The Oil Wars Myth

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Published by Cornell University Press

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The Oil Wars Myth: Petroleum and the Causes of International Conflict.

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“A drop of oil is worth a drop of blood.” Since the early twentieth century, Georges Clémenceau’s adage has regularly been deployed to support claims that countries fight over oil. However, the axiom is an invention. The French prime minister did draft a hurried telegram mentioning oil to US president Woodrow Wilson in December 1917, in the midst of World War I. Recognizing that France was running short of fuel and that the United States was the world’s leading petroleum producer, Clémenceau appealed to Wilson to direct American oil tankers to French shores. Yet, rather than writing, “Une goutte de pétrole vaut une goutte de sang,” as the popular version of the quotation implies, the prime minister actually observed that France must have “l’essence aussi nécessaire que le sang” (the gasoline, as necessary as blood) for its upcoming battles with Germany. Otherwise, he warned, the Allied armies would be “abruptly paralyzed” and might be forced to establish an “unacceptable peace.” Clémenceau’s telegram therefore acknowledged oil’s exceptional importance for modern warfare. However, contrary to the popular misquotation, the French leader did not claim that it was worth shedding blood for oil.

The cognitive leap that transformed Clémenceau’s telegram from a plea for additional fuel into an explanation for violence also characterizes classic oil war claims. Rather than merely observing that petroleum is an exceptionally valuable natural resource, oil war believers also assume that petroleum is worth fighting for and, consequently, can inspire interstate conflicts. This chapter explores oil’s transformation from a worthless substance into the world’s most strategically and economically valuable resource and a presumed casus belli. In the process,
I elaborate on the object of my analysis—the classic oil war—and previous academic treatments of the topic. Observing that skeptical voices and inconsistent empirical evidence have failed to overturn prevailing oil war arguments, I argue that these conflicts are a myth: a taken-for-granted story about how the world works.

**Oil’s Value**

Why would countries fight over oil? Like all natural resources, the substance has no inherent value. It is simply a collection of hydrocarbon compounds, along with small amounts of nitrogen, oxygen, sulfur, and metals, including copper, nickel, and iron. Oil can be slick or sticky, flowing easily or refusing to budge unless heated. It ranges in color from pitch black to yellowish green, and, if it possesses a high sulfur content, it smells like rotten eggs. Oil is also known as petroleum (literally, “rock oil”) and, in its more viscous forms, is often identified as bitumen, tar, asphalt, or pitch.

As the resource economist Erich Zimmermann observed in the early 1950s, “Resources . . . are not, they become.” Oil acquired value—and its status as a “natural resource”—because of its utility to people. Mesopotamian civilizations used oil to build roads and waterproof boats. Moses’s basket was caulked with pitch, and the cities of Babylon and Jericho were constructed with bitumen as mortar. Ancient Egyptians used the material in their embalming rites. The Roman naturalist Pliny remarked on oil’s medicinal utility; he claimed that petroleum “healed wounds, treated cataracts, provided a liniment for gout, cured aching teeth, soothed a chronic cough, relieved shortness of breath, stopped diarrhea, drew together severed muscles, and relieved both rheumatism and fever.” Many early Middle Eastern societies used oil as an illuminant, lighting their homes and businesses with the fuel. Some also employed oil as a weapon. In the *Iliad*, Homer reported that the Trojans launched burning bitumen against enemy ships. Over 1,500 years later, the Byzantines were renowned for their “Greek fire”: incendiary petroleum applied to arrows and used in early grenades.

However, it was only in the twentieth century that oil obtained its current status as a uniquely valuable natural resource. This shift arose partly from changing extractive technologies. Before the Common Era, people gathered oil solely from surface seeps. Approximately 1,700 years ago, Chinese salt miners produced the first mechanically drilled “oil” wells, which extracted natural gas, along with salt water. In the nineteenth century, prospectors began to significantly increase petroleum output by applying percussion drilling techniques to oil wells. Rotary drilling, introduced around the beginning of the twentieth century, further
expanded petroleum production. By 1916, oil wells exceeded 1,500 meters in depth. By the beginning of World War II, they reached 4,500 meters.9

Oil production also increased as the industry moved offshore. The first “offshore” well was drilled from an extended pier near Ventura, California, in 1896.10 In the 1930s, fixed drilling platforms appeared in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico and Venezuela’s Lake Maracaibo. After World War II, the use of semi-submersible and floating rigs enabled offshore production to spread worldwide.11 At the same time, the number of significant petroleum-producing countries expanded dramatically. When World War II began, only three states extracted more than fifty thousand barrels of oil per day.12 Today, over fifty countries produce that volume. In total, the global petroleum industry’s crude oil output is currently over eighty million barrels per day.13

The second reason for oil’s changed status was shifts in petroleum consumption. Over the last 150 years, people have discovered new ways to use oil. The first major innovation was the development of kerosene. In the 1840s, Abraham Gesner, a Canadian geologist, developed a refining process to distill kerosene from bitumen.14 The next decade, pharmacists in Galicia (in present-day Poland and Ukraine) found a means of refining the fuel from crude oil and invented a new lamp that could safely burn it.15 Kerosene subsequently replaced whale oil and camphene as consumers’ favored illuminant, boosting petroleum production.16

The second, more significant innovation was the development of the internal combustion engine, which ran on oil-based fuels. As the popularity of automotive transportation surged, gasoline transformed from a waste product, sold for cents on the barrel, into oil’s most significant derivative.17 Airplanes, a new innovation, also ran on petroleum-based fuels, as did growing proportions of maritime transportation. With these technological developments, the Age of Oil had begun. Petroleum production boomed to meet burgeoning demand and has continued to climb for over a century.

Oil’s value, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has arisen from the resource’s military and economic utility. On the military side, most countries’ armed services run predominantly on oil. The transition to petroleum-based fuels began in the 1880s, when British admiral John Fisher started promoting the Royal Navy’s conversion from coal to oil. Fisher observed that oil-burning ships could achieve higher speeds, accelerate more quickly, and maneuver more precisely than their coal-burning counterparts. They could also be refueled at sea and required far less labor for stoking, all of which would grant the British fleet a significant advantage over its emerging naval rival, Germany. However, Fisher’s initial efforts to persuade Parliament to endorse conversion floundered, as British leaders were reluctant to abandon coal, a resource they possessed in abundance, for oil, which they lacked entirely.18 It was not until Fisher secured the support of
Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, that the government officially initiated the fleet’s full transition to oil, in 1912.19

Navies saw few engagements during World War I. Nevertheless, the conflict firmly established oil’s military importance. Automotive transport offered increased flexibility for modern armed forces. Rather than conducting “war by timetable” on the railways, they could use trucks to deploy troops and materiel at any time and in great volumes. Mechanized transport also revolutionized the battlefield. The invention of the tank helped armies break through the stalemate of trench warfare, while aerial reconnaissance and strategic bombing permanently altered the nature of modern war. All of these technologies ran on oil derivatives. In addition, oil-based lubricants prevented vehicles, artillery, and other military machinery from seizing up.20

Unsurprisingly, access to oil—and denying it to the enemy—became a major tactical concern for all of World War I’s belligerents. Germany’s U-boat campaign aimed to knock the United Kingdom out of the war by torpedoing fuel tankers headed toward the island nation. France was also beset by fuel shortages, prompting Clémenceau’s appeal to Wilson in 1917. The United States’ entry into the conflict earlier that year proved to be a crucial turning point. Despite early supply hiccups, US participation provided the Entente with sufficient oil and manpower to defeat its German adversaries, who suffered from their own fuel shortages. After the war, Britain’s Lord Curzon asserted that “the Allies floated to victory on a wave of oil.”21

Petroleum access was equally important to the outcome of World War II. Germany’s dramatic victories in North Africa, from 1941 to 1942, were eventually reversed by fuel shortages; General Erwin Rommel’s forces could not be resupplied because of Allied attacks on Mediterranean fuel shipments.22 Resource shortages also contributed to the failure of Adolf Hitler’s Russian campaigns. German forces lacked sufficient fuel to reach Moscow, retreat from Stalingrad, or complete Case Blue (1942), which ironically aimed to capture Soviet oil fields. Later in the war, all German operations were compromised by petroleum scarcity. By autumn 1944, much of the Luftwaffe was grounded because of inadequate fuel supplies.23

Oil shortages also compromised Japan’s performance in the war’s Pacific theater. Starting in 1944, Japanese battleships were unable to fully participate in naval engagements, including the Marianas and Philippines campaigns, because they lacked sufficient fuel supplies.24 Oil scarcity also encouraged the Japanese to rely more heavily on their infamous kamikaze tactic, as fewer of those attacks were needed to disable an enemy battleship and no fuel was required for return flights. However, even with these brutal conservation measures, by July 1945, Japan had essentially run out of oil.25
Oil has sustained its military importance since the end of World War II. Contemporary military establishments continue to depend on petroleum-based fuels to power their air, sea, and land vehicles. In the United States, almost 80 percent of the energy consumption of the Department of Defense (DOD) consists of petroleum products. In 2018 alone, the US military consumed almost eighty-six million barrels of fuel for operations, training, and readiness. These inputs are irreplaceable; there are currently no viable, large-scale substitutes for oil-based transportation fuels. Additionally, while the DOD has committed itself to increasing energy efficiency and renewable fuel use, these programs are still in their infancy. Most other countries have made even less progress toward supply diversification. Without access to oil, every state’s military would stop in its tracks.

On the economic side, oil is valuable both as an input and as a revenue source. Civilian transportation, like military transportation, runs on petroleum. In the United States, 92 percent of the transportation sector is powered by oil-based fuels. Similar figures are the norm globally. In many countries, oil is used as a heating fuel or to produce electricity, in power plants or diesel-fueled generators. Hydrocarbons are also employed as a feedstock for the petrochemical industry. Overall, civilian oil consumption dwarfs military petroleum use. Although the DOD is the single largest oil consumer in the United States, the federal government, including the DOD, has historically accounted for less than 2 percent of US petroleum use.

Losing access to civilian oil inputs can have serious negative consequences. Greater consumption of energy resources has historically been correlated with better economic performance; countries that use more energy have higher growth rates. In addition, lack of access to affordable oil resources has negative economic effects; rising oil prices often precede recessions, in the United States and elsewhere. Expensive oil increases household expenditures and takes a particularly heavy toll on the shipping, agricultural, and heavy industrial sectors.

Oil is also economically valuable because it can supply enormous amounts of revenue to petroleum-producing states. In these countries, governments collect oil rents in a variety of ways: as concessions and royalty payments from oil companies that want to develop local petroleum resources, as taxes on oil companies’ profits, and as revenue from domestic and international oil sales. For many states, these revenue streams are a vital source of income. Countries like Angola, Kuwait, and Nigeria depend on oil rents for the majority of government revenue and up to 95 percent of export earnings.

These governments use oil income to sustain domestic political support. Some offer cash payments to citizens; in 2018, Alaska provided each resident with a $1,600 dividend from the Alaska Permanent Fund. Governments also use oil rents to finance social spending, including public employment, health care and
education, and to subsidize consumption of basic goods, such as food and fuel.\textsuperscript{39} Venezuela’s former president Hugo Chavez notoriously employed these strategies in the early 2000s to expand his political base.\textsuperscript{40} During the Arab Spring (2010–2011), Saudi Arabia discouraged domestic discord by raising salaries for current government employees and devoting $134 billion to housing subsidies, unemployment benefits, and new public-sector jobs.\textsuperscript{41} If oil-funded carrots fail to sustain public support, these governments can turn to petroleum-financed sticks; many oil producers use their resource rents to pay for robust domestic security apparatuses.\textsuperscript{42} Gulf producers also used this strategy during the Arab Spring, spending lavishly on their own militaries and supporting their neighbors’ security forces in order to contain antigovernment protests.\textsuperscript{43}

When oil revenue declines, this political order is threatened.\textsuperscript{44} Producer state governments may be forced to cut subsidies and reduce social spending, provoking popular discontent. After oil prices dropped in late 2014, the Saudi government eliminated bonus payments and trimmed subsidies for food and fuel. However, blowback was so severe that, in April 2017, the regime reinstated many of the benefits.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly, the Nigerian government was compelled to restore payments to former rebels in the restive Niger Delta after a decrease in state payouts led to a resumption of hostilities.\textsuperscript{46} Insufficient investment in domestic security institutions can also be destabilizing, as civilian and military forces have less capacity and incentive to defend the ruling regime. Countries that are highly dependent on oil rents therefore have strong inducements to defend—or increase—their petroleum revenue.

Lastly, oil producers derive some more subtle benefits from their petroleum output. One of these is a more favorable balance of trade. Major oil producers can consume domestic petroleum resources, thereby keeping their money at home rather than shipping dollars overseas to pay for foreign crude oil and petroleum products.\textsuperscript{47} Illustratively, after the United States’ shale oil boom began in 2007, the national trade deficit declined significantly.\textsuperscript{48} Major petroleum producers may also possess political leverage over oil-consuming states, because they can threaten to shut off their petroleum supplies.\textsuperscript{49} To stay in producers’ good graces, oil-importing states provide them with significant diplomatic and military support.\textsuperscript{50} Meanwhile, oil exporters have greater foreign policy autonomy; since they are not vulnerable to oil supply cutoffs, they do not have to tailor their behaviors to sustain their access to foreign petroleum resources.\textsuperscript{51}

Oil is therefore an exceptionally valuable natural resource. It is a vital input for modern militaries and industrialized economies, can be a source of enormous national wealth, and conveys a variety of subtler benefits. Losing access to oil can have devastating consequences. Consequently, all countries would prefer to control more petroleum resources.\textsuperscript{52} As Indra de Soysa and his coauthors observe,
“Countries are bound to covet assets that are valuable, tradable, conquerable, durable, and intrinsic to a given territory.”

Oil and Interstate Conflict?

Yet does oil’s value lead countries to fight for it? Specifically, will they engage in classic oil wars: severe militarized interstate conflicts driven largely by participants’ desire to obtain petroleum resources? Before answering this question, it is helpful to elaborate on the classic oil war concept. These conflicts are distinguished from other types of oil-related contention in three ways. First, classic oil wars are interstate conflicts. Unlike civil wars, which are prosecuted by actors from the same country, classic oil wars are competitions between two or more independent states. Consequently, petroleum-related intrastate conflicts, such as Colombia’s civil war or insurrections in the Niger Delta, are not classic oil wars. Second, classic oil wars are “disproportionately lethal.” In these conflicts, countries expend substantial amounts of blood for oil. To reflect this criterion, my empirical analysis employs a minimum threshold of twenty-five battle deaths to identify conflicts as classic oil wars.

Third, in classic oil wars, countries fight for petroleum resources. At least one participant aims to acquire direct, sustained control over oil or natural gas reservoirs. This characteristic distinguishes classic oil wars from other types of international petroleum-related contention, including petro-aggression, competition over oil transportation routes, and efforts to prevent the consolidation of control over global oil supplies, none of which involve seizing oil or gas reservoirs. States’ resource ambitions do not have to be their only motive for aggression in classic oil wars; leaders may have additional reasons for initiating these conflicts. However, in classic oil wars, the desire to obtain more oil is “a major determinant” of international attacks. As Jeff Colgan asserts, in this type of conflict, “the presence or perception of oil reserves . . . creates a significant incentive for conquest.”

Based on these three criteria, the potential for classic oil wars is expansive. Over the last century, more than 130 countries have produced oil or natural gas, while others are believed to possess these resources. Any of these states could have been the target of a classic oil war at any point after expectations of their resource endowments emerged.

Classic Oil War Believers

For countries to prosecute classic oil wars, they cannot merely recognize oil’s economic and military value. Decision makers must also believe that international
militarized aggression is an effective way to obtain petroleum resources and revenue. Put more simply, they must believe that fighting for oil pays, strategically or economically. This cognitive leap, from value to violence, has been endorsed by many international relations theorists. Contributors to an ongoing disciplinary debate about the value of conquest, in particular, have repeatedly asserted that fighting for oil is worth the effort.

The value of conquest debate has conventionally pitted international relations liberals and realists against each other, with the two sets of theorists disagreeing over whether foreign conquest pays in the modern world. On one side, liberals assert that territorial conquest is no longer worth the effort, as changes in the international economic system, including increasing free trade, shifting patterns of global production, and land’s declining value as a source of national wealth, have rendered the seizure of advanced, industrialized societies unprofitable. Liberals also argue that nationalism is a serious impediment to conquering territory, as local populations resist foreign rule. In addition, prospective aggressors are deterred by the difficulty of attracting foreign investment to occupied territories. On the other side of the debate, realists claim that conquest can still be worth the effort if an aggressor is sufficiently repressive. The disagreement over whether seizing industrialized societies pays is therefore unresolved.

Liberals and realists come together, however, on the issue of oil. Members of both camps agree that fighting for petroleum can pay. John Mearsheimer, a realist, asserts, “Any Great Power that conquered Saudi Arabia would surely reap great value from the country’s petroleum resources.” Stephen Krasner concurs, asserting that, while the use of military force to obtain access to most raw materials is “imprudent,” “in the case of petroleum, the use of force would be compatible with a politics of interest because the economic stakes are so great.” Kenneth Waltz and Charles Glaser are only slightly more circumspect, claiming that oil is “the only economic interest for which the United States may have to fight” and “in an era in which territory has become far less important for producing both wealth and security, territory that contains oil or controls access to it remains something of an exception.” Realists therefore agree that fighting for oil can be worth the effort.

Their commitment to this position is unsurprising, since realists believe, more broadly, in the value of conquest and regularly emphasize natural resources’ importance as a source of state power. In contrast, liberals’ conviction that oil conquest pays is counterintuitive, as it departs from their usual claim that seizing foreign territory is unprofitable. Nonetheless, Christopher Fettweis states that “conquest of oil-rich regions could pay substantial dividends,” while Stephen Brooks asserts that “countries with high GDP per capita whose economies are tied to extractable resources (e.g. Kuwait) still offer high cumulative gains to a
conqueror.” Other scholars, including Daniel Deudney, Klaus Knorr, and Richard Ullman, also make an exception for oil. Although resource wars rarely pay, they assert, fighting for oil can be worth the effort. As Deudney puts it, “Oil is [a] ‘hard case’ for the critic of resource war scenarios.” Liberals rationalize this departure by asserting that oil-producing countries have not undergone the economic changes that made conquering advanced, industrialized societies unprofitable. As Richard Rosecrance asserts, “Where land and its products still remain the vital factor for production—in the agriculture of Eastern Europe, the oil of the Caspian or the Middle East—territory will continue to exert a decisive influence.”

Few scholars, in the liberal or realist camps, offer extensive explanations for their claims that fighting for oil pays. Their petroleum-related observations are usually one-off statements or based on perfunctory reasoning. Some authors justify their assertions by highlighting oil’s exceptional value. Others mention countries’ intense dependence on foreign oil supplies; the lack of viable, affordable oil substitutes; or the concentration of global oil reserves in a few geographic regions. Still others base their claims on the assumption that classic oil wars have occurred in the past. Yet, overall, the believers’ assertions are peculiarly underdeveloped for scholars who are otherwise rigorous in their theorizing.

**Classic Oil War Skeptics**

Some scholars have challenged the idea that fighting for oil pays. Many argue that oil wars are inefficient. Hanns W. Maull’s assertion that forcefully seizing natural resources “would be costly, of doubtful effectiveness and full of risk and uncertainties, if not even counter-productive,” is representative of this view. Some skeptics highlight the risks associated with specific oil grabs. Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, for example, contend that seizing Saudi Arabian petroleum resources “could be accomplished only at great military, diplomatic, and moral cost.” Other critics claim that states refrain from fighting for oil because they can obtain the resource in other, cheaper ways: through trade or by developing petroleum substitutes. As Carl Kaysen observes, “If the calculation were made of the economic balance between securing these materials by conquest, and securing them in the ordinary ways by trade or by the search for substitutes and alternative sources of supply, it would be a peculiar situation indeed that gave the advantage to war.” Noting the existence of a global oil market, Brenda Shaffer describes the idea of states fighting to gain direct control over petroleum resources as “antiquated.”

Many skeptics argue that, for classic oil wars to occur in the contemporary international system, something would have to go terribly wrong. Gholz and Press claim that countries might seize foreign resources “in an extreme scenario.”
Daniel Moran and James Russell postulate that oil wars would only arise “within a context of strategic anxiety and severe economic stress.” Thomas McNaugher borrows from Henry Kissinger, who observed in 1974 that he would only consider seizing Middle Eastern oil if “there is some actual strangulation of the industrialized world.” Facing that “gravest emergency,” McNaugher asserts, the United States might fight for oil.

Some scholars, however, have questioned the idea of classic oil wars entirely. Evan Luard contends that “there is no evidence that pressure on resources . . . though of acute importance to many states, especially in the case of oil, has played any part in stimulating war.” Other skeptics suggest that, while oil ambitions contribute to international conflict, they are a subordinate factor in leaders’ war decisions. As Ronnie Lipschutz and John Holdren assert, “While resources unquestionably have played a role in the foreign and military policies of modern industrial states, this role has usually been a secondary one.” Similarly, Ian Lesser observes that resources have never been “the primary cause of war in their own right” (emphasis in original).

Taken together, these skeptical voices constitute a serious challenge to oil war believers. However, individually, the critiques are piecemeal. None of the skeptics offers a comprehensive, systematic argument explaining why oil wars are unlikely. Nor have their theoretical claims been coupled with rigorous empirical analyses. Perhaps as a result, these critical voices have failed to dislodge classic oil war beliefs.

**Classic Oil War Evidence**

Empirical evaluations of classic oil wars are surprisingly rare, given the popular perception that petroleum competition is a serious threat to international security. Only a handful of statistical analyses have evaluated oil’s contribution to international militarized conflict or territorial disputes. Even fewer have produced positive findings revealing a connection between resource endowments and interstate conflict. Moreover, these studies suffer from significant methodological limitations. The most severe is that statistical models do not evaluate causality; they merely search for geographic correlations between resource endowments and conflict episodes. As a result, they cannot distinguish between conflicts that are fought for oil resources and those that merely occur in oil-endowed territory. Accordingly, all statistical analyses are likely to overstate petroleum’s causal power. Quantitative analyses are also unable to tell us precisely how oil influences international conflict, and they have difficulty parsing the intersections between petroleum resources and other causes of violence, so they capture neither the “nuance” nor the “multidimensionality” of oil-related contention.
Case studies of classic oil wars do not face the same methodological limitations, as scholars can closely investigate decision makers’ motives for aggression and examine conflicts within their specific historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts. However, these analyses are hampered by a different methodological weakness: their lack of generalizability. Most qualitative analyses examine only one or two supposed classic oil wars, with prominent cases, such as World War II, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, and the Iran–Iraq War, garnering the greatest attention. By focusing on these purportedly positive cases, qualitative studies imply that oil–war connections are robust. Yet, because their analytic scope is so limited, it is unclear whether these findings apply more broadly. Even if oil ambitions are a significant cause of some wars, their overall contribution to interstate conflict may be minimal.

Evidence that states engage in classic oil wars is therefore startlingly limited. Yet the conviction that countries fight to acquire oil resources persists, in spite of weak evidence, skeptical critiques, and underdeveloped supporting arguments. To understand why, it is necessary to recognize that classic oil wars are not a conventional analytic concept that can be evaluated objectively and cast aside if falsified. Instead, they are a myth.

The Oil Wars Myth

Myths, as described by international relations theorist Cynthia Weber, are “apparent truths.” They are collective beliefs that are persistently reiterated until they become “that part of the story that is so familiar to us that we take it for granted.” Some myths emerge from historical events, while others can be traced back to religious practice. Still others arise from scientific claims about how the world works. However, over time, myths’ apparent validity becomes detached from history, hard evidence, and rigorous logic. They become the ideas that we take on faith.

Like unconscious ideologies, popular discourses, and common sense, myths shape our thinking. They provide concepts, categories, and narratives that can be cast over historical and lived experience. We are more apt to notice incidents and believe in arguments that conform to existing myths. We also interpret new events and experiences through the lenses of these shared understandings. By persistently attempting to make our observations fit our existing stories, we reinforce these narratives’ apparent validity. Over time and through repetition, myths gain traction. They are beliefs that have become the conventional wisdom.

Since myths are “just the way things are,” we rarely seek to question them. We do not investigate their empirical validity. Nor do we ask why certain myths are
so widely accepted or how they unconsciously structure our understanding of how the world works, contour the way we interpret events, or condition our policy choices. We simply accept myths as accurate representations of real phenomena. As a result, topics that have been mythologized, like classic oil wars, are shielded from interrogation. We know they exist and assume that we understand how they work. So why bother investigating them?

I use the term myth to describe our collective belief in classic oil wars because it captures the way that people think about these conflicts. Classic oil wars are not simply an analytic concept developed through an objective reasoning process to reflect a real-world phenomenon and capable of being straightforwardly dismissed through empirical evaluation and critical scrutiny. Instead, they are part of our collective lore, imbued with assumptions and expectations, an enduring repository of shared fears and desires.

Classic oil wars’ mythic status shields them from an array of analytic challenges and explains why scholars who are otherwise meticulous in their theoretical reasoning abandon their intellectual rigor when it comes to oil. Liberals and realists do not need to elaborate on their assertion that fighting for oil pays. Historians do not need to justify their identification of certain conflicts as oil wars. Because of the ubiquity and strength of the oil wars myth, these claims are simply presumed to be true. The myth has also contributed to the dearth of empirical analyses of classic oil wars. Since we are certain that these conflicts occur, there is little reason to devote energy to hunting for them. Finally, oil wars’ mythic qualities explain the tenacity of our conviction that states fight wars to obtain petroleum resources, despite the limited historical evidence of these conflicts and substantial theoretical critiques.92 Because myths are based on faith, they are difficult to dislodge, even with watertight logic and incontrovertible evidence.

A thorough, rigorous analysis of classic oil wars is long overdue. However, before confronting the oil wars myth, theoretically and empirically, the next chapter explores why and how oil wars were mythologized. What is it about this particular type of conflict that captures the popular imagination, making classic oil wars appear exceptionally believable?