. By contrast, if the leader is simply pursuing a pet policy aim that the public does not share, she may be able to extend the war for a significant amount of time, but only if the costs remain relatively low. These wars thus may be long, but they will not be unusually deadly.

The case studies in this chapter are both ones in which domestic politics played a significant role in the onset, conduct, and termination of war. The better-known conflict is the 1982 Falklands War between Britain and Argentina, in which the Argentine military junta gambled that an invasion of the disputed Falkland/Malvinas Islands would improve their hold on power in the face of significant internal unrest. The lesser-known case is the 1919–21 Franco-Turkish War, in which the colonial faction in France hijacked foreign policy to pursue policy aims that did not
serve broader French interests. The former case is a classic diversionary war, although a closer examination reveals the significance of other mechanisms. The latter fits the description of a “policy” war, in which downplaying coverage of events on the ground permits leaders to resist settlement so long as fighting is not particularly intense. In each case, the leaders ultimately found their freedom of action increasingly restricted by domestic opposition as the extent of their misrepresentations became clear; war ended in each case not because the leaders favored war termination but because they were left with no other choice.

The Falklands War

The Anglo-Argentine clash over the Falkland Islands in 1982 has been described as “the archetypal case of diversionary war.”¹ According to this view, a military junta in Argentina that was steadily losing its hold on power distracted the public by launching an unexpected military adventure. This strategy succeeded in rallying the public behind the junta, at least until a British task force arrived and evicted the Argentines from their new conquests. Given this standard interpretation, this war provides a natural case for testing hypotheses about the principal-agent mechanism.

While it would be incorrect to ignore domestic politics, a closer look demonstrates that a purely domestic political explanation for the war would be woefully incomplete. The Argentines were willing to invade in large part because they underestimated British resolve and capability; thus, divergent expectations about the consequences of the use of force played a significant role in bringing about the conflict. Moreover, although temporarily successful, the diversionary strategy quickly backfired when the war went poorly for the Argentines. This case is thus consistent with the prediction that diversionary wars will typically be short.

History of the Conflict

The islands in question—known as the Falklands to the British and the Malvinas to the Argentines—lie several hundred miles off the coast of Argentina. Although of limited strategic significance—the famous Argentine novelist Jorge Luis Borges described the war as “a fight between two bald men over a comb”—the islands nonetheless have been the subject of disputes between several powers over the last few hundred years, including consistent Argentine claims over the entire period since the British established sole control in 1833.² Over time, the symbolic
significance of the islands increased, with the Argentines arguing that their transfer was necessary for the completion of decolonization, while the British argued that the principle of self-determination implied that the islanders—who wished to remain British—should be permitted to choose their own fate. British governments were to a significant degree entrapped, reluctant to anger the Argentines and entirely unwilling to pay the exorbitant costs that would be associated with funding an effective standing deterrent on the islands, but also unwilling to force the islanders, who had the support of a significant lobby in London, to acquiesce to a deal with which they were not comfortable. They thus adopted a policy of equivocating on Argentine demands for a final resolution of the dispute, never directly rejecting Argentine claims but at the same time never allowing negotiations to progress toward a resolution. This strategy, however, grew more difficult over time, and when the Argentines began to push more aggressively for a final deal in the first few months of 1982 the British were forced to effectively reject Argentine demands.

An internal shuffle in the Argentine junta in December 1981 had produced a new, hard-line leadership that was predisposed to seek a final resolution to the Falklands issue by the end of 1982. The Argentines thus attempted to accelerate the negotiations while also planning for a possible invasion, scheduled if necessary to take place in the second half of the year. In the event, however, the British refusal to make concessions on sovereignty combined with a sudden and unexpected crisis related to South Georgia—a polar island over which the two countries also contested sovereignty—led the Argentines to fear that the British were on the verge of reinforcing the islands, which if done would render an invasion impractical. As a result, the junta decided on March 26 to proceed with the military option. The invasion force departed on March 28; by the time that the British ascertained Argentine intentions on March 31 it was too late to do anything, and on April 2 the invasion succeeded with a minimum of fighting.

The conquest provoked strong reactions in both countries, with Argentines rallying to the junta while the British quickly assembled and dispatched a task force to retake the islands. During the roughly three weeks that it took for the task force to reach the South Atlantic, the Argentines, working through a number of mediators, most prominently American secretary of state Alexander Haig, forwarded a variety of proposals for a negotiated settlement that would leave Argentina with final sovereignty over the islands while offering the British a variety of face-saving concessions. The British, however, resolutely demanded Argentine withdrawal as a precondition for negotiations, and thus no settlement was reached prior to the arrival of the task force.
Much of the war took place, unsurprisingly, at sea, where each side suffered losses, the biggest (and most controversial) of which was the sinking of the Argentine General Belgrano. After retaking South Georgia on April 25, the British landed troops at a secluded bay on East Falkland on May 21. These units then moved across the island, facing at times heavy resistance, to put themselves in a position by June 14 to compel the surrender of the forces in the island capital of Stanley. By this point, public opinion in Argentina had turned against the junta, which, after acknowledging its defeat, was rapidly turned out of power.

The Interaction of Domestic Politics and Divergent Expectations

How then can we explain the critical decisions in this case? Historical attention has focused primarily on the junta, as it both took the initial decision to invade the islands and failed to back down in the subsequent crisis period. That said, the British decision to retake the islands was not necessarily predictable prior to the event, and thus is also worth examining. The central questions for this case then are why, after decades of persistent negotiation, the Argentines took the gamble of invading the islands at this particular point, why the British decided to assume the risks and costs of a military response, why the two sides were unable to reach a negotiated settlement to the dispute prior to the British reconquest of the islands, and (an almost unrecognized question in the literature) why the war ended at that point.

Ultimately, both diversionary motives in Argentine domestic politics and divergent expectations about the likely consequence of a resort to arms are necessary to answer these questions. The domestic-political imperatives confronting the junta provided a reason for urgency, and thus ultimately prodded them to take risks that they would not have been willing to take had their hold on power been more secure. At the same time, the junta was willing to take these risks only because they underestimated how large they actually were, in line with the informational mechanism. Without overoptimism about the probability of a British military response and the likely outcome of a final military clash, the junta would not have been willing to invade in the first place.

Domestic Political Motivations

The military coup in 1976 that brought the junta to power was a response to widespread social unrest and poor economic performance. It was thus welcomed by much of the country, especially among the more conservative parts of society that tended to share the political and social preferences of the generals. The new junta promised a neoliberal
economic policy and a return to order, including the repression of leftists, that together would restore Argentina to wealth and stability. In practice, however, things did not work out as well as advertised. The repression deemed necessary to restore stability turned out to be remarkably widespread, with as many as thirty thousand Argentines “disappearing” in the dirty war in the first few years of military rule. Meanwhile, the economic reforms failed to generate the promised stability and growth, with continued high inflation coupled with increased unemployment and stagnant wages. Facing international criticism for human rights abuses and losing the support of parts of society that were frustrated by economic failures, the junta had to start to worry about fissures within the military that became more prominent over the course of 1981.7

As a result, pressure on the junta started to grow. In May 1981, General Videla, who had headed the military regime since the coup, completed his term in office; his successor in turn found himself unable to deal with the country’s problems effectively and was ousted in December, precipitating a transition to hardliners under Leopoldo Galtieri. Starting with protests by the mothers of some of the “disappeared,” Argentine civil society began to reassert itself, with leading political parties working together under the Multipartidaria, established in January 1982, to press the junta to restore civilian control of the government, while the trade unions began to demonstrate an increased willingness to protest over poor economic conditions.8 In this context, the junta had to start to think more seriously about the possibility of transition. Indeed, several sources report that army General Galtieri aimed to use his time in office to put himself in a position to win an election after an eventual transition.9

Whether the goal was to stave off transition or to be in a position to fare well once transition arrived, the junta needed policy successes to enhance its legitimacy. Given the excesses of the dirty war and the economic difficulties, few obvious gains were available in domestic politics, and thus the natural solution was to look to the international realm. Here a contemporaneous territorial dispute with Chile over the Beagle Channel was headed for an unsatisfactory ending, with the junta anticipating that papal mediation would not yield a favorable conclusion. The Falklands dispute was little more promising, as the British—torn between the desire not to anger Argentina and a disinclination to force the Falkland islanders to join Argentina against their will—had effectively given the islanders a veto over any possible deal, but at the same time there were some indications that the British might not stand firm if pushed. Thus the new government decided to make acquiring sovereignty over the islands its primary goal for 1982, in the expectation that success in this venture would go a long way toward reestablishing the junta’s reputation for effective leadership.10
In making this decision, the junta was not committing to a war with Britain, but it was demonstrating a willingness to consider an invasion if minimal demands were not met. On January 5, the junta formally ordered the military to develop plans for a bloodless invasion of the islands, while at the same time demanding that Britain agree to a new negotiating framework that would culminate in a transfer of sovereignty by the end of the year. This diplomatic approach ran the risk of angering the British and of permanently alienating the islanders and hence hindering a deal, but the junta adjudged that risk to be worth taking. Indeed, when the initial talks did not yield the desired results, the junta broke one of the understood rules of past negotiations by publicizing the nature of the discussions, including the demand for sovereignty, thereby ensuring a diplomatic crisis (if still, from the British perspective, an eminently manageable one). At the same time, public comments hinted at the possible use of force. These diplomatic moves had the effect of heightening attention on the islands in Argentina, where newspaper editorials signaled to the public that it should be prepared for action of some sort on the issue.

The risks that the junta was willing to run in the first few months of 1982 contrast sharply to the strategy that it had adopted in earlier negotiations, when it was willing to accept Britain’s argument that quiet, low-pressure diplomacy that focused on minor issues while leaving more divisive issues like sovereignty for later had the best chance of eventually convincing the islanders to accept a transfer to Argentina. In so doing, they recognized that they might alienate the islanders and thus make a transfer more difficult, but they gambled that if pushed the British would not be willing to suffer a diplomatic breakdown over a few thousand people whose continued support was a constant drain on state revenues. When that strategy failed, the decision to invade likewise was predicated on an acknowledged gamble that the British would be unwilling or unable to take back the islands. These gambles had been available earlier, but because of the risks associated with them successive Argentine governments had not seen them as worthwhile. Facing domestic political pressures, the junta thus was willing to take risks that previous governments had eschewed.

That said, there are limits to the principal-agent story. The most important one, discussed below, concerns the role of divergent expectations. It is also worth noting, however, that there are problems with the most extreme diversionary interpretation of the junta’s behavior that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the war. Specifically, several commentators immediately after the war attributed the decision to invade to a desire to distract attention from large union protests over the state of the economy that began on March 30. In reality, however, the order to invade was
given on March 26, and the invasion force had left the harbor on March 28. Moreover, as was noted above, the invasion was the culmination of a broader strategy dating back several months, and thus could not have been tailored to immediate domestic concerns. From this perspective, this case is consistent with the view that there are limits to degree of cynical diversion that elites can engage in.

**Divergent Expectations and the Underestimation of Risk**

More important, available evidence indicates that, even with its increased tolerance for risk arising out of a desire to enhance its domestic position, the junta was willing to authorize an invasion only because it believed that international opinion would be on Argentina's side, that the British would not fight back, and that any attempt against expectations to retake the islands would fail. These beliefs, although ultimately incorrect, were not without foundation, and it is thus worth investigating their origins and consequences in greater detail.

Confidence that the international community would be amenable to the Argentine action arose from several sources. By framing the dispute in terms of decolonization, the Argentines had managed to get widespread support in the UN General Assembly, which had issued a number of favorable resolutions. Meanwhile, the junta, which had impeccable anticommunist credentials, had established close relations with the Reagan administration in the United States, which led them to expect the United States to adopt a neutral position in the dispute. While aware that the use of force might pose an issue, the Argentines hoped that a surprise invasion would allow them to take the islands bloodlessly; indeed, both the Falklands and South Georgia were occupied without British casualties, although the Argentine forces suffered some losses. In the event, however, the United States tilted ever more toward Britain over the course of the conflict, while the support that Argentina gained in the postcolonial world turned out to be of limited practical value.

The expectation that the British would not fight also had fairly solid foundations. Maintaining a true deterrent force on the islands, some eight thousand miles from Britain, would have been exorbitantly expensive and would have detracted from the far more important task of fulfilling Britain's responsibilities within NATO. As a result, the British had installed a platoon of marines—fewer than fifty men—backed up by the **Endurance**, an ice patrol ship of such limited capacity as to be "a military irrelevance." This force was always intended as a trip wire (much like the NATO military presence in West Berlin), incapable of defending itself but generating a credible commitment to fight in the event of an invasion. However, the British commitment to this force was never
particularly strong, as evidenced by repeated debates over whether to keep paying for the Endurance, which culminated in the decision in June 1981 to withdraw the ship from service in 1982.21 In this context, a bloodless Argentine takeover could easily be construed as providing the British with the opportunity to make a graceful exit from the scene.

Indeed, in previous negotiations, the British had encouraged the idea that they might want to make such an exit, telling their Argentine interlocutors that they would be perfectly happy to cede sovereignty if the islanders were willing to go along with the transfer.22 The British raised no strategic or economic arguments for keeping the islands, and the Tory government had just two years previously been willing to negotiate about sovereignty behind the backs of the islanders, despite the risk that publicity would lead to attacks by the vocal and influential Falklands lobby.23 The British refrained from making clear deterrent threats, both because they expected that invasion would only follow an extended coercive campaign and because they worried that any such threats might provoke the behavior that they were intended to prevent.24 Moreover, several recent precedents gave the Argentines hope. The Thatcher government had been willing to negotiate away sovereignty over Rhodesia just the year before, while the Indian invasion of Goa in 1961 provided what the junta saw as a direct precedent: a military invasion of a colonial remnant that, while condemned in some quarters, ultimately was allowed to stand.25

Statements and actions at the time clearly demonstrated confidence that the British would not respond militarily. The invasion was carried out despite a significant lack of readiness for war, and the junta had no military plans for anything beyond the initial incursion.26 The expectation was that the occupation forces would only be needed for a few months; indeed, the military began transferring soldiers back to the mainland almost immediately once conquest had been assured.27 In an interview in the final days of the war, Galtieri observed that “though an English reaction was considered a possibility, we did not see it as a probability. Personally, I judged it scarcely possible and totally improbable.”28 Similarly, during the mediation of Alexander Haig, Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Mendez commented that he was “truly surprised that the British will go to war for such a small problem as these few rocky islands.”29

Moreover, the junta doubted Britain’s ability to retake the islands even if an attempt were made. The Argentine military was geared toward the capabilities needed to control the South Atlantic, in contrast to British preparations for land war in Europe, and Britain would not be able to generate any sort of quantitative superiority in forces over the Argentines.30 Initial clashes, in which the Argentines (erroneously) believed
that they had imposed high costs on the British while thwarting an attempted landing, further encouraged the view that Britain could not retake the islands.\textsuperscript{31} This view was not uniquely Argentine: given the tremendous distances involved and the lack of friendly bases from which to operate, many even among Britain’s allies believed that the attempt was unlikely to succeed. Indeed, a number of scholars have argued subsequently that had the junta made more effective use of its available forces—instead of holding back its best units in interagency battles—it quite possibly could have won, and certainly would have imposed far greater losses on British forces.\textsuperscript{32} Confidence in victory dovetailed with the view that the British would not fight, as even if the British valued the islands more than expected, it made no sense to attempt to retake them if that mission was doomed. Taken together, these were not unreasonable beliefs; the Soviets, for example, apparently also believed that Britain would not fight and could not retake the islands if it tried.\textsuperscript{33} Of course, “so long as Argentina was unconvinced that Britain would actually fight or that, if it did, it would succeed there was no need to renounce its fundamental objective.”\textsuperscript{34}

The view from London, unsurprisingly, was different. Thatcher had little knowledge of military affairs, and thus relied on her advisers, such as Defense Minister John Nott, for guidance, although as a matter of principle she was inclined not to let the invasion stand. The military in turn quickly concluded that, although retaking the islands would not be easy—Admiral Fieldhouse at one point described it “the most difficult thing we have attempted since the Second World War”—it could be done at acceptable cost, at least so long as Britain moved quickly.\textsuperscript{35} The navy’s ability to dispatch a task force within a matter of days was a basis for confidence, with Nott literally overnight going from doubting that the islands could be retaken or that Britain could mount any sort of viable military response to believing “that a task force was a viable proposal and had a good chance of success.”\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, many in the Cabinet believed that a demonstration of British resolve in the form of the task force would convince the Argentines to back down, although this belief evaporated as successive attempts at mediation failed.\textsuperscript{37}

Evaluating a Commitment Problem Story

Before moving on to discuss the way in which the conflict evolved over time, it will be useful briefly to evaluate the plausibility of a commitment problem interpretation of the war. Setting aside domestic political concerns, the junta had no reason to believe that time was not on its side. Militarily, the situation in the South Atlantic was likely to grow only more favorable to the Argentines over time: the British Ministry of
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Defense had been trying for years to retire the *Endurance*, the only armed vessel in the region; the government also wished to withdraw the survey mission that constituted the only human presence on South Georgia. While both decisions were ultimately withdrawn prior to the invasion, it was clear that the solutions adopted were at best temporary fixes. Meanwhile, the British had decided not to withdraw the marines who were scheduled to be relieved in March, instead reinforcing them with their intended replacements. In this context, the long-term trend seemed to be toward the invasion becoming even easier over time.

That said, as with the Persian Gulf War, there is some evidence that local concerns about shifting power may have influenced Argentine policy on the margins. The decision to invade if the British refused to negotiate seriously was made several months before the invasion, but at that point the junta did not intend to launch an invasion until later in 1982. The response in the British Parliament to the unexpected and unintended South Georgia crisis, most notably in its debate on March 23, raised fears that the British would reinforce the islands in the near future, thereby rendering it impossible to carry out the junta’s strategy of a bloodless takeover. The junta thus decided on March 26 to launch the invasion as soon as possible. This decision was militarily significant, in that it forced the junta to act with incompletely developed military plans and, more importantly, provided the British with a window to respond prior to the arrival of the stormy Southern Hemisphere winter. Shifting power concerns thus accelerated the war. By the time these concerns unfolded, however, the junta was already committed to invading, meaning that these concerns do not explain the decision to invade or, equally important, the manner in which the invasion was carried out. It is thus unsurprising that they did not play a significant role in the adversaries’ subsequent conduct.

Views as the Conflict Unfolded

Intensive diplomacy followed the Argentine invasion, highlighted by mediation efforts by Haig, Peruvian president Belaúnde, and UN secretary general Pérez de Cuéllar. The historical record contains a remarkable amount of detail about the course of these negotiations, but the relevant developments can be summed up relatively quickly. The Argentines had always recognized that negotiations would necessarily follow the invasion, and they were prepared to make a variety of what they saw as face-saving concessions to Britain to assure their success. That said, they resolutely insisted that any settlement reliably guarantee that Argentina ultimately receive sovereignty over the islands, although the formal transfer might occur as the outcome of some sort of negotiated
transition process. The British, by contrast, never wavered in rejecting any approach that would reward Argentine aggression with sovereignty. It was this fundamental difference over the future disposition of the islands that prevented a negotiated agreement in the period prior to the insertion of the landing force.

During this period, it became possible for each side to at least in part revise its expectations about the consequences of the use of military force. Most obviously, the sending of the task force indicated that Britain was more willing to fight than the Argentines had believed, and the Argentines accordingly concluded that a war was indeed possible, although they continued to believe that there was a chance that Britain could be bought off at an acceptable price prior to actual clashes. Moreover, the response of other international actors provided an indication of how they likely would behave in the event of further escalation; in particular, the Argentines concluded that the Americans were providing significant assistance to Britain, indeed beyond what was actually given. 41 Overall, then, the junta grew increasingly desperate to avoid full-scale war as the crisis unfolded, although at the same time the military was confident that Britain would be unable to take the islands back. 42

By this point, however, the junta had no real freedom to maneuver. The initial invasion had proven remarkably popular, with protests against the government transforming overnight into celebrations. Although quick to acknowledge that they would need to make some sort of concessions as a salve to British honor, the junta left no doubt that Argentina would retain sovereignty over the islands. Indeed, the escalating economic and diplomatic costs of the crisis meant that the junta was entirely dependent on success in the dispute for legitimacy, with the implication that rejecting concessions and continuing to fight was a “desperate gamble” that nonetheless was the only option that “held out any prospect of success.” 43 Thus even relatively unambiguous evidence that Argentina would not manage to hold the islands did not bring about substantial concessions. Once the landing force was established, the best available option, if an increasingly unlikely one, was to stabilize the situation enough to ensure “a tolerable negotiating position.” 44 Even at this point, however, the junta would not concede on the sovereignty issue, although they were less diplomatically exposed given that the British refused to contemplate any concessions once they were on the verge of retaking the islands by force.

After the local surrender on June 14, the Argentines lacked the capacity to insert a new invasion force on the islands. That said, an end to the war was not foreordained. In an interview just days before the surrender, Galtieri referenced the British evacuation from Dunkirk in 1940, which as he noted did not constitute a final defeat, and promised that not even the

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loss of the islands “would be the end of this conflict and our defeat.” The British had long worried that the Argentines might isolate the islands in a costly and painful diplomatic war of attrition; there is no reason why they could not have pursued a similar strategy of isolation and embargo after their initial gambit failed. Indeed, the British ambassador in the United States was reporting significant concern in Washington that retaking the islands would not necessarily bring about Argentine capitulation, and that the Argentines could carry out attacks indefinitely from the air, making the long-term cost of maintaining the islands unacceptable. Had they done so, the British would have faced the uncomfortable prospect of an extended and costly campaign in the South Atlantic over a resource of tangential significance, with no real options for escalation that would not have brought about widespread international condemnation.

Indeed, there is every indication that the junta contemplated exactly such a strategy. For several days the Argentines refused to recognize a British cease-fire declaration, while Galtieri called the population to the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires to build support for a continued struggle of unspecified form. In practice, however, the continuation of the war was no longer an option. The disappearance of dissent had, in one scholar’s words, “rested on only one point of support: the conviction that the war could be won,” and with the surrender that support vanished. The attempt to rally the public was met by chants of “the boys were killed; the chiefs sold them out,” and the junta had to resort to violent repression of its own rally to restore order. The junta had also lost legitimacy within its core constituency of the armed forces, where interservice recriminations quickly replaced the fight against the British. With the loss of its ability to continue to prosecute the war, the junta had to concede defeat, accepting an end to the war and permitting a transfer within the military government to officers who had been uninvolved in the war. Having invested their entire legitimacy in the acquisition of the islands, Galtieri and the junta had no incentive to end the war even after the garrison’s surrender, but the public (and members of the military not in the junta), presented with incontrovertible evidence of incompetence and misrepresentation, refused to endorse such a move. These final events—little noticed in the diversionary literature—highlight the importance of constraints on the leadership’s ability to continue to prosecute an ongoing war.

Summary

Overall, then, the decision to resort to force over the Falklands was motivated by both domestic politics and divergent expectations. The junta took a substantial risk in ordering the invasion, permanently alienating the islanders and ultimately provoking Britain into a military
response for which the Argentines were unprepared. This willingness to take risks stemmed from an unambiguous domestic political incentive to pursue a policy success that would offset economic weakness, domestic repression, and diplomatic defeat in a separate high-profile territorial dispute with Chile. Yet the junta was willing to take this risk only because it underestimated its size. International opinion was far more hostile to the invasion than expected, with the United States providing Britain with extensive and unanticipated assistance. More important, the British turned out to be both more resolved and more capable than expected, willing to pay the costs associated with sending a task force to the South Atlantic to retake the islands in the face of resistance. Having successfully diverted opinion, the junta was unable to back down once it became clear that the British were willing to fight, and as a result no negotiated solution to the conflict was possible until after the Argentines had been forcibly evicted from the islands. That said, evidence of failure rapidly turned Argentine opinion against the junta, which found itself with no option but to end the war and surrender power.

This case thus highlights the limits of diversionary war, both as a strategy for embattled leaders and as an explanation for unusually extended conflicts. The junta was able to use the Falklands issue for diversion, if only for a short period, only because it had recourse to a long-standing dispute on which most Argentines believed that their country had been eminently reasonable and had received nothing to show for their cooperation, and because their belief that the invasion was likely to succeed was quite plausible. Turning to the question of war duration, the failure of the junta’s gamble rapidly became apparent, and as it did so its freedom to maneuver likewise vanished. The consequence was a war, but a war that never would have lasted more than a few battles, and that ended as soon as the Argentine public came to realize the deficiencies of their leaders’ strategy. Indeed, it appears that the junta was prepared to continue the war after the fall of the islands, but by this point they were unable to do so. This is exactly the process anticipated in hypothesis 4a, which predicts that diversionary wars will typically be short.

The Franco-Turkish War

The 1919–21 Franco-Turkish War provides an example of what I refer to as a policy war. In this case, a French political faction that favored colonial expansion, salivating at the opportunities created by the partition of the Ottoman Empire, dragged the country into a war that the general public and the central government neither wanted nor knew much
about. This interpretation helps to answer a number of questions about an otherwise puzzling conflict: why did France spend two years fighting a war against a country that it generally viewed favorably (and that had every incentive to find outside allies, given the range of foes stacked up against it), when the territory at stake was of little value and the political costs of the war were quite high? Not only can the principal-agent mechanism explain the decision to adopt a policy that did not serve broader French interests, it can also explain the decision of the colonial faction to stifle discussion of the war in France, which ultimately resulted in an extended, but not particularly costly, war.

History of the War

While the end of World War I on the Western Front was fairly orderly, postwar politics on the Eastern Front were extremely chaotic, with a host of new states jockeying for position in the power vacuum created by the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires. In the years after the war, Eastern Europe and the lands of the former Ottoman Empire experienced conflict from the Baltic to the Holy Land. Even given the tendency to overlook this complex of wars, however, the Franco-Turkish War constitutes a particular lacuna in existing scholarship, overshadowed by the French actions in Syria and especially by the Greco-Turkish War. That said, the Franco-Turkish War was an essential part of the broader Turkish independence struggle, while for the French it constituted an embarrassing defeat whose costs exacerbated the country’s economic difficulties and contributed to the financial crises of the mid-1920s.

The war concerned possession of Cilicia (roughly corresponding to modern-day Çukurova), a region in southern Anatolia that lies to the north of Syria. Inter-Allied negotiation during World War I about the postwar disposition of the Ottoman Empire resulted in an agreement to allow France to claim mandates over Syria (including Lebanon) and Cilicia, while the British acquired Mesopotamia, the Italians acquired a region in southern Anatolia west of Cilicia, the Greeks took Smyrna (modern Izmir) in western Anatolia, and the Armenians were allotted an independent national state in the East. The basic nature of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, which in May 1916 formalized the British and French claims on Ottoman Territory, can be seen in figure 7.1 below: the blue zone of direct French control included coastal Syria and much of southeastern Anatolia, although in practice the British began impinging on the French zones almost from the outset (for example, quickly gaining unilateral control over Palestine) and the French never established an effective presence in the interior regions.
Figure 7.1 Plans for the partition of the Ottoman Empire, including the zones claimed by France
French policy throughout this period involved repeated retreats to second-best options. What the French really wanted in Anatolia was a return to their pre-World War status quo, in which they had exercised a preeminent political and economic influence in the Ottoman Empire. In this goal, the French were undercut by their allies, however, first with the March 1915 Russian demand for Constantinople, to which the British assented, and later with expanding British territorial interests in the Middle East. The French thus retreated to trying to secure at least a generally accepted claim to some portion of Ottoman territory, centering on Syria, yet even the British concessions in the Sykes-Picot Agreement were undermined as the British, who had far more soldiers in the Middle East, gradually encroached on French claims while encouraging undesired Greek activism in western Anatolia.

Meanwhile, the political situation in Turkey was changing quickly, as the supine Ottoman Porte—the traditional government of the Ottoman Empire—lost legitimacy to a nationalist resistance headed by Mustafa Kemal (later venerated as the Atatürk, or father of Turks) and located in the Anatolian interior. As the extent of Allied demands on Turkey became clear, the Porte’s strategy of relying on British magnanimity to retain power became increasingly unpopular, while increased organization and early military successes encouraged the view that the Turks could successfully oppose their enemies.

The emergence of Kemal’s force coincided with the initial guerrilla resistance against the French, who had assumed control over Cilicia in November 1919 and almost immediately encountered low-level but persistent military opposition. A successful uprising at Maraş in early 1920 spurred further opposition throughout the region, forcing the French to consolidate their overstretched forces in a few strategic locales. Unable to defeat the resistance, the French tried to reach a negotiated agreement with Kemal, but their refusal to contemplate withdrawal from Cilicia and their support for the Porte ultimately prevented any durable agreement. In the face of continued guerrilla resistance, the French were able to achieve some local military victories, but never came close to pacifying the contested region. Ultimately, with the impossibility of overcoming the resistance (at least at acceptable cost) clear, and with growing threats to the more highly valued possessions in Syria, the French negotiated a humiliating withdrawal in the Ankara Agreement of October 1921, whose terms were later carried over into the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.

The war thus ended with the French withdrawing from Cilicia in humiliation, having abandoned almost all their claims to the region. Their troubles in Cilicia were an embarrassment internationally and had undermined efforts to achieve political goals elsewhere. Their withdrawal
was also a disaster for the native Christian population, largely Armenians, who, having already suffered mass killings during World War I, generally fled rather than await retribution for their involvement in French occupation. For the Turks, the victory was a significant step on the way to establishing a truly independent Turkey, free of the constraints that had hindered the Ottoman Empire, although full achievement of the Turkish national state came only with victory over the Greeks and the Treaty of Lausanne.

Domestic Politics

Ultimately, a convincing explanation for the Franco-Turkish War must examine the role of the French colonial party in pursuing goals that, for all their talk of French prestige, were not in the interest of the country as a whole. French colonialists had long been concerned with expanding the French Empire, despite the absence of clear national interests beyond simple prestige that would be served by doing so. In particular, oft-cited economic benefits had little basis in reality, and business leaders were correspondingly uninterested in acquiring new colonies. Moreover, colonial aspirations served as a distraction from France’s central security concern, which was Germany. In the Cilician case, the aspirations of the colonial party created conflict with Britain at precisely the time when the French needed a close relationship with the British for protection against Germany. The colonialists recognized that conflict over Cilicia would be unpopular and thus took steps to misrepresent their actions, the ease of their task, and the level of resistance that they faced. This strategy generated systematic misperceptions in Paris, which in turn ironically tied the hands of the colonial faction when it finally decided that the time had come to abandon Cilicia. It was these actions that ultimately produced both an unnecessary (and unnecessarily extended) war and a substantial humiliation for France.

The French Colonial Party and the Interests of France

The French colonial party was relatively small in numbers but exercised a significant influence over French foreign policy in the decades prior to World War I. Adherents to the party were spread across some fifty overlapping societies, with a total membership that certainly numbered under ten thousand and most likely numbered under five thousand. Starting around 1890, however, they took advantage of their strength among civil servants and the chronic instability of French governments under the Third Republic to exert a consistent influence on French foreign policy in favor of colonial expansion. Their influence

[194]
further increased during World War I, when the urgency of the war on
the Western Front distracted their opponents from more distant issues
and made “the abdication by the cabinet of its responsibility for colonial
war aims even more complete than it might otherwise have been.”

Thus, for example, François Georges-Picot, who represented the French
in the negotiations with the British that led to the Sykes-Picot Agree-
ment, drafted his own instructions for the negotiations, which highly
optimistically called for France to receive the entire Mediterranean coast
from Egypt to Cilicia, extending inward to Mosul and the Tigris; Prime
Minister Briand accepted them without amendment.

In pursuing the acquisition of colonies, the colonial party was consis-
tently hampered by the difficulty it had identifying and articulating posi-
tive benefits that would ensue from an expansion of the empire. The
British had already secured the most valuable colonies, most notably
India, while the zones that the French acquired were frequently of no real
economic value. Indeed, for many of the French colonialists, value for
French finance and industry was hardly relevant: the motivation
was French prestige. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that
French business figures were frequently less excited about colonial ac-
cquisitions than members of the colonial party wished for them to be.
Thus, for example, during World War I colonialists in government
formed a commission with the sole intent of recommending colonial ex-
pansion and called in leading business figures in the expectation that
they would provide support for such an enterprise. They were thus
sorely disappointed when business leaders expressed almost no interest
in overseas acquisitions and instead called for increased tariff protec-
tion. It is thus hard to argue that France’s colonial acquisitions served a
useful economic purpose.

More important, colonial aspirations if anything detracted from French
security. Unlike Britain, which benefited from the defense provided by
the English Channel, the French were a continental power that had to
worry about threats from both Germany and Italy. The Germans in par-
ticular were a serious concern: they had imposed a humiliating defeat on
France in the Franco-Prussian War and came close to doing so again in
1914 in a war that the French won narrowly and only with the help of a
number of significant allies. At a general level, then, pursuing imperial
dreams in the Levant was a distraction from the far more important task
of finding a way to keep Germany down and to begin the process of do-
mestic recovery from the war. Moreover, the French were keenly aware
that security against Germany in the long run would require assistance
from allies. Communism in Russia, isolationism in the United States, and
general weakness among the remaining Western powers left Britain the
most attractive option in this regard and thus provided good reason to
avoid antagonizing the British.\textsuperscript{73} For the colonial party, however, the defeat of Germany left Britain as the only other significant imperial power and thus as the natural opponent, even while the two sides were formally allied during World War I.\textsuperscript{74} The inevitable consequence was to risk alienating the very country on which the French relied for security over overseas interests of minimal strategic significance. Indeed, colonial disagreements contributed notably to the deterioration in Franco-British relations in the years after the war.\textsuperscript{75}

Given the costs of acquiring and administering new colonies, the absence of clear economic benefits, and the geopolitical dangers of estrangement from Britain, it is unsurprising that the colonial faction lacked popular support. Indeed, the colonialists were quite aware of this unpopularity, as when a leading colonialist noted that “French public opinion will for a long time preserve its desire to repress all efforts at colonial competition. . . . This attitude is unfortunate but incontestable.”\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{Colonial Policy in Cilicia: Hiding the War}

Given the unpopularity of their preferred policy, the colonial party responded by pursuing their desired ends while going to great lengths to avoid attracting the attention of Paris. They thus maintained expansive territorial demands in Cilicia while simultaneously doing everything they could not to call on resources (particularly soldiers) from metropolitan France. Instead, they responded to the insufficiency of French forces in the Levant by drawing on Muslim colonial troops (despite fears that they might prove unreliable in fight against Muslim Turks) and, more problematically, by co-opting local Armenians to serve as legionnaires, despite their new soldiers’ manifest deficiencies and proclivity for attacking Turkish civilians.\textsuperscript{77} The upshot of these strategies was to leave French forces perpetually undermanned and staffed with unreliable troops, whose repeated attacks on the local population ultimately helped to ensure the failure of French efforts to control and pacify the region.

The colonialists further protected themselves from constraints imposed by Paris by using their levers of control to ensure that as little information as possible concerning Cilicia, and especially concerning the difficulties that French forces encountered there, reached the eyes and ears of parliamentarians and the public in Paris. The colonialists had a significant informational advantage to begin with—the French public tended to confuse Cilicia with Silesia (which lies in present-day Poland), for example—and thus needed only to prevent unambiguously discrediting information from appearing while muddying the waters in public discussions.\textsuperscript{78} To the end of the war, colonialists in the Quai d’Orsay—the French foreign ministry—imposed a general news blackout that, despite
early Parliamentary complaints that the government was hiding the truth from the people, prevented the opposition from mounting effective criticism.\textsuperscript{79} The effectiveness of the news blackout—the socialist press ultimately was limited to reprinting reports from British and German newspapers outside the control of the colonialists—meant that critics had to resort to arguments about the illegitimacy of colonialism, to which the colonialists could respond with equally principled arguments about protecting the local Christian population.\textsuperscript{80} The evidence for more powerful critiques about the failure of pacification attempts and the likelihood of backlash against the local Christians, which would more clearly have undercut the colonialists’ case, was simply unavailable.

**Public Opposition, Aborted Withdrawal, and Painful Defeat**

At the same time that hiding the war allowed the colonial party to pursue goals that most Frenchmen would not have supported, it also did much to ensure their ultimate failure. The reluctance to ask for resources from the metropole meant that General Gouraud, the French commander in Syria and Cilicia, would be perpetually short on men and unable to pacify the region directly; reliance on the Armenians, while addressing the manpower shortage, ultimately worsened the problem by alienating the local population. Meanwhile, even those limited funds that government was providing for action in the Levant came under threat as parliamentarians became increasingly aware that the government was hiding something.\textsuperscript{81} By March 1921, Prime Minister Briand had to deal with a parliament that was “slashing his military budget by hundreds of millions of francs every day.”\textsuperscript{82} These developments are illustrative of the constraints that domestic opposition can place on policymakers intent on adopting policies that do not serve the national interest. In practice, these domestic constraints, combined with complications in Cilicia and Syria discussed below, tied the hands of the colonial party sufficiently to convince them the attempt to control Cilicia was now a lost cause.

As a result, General Gouraud and the colonialists prepared a change of strategy. The colonialists had always valued Syria more highly than Cilicia, and the emergence of a significant threat from Arab nationalists under Emir Faisal committed to incorporating Syria into a broader Arab state posed a serious threat that ultimately induced the French to forcibly seize Damascus in July 1920.\textsuperscript{83} Even after the victory over Faisal, who decamped to become king of Iraq, the French faced continuing unrest in Syria, which culminated in a significant revolt between 1925 and 1927.\textsuperscript{84} Given this situation, the French thus had a strong incentive to reach an understanding with the Kemalists that would permit the redeployment of troops from Cilicia to Syria. Kemal was aware of French
difficulties, however, and consistently rejected proposed deals that
would formally recognize Turkish sovereignty over Cilicia while leav-
ing the French with effective control. By September 1920, therefore, the
colonialists reluctantly concluded that Cilicia was not worth the effort
required to hold it. 85

At this point, however, the colonialists found themselves entrapped
by their own chicanery. Precisely because of their efforts to suppress
negative information about events in the Levant, policymakers in Paris
were uninformed about the extent of difficulties there. As a result,
Prime Minister Georges Leygues, who admitted to an Armenian diplo-
mat that he knew almost nothing about events on the ground in Cilicia,
reversed the withdrawal policies and ordered a significant escalation
of the war. 86 This move torpedoed any chance at a settlement in the
immediate future but did nothing to improve the French position in
Cilicia, as the troops devoted to the escalation in Cilicia were needed
back in Syria in short order to restore a deteriorating situation there.
It was thus only when Gouraud, who obviously was fully aware of
the problems in the region, in consultations in Paris demanded full
withdrawal from Cilicia that the French returned to seriously (and in-
creasingly importunately) seeking a negotiated settlement. 87 This de-
development, while not anticipated in the theoretical discussion of
domestic politics and war, nonetheless is consistent with the observa-
tion that to be effective in diverting policy, agents must keep their
actions relatively quiet.

To summarize, a small but well-placed faction in French politics was
able to divert policy to pursue its preferred aim of colonial expansion,
despite the high costs and limited benefits of such a policy for France
more generally. By limiting discussion of the war, the colonialists en-
sured that they could continue to stake a claim to Cilicia even in the face
of sustained guerrilla resistance. The strategies that they used to main-
tain that policy ultimately undercut their ability to win the war, however,
and the combination of increasing checks domestically and growing
threats in the Levant ultimately forced them to back down. That said, a
reasonable case can be made that this strategy would have worked
better at a different time. The First World War meant that the French pub-
lic was unusually attuned to foreign policy and, given war weariness,
more reluctant to pay significant costs for minor policy aims. 88 In other
settings, the colonialists might have been able to entrap Paris by first
staking a claim and then convincing the government to provide the re-
sources to protect a claim that it would not originally have advanced. In
such a situation, the war might have been substantially longer than it
actually was. 89
The Limits of Alternate Mechanisms

In contrast to the clear domestic political story, neither commitment problems nor overoptimism seem to have played a significant role in this war. While the reestablishment of control over Anatolia certainly strengthened Turkey relative to its neighbors (including the French in Syria), the French were not worried about this development, largely because they expected to be able to restore their historically good relations with the Turks once the war was over. As for optimism, while overoptimistic prognostications were present, they are better understood as part of a duplicitous campaign to justify the French claim to Cilicia than as genuine beliefs about the likely outcome of a war.

Consider first potential concerns related to the restoration of Turkish power. For several reasons, the French did not feel threatened by this accretion in capabilities. Given continued disputes with the Greeks, British, and Armenians, in the immediate term Kemal and the Turks had every reason not to intervene in Syria, the one place where they could potentially have threatened French interests. Indeed, during the war Kemal had generally been cool to suggestions of military cooperation from Arabs in Syria, given the danger that such cooperation would complicate attempts to end the war in Cilicia and hence delay the restoration of the generally friendly relations that Turkey had had with France in the past. Thus the French appear not to have worried that surrendering Cilicia would simply have allowed the Turks to bring the war to Syria.

In the longer term, of course, a Turkey that successfully fought off its opponents (still not guaranteed at the time of the Ankara Agreement) might have been able to threaten France’s hold over Syria. That said, there were several reasons why the French were not worried about such gains. The French had had close relations with the Ottoman Empire prior to World War I and, as was noted above, would have preferred a situation in which they retained a significant degree of influence over a unified Turkey to its complete partition. A not insignificant benefit was that the Turks might be induced to repay the Ottoman Empire’s debts. Moreover, given the historical rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and Russia, a united Turkey was a logical partner in the attempt to prevent the spread of communism, a particular concern of French governments during this period. Most important, the significant animosity felt by Arabs in the Middle East toward the Turks—a consequence of hundreds of years of repressive rule—meant that the obstacles to reestablishing the Ottoman Empire were in practice insurmountable, a point that Kemal appears to have been fully aware of. It is thus unsurprising that debates about withdrawal from Cilicia focused on the fate of the Christian
population in Anatolia and on possible reputational costs in France’s Muslim colonies; indeed, French parliamentarians concluded that that an agreement with Turkey would provide better security for Syria than occupation of Cilicia possibly could.\(^94\)

An argument grounded in overoptimism about the ease of pacifying Cilicia is similarly unconvincing. This is not to say that overoptimistic prognostications were not present: colonialists predicted both that France’s civilizing mission and experience with prior Muslim colonies would lead the population to accept them and also (contradictorily) that the local population in Cilicia consisted primarily of Christian Armenians who would constitute logical allies.\(^95\) On closer analysis, however, these predictions appear to have been less than entirely sincere. Thus, for example, the colonial party heavily lobbied local Muslims and Christian Arabs to submit petitions for a French protectorate that they then used as evidence of spontaneous local support; similarly, the overestimation of the size of the Armenian population relative to the Turks was accomplished in part through the deliberate deception of omitting from the count of Turks anyone who was not ethnically Turkish, who did not adhere to Sunni Islam, or who spoke Arabic, despite the fact that the vast majority of those so omitted could be counted on to side with the Turks in the event of a conflict.\(^96\) To the extent that the French government in Paris was overoptimistic, it was as a consequence of these sorts of misrepresentations.

Moreover, in many respects the French were unusually accurate in their assessments. They were the first of the World War I allies to recognize the importance of Kemal’s movement, negotiating with him even before fighting broke out.\(^97\) As a result, the obsequiousness of the Porte provided little basis for comfort. Likewise, it was almost immediately apparent that the Armenians—who first opposed the French presence altogether out of a desire to construct a Greater Armenia and then repeatedly attacked Turkish civilians in retribution for past attacks or, later, to undermine negotiations with Kemal—would constitute difficult and counterproductive allies.\(^98\) Given the quick difficulties that the French encountered and their unwillingness to contemplate the sort of escalation that would have been necessary to address these problems, it is hard to argue that the war lasted for as long as it did because of sustained French overoptimism.

**Summary**

In summary, to understand what happened in the Franco-Turkish War, we need to examine developments within French domestic politics. In the face of a well-organized colonial movement, the French government
lost control over imperial policymaking, not only overseas but in Paris itself. As the primary group that cared about imperial policy, the colonial faction in France secured the relevant policymaking posts and then proceeded to pursue policies that few in France would have chosen. The expansion into the Levant, including Cilicia—despite the almost complete absence of interest among the business and finance figures who were supposed to benefit, the strong public demand for demobilization, and the likelihood that this policy would damage relations with key allies and thus undermine French security in Europe—thus involved the colonialists making political demands on Turkey that the French public was not willing to back up. Under these circumstances, when fighting ensued, the French forces in the Levant were incapable of asserting control over the situation. The colonialists nonetheless remained committed to trying to salvage some sort of position in Cilicia, with the result that their begrudging concessions were never enough to match what the Kemalists knew they could get by just extending the war until discontent in Paris forced a unilateral withdrawal. The threat to Syria, combined with the constraints increasingly imposed from Paris, prompted Gouraud to begin a unilateral withdrawal from Cilicia, but here the colonialists were undermined by their own strategy, as a new prime minister, unaware of the extent of the difficulties in Cilicia precisely because of the strategy adopted by the colonialists, overruled the decision to withdraw, thus substantially extending the war before a final French withdrawal in 1921.

Overall, then, this war almost certainly would not have happened had the colonial party been kept on a tighter leash, and it certainly would have ended sooner. These findings are consistent with the argument that in “policy” wars—nondiversionary principal-agent conflicts—leaders will attempt to limit the availability of information, and that to the extent that they are successful in doing so the war may be relatively long. Indeed, had the colonialists not chosen a particularly inauspicious time for their overseas adventure, it is likely that the center would not have imposed constraints as quickly and hence that the war might have dragged on substantially longer.

Neither the Falklands War nor the Franco-Turkish War can be explained without recourse to domestic politics. In the former case, a government with a shaky hold on power saw a military clash as an opportunity to restore its position, and thus took a gamble that it otherwise would not have undertaken. In the latter, a small set of policymakers with interests at odds with those of the broader public whom they theoretically represented fought a war to advance claims that their constituents would not have backed. In each case, these decisions brought about the deaths of soldiers in the pursuit of objectives that can hardly be seen as advancing their interests and that in any event were not achieved.
The only silver lining to this story is that in each case fewer soldiers died than the responsible policymakers might have been willing to sacrifice. In the Falklands War, an initially successful gamble backfired as the British proved both more willing and better able to respond militarily than the Argentine junta predicted; by the end, reaction on the streets and within the armed forces meant that any attempt to extend the war beyond the fall of Stanley—a military possibility, if not a political one—was doomed to failure. In the Franco-Turkish War, the knowledge that they would not have the backing of Paris forced the colonial party into a strategy that limited the direct costs of the war and militated against substantial escalation, albeit at the cost of lowering the probability of victory. Both wars were thus internally limited: the Falklands conflict ended before the Argentine leadership would have chosen to end it, while the war in Cilicia was less deadly than it likely would have been had the colonial party had free rein to spend France’s resources as it wished. At the same time, commitment problems played no role in either of these wars, consistent with the argument that they tend to produce wars more destructive than either of these.